

## ABSTRACT

Title of Dissertation: "AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN'S POLITICS, ORGANIZING, AND ACTIVISM IN 1920S-WASHINGTON, D.C."

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This dissertation offers a social history of African American women's political activism and organizing in 1920s-Washington, D.C. Specifically, I examine the ways that black women worked to reform the school system, protested segregation in the offices of the federal government and neighborhoods, fought for the passage of an anti-lynching law, formed Republican organizations, upheld African American citizenship through commemoration, and recruited more than one thousand women and men to join a labor union, the National Association of Wage Earners. I argue that black women in 1920s-Washington, D.C., reached into the knowledge and skills they derived from black institutional culture, from their location in the city, from their work experiences, friendships, and family life to organize their campaigns and participate in politics.

Black institutional culture formed a bridge to women's formal political activism. As churchgoers, dues-paying members of fraternal orders, fundraisers for

the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA), or participants in social clubs, African American women developed important skills, including fundraising, publicity, and public speaking, which they applied to their more overtly political campaigns. Locating the origins of African American women's political campaigns and organizations within black institutions helps to explain how black women were sometimes able to mobilize hundreds of foot soldiers in a short period of time. Personal experiences also mattered tremendously in women's political activism. Stories and memories passed along from family and friends inspired African American women to wage their wide-ranging campaigns for justice.

During the 1920s, black women in ways both large and small, individual and collective—from walking through the streets to recruit members to a labor organization to raising money for a YWCA organizing drive, from marching through the streets in support of anti-lynching bill, to staging protests in front of the Board of Education building—organized to sustain their communities, reform their city, and enact democracy in Washington and throughout the nation. This dissertation relies on a range of sources, including organizational records, personal papers, black and white newspapers, social scientific studies, government documents, court cases, oral histories, Sanborn maps, city directories, and the manuscript census.

AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN'S POLITICS, ORGANIZING, AND ACTIVISM  
IN 1920S-WASHINGTON, D.C.

By

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## Acknowledgements

The origins of this dissertation can be traced to a seminar paper I wrote on African American politics in Spring 2005 at the University of Maryland. Every piece of evidence I had fit together like a puzzle, except for a couple of letters I had uncovered by a black woman named Gretchen McRae. My advisor, Professor Elsa Barkley Brown, forbade me from turning the paper in until I located more information on this woman. After weeks of digging in the archives, I finally unearthed a sheaf of documents on Gretchen McRae, which pointed to the richness of African American women's political activism in the 1920s. I am deeply grateful that Professor Barkley Brown nudged me on this path and for all of the questions she has asked along the way.

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### **List of Abbreviations**

AG-MSRC	Archibald Grimké Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.
AKW-LC	Anna Kelton Wylie Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.
AME	African Methodist Episcopal
AMEZ	African Methodist Episcopal Zion
Asbury-NYPL	Records of the Asbury Methodist Episcopal Church, Manuscript Division, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library, New York, New York
CWRL	Colored Women's Republican League
CME	Christian Methodist Episcopal
IOSL	Independent Order of Saint Luke
KKK	Ku Klux Klan
LC	Library of Congress
MCT-LC	Mary Church Terrell Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.
MCT-MSRC	Mary Church Terrell Papers, Manuscript Division, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Founders Library, Howard University, Washington, D.C.
ME	Methodist Episcopal
MSRC	Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Founders Library, Washington, D.C.
NACW	National Association of Colored Women
NAACP	National Association for the Advancement of Colored People

NAACP-LC	National Association for the Advancement of Colored People Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.
NAACP-MSCR	National Association for the Advancement of Colored People Papers, Manuscript Division, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Founders Library, Howard University, Washington, D.C.
NMA	National Memorial Association
NAWE	National Association of Wage Earners
NHB-LC	Nannie Helen Burroughs Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.
NLRCW	National League of Republican Colored Women
NTS	National Training School
NWTUL-LC	National Women's Trade Union League Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.
NYPL	New York Public Library
OES	Order of the Eastern Star
RCB-MSRC	Roscoe Conkling Bruce Papers, Manuscript Division, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Founders Library, Howard University, Washington, D.C.
RG	Record Group
Shiloh-NYPL	Records of Shiloh Baptist Church, Manuscript Division, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library, New York, New York
Sumner	Charles Sumner Educational Archive, Washington, D.C.
SCRBC	Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library, New York, New York
SSC	Sophia Smith Collection, Nielson Library, Smith College, Northampton, Massachusetts
UDC	United Daughters of the Confederacy

WC	Woman's Convention of the National Baptist Church
WC-Burke	Records of the Women's Convention, Auxiliary of the National Baptist Church, MRL Reports, Rare Book Room, Burke Library, Union Theological Seminary, Columbia University, New York, New York
WCTU	Women's Christian Temperance Union
WRL	Women's Republican League
WPSC	Women's Political Study Club
WWEA	Woman Wage Earner's Association
YMCA	Young Men's Christian Association
YWCA	Young Women's Christian Association
YWCA-SSC	Young Women's Christian Association Papers, Sophia Smith Collection, Nielson Library, Smith College, Northampton, Massachusetts

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## Introduction

Between 1920 and 1930, African American women in Washington, D.C., founded dozens of organizations aimed at racial and gender justice, challenged segregation in the offices in the federal government and neighborhoods, lobbied for the passage of the Dyer Anti-Lynching Bill, organized more than one thousand men and women into a labor union, and worked to improve the school system. Part of this activism can be explained by pointing to important shifts in American political history in the 1920s, notably the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment granting woman suffrage, the aftermath of World War I and its message of democracy, and the return of Republicans to the White House and Congress. Cumulatively, these changes helped to make the American political climate more receptive to African American women's campaigns for reform. But centering the narrative arc of African American women's politics on these external events casts their activism as both reactive and static. It also neglects to consider the previous organizing and activist experiences that prepared them to engage in activism in the 1920s. And it marginalizes the process by which women acquired the knowledge and skills to launch their campaigns.

“African American Women's Politics, Organizing, and Activism” chronicles this important process, illuminating the ways that women learned about issues, developed political skills, organized their campaigns, and participated in activism. It was not a foregone conclusion that black women in the 1920s—living in a city rife with segregation, gender discrimination, violence, and economic inequality—would

band together to press for racial, gender, and economic justice. In order for African American women to come together and effectively organize, they needed to establish bonds of trust and hone their political skills. African American women's organizing can be seen in their work to initiate and sustain political campaigns, from recruiting constituents, raising money, and forging alliances with other organizations to circulating information and attending to logistical details of meeting space, speakers, and events. Black women's activism included leadership or participation in movements to enact their visions of justice, which often fused racial, gender, and economic concerns. Their activism assumed many guises, from attending a fundraiser to marching in an anti-lynching parade. African American women organized in many different spaces across Washington, D.C., including their households, streets, neighborhoods, workspaces, churches, schools, fraternal orders, schools, parks, and the offices of the federal government. Collectively, these processes made up black women's politics.

African American women conducted their politics within a variety of organizations, institutions, and networks throughout the city. Varying degrees of participation in organizations engaged black women with conversations about justice, thereby acquainting them with individual and collective memories of struggle. And involvement in this political culture—uniting in a church, banding together as fraternal sisters and brothers, or gathering for a street corner conversation—demonstrated how people come together to forge community. Through these engagements, black women became adept at the craft of political organizing. Whether canvassing businesses for donations, distributing fliers for a school

fundraiser, recruiting members for a mutual benefit association, or raising money for a church, in working to sustain community institutions, black women learned deeply important lessons about the work of sustaining political movements.

From a very young age, African American girls and boys in Washington were exposed to the inner workings of black activism, organizing, and community formation. In multiple spaces across the city—households, churches, halls, schools, stores, streetcars, and streets—African Americans participated in experiences that influenced the development of their political consciousness, introduced them to strategies of organizing and mobilization, and taught them about the ways people form attachments to each other. Women’s location in and movement across households, neighborhoods, businesses, institutions, and the city at large endowed them with a rich education in politics, organizing, and activism. Personal experiences, everyday travels, and chance encounters in different spaces across the city also introduced black women to politics.

This dissertation argues that black women in 1920s-Washington, D.C., reached into the knowledge and skills they derived from black institutional culture, from their location in the city, from their work experiences, friendships, and family life to organize their campaigns and participate in politics. Situating women’s activism within the framework of longer traditions of political education, community formation, and institutional culture explains how they were able to mobilize large numbers of citizens from diverse backgrounds across the city, mount campaigns, and sustain political activities. And framing these different episodes through the lens of women’s ongoing organizing, activism, and political education helps to illuminate the

visions that undergirded them. This dissertation centers women's politics in Washington, D.C., precisely because their level of formal organizing expanded in the 1920s. At times, it offers parallel examples of men's activism and organizing. During the 1920s, black women in ways both large and small, individual and collective—from walking through the streets to recruit members to a labor organization to raising money for a Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA) organizing drive, from marching through the streets in support of anti-lynching bill, to staging protests in front of the Board of Education building—organized to sustain their communities, reform their city, and enact democracy in Washington and throughout the nation. This dissertation is concerned with the processes of organizing and activism and the ways that location—geographical, occupational, or social—can illuminate the everyday work of African American women's politics.

African American women deployed a range of strategies during the 1920s. Throughout the decade, Washington had a weekly black newspaper; the *Washington Bee* was published between 1884 and 1922, while the *Washington Tribune* was published between 1922 and 1930. During the 1920s, each of these papers ranged between six and twelve pages. They covered local and national issues, including the weekly activities of churches, fraternal orders, social and political organizations, schools, and nightlife. They also tracked sporting events, plays, movies, and dances. In 1924, at least 6,000 black Washingtonians subscribed to the *Washington Tribune*. In addition, many black Washingtonians read the city's two white newspapers, the *Washington Post* and the *Washington Star*.<sup>1</sup> African American women in Washington

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<sup>1</sup> For the circulation statistics of the *Washington Tribune*, see *N. W. Ayer and Son's American Newspaper Annual and Directory* (Philadelphia: N. W. Ayer and Son, 1924), 158.

used the local black and white newspapers to circulate news about their organizations and political campaigns. For instance, the Phyllis Wheatley YWCA and the National Association of Wage Earners (NAWE), a labor organization, both published a weekly column about their day-to-day activities in the *Washington Tribune*. Black women also used the local press to recruit members into their organizations, solicit donations, circulate political petitions, and document political events.

African American women also relied heavily on black churches and mutual benefit associations located across the city. Over 60 percent of black Washingtonians belonged to a church in the 1920s, making these institutions significant for African American women's political campaigns.<sup>2</sup> In addition, African Americans registered memberships in at least 162 mutual benefit associations throughout the city.<sup>3</sup> Black women used churches and mutual benefit associations for many purposes, including meeting space, the circulation of news and information, recruitment, and alliances in their political campaigns.

At times, African American women organized within the city's spaces of recreational and leisure culture. During the 1920s, black Washington operated five movie theaters, and black women sometimes persuaded the owners of these venues to

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For information on black readership of the *Washington Post*, see William Henry Jones, *Housing of Negroes in Washington, D.C.* (Washington, D.C.: Howard University Press, 1930), 123.

<sup>2</sup> These statistics were calculated using the numbers from "Table 38," *Religious Bodies: 1926*. (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1926), 730. I correlated these numbers with the black population of Washington in 1925. See *Report of the Commissioners of the District of Columbia for the Year Ended June 30, 1917*. Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1917 (1917-1931) located in Record Group 351, Entry 9, National Archives, Washington, D.C.

<sup>3</sup> This count is based on a close reading of Washington's black and white newspapers throughout the 1920s, as well as the 1930 *Boyd's Directory*.

screen short films about their political causes or donate their auditoriums for public meetings.<sup>4</sup> Black Washington also had several radio stations, and black women occasionally appeared on radio programs to discuss their political activities.<sup>5</sup> A black amusement park, Suburban Gardens, opened in Deanwood in Northeast Washington during the decade, and African American women held picnics, gatherings, and celebrations in this new park. However, some black women activists had reservations about the moral aspects of some of this mass culture, especially movie theaters, which explains why such organizing was not more widespread.<sup>6</sup>

In addition to using churches and movie theaters as spaces for meetings and activities, African American women acquired their own buildings. In 1920, black women dedicated the Phyllis Wheatley YWCA, a new, modern building in Northwest Washington that featured multiple meeting spaces, dormitory rooms, and a gymnasium. In 1922, African American women raised enough money to pay off the mortgage of the Frederick Douglass home in Southeast Washington and dedicate it as a memorial. In 1924, African American women in the National Association of Wage Earners opened a headquarters in Northwest Washington. One year later, black women opened the National Legislative Council of Colored Women in Southeast Washington, one block away from the U.S. Capitol. And finally, in 1929, African American women opened the headquarters of the National Association of Colored Women in Northwest Washington.

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<sup>4</sup> “YWCA Plans Monster Charity Dance,” *Washington Tribune*, December 18, 1928.

<sup>5</sup> See Frances Boyce, Washington, D.C., to Mary Church Terrell, Washington, D.C., 8 March 1928, Frame 296, Reel 6, Mary Church Terrell Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C., (hereafter cited as MCT-LC).

<sup>6</sup> “Shiloh’s Fall Work Opens,” *Washington Tribune*, October 7, 1927, 7.

These buildings served multiple functions. Black women used them as organizational headquarters to conduct a variety of administrative tasks. But many of these buildings were also residential, featuring bedrooms, kitchens, and dining rooms. During the 1920s, Washington's segregation practices barred black women from many hotels and restaurants throughout the city. In addition, Washington could be a dangerous place for black women, who faced the prospect of police brutality and assaults.<sup>7</sup> Through the physical buildings of their organizations black women could address some of these problems. The way that activists used their organizational headquarters in the 1920s illustrate that black women's politics were often informed by practical concerns, including shelter, meals, and safety.

In their organizing and activism, African American continually worked to make their political constituencies citywide and cross-class. Black women activists employed a range of recruitment tactics to achieve this goal. To create citywide coalitions, black women recruited constituents at work sites, in streets, and through other members. They also staged their meetings in churches and halls in neighborhoods throughout the city, and worked with pastors from various religious denominations. To ensure that women from diverse occupations could participate, activists sometimes held their meetings and events at times when a wide range of workers would be able to attend.

In all of their political campaigns—including educational reform, anti-lynching activism, fights against segregation, labor justice, and Republican organizing—African American women pursued a variety of organizing strategies.

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<sup>7</sup> See, for instance, "Novella Johnson, Brutally Assaulted," *Washington Tribune* 18 June 1921, 1.

Focusing on the precise details of these modes of organizing illuminates the ways black women imagined their political constituencies and how they worked very hard to achieve them. Sometimes they were successful, but many times they struggled. While black women's organizing and activism in Washington, D.C., mirrored patterns across the country, the particular circumstances of black women's location in the nation's capital also shaped their approaches to politics.

### **African Americans in Washington, D.C.**

Black Washington had a long and rich history of activism. When slavery was abolished in the nation's capital in 1862, the city's black residents banded together with churches and mutual aid associations to assist the influx of migrants into the city. After the Civil War, African Americans in Washington worked to make their vision of freedom a political reality by fighting for the right to vote in local and national elections and protesting all forms of segregation and discrimination. In 1867, Congress passed the District of Columbia Voting Rights Act that enfranchised all men in the District of Columbia. Between 1867 and 1878, African American men cast ballots and held local political offices. The Washington, D.C., City Council enacted ordinances that banned segregation in theaters, restaurants, and other establishments. African American women and men across Washington exercised their new rights of citizenship by attending congressional hearings, holding fundraisers on the Executive lawn, and parading around federal buildings. While the city had two separate school systems, African Americans exercised control over the black schools. But in 1871, Congress created a territorial government for the District

of Columbia with a governor appointed by the President of the United States and an elected House of Delegates. Seven years later, in 1878, Congress created a federally appointed Board of Commissioners. All residents of Washington, D.C., lost the right to vote, along with most control over local governance.<sup>8</sup> And in 1900, Congress reorganized the school system by appointing a white superintendent to be in charge of all of the schools and selected black and white assistant superintendents to oversee the black and white school systems, respectively. With the demise of Reconstruction, voting rights, and local control over the school system, African Americans lost significant power.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, African American residents of Washington continued to press for democracy, both in their city and across the country. Largely because of Howard University and opportunities for government employment, Washington, D.C., developed a large and influential African American middle class. Through their churches, fraternal orders, and social and political clubs, black Washingtonians protested the declining status of African Americans across the country, marked by the spread of lynching, segregation, and disfranchisement.<sup>9</sup> African American women also engaged in reform on a local level to address issues of poverty, employment, and child welfare. In 1892, African American women in the city formed the Colored Women's League, which united 113

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<sup>8</sup> For an excellent analysis of African American politics during Reconstruction, see Kate Masur, *An Example for All the Land: Emancipation and the Struggle over Equality in Washington, D.C.* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010).

<sup>9</sup> See, for instance, "The Congressional Lyceum," *Washington Bee*, December 18, 1897, 5; and "The District Conference of the African Methodist Episcopal Church," *Washington Bee*, September 12, 1903, 1.

different organizations, 85 of which were local.<sup>10</sup> The league was involved in the establishment of the Southwest Social Settlement in 1895, which offered black women in Southwest Washington the opportunity to improve their cooking and sewing skills, and provided a kindergarten for African American children.<sup>11</sup> The Colored Women's League federated with the National Association of Colored Women (NACW) in 1896. African American women continued their patterns of outreach by forming the city's first black YWCA in 1905 to address housing and employment for migrant women. African American women in Washington, D.C. banded together with their churches, fraternal orders, and political organizations to improve the quality of life for all black citizens of the city.

The political status of African Americans in Washington declined significantly when Woodrow Wilson, a native of Virginia and vocal opponent of African American civil rights, was elected president. In 1913, when Wilson took office, his administration enacted racial segregation in government offices. Not only did African American civil servants face humiliation through separate offices, restrooms, and cafeterias, but segregation also created barriers to black promotion and pay raises. That same year, women and men formed the city's chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). While activists

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<sup>10</sup> Willie Mae Coleman, "Keeping the Faith and Disturbing the Peace. Black Women: From Anti-Slavery to Woman's Suffrage" (Ph.D. diss., University of California, Irvine, 1982), 75. See also, Sharon Harley, "Black Women in the District of Columbia, 1880-1920: Their Economic, Social, and Institutional Activities" (Ph.D. diss., Howard University, 1981) and Stephanie Shaw, "The Creation of the National Association of Colored Women," *Journal of Women's History* 3, no. 2 (Fall 1991): 11-25.

<sup>11</sup> Constance McLaughlin Green, *The Secret City: A History of Race Relations in the Nation's Capital* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967), 145.

worked tirelessly with the NAACP to protest these new segregation practices and improve employment prospects for civil servants, they were unable to integrate the federal government. African Americans in Washington, then, felt optimistic that new Republican administrations in the 1920s would erase some of these practices.

### **Black Women's Activism in the 1920s**

During the 1920s, African Americans in Washington worked to sustain old institutions and organizations while nurturing the growth of new ones. By 1930, black Washington included more than 300 businesses, 150 churches, 162 mutual benefit and fraternal orders, dozens of political organizations, and the largest National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) branch in the nation.<sup>12</sup>

One of the reasons why black Washingtonians maintained such a rich and vibrant institutional life was because of the city's large black population. In 1920, African Americans were 25 percent of the city's residents; ten years later, that figure had climbed to 27 percent.<sup>13</sup> By 1930, African Americans composed nearly one third of Washington's population, making it the third largest proportion of African

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<sup>12</sup> For the figure on businesses, see James Borchert, "Washington, D.C.," in *Encyclopedia of the Great Black Migration*, ed. Steven A. Reich (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2006), 884. For numbers of churches, see "Food Show Will Open for Colored People," *Washington Star* January 31, 1923, 33; and Neval H. Thomas, "These 'Colored' United States": The District of Columbia, A Paradox of Paradoxes," *Messenger* 5, no. 10 (October 1923): 839. The number of mutual benefit and fraternal associations is derived from a close reading of the *Washington Bee*, the *Washington Tribune*, and the *Washington Star*; Jones, *Recreation and Amusement among Negroes in Washington, D.C.*; and the 1930 *Boyd's Directory*. For information on Washington's NAACP chapter, see Mark Robert Schneider, *"We Return Fighting": The Civil Rights Movement in the Jazz Age* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2000), 284.

<sup>13</sup> *Report of the Commissioners of the District of Columbia for the Year Ended June 30, 1917* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1917, Record Group (RG) 351, Entry 9, National Archives, Washington, D.C.

American residents in the nation, next only to Atlanta (32 percent) and New Orleans (28 percent). In that year, 132,068 African American women and men lived in Washington; the fifth largest black urban population in the United States.<sup>14</sup>

Black Washingtonians seized on their large population to create important cultural spaces through the city. Throughout the 1920s, African Americans patronized five movie theaters across the city, participated in literary salons, and attended plays. Black Washington was a thriving cultural center where residents could mingle with local artists, writers, dancers, performers, and painters, including such luminaries as Duke Ellington, Georgia Douglas Johnson, Albert Rice, Carrie Williams Clifford, Langston Hughes, Lewis Alexander, Alain Locke, and Angelina Weld Grimké. During the 1920s, Georgia Douglas Johnson initiated her literary salons, the Saturday Nighters Club; the theater group the Howard Players began to perform, and Gregoria Fraser Goins revived the black musical club, the Treble Clefs.<sup>15</sup> While many of these activities attracted the black elite, the city's working-

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<sup>14</sup> In 1920, African Americans composed 31 percent of the population in Atlanta, 26 percent in New Orleans, 25 percent in Washington, D.C., 15 percent in Baltimore, 7 percent in Philadelphia, 5 percent in New York, and 4 percent in Chicago. But the largest numerical black populations were, New York (152,467), Philadelphia (135,039), Washington, D.C. (109,976), Chicago (109,458), Baltimore (108,322), New Orleans (100,930), and Atlanta (62,296). Because of wartime labor patterns and migration, these figures shifted over the next ten years. By 1930, African Americans represented 32 percent in Atlanta, 28 percent in New Orleans, 27 percent in Washington, D.C., 18 percent in Baltimore, 11 percent in Philadelphia, 7 percent in Chicago, and 5 percent in New York City. By 1930, the largest metropolitan black populations included: New York (327,706), Chicago (233,903), Philadelphia (219,599), Baltimore (142,106), Washington, D.C. (132,068), New Orleans (129,632), and Atlanta (90,075). See *Fourteenth Census of the United States*, Volume III: Population 1920 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1922); and *Fifteenth Census of the United States*, Volume III: Population, Parts I and II (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1932).

<sup>15</sup> Several recent dissertations describe African American cultural activities in 1920s-Washington. See Marya McQuirter, "Claiming the City: African Americans, Urbanization, and Leisure in Washington, D.C., 1902-1957" (Ph.D. diss., University of Michigan, 2000);

class participated in cultural activities as well. Working-class African American women and men attended plays, visited movie theaters and dance halls, and sometimes illegally sold or consumed alcohol.<sup>16</sup> These recreational, leisure, and artistic spaces in black Washington—including juke joints, theaters, dance halls, literary salons, movie theaters, and speakeasies—were no doubt influential in shaping black women’s approaches to politics. This dissertation, however, begins the work of understanding African American women’s political culture by focusing on churches, mutual benefit associations, schools, work experiences, street life, and social and political organizations.

A variety of local circumstances shaped the character of African American women’s political culture in the 1920s. Race relations in the city worsened during the decade. Following the end of World War I, the *Washington Post* began to print inflammatory articles claiming that African American men were attacking white women.<sup>17</sup> On the evening of July 19, a group of white soldiers and sailors gathered near the White House and began to attack black residents of the city. White men

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Angela Michelle Winand, “Weighed upon a Scale: African-American Women, Class, and Consumer Culture in New Orleans and Washington, D.C., 1880-1950” (Ph.D. diss., University of Michigan, 2003); Sarah Carr Schmalenberger, “The Washington Conservatory of Music and African-American Musical Experience, 1903-1941” (Ph.D. diss., University of Minnesota, 2004); Tamara Lizette Brown, “Lingering Lights from America’s Black Broadway: Negro Renaissance to the Black Arts Movement, African American Concert-Theatrical Dance in Washington, D.C.” (Ph.D. diss., Howard University, 2004); Abena Lewis-Mhoo, “Adorning Adversaries, Affecting Avenues: African American Women’s Impact on Adornment and Fashion Design in Washington, D.C., 1880-1950” (Ph.D. diss., Howard University, 2005); and Treva Blaine Lindsey, “Configuring Modernities: New Negro Womanhood in the Nation’s Capital, 1890-1940” (Ph.D. diss., Duke University, 2010).

<sup>16</sup> See Garrett Peck, *Prohibition in D.C.: How Dry We Weren’t* (Charleston: The History Press, 2011); “Booze Magnates Work Overtime in Washington,” *Chicago Defender*, September 10, 1921, 15; “A Hundred are Seized in a Hotch Raid,” *Chicago Defender*, February 17, 1923, 13; and “Fined Fifty Dollars,” *Washington Tribune*, January 4, 1929, 7.

<sup>17</sup> See, for instance, “Negroes Attack Girl,” *Washington Post*, July 19, 1919, 1.

pulled African Americans off streetcars and beat them. Six people died, and hundreds were injured.<sup>18</sup> The four-day riot ended when 2,000 soldiers began to patrol the city. In addition to this citywide violence, white police officers often harassed black residents. And in 1925 and 1926, the Ku Klux Klan paraded down Pennsylvania Avenue. Such visible violence and open displays of white supremacy existed alongside more hidden, but no less important, acts of violence against black women in the households where they lived and worked.<sup>19</sup> Meanwhile, segregation hardened during the 1920s with racial restrictions spreading to more neighborhoods, department stores, and recreational spaces.

The southern migration of African Americans from the South into Washington was another factor that shaped black women's politics in the 1920s. Approximately 15,000 migrants moved to the city between 1916 and 1920.<sup>20</sup> Most migrants traveled from South Carolina, North Carolina, Georgia, and Virginia to settle in the city.<sup>21</sup> While this influx of migrants was significant, it was smaller than

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<sup>18</sup> Delia Cunningham Mellis, "'The Monsters We Defy': Washington, D.C., in the Red Summer of 1919" (Ph.D. diss., City University of New York, 2008).

<sup>19</sup> For excellent accounts of the violence that African American servants in Washington experienced in the households where they worked and sometimes lived, see Elizabeth Clark-Lewis, *Living In, Living Out: African American Domestic Workers in Washington, D.C., 1900-1940* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1994); and *Freedom Bags*, VHS, directed by Elizabeth Clark-Lewis and Stanley Nelson (New York: Filmmakers Library, 1990).

<sup>20</sup> For these figures, see *Report of the Commissioners of the District of Columbia for the Year Ended June 30, 1917* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1917), Record Group 351, NARA.

<sup>21</sup> These states included South Carolina (7,596), North Carolina (3,878), Georgia (1,824), and Virginia (1,247). For the figures on the states of birth for the black population in 1920, see "Table 19: Native Negro Population of Each Division and Each State by Division and State of Birth: 1920," *Fourteenth Census of the United States, Part II* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1923), 636-640. For the figures on the states of birth for the

other cities, such as Chicago, Detroit, Baltimore, and Pittsburgh.<sup>22</sup> Not all black migrants were southern-born; African Americans from nearly every state in the nation moved to Washington for a variety of reasons, but especially for the prospect of government employment and to take advantage of the city's public school system. Some black women who moved to Washington maintained legal residence elsewhere and cast ballots in local and federal elections. And some African American women who had been born in the South could, in effect, serve as political lobbyists for their friends and families on a range of issues, including anti-lynching activism and campaigns against segregation and disfranchisement.

Many of Washington's African American women banded together to offer assistance to southern migrants, who were often in need of housing, employment, and childcare. For instance, some churches endeavored to accommodate migrants' basic needs by opening employment bureaus and day nurseries. The large influx of migrants in the late 1910s taxed the Phyllis Wheatley YWCA headquarters beyond its capacity, prompting the organization to petition the YWCA's War Work Council for a modern building in which to carry out their community service. When political activist Nannie Helen Burroughs created the National Association of Wage Earners, one of its founding aims was to "elevate the migrant classes of workers and

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black population in 1930, see "Table 23: Native Negro Population of Each Division and State, by Division and State of Birth: 1930," *Fifteenth Census of the United States, Part II* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1932), 163-167.

<sup>22</sup> For instance, between 1890 and 1930, the African American population of Illinois grew from 57,028 to 328,972, or 475 percent. For this figure, see Lisa G. Materson, *For the Freedom of Her Race: Black Women and Electoral Politics in Illinois, 1877-1932* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 9-10.

incorporate them permanently into service of some kind.”<sup>23</sup> In Washington, D.C., as in many cities across the country, interactions between southern migrants and longtime black residents sometimes resulted in intraracial tensions regarding religion, food, dress, and work habits.<sup>24</sup>

Also shaping black women’s politics in the 1920s was the high cost of living in the city, which increased during the decade. Between 1919 and 1930, streetcar fares, for example, doubled from 5 to 10 cents.<sup>25</sup> In 1919 Washington was ranked the fourth most expensive city in the nation in terms of food prices, which rose considerably during the 1920s.<sup>26</sup> On average, black Washingtonians paid higher rent than white Washingtonians, and the cost of renting a house or an apartment climbed throughout the decade. The rising cost of food, rent, and streetcar fare prompted many black women to try to assist elderly populations, poor people, and students.

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<sup>23</sup> Nannie Helen Burroughs, Washington, D.C., to “My Dear Friend,” March 26, 1921, as quoted in “National Association of Wage Earners,” *Washington Bee*, April 4, 1921, 1.

<sup>24</sup> For discussions of migrant/resident tensions across the United States, see Davarian L. Baldwin, *Chicago’s New Negroes: Modernity, the Great Migration, and Black Urban Life* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007); Richard W. Thomas, *Life for Us is What We Make It: Building Black Community in Detroit, 1915-1945* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982); Victoria L. Wolcott, *Remaking Respectability: African American Women in Interwar Detroit* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000); and Kimberly L. Phillips, *AlabamaNorth: African-American Migrants, Community, and Working-Class Activism in Cleveland, 1915-1945* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999).

<sup>25</sup> See “7-Cent Car Fare After Midnight,” *Washington Post*, October 31, 1919, 16, and “10-Cent Car Fare Awarded Trolley Lines,” *Washington Post*, July 20, 1930, 1.

<sup>26</sup> *High Cost of Living in the District of Columbia: Hearings before a Subcommittee on the District of Columbia, United States Senate 65th Cong., 1st sess., Senate Resolution 150* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1919), 35 and *passim*; and “Capital is Third in Food Cost Gain since before War,” *Washington Post*, January 24, 1926, M17.

Both federal and local authorities governed Washington during the 1920s. A three-member Board of Commissioners formed the local government of the city. The President of the United States appointed two of the commissioners, while the Army Corps of Engineers appointed the third. The Board of Commissioners appointed the city's police officers, School Board members, and public health officers. The Board also oversaw the funding of public works. The President appointed the justices to the District Supreme Court. The United States Senate's Committee on the District of Columbia convened special hearings on issues that arose in Washington and allocated the funds for special projects. And the United States Superintendent of Public Buildings and Grounds controlled the recreational spaces in Washington, including monuments, public parks, the zoo, and swimming pools. All residents of Washington, regardless of race or sex, were disfranchised with no vote in federal elections and no elected positions in local government. The only residents of the city who escaped these limitations were those who maintained residency in other states and voted there via absentee ballot.<sup>27</sup>

Within this system of governance that blocked nearly all formal political participation, African American women and men nevertheless engaged actively in politics. In neighborhood civic associations, they submitted petitions to the Board of Commissioners, asking for such municipal reforms as street paving, expanded mail delivery, and sewers. Throughout the decade, one African American woman and two African American men served on the city's School Board. And black residents of the

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<sup>27</sup> For information on the federal and local government, see Constance McLaughlin Green, *The Secret City: A History of Race Relations in the Nation's Capital* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967), 111-117.

city testified before Congress, weighing in on issues of both local and national concern, such as anti-lynching legislation, the state of the public schools in the city, and a memorial dedicated to the contributions of Africans to America. In addition to these formal appearances, black Washingtonians continued longstanding patterns of black activism by sitting in the galleries during congressional hearings, marching in a parade around federal buildings, and initiating protests against segregation within federal workspaces.

Close proximity to federal space also shaped black women's political activism. As residents of both the federal and local city, black women in Washington—unlike their counterparts in other American cities—straddled local and national politics as they daily encountered the federal government as employer, source of local government, and financier of public space and civic improvements. During the 1920s, with the return of Republicans to the White House and Congress, African Americans challenged the Republican Party to re-embrace its earlier commitment to civil rights. Much of federal racial policy involved issues of local concern to Washington residents, such as the segregation of swimming pools and bathing beaches, segregation in the offices of the federal government, and a proposed monument to the faithful slave, "Mammy." Black women viewed their local city policies and ordinances as touchstones for conversations about national racial practices and issues. Residence in Washington strategically positioned black women to take local issues, such as hardening segregation practices in their spaces of work and recreation, to national audiences. In addition, they seized upon their location in the nation's capital to press the Republican Party to enact racial justice for African

Americans throughout the country by passing an anti-lynching bill. Location in Washington also gave black women's organizations, associations, and institutions connections to the capital. Civil rights struggles in Washington often functioned as a testing ground for national movements, and black women waged fights against civil service and residential segregation within the context of 1920s-Washington politics. This dissertation therefore analyzes the significance of black women's politics in Washington on both local and national levels.

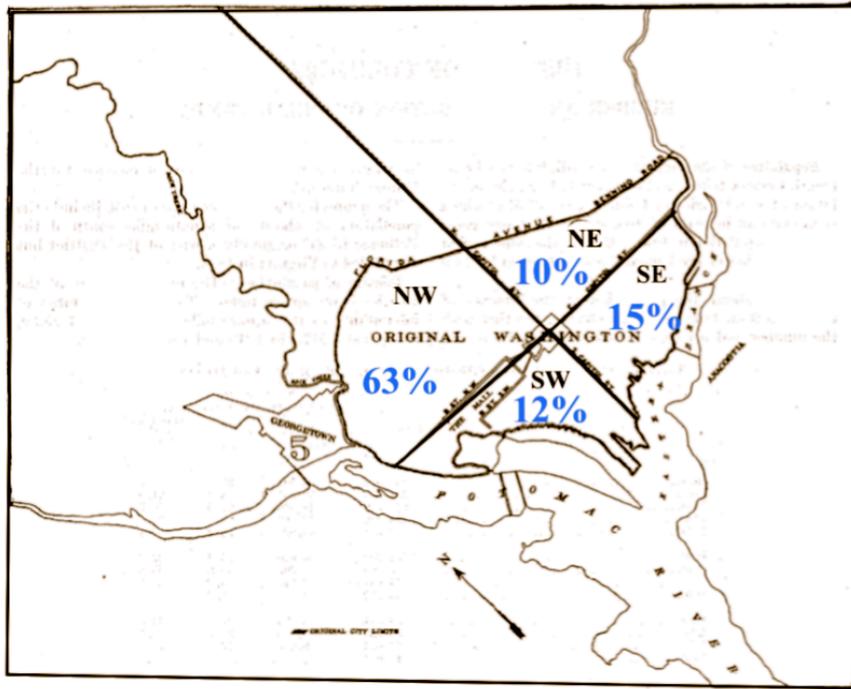
Not only did the circumstances of the 1920s shape black women's politics, but their location in diverse neighborhoods across the city also influenced their activism. During the decade, African Americans lived in each of the city's four quadrants. Through participation in the everyday activities of urban life, including work, streetcar travel, school, shopping, and institutional and organizational life, African American Washingtonians inhabited all corners of the city. As William Henry Jones, a sociologist of the city's black housing patterns noted in 1929, "It would not be an exaggeration to state that Negroes live in every residential block in Washington either as residents or as servants in somebody else's household."<sup>28</sup>

In 1920, 63 percent of the city's African Americans lived in the city's Northwest quadrant, while 15 percent lived in Southeast, 12 percent lived in Southwest, and 10 percent lived in Northeast (see figure 1).

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<sup>28</sup> Jones, *The Housing of Negroes in Washington, D.C.*, 57.

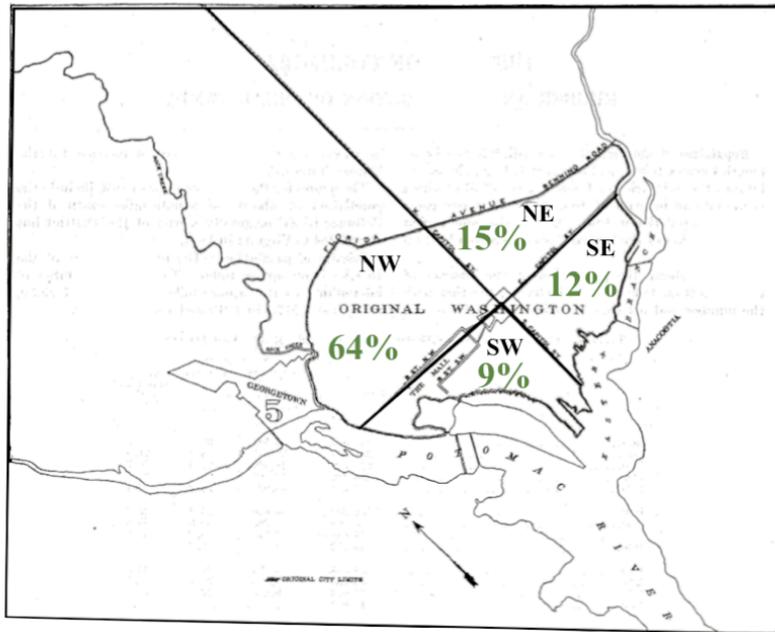
**Figure 1: Percentage of African Americans in Each Quadrant of Washington, 1920**



**Source:** *Fourteenth Census of the United States*, Volume III: Population: Composition and Characteristics of the Population by States (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1923), 182.

During the 1920s, the black population shifted slightly, but not significantly. Large numbers of black Washingtonians moved to the city's Northeast quadrant, settling into middle-class neighborhoods such as Deanwood and Lincoln Heights. Although black Washingtonians migrated out of Southeast and Southwest, those sections of the city retained high numbers of African Americans. In 1930, a large majority of African Americans (64 percent) continued to live in Northwest. But 15 percent of black Washingtonians lived in Northeast, 12 percent lived in Southeast, and 9 percent lived in Southwest (see figure 2).

**Figure 2: Percentage of African Americans in Each Quadrant of Washington, 1930**



**Source:** *Fifteenth Census of the United States*, Volume III: Population: Composition and Characteristics of the Population by States (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1932), 384.

Northwest Washington was the largest quadrant in the city. A majority of the city's African Americans lived in a dense section of Upper Northwest between 4th and 20th Streets. Among the many neighborhoods where they lived were LeDroit Park, DuPont Circle, Shaw, and Columbia Heights, each of which was different from the others. Shaw was a primarily working-class neighborhood that was close to Howard University and contained modest, two-story brick houses. LeDroit Park, also near the university, was a grander neighborhood, featuring three-story brick mansions trimmed with ornate detail. Between 1890 and the 1920s, many members of the

black elite moved to LeDroit Park, including Mary Church Terrell and Anna Julia Cooper.<sup>29</sup> Collectively, neighborhoods in Northwest featured hundreds of black businesses, ninety black churches, important organizations, such as the Phyllis Wheatley YWCA, and thirty-six schools, including two high schools and two colleges. There was a thriving nightlife in Northwest, with theaters, dance halls, and movie theaters. Mutual benefit and fraternal orders met at the True Reformers Hall, the Masonic Temple, or the Odd Fellows Hall. Neighborhoods in Northwest were lined with sidewalks and asphalt streets and crowded with bustling streetcar routes, seventeen firehouses, and eight police stations.<sup>30</sup> African Americans living in Northwest had the best access to municipal services, including schools, playgrounds, a swimming pool, and mail delivery.

African Americans who lived in Northeast, Southeast, and Southwest had more limited services. The black population increased in Northeast during the 1920s, with most African Americans living in Deanwood and Lincoln Heights. Deanwood was bordered between Kenilworth Avenue, Minnesota Avenue, and Dean Avenue. Lincoln Heights, located within Deanwood, was the site of Nannie Helen Burroughs's National Training School. Deanwood was a principally working-class neighborhood featuring modest, wooden-frame and brick houses. During the 1920s, it had a rural,

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<sup>29</sup> Jones, *Housing of Negroes in Washington, D.C.*, 65.

<sup>30</sup> *Report of the Commissioners of the District of Columbia for the Year Ended June 30, 1917* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1917), Record Group 351, Entry 9, National Archives, Washington, D.C.

small-town feel. Streets were mostly paved with granite and rubble or cobblestone.<sup>31</sup> African Americans attended twenty-six churches in Northeast and were served by four firehouses and two police stations. Important attractions in this area included Burroughs's Training School as well as the black amusement park, Suburban Gardens.

Southwest, the city's smallest quadrant, was located at the confluence of the Anacostia and Potomac Rivers. The African American population living in Southwest was primarily working-class; many male residents worked as laborers at the Navy Yard. Black citizens in Southwest were served by three firehouses and one police station, and the streets were mostly paved with asphalt or granite and rubble. Sixteen black churches were located in Southwest, as were two important meeting spaces, the Galilean Fisherman's Hall and the Samaritan Hall. In addition, there was a thriving black business community, including physicians, dentists, undertakers, and druggists. In the city's Southeast quadrant, African Americans principally lived in three neighborhoods, Anacostia, Garfield, and Barry Farms. Black residents of Southeast were served by four firehouses and only one police station, and the streets were mostly paved with asphalt. African Americans supported and maintained sixteen churches in this area, as well as one of Anacostia's most important fraternal orders, the National Sewing Council, which distributed clothing to poor children.

Black women's location in different neighborhoods across Washington often guided their political concerns. Through their residence in neighborhoods with

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<sup>31</sup> *Report of the Commissioners of the District of Columbia for the Year ended June 30, 1918* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1919), Record Group 351, Entry 9, National Archives, Washington, D.C.

differing access to municipal services, schools, and resources, African American women learned about the degree of inequality that existed within their city. While all African Americans across the city used civic associations to press for local reforms, their activism varied from neighborhood to neighborhood. For example, members of the Hillside Citizens' Association in Anacostia spent the 1920s petitioning the Board of Commissioners for better sewers and for drains in Stickfoot Creek.<sup>32</sup> In Deanwood in Northeast Washington, women and men lobbied for mail delivery.<sup>33</sup> Because the only black high schools were located in Northwest, African Americans from other parts of the city were forced to pay a high streetcar fare to travel across town. This inequity caused citizens in Northeast, Southeast, and Southwest to press for the construction of a high school in their respective neighborhoods.<sup>34</sup>

Black women's varying labor experiences also influenced their activism. For instance, teachers and attendance officers in the public schools banded together in the Sterling Relief Association, which raised money to furnish poor students with stockings, shoes, books, and carfare. These women knew firsthand that a lack of clothing, supplies, and streetcar fare could prevent students from receiving an education.<sup>35</sup> While teachers and attendance officers were raising money to ensure that African American students could receive an education, charwomen who labored for the federal government united to protest the re-classification of their salaries and

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<sup>32</sup> "Anacostia and Deanwood Hit by Big Flood," *Washington Tribune*, May 5, 1923, 1.

<sup>33</sup> "Mail Plea in Deanwood," *Washington Post*, June 11, 1923, 2.

<sup>34</sup> "Local News," *Washington Tribune*, January 20, 1923, 3.

<sup>35</sup> "Sterling Relief Association," *Washington Tribune*, February 18, 1922, 4.

to fight for a “living wage.”<sup>36</sup> The spatial landscape of these different types of jobs influenced black women’s strategies of organizing. For instance, in recruiting for the National Association of Wage Earners, laundresses who earned a living by washing clothes in their own homes often practiced street-based recruitment, whereas workers at the Bureau of Printing and Engraving used their workspace to enlist members in the organization.

Existing connections with churches, neighborhoods, schools, and fraternal orders often influenced black women’s activism. The ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment in 1920 spurred black women in Washington to establish Republican clubs to help elect Warren Harding. Black women did not create a citywide organization, but instead founded neighborhood-based clubs, thereby indicating that organizing occurred on the local level. Women in Northwest Washington joined the Colored Women’s Republican League, while women in Anacostia, a neighborhood in Southeast, formed an auxiliary to the organization that met the Campbell ME Church. And women in Deanwood, a neighborhood in Northeast, formed their own Republican League.<sup>37</sup> The fact that black women formed these new Republican clubs and leagues close to their homes demonstrates the ways in which activism emerged organically out of neighborhood-based organizing cultures. Moreover, black women’s existing organizational affiliations often nurtured new connections. For instance, in 1925, many black women who were active members of the Women’s

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<sup>36</sup> “Charwomen Protest,” *Washington Tribune*, July 26, 1924, 1.

<sup>37</sup> See “Women’s Republican League at Asbury,” *Washington Bee*, November 6, 1920, 2; and “Deanwood News,” *Washington Bee*, February 8, 1921, 7.

Political Study Club in Northwest Washington united to create a mutual benefit association, the Benevolent Protection of the Reindeers.<sup>38</sup>

Black women's residence in different neighborhoods, diverse labor experiences, and varied organizational and institutional connections shaped their political knowledge and flowed into their organizing and activism. The complexity of these different experiences demonstrates that black women did not constitute a monolithic political community. Considering black Washington's households, streets, worksites, schools, and churches illuminates how these spaces helped to shape African American women's understandings of and approaches to issues of both local and national concern.

### **Situating Black Women's Activism within the Literature**

Historians have long acknowledged the importance of African American women's organizations.<sup>39</sup> From the eighteenth century onward, African American women across the United States initiated, organized, and sustained thousands of mutual benefit societies, church groups, social clubs, and labor unions. These

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<sup>38</sup> "Reindeers Organize," *Washington Tribune*, August 29, 1925, 5.

<sup>39</sup> See, for example, Sharon Harley and Rosalyn Terborg-Penn, eds., *The Afro-American Woman: Struggles and Images* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1978); Gerda Lerner, ed., *Black Women in White America: A Documentary History* (New York: Random House, 1979); Cynthia Neverdon-Morton, *Afro-American Women of the South and the Advancement of the Race, 1895-1925* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1989); Anne Firor Scott, "Most Invisible of All: Black Women's Voluntary Associations," *Journal of Southern History* 56, no. 1 (February 1990): 3-22; Dorothy C. Salem, *To Better Our World: Black Women in Organized Reform* (Brooklyn: Carlson Press, 1990); Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993); Deborah Gray White, *Too Heavy a Load: Black Women in Defense of Themselves* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1999); and Bettye Collier-Thomas, *Jesus, Jobs, and Justice: African American Women and Religion* (New York: Random House, 2010).

organizations sometimes had multiple functions, from assisting members financially to offering a social space for friendship to acting as a collective body to press for rights and reforms. Tera W. Hunter, for instance, has documented the ways in which washerwomen in Atlanta organized neighborhood-based networks and fraternal societies, which they drew upon to mount a city-wide strike in 1881 for higher wages and greater autonomy.<sup>40</sup> Elsa Barkley Brown has painstakingly detailed Maggie Lena Walker's work as Right Worthy Grand Secretary of a mutual benefit association, the Independent Order of Saint Luke, examining the process by which she crafted programs to address race and gender.<sup>41</sup> This long and rich history of organizing led Stephanie Shaw to conclude that the formation of the National Association of Colored Women (NACW) in 1896 was not the moment when black women began to organize, but rather, a moment when they consolidated existing organizations.<sup>42</sup>

Historians have also addressed African American women's participation in electoral politics. The pioneering scholarship of Elsa Barkley Brown has demonstrated that in the aftermath of slavery, African American Richmonders viewed the vote "as a collective, not an individual, possession."<sup>43</sup> Barkley Brown's argument—that black women could influence politics despite their lack of the

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<sup>40</sup> Tera W. Hunter, *To 'Joy My Freedom: Southern Black Women's Lives and Labors after the Civil War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 74-97.

<sup>41</sup> Elsa Barkley Brown, "Womanist Consciousness: Maggie Lena Walker and the Independent Order of Saint Luke," *Signs* 14, no. 3 (Spring 1989): 610-633.

<sup>42</sup> Shaw, "Black Club Women and the Creation of the National Association of Colored Women."

<sup>43</sup> Elsa Barkley Brown, "Negotiating and Transforming the Public Sphere: African American Political Life in the Transition from Slavery to Freedom," *Public Culture* 7 (1994): 124.

franchise—has prompted scholars to carefully investigate the role of black women in politics and organizing.<sup>44</sup> In another important contribution, Lisa G. Materson documents the process by which black migrant women served, in effect, as “proxy voters,” representing the interests of their families in the South through activism in Illinois politics, especially by casting votes for the Republican Party.<sup>45</sup>

The literature on African American women and electoral politics widens considerably in the 1920s, when some black women in the North gained the franchise with the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment and founded national, partisan organizations.<sup>46</sup> Rosalyn Terborg-Penn argues that in the aftermath of the Nineteenth Amendment, racism from white woman’s suffrage groups, as well as widening economic inequality, prompted black suffrage activists to pursue reform strategies that aided all African Americans, both in the United States and across the African Diaspora. Terborg-Penn documents black women’s activism in anti-lynching, the International Council of Women of the Darker Races, and Garveyism. Although some white feminists (and some scholars) cast these efforts as black women privileging their race over their gender, Terborg-Penn argues that black women practiced feminism by addressing racial injustices.<sup>47</sup> While Evelyn Brooks

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<sup>44</sup> See, for example, Steven Hahn, *A Nation under Our Feet: Black Political Struggles in the Rural South from Slavery to the Great Migration* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003).

<sup>45</sup> Materson, *For the Freedom of Her Race*, 60-107.

<sup>46</sup> Lorraine Gates Schuyler, *The Weight of their Votes: Southern Women and Political Leverage in the 1920s* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 6-7.

<sup>47</sup> Rosalyn Terborg-Penn, “Discontented Black Feminists: Prelude and Postscript to the Passage of the Nineteenth Amendment,” in *We Specialize in the Wholly Impossible: A Reader in Black Women’s History*, ed. Darlene Clark Hine, Wilma King, and Linda Reed (Brooklyn: Carlson Publishing, 1995), 487-503.

Higginbotham acknowledges black women's reform work in the 1920s, she contends that they also remained active in partisan politics. Higginbotham examines the impact of black migration on women's voting patterns, as well as the role of the black press in raising awareness about woman suffrage and partisan causes. She also documents the political work of middle-class black clubwomen in organizations such as the National Association of Colored Women, the National League of Republican Colored Women, and the League of Women Voters. She argues that black women's participation in the 1920s partially laid the groundwork for African American voters to switch to the Democratic Party in the 1930s.<sup>48</sup> And Nikki J. Brown, in her analysis of middle-class black women's politics from World War I to the New Deal, documents the ways that black women worked to push racial justice onto the Republican Party platform throughout the 1920s.<sup>49</sup>

These studies have made important contributions by describing the role of African American women's politics in the 1920s, whether through reform movements or partisan activism, but they have largely centered on leaders and organizations. This dissertation builds upon this scholarship, but broadens the focus to connect leaders and organizations with their grassroots constituencies. Generally speaking, leaders performed important political work by crafting the ideological program, delivering speeches, forging alliances, and guiding the trajectory of their organizations. But, as this dissertation argues, it was often the individual members

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<sup>48</sup> Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, "In Politics to Stay: Black Women Leaders and Party Politics in the 1920s," in *Unequal Sisters: A Multicultural Reader in U.S. Women's History*, ed. Vicki L. Ruiz and Ellen Carol DuBois (New York: Routledge, 2000), 303-304.

<sup>49</sup> Nikki J. Brown, *Private Politics and Public Voices: Black Women's Activism from World War I to the New Deal* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 132-133.

who sustained these organizations' day-to-day work by recruiting members, participating in programs, and connecting organizations with their own church, fraternal, and neighborhood networks. This dissertation attempts to document the women who filled the church pews, canvassed businesses for donations, marched in parades, participated in fraternal orders, recruited neighbors to join organizations, and circulated political knowledge.

This dissertation also joins scholars whose work connects social history with politics. Historians have broadened the definition of politics to include issues of resistance, organizing, the process of policymaking, the formation of institutions, and political culture. While these new categories of politics are not intended to diminish the impact of the formal politics that occurred in elections, legislation, political parties, voting, and office holding, scholars have widened the scope of inquiry to discern how ordinary people created social movements, practiced politics, and behaved in political ways.<sup>50</sup> This new scholarship is important not only for the innovative arguments posited, but also for the sources employed. By tapping a rich repository of social history in newspapers, city directories, census data, and oral histories, these historians have uncovered the process of political mobilization among ordinary people. This dissertation joins this body of scholarship by illuminating the ways that black women in Washington worked to influence both local and federal

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<sup>50</sup> See, for example, Lawrence Goodwyn, *The Democratic Promise: The Populist Moment in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976); Steven Hahn, *The Roots of Southern Populism: Yeoman Farmers and the Transformation in the Georgia Upcountry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983); Jane Dailey, *Before Jim Crow: The Politics of Race in Postemancipation Virginia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000); Stephen Kantrowitz, *Ben Tillman and the Reconstruction of White Supremacy* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001); and Jane Dailey, Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore, and Bryant Simon, eds., *Jumpin' Jim Crow: Southern Politics from Civil War to Civil Rights* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).

policy. It takes a broad view of politics, analyzing the ways that Washington's black women worked for justice in their schools, neighborhoods, workplaces, and in federal spaces within the city.

Finally, this dissertation contributes to the growing historiography about African Americans in Washington, D.C. Early studies exposed the contradictions of racial inequality in the nation's capital, charting the "secret city."<sup>51</sup> More recently, scholars have begun to center histories of black Washington more specifically on questions of gender, labor, politics, and culture. Sharon Harley's dissertation examined African American women in Washington between 1880 and 1920, charting the lives, labors, and activities of women living across the city.<sup>52</sup> Marya McQuirter documents how African Americans made claims to such spaces in Washington, D.C., including public libraries, amusement parks, and shopping centers, forming an important part of their urbanization process.<sup>53</sup> Through oral history, Elizabeth Clark-Lewis has analyzed the process by which African American domestic servants embarked upon the transition from "living in" to "living out."<sup>54</sup> Eric Yellin examines the ways in which black civil servants protested segregation policies during the Wilson administration.<sup>55</sup> Kate Masur has examined the Reconstruction period in Washington, analyzing how African American claims to the state resulted in the

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<sup>51</sup> Green, *The Secret City*.

<sup>52</sup> Harley, "Black Women in the District of Columbia, 1880-1920."

<sup>53</sup> McQuirter, "Claiming the City."

<sup>54</sup> Clark-Lewis, *Living In, Living Out*.

<sup>55</sup> Eric S. Yellin, "In the Nation's Service: Racism and Federal Employees in Woodrow Wilson's Washington" (Ph.D. diss., Princeton University, 2007).

creation of the Board of Commissioners and weak political representation for residents of the city, as well as a precedent for the disfranchisement of black and white voters across the South.<sup>56</sup> Treva Lindsey documents the ways that African American women fused concepts of the New Negro and the New Woman in Washington, D.C., as illustrated by their engagement with suffrage activism, education, beauty culture, and leisure culture.<sup>57</sup> Other relevant works have examined such topics in black Washington as alley life, the transformation of the black middle class, and the city's NAACP branch.<sup>58</sup>

Scholars have also written extensively on elite, middle-class women and men in Washington, such as Nannie Helen Burroughs, Anna Julia Cooper, Mary Church Terrell, Carter G. Woodson, Emmett J. Scott, and Archibald Grimké. These studies have acknowledged the important leadership that these women and men provided, both to their particular institutions and to black communities across Washington.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Masur, *An Example for All the Land*.

<sup>57</sup> Lindsey, "Configuring Modernities."

<sup>58</sup> See James Borchert, *Alley Life in Washington: Family, Community, Religion, and Folklife in the City, 1850-1970* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1980); Jacqueline M. Moore, *Leading the Race: The Transformation of the Black Elite in the Nation's Capital, 1880-1920* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1999); Lewis Newton Walker, Jr., "The Struggles and Attempts to Establish Branch Autonomy and Hegemony: A History of the District of Columbia Branch Association for the Advancement of Colored People, 1912-1942" (Ph.D. diss., University of Delaware, 1979).

<sup>59</sup> Bruce D. Dickson, Jr., *Archibald Grimké: Portrait of a Black Independent* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1993); Beverly Washington Jones, "Quest for Equality: The Life of Mary Eliza Church Terrell, 1863-1954" (Ph.D. diss., University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, 1980); Jacqueline Goggin, *Carter G. Woodson: A Life in Black History* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1993); M. Melinda Chateaubert "The Third Step: Anna Julia Cooper and Black Education in the District of Columbia, 1910-1960," *Sage* (1988): 7-13; Sharon Harley, "The Black Goddess of Liberty: Nannie Helen Burroughs," *Journal of Negro History* 81 (1996): 62-71; Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham,

This dissertation builds on such work, but expands it to focus on the everyday work of politics and the women and men who joined political organizations and participated in political campaigns. To chart black women's everyday work of politics, organizing, and activism from the bottom up, this dissertation relies on a range of sources, including organizational records, personal papers, black and white newspapers, social scientific studies, government documents, court cases, oral histories, Sanborn maps, city directories, and the manuscript census.

### **Chapter Outline**

The chapters in this dissertation begin with black women's activism on the local level and then gradually examine the ways that black women's activism in Washington D.C., expanded to address more national concerns. Chapter 1 analyzes African American women's work in churches and mutual benefit associations throughout the city. It examines how women's affiliation with these institutions helped them hone such skills as public speaking, fundraising, and recruitment. Work within churches and mutual benefit associations also familiarized African American

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"Religion, Politics, and Gender: The Leadership of Nannie Helen Burroughs," *Journal of Religious Thought* 44, no. 2 (1988): 7-22; Dormetria La Sharne Robinson, "Nannie Helen Burroughs: The Trailblazer," *American Baptist Quarterly* 23, no. 2 (2004): 155-178; Victoria Wolcott "'Bible, Bath, and Broom': Nannie Helen Burrough's National Training School and African-American Racial Uplift," *Journal of Women's History* 9, no. 1 (1999): 88-110; Traki Lynn Taylor, "God's School on the Hill: Nannie Helen Burroughs and the National Training School for Women and Girls, 1909-1961" (Ph.D. diss., University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, 1998); Tameka Dunlap, "Washington's Sweetheart: Nannie Helen Burroughs" (Ph.D. diss., Howard University, 2008); Karen Ann Johnson, "'Uplifting the Women and the Race': A Black Feminist Theoretical Critique of the Lives, Work, and the Educational Philosophies of Anna Julia Cooper and Nannie Helen Burroughs" (Ph.D. diss., University of California, Los Angeles, 1997); Rosalie M. Sanderson, "Mary Church Terrell: A Black Woman's Crusade for Justice" (M.A. thesis, University of Arkansas, 1973); and Brittney Cooper, "Race Women: The Politics of Black Female Leadership in Nineteenth and Twentieth Century America" (Ph.D. diss., Emory University, 2009).

women with some of the inequalities in housing, nutrition, and health care that black Washingtonians faced. Finally, churches and mutual benefit associations instilled in black women philosophies of commitment. In churches and mutual benefit associations, I argue, black women developed the organizing skills that they employed in more formal political movements.

Chapter 2 examines black women's work with the Phyllis Wheatley YWCA. During the 1920s, African American women acquired a new headquarters from the national YWCA's War Work Council, which required them to increase their fundraising and recruitment activities. I argue that activities at the YWCA demonstrate that black women's politics and organizing involved not only rhetoric and mobilization, but also such pragmatic concerns as securing adequate meeting rooms, locating shelter, and providing meals. Owning and managing their own building enabled black women to meet some of the needs that emerged in the course of their activism.

Chapter 3 focuses on the 1,121 women and men who joined the District Union, the Washington Branch of the National Association of Wage Earners. The leadership of the District Union succeeded in gathering a cross-class membership by crafting a democratic recruitment process, by intervening in local labor issues, and by situating the organization within existing sites of women and men's organizing and activism. Examining the process of recruitment into the District Union illuminates the ways in which black Washingtonians forged political connections within households, within neighborhoods, at work sites, and through community institutions such as schools, churches, and mutual benefit associations.

Chapter 4 analyzes African American women's politics in the school system. It documents black women's work to reform the school system by campaigning for neighborhood-based school resources for students, protesting the ban on married teachers to expand employment opportunities, and demanding the firing of white teacher H. M. Bernloet Moens while also seeking the resignation of Assistant Superintendent Roscoe C. Bruce. In their activism for educational reform, I show, African American women relied on their existing political networks.

Chapter 5 examines African American women's Republican activism and organizing in the city. Ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment inspired black women in Washington to channel their organizing traditions into activism on behalf of Republican candidates. They founded a number of Republican organizations, including the Colored Women's Republican League, the Women's Political Study Club, and the National League of Republican Colored Women. Within these organizations, they worked to end disfranchisement of African Americans in the U.S. South, prevent the confirmation of Supreme Court nominee John J. Parker, and emphasize the importance of voting and voter education, even when most residents of the city could not cast a ballot.

Chapter 6 explores African American women's fight fought for the passage of an anti-lynching law. By participating in early morning prayer services, observing Congressional hearings, marching in a parade around federal buildings, or testifying before Congress, African American women banded together within their churches, mutual benefit associations, and political organizations to demand an anti-lynching law. They also seized on their location in Washington, D.C., to act as political

surrogates for their friends, family members, and black women in cities and towns across the nation, thereby making their anti-lynching movement a national as well as local affair.

Chapter 7 examines African American women's fights against segregation on multiple fronts, including the offices of the federal government and the city's neighborhoods. In their battle against civil service segregation, black women took an issue of local concern and pressed the federal government to adopt a policy of racial integration. While they did not succeed on this issue, their encounters with the federal government, specifically the Republican Party, helped to circulate awareness to African Americans across the country about the party's limitations on the question of racial justice. And African Americans' protest against residential segregation resulted in the landmark Supreme Court decision *Corrigan v. Buckley*, which upheld restrictive covenants. African American women's work to make the spaces of the city more democratic extended beyond attacking segregation. Black women also weighed in on issues of commemoration by using public monuments as instruments to uphold African American citizenship. In 1922, black women dedicated the Frederick Douglass house in Southeast Washington. Between 1923 and 1924, they protested the prospect of a monument to the faithful slave, "Mammy." And between 1924 and 1928, they raised money and testified before Congress for the construction of a National Negro Memorial.

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In their politics, organizing, and activism in 1920s-Washington, D.C., African American women drew upon a range of resources and experiences—including their

particular locations in the city, their networks in churches, fraternal orders, neighborhoods, and social clubs, and their personal lives—to initiate and sustain a variety of political campaigns. A number of spaces in black Washington’s political culture, including households, churches, fraternal orders, social clubs, and neighborhoods, were important to the day-to-day logistics of organizing. Black women’s politics and organizations both emerged out of and maintained alliances with this rich landscape of black institutional culture, which offered constituencies, sources of fundraising, and sites for meeting spaces and the circulation of news and ideas. Members infused these organizations with their existing institutional connections and knowledge networks, which helped sustain their day-to-day work of politics and activism.

This is a dissertation about people who, at first glance, appear to have had little power and wield little control in their everyday lives. Many of the subjects in this dissertation were teachers, domestic workers, laundresses, hairdressers, and housewives. Through their numerous acts of banding together fraternally, joining a church group, or meeting in a neighborhood civic association, African American women participated in the process of coming together and building community, which was a crucial ingredient in their politics, organizing, and activism.

## **Chapter 1: “Pledge a Small Amount so the Church Will Know You are Standing By Old Shiloh”: Political Education in Neighborhood Institutions**

### **Introduction**

For many African American women in Washington, D.C., as elsewhere, activism began at the neighborhood level. In their work to nurture and maintain churches and mutual benefit associations, African American women forged connections that would be important in their more overtly political organizations. African American women’s experiences in their churches and mutual benefit associations often shaped their participation in formal politics. The process operated on several levels. Churches and mutual benefit associations were often the places where women first encountered in a collective way the needs of their communities, began to organize and fundraise, and to develop models of community activism that would inform their more formal political work. Furthermore, churches and mutual benefit associations often provided black women a set of potential constituents for recruitment to their political causes. Black women who later became prominent in citywide political organizations and activities might have waged their very first fundraising campaign for a church organization, or begun their public speaking career within a mutual benefit association. Within these neighborhood institutions many African American women developed their political acumen. African American women, then, often came to formal political organizations equipped with skills they had honed in neighborhood settings.

Many churches and fraternal orders also conducted outreach programs to address some of the inequalities that black Washingtonians confronted. Between

1900 and 1930, some of the most pressing matters concerned employment, housing, medical treatment, childcare, and assistance for elderly residents. In working with their churches and fraternal orders to resolve some of these problems, African American women developed a familiarity with the day-to-day struggles of black Washingtonians that informed their sense of what kind of organizing was needed.

Churches and mutual benefit associations also instilled in members philosophies of commitment that were acquired through decades of work. Any act of collectivism, whether to sustain a church or pledge money to a mutual benefit association, required all participants to continually construct bonds of faith in their commitment. “The base of every social movement,” the historian Paul Ortiz writes, “is made up of relationships of trust knitted together by individuals who spend time establishing the foundations of collective self-confidence needed to challenge power.”<sup>1</sup> Formal rituals and everyday activities within these institutions—church rallies, fraternal testimonies, community dinners, weekly meetings, and celebrations—helped to develop and strengthen these relationships. Black women brought these principles of collectivism into their formal political organizing.

This study of black women’s activism in Washington, D.C., in the 1920s thus begins by surveying some of these activities, looking at the ways that churches and mutual benefit associations provided black women with an important foundation for their political activism, whether it was honing particular skills, offering models for organizing, providing space to learn about and engage the issues within their neighborhoods and the community at large, or instilling within them an ideology of

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Ortiz, *Emancipation Betrayed: The Hidden History of Black Organizing and White Violence from the End of Reconstruction to the Bloody Election of 1920* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 119.

collective commitment. Black women's participation in churches and mutual benefit associations mattered tremendously in their formal political activism.

### **African American Women and the Politics of Churches**

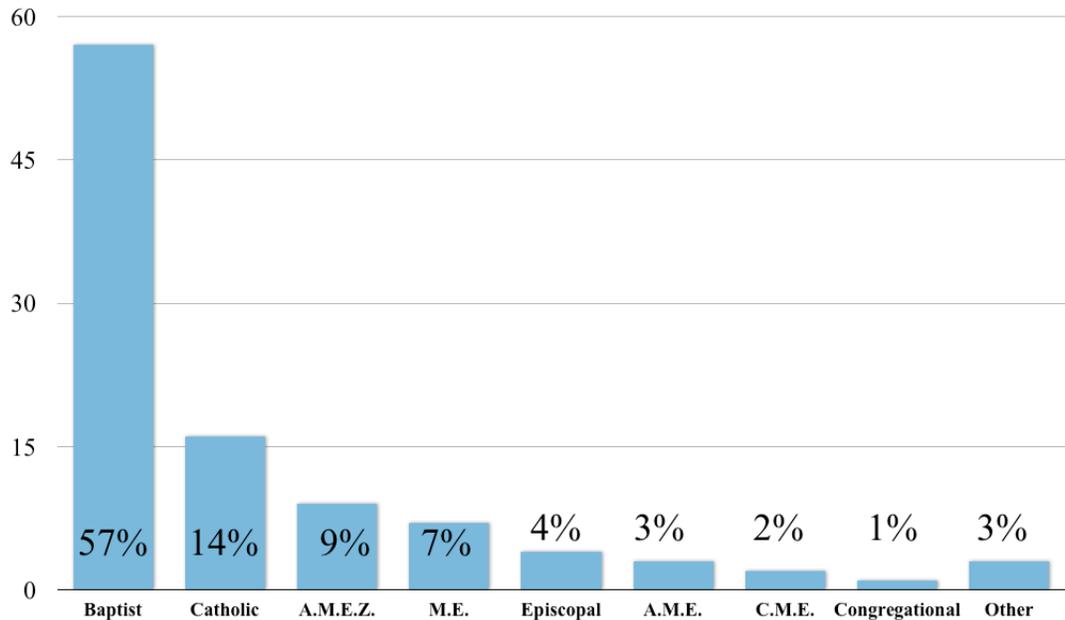
During the 1920s, black Washingtonians worked to maintain more than 150 churches in different neighborhoods across the city. The 1926 federal census of religious bodies revealed that 144,764 African Americans, or 60 percent of all black people in Washington, D.C., belonged to a church. The major denominations African Americans attended were African Methodist Episcopal (AME), African Methodist Episcopal Zion (AMEZ), Baptist, Catholic, Christian Methodist Episcopal (CME), Congregationalist, Episcopalian, and Methodist Episcopal (ME) (see figure 3). The actual number of church members was probably higher because this report tracked only members of official denominations, thereby excluding the women and men who attended services in holiness, spiritualist, alley, and storefront churches.<sup>2</sup> The historian James Borchert notes that churches in “alley dwellings” were often hidden and known only to local residents.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> “Table 38,” *Religious Bodies: 1926* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1926), 730.

<sup>3</sup> James Borchert, *Alley Life in Washington: Family, Community, Religion, and Folklife in the City, 1850-1970* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1980), 201.

**Figure 3: 1926 Census of African American Church Memberships Across Religious Denomination in Washington, D.C.**



**Source:** “Table 38,” *Religious Bodies: 1926* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1926), 730; and *Report of the Commissioners of the District of Columbia for the Year Ended June 30, 1926*.

The importance of church organizations to black women’s political culture cannot be overstated because these institutions strengthened many important skills, including fundraising, publicity, and public speaking. The historian Bettye Collier-Thomas acknowledges the powerful influence that church groups played in black women’s political development. “These associations,” she writes, “taught women organizational skills, how to work together, and to value themselves and their abilities. Women’s missionary societies and conventions within the church

unwittingly laid the groundwork for a national black feminist awareness.”<sup>4</sup>

Examining African American women’s activities in church organizations during the 1920s illustrates this process.

African American women participated in a variety of activities within their churches. In addition to regular weekly services, African American churches maintained a calendar of events that provided women opportunities for organizing and leadership. . Some of these events included “Race Relations Sunday,” “Thrift Sunday,” “Mother’s Day,” “Woman’s Day,” and services marking the anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation. Woman’s Day especially was often connected to the work of various women’s organizations in the city. For example, in 1921, the Federated Women’s Clubs spearheaded the Woman’s Day program at Metropolitan AME Church in Northwest, while in November 1921, when congregants at the Ebenezer ME Church in Southeast gathered to celebrate Woman’s Day one of the addresses they heard was by Women’s Christian Temperance Union organizer Rosetta Lawson.<sup>5</sup> While churches were often sites for many black women’s clubs

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<sup>4</sup> Bettye Collier-Thomas, *Jesus, Jobs, and Justice: African American Women and Religion* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2010), 120. See also Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women’s Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993); Frederic C. Harris, “Rock in a Weary Land: Religious Institutions and African-American Political Activism,” in *Something Within: African American Religion and Political Activism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 86-120; Charles Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African American Experience* 13th ed. (Durham: Duke University Press, 1990); and Barbara Dianne Savage, *Your Spirits Walk Beside Us: The Politics of Black Religion* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), 4.

<sup>5</sup> “Woman’s Day,” *Washington Tribune*, November 26, 1921, 4, Fourteenth Census of the United States, Washington City, 1920, Enumeration District 120, Sheet 11B and Enumeration District 197, Sheet 12B.

and organizations to meet, special days like these offered opportunities for African American women to bring their political work directly into the church service.

Within church organizations, African American women had the opportunity to hear many styles of oratory and to hone their own public speaking skills. In August 1925, for instance, black women and men in the Christian Endeavor Society at the Nineteenth Street Baptist Church gathered for presentations on the subject of “The Progress and Achievements of the American Negro.” Younger African American women shared the stage with more practiced activists. Emma Hall presented a paper on Frederick Douglass and Marian Butler, secretary of the local chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and of the District Federation of Colored Women’s Clubs of Washington and Vicinity, offered a paper that discussed Booker T. Washington, meanwhile Bernice Jones, age fifteen, Inez Rivers, age fourteen, and Princess Richardson, age thirteen, presented papers on “Negro Religion,” the life of scientist George Washington Carver, and Paul Laurence Dunbar’s “Antebellum Sermon,” respectively. The report of the occasion in the *Washington Tribune* noted that Louise Johnson’s paper on the life of Harriet Tubman was “a real gem and must have cost many hours of research.”<sup>6</sup>

For all churches, fundraising—for building and maintaining places of worship, for the pastor’s salary, and for their many community outreach efforts—was an ongoing necessity. In the early 1920s, the minister and members of Shiloh Baptist Church in Northwest Washington decided to purchase a new building to

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<sup>6</sup> “Nineteenth Street Baptist Church CE Street,” *Washington Tribune*, August 1, 1925, 2. The ages of the speakers are derived from Fourteenth Census of the United States, 1920, Washington City, Enumeration District 26, Sheet 6B (Hall); E.D. 41, Sheet 5B (Jones), Sheet 9B (Rivers), and Sheet 6B (Richardson).

accommodate their growing congregation. Through intricate organizing drives, conducted by individual members and by clubs affiliated with the church, congregants raised \$50,000 to purchase the building. The *Shiloh Herald* listed the amount of money that each member had pledged as well as contributed. These pledges ranged from \$1 to \$100. The list of pledges made in March 1924 reveals that women and men of all ages and backgrounds participated. Collectively, women made 62 percent of the pledge while men 38 percent.<sup>7</sup>

In addition to paying for church construction and maintenance, black women also raised money for the pastor. At the First Baptist Church in Northwest, women and men belonged to an organization called the “Sisters and Brothers and Friends of Benevolence,” which, in a 1922 campaign spearheaded by Mary E. Milstead and Ella Clark, presented a gift of \$180 to their pastor, Reverend James L. Pinn. Important organizers in the campaign included Mary E. Milstead, a housewife, and Ella Clark, a notetaker. Ella Clark and her husband boarded in Mary Milstead’s home.<sup>8</sup> And when the Reverend Hampton T. Medford was assigned to the pulpit of John Wesley AMEZ Church, a group of women worked to ensure that he would have a warm welcome to Washington. A church delegation met Medford, his wife, and their two sons at Union Station when their train arrived from Kentucky around midnight in July 1923; and they escorted them to their new home. When the Medford family arrived, a “score of

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<sup>7</sup> “Pledges,” *The Shiloh Herald* 4, no. 10 (March 1924): 4, Reel 1, Shiloh Baptist Church Records, Manuscript Division, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library, New York City (hereafter cited as Shiloh-NYPL).

<sup>8</sup> “Locals News,” *Washington Tribune*, January 21, 1922, 2. For these members in the census, see Fourteenth Census of the United States, Washington City, 1920, Enumeration District 159, Sheet 5B.

members were waiting to receive them at the parsonage” where they presented them with a “pantry and kitchen shower.”<sup>9</sup>

Each congregation relied on a series of programs and organizations that bore the burden of securing the church’s operating expenses. John Wesley AMEZ, which had a large congregation in Northwest Washington, developed a vast network of fundraising organizations, many of them newly founded in the 1920s, including the Church Extension Club (1921), the Stewardess Board (1923), the Everready Improvement Circle (1924), the Trustees Aid Club (1924), and the Self-Denial Club (1926). African American women served as leaders and members of many of these clubs.<sup>10</sup> Maggie P. Johnson and Mary B. Wallace chaired the Altar Guild Society, which also raised money for the coal fund.<sup>11</sup> Ethel Quarles directed the parsonage fund, Helen Ringgold was in charge of the Church Extension Fund, and Katie Shepherd oversaw the Senior Stewardess fund.<sup>12</sup>

Common fundraising strategies included the appointment of captains to secure money from various sectors of the congregation and the employment of a competitive focus, often pitting the men’s fundraising abilities against the women’s. It was not uncommon for the women’s teams to demonstrate the greater prowess. In November 1926, church members at the John Wesley AMEZ staged a rally where men and women competed to see who could raise the most money. Clarence P. Brooks led the

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<sup>9</sup> “Locals and Society,” *Washington Tribune*, July 19, 1923, 2.

<sup>10</sup> Harold T. Pinkett, *National Church of Zion Methodism: A History of John Wesley A.M.E. Zion Church, Washington, D.C.* (Baltimore: Gateway Press, Inc., 1989), 107.

<sup>11</sup> “Locals and Society,” *Washington Tribune*, August 2, 1924, 2.

<sup>12</sup> “John Wesley A.M.E. Z. Church,” *Washington Tribune*, February 14, 1925, 2.

men and Ida V. Thompson Smith led the women. In Smith, the women had a veteran fundraiser. Widow of Bishop John Smith, she had worked as the treasurer for the Women's Home and Foreign Missionary Society of the AMEZ Church since 1912, a job that required her to travel throughout the city and across the country, attending conferences and raising money.<sup>13</sup> The *Washington Tribune* reported that "the financial rally contest between men and women closed Tuesday night with the women leading." In honor of the women's victory, "a mammoth leadership reception was tendered by the men."<sup>14</sup> In November 1929, men and women competed against each other in a financial rally at the Third Baptist Church in Northwest. One of the captains was Irene Fletcher, who was active in the church's Sisterhood Group, N. 1, as well as the La Jarva Art Circle.<sup>15</sup>

Pastors and church leaders emphasized the collective process of maintaining their church as part of the work of community building. During the annual "Fall Drive" of John Wesley AMEZ Church in September 1925, leaders convened a special "Home Coming" service. Here "families were requested to sit together, and mothers, fathers, and children were asked to stand at particular times." In tandem with this community and family-based activity "captains, leaders, and members reported. . .

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<sup>13</sup> Smith had inherited a substantial sum from her father, which she sometimes drew upon to financially assist churches in time of distress. "Woman's Missionary Society of A.M.E. Zion Church Meets in Detroit," *Atlanta Daily World*, July 23, 1939, A3; and William J. Walls, *The African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church: Reality of the Black Church* (Charlotte: A.M.E. Zion Publishing House, 1974), 412.

<sup>14</sup> "John Wesley Church," *Washington Tribune*, November 17, 1926, 4.

<sup>15</sup> "Big Rally at Third Baptist Church," *Washington Tribune*, November 1, 1929, 4.

their money for the fall drive.”<sup>16</sup> Fundraising was thus represented as an act of family and community, and public commitment.

In support of their churches and in these fundraising drives, black Washingtonians of various economic means pledged and contributed money. For instance, when Shiloh Baptist raised money for its new building, Louisa Catlett, a sewer who repaired mail bags, pledged \$100 and by 1924 had paid \$20. Emma Braxton, a servant, had paid \$25. Housewife Alice J. Early, who pledged \$25 had paid \$3. And Gladys Manning, an eleven year-old girl, paid 63¢.<sup>17</sup> Along with these individual pledges, seven different organizations spearheaded the fundraising, including the Social Reapers Club, the Choir Club, the Woman’s Club, the Sunday School, the Usher’s Board and Ladies Auxiliary, the Christian Endeavor Society, and the Sacrifice Club. By April 1924, the church was able to move into its new home at 9th and T Streets in Northwest. But seven months later, tragedy struck. In a presumed act of racial terrorism, an arsonist lit a fire and the church burned for two hours, destroying much of the interior and the pipe organ.<sup>18</sup> This fire prompted other black churches in Washington, including Mount Olive, Mount Airy, Nineteenth Street Baptist, Metropolitan Baptist, Ebenezer ME, as well as the white Foundry ME Church, to all assist financially in the rebuilding campaign.<sup>19</sup> All of these examples

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<sup>16</sup> “Church and Sunday School Program,” *Washington Tribune*, October 10, 1925, 3.

<sup>17</sup> “Pledges,” *The Shiloh Herald* 4, no. 10 (March 1924): 4, Reel 1, Shiloh-NYPL. Occupational and age data from Fourteenth Census of the United States, Washington City, 1920, E.D. 304, Sheet 5B (Catlett), E.D. 194, Sheet 19B (Braxton), Enumeration District 197, Sheet 8B (Early), E.D. 201, Sheet 15A (Manning).

<sup>18</sup> “Fifth Mystery Blaze Wrecks Shiloh Church,” *Baltimore Afro-American*, August 1, 1925, A1.

demonstrate that participation in daily church activities equipped women with fundraising skills as well as important fundraising models. In these endeavors and activities, black women could experience firsthand the power of collectivism. The pennies, nickels, dimes, and dollars that church members pledged to assist Shiloh Baptist totaled enough money for a new building and organ. It was this power of collectivism that black women aimed to replicate in their political organizing.

Fundraising campaigns were not limited to adults; within churches, young women often began to learn the responsibility of contributing and the art of coaxing support for their causes. At the Cosmopolitan Baptist Church in Northwest Washington whose members proposed to raise \$250,000 to construct a “Cosmopolitan Institute Center” that would provide instruction in “domestic science, carpentry, millinery, tailoring, and dressmaking,” “schoolchildren” were urged to do their part by each donating 10¢.<sup>20</sup> To raise money for the Simpson ME Church, members gathered for a “ninety-eight cent rally” at the black amusement park, Suburban Gardens, located in Deanwood, where they feasted on fried chicken, cake, and ice cream and heard a sermon by a female evangelist, Isabelle R. Bundy.<sup>21</sup> In 1927, the Third Baptist Church held an ambitious “4,000” rally where every adult member was asked to donate \$10 and every child, \$2.50.<sup>22</sup> The inclusion of children

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<sup>19</sup> “Shiloh Church Starts big task of rebuilding,” *Washington Tribune*, August 15, 1925, 1.

<sup>20</sup> “Colored Church Opens \$250,000 Campaign,” *Washington Post*, September 21, 1924, W3.

<sup>21</sup> “Simpson M.E. Church,” *Washington Tribune*, August 11, 1923, 2.

<sup>22</sup> “Colored Churches Change Schedules,” *Washington Post*, January 4, 1927, 6.

in these fundraising campaigns emphasized the obligations of all—young and old, those with greater and those with lesser means—teaching a political ideal as well as religious lesson.

Within the framework of their church-based organizing, black women and men did more than address that particular institution's needs; they also worked to address many of the issues facing black Washingtonians. During World War I and the 1920s, the surge in black migration and rising cost of living prompted many churches across the city to broaden their community outreach efforts.<sup>23</sup>

Approximately 15,000 migrants moved to the city between 1916 and 1919, and many of them were in need of housing and employment.<sup>24</sup> Between 1919 and 1930, streetcar fares doubled from 5¢ to 10¢.<sup>25</sup> In 1919, Washington was ranked the fourth most expensive city in the nation in terms of food prices, which rose considerably during the 1920s.<sup>26</sup> On average, black Washingtonians paid higher rent than white

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<sup>23</sup> For information on the ways that World War I and the 1920s caused churches to expand their outreach efforts, see *Asbury—Our Legacy, Our Faith, 1836-1993* in Reel 5, Records of the Asbury M.E. Church, Manuscript Division, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library, New York City (hereafter cited as *Asbury-NYPL*).

<sup>24</sup> For these figures, see *Report of the Commissioners of the District of Columbia for the Year Ended June 30, 1917*. Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, (1916-1919), RG351-NARA.

<sup>25</sup> See “7-Cent Car Fare After Midnight,” *Washington Post*, October 31, 1919, 16 and “10-Cent Car Fare Awarded Trolley Lines,” *Washington Post*, July 20, 1930, 1.

<sup>26</sup> *High Cost of Living in the District of Columbia: Hearings before a Subcommittee on the District of Columbia, United States Senate 65th Cong., 1st sess., Senate Resolution 150* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1919), 35 and *passim*; and “Capital is Third in Food Cost Gain Since before War,” *Washington Post*, January 24, 1926, M17.

Washingtonians, and the cost of renting a house or an apartment rose during the decade as well.<sup>27</sup>

Black churches across the city worked to deliver social services to black residents. Black women were keenly informed by these local circumstances.<sup>28</sup> For instance, in 1911, Martha Matthews Waldron, a former teacher, and her husband, the Reverend John Milton Waldron, who was the pastor of Shiloh Baptist Church, founded the Alley Improvement Association, which lobbied Congress and the District commissioners to raze blighted housing throughout the city, especially squalid alley dwellings. They also created an Emergency Housing Association at the church, which “worked to better housing and living conditions among the poor.”<sup>29</sup> The Waldrons’ outreach with residents of alley dwellings alerted them to the fact that many children were alone during the day, while their parents worked. These concerns prompted Martha and J. Milton Waldron in 1914 to create the Day Nursery on New Jersey and Pierce Streets in Northwest Washington for the purpose of assisting working parents. Martha Waldron served as the superintendent of the nursery. At its founding, the organization promised to “furnish more than 3,000 working mothers living in the alleys of the city a place where their little ones may be

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<sup>27</sup> William Henry Jones, *The Housing of Negroes in Washington, D.C.: A Study in Human Ecology* (Washington, D.C.: Howard University Press, 1929), 133; and “Negro Tenants Hit Hard, Rev. Mr. Waldron Says,” *Washington Post*, January 23, 1925, 16.

<sup>28</sup> For a discussion of these patterns across the country, see Milton C. Sernett, *Bound for the Promised Land: African American Religion and the Great Migration* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), 122-153.

<sup>29</sup> “Rev. J. M. Waldron has Served Church for 12 Years,” *Philadelphia Tribune*, June 28, 1928, 14.

cared for by trained women.”<sup>30</sup> Martha Waldron worked hard to support and sustain the Day Nursery, which increased in popularity during World War I. She sponsored tag days and petitioned the D.C. School Board to stage a penny rally whereby all schoolchildren would donate a penny.<sup>31</sup> She also worked with church organizations to raise funds to support the nursery. In September 1922, members of men’s clubs in churches across Washington gathered to aid “impoverished working mothers and their children in this city.” By raising money to support the day nursery at New Jersey Avenue, men first gathered at the Peoples’ Congregational Church, where they heard addresses from J. Milton Waldron and Nannie Helen Burroughs.<sup>32</sup>

Churches addressed health and labor issues by opening medical clinics and employment bureaus. In 1927 members of Mount Carmel Baptist in Northwest remodeled their church basement to accommodate a “free clinic” for poor people in the neighborhood. The clinic was open daily between noon and one o’clock and was staffed by a volunteer cohort of “12 doctors and 1 trained nurse.”<sup>33</sup> Metropolitan AME Church also opened a “health and welfare clinic” in the building, which was open every day except Sunday. Church members founded the clinic to “close the gap

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<sup>30</sup> “Will Open Day Nursery: Alley Improvement Association will Hold Reception Tomorrow,” *Washington Post*, February 27, 1923, 14.

<sup>31</sup> For the tag day, see “Day Nursery Solicits Funds,” *Washington Post*, June 4, 1920, 8. For Martha Waldron’s petition for a Penny Rally, see “Minutes of the Board of Education of the District of Columbia,” June 6, 1917, vol. 9, 4, Charles Sumner School and Archives, Washington, D.C.; and “Student Penny Charity,” *Washington Post* June 7, 1917, 4.

<sup>32</sup> “Aid Impoverished Mothers,” *Washington Post*, September 25, 1922, 2.

<sup>33</sup> “Go to Church Sunday, Meet Wholesome Friends,” *Washington Tribune*, October 26, 1927, 5.

between black and white deaths” and offered both smallpox vaccinations and yearly examinations.<sup>34</sup>

At least two churches in Washington—Shiloh Baptist and Cosmopolitan Baptist—offered employment bureaus. These employment centers appeared to be largely aimed toward African American women. The Reverend Simon P. Drew led the congregation of the Cosmopolitan Baptist Church in organizing the White Cross Free Labor Bureau, and in December 1917 the *Washington Bee* reported that more than 2,500 people had obtained jobs through the bureau that year.<sup>35</sup> In November 1917 the bureau hosted a “Thanksgiving Dinner” for soldiers and elderly residents inside the church.<sup>36</sup> Three years later, in October 1920, a large crowd gathered in a mass meeting of the White Cross Free Labor Bureau to seek job opportunities for all black Washingtonians, but especially “unemployed mothers.”<sup>37</sup> Shiloh Baptist Church also operated an employment bureau, which apparently served domestic servants. A newspaper article noted that the church maintained an “employment agency of dependable, reliable members...where desirable help can be furnished to those seeking the same.”<sup>38</sup> And Missionary Baptist church in Northwest hired a paid social worker to assist the community.<sup>39</sup> African American women directly involved

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<sup>34</sup> “Health and Welfare Clinic Opened,” *Washington Tribune*, May 9, 1925, 2.

<sup>35</sup> “Praises Work of Dr. Drew,” *Washington Bee*, December 29, 1917, 1.

<sup>36</sup> “Stop, Listen, Look,” *Washington Bee*, October 20, 1917, 2.

<sup>37</sup> “Large Crowd,” *Washington Bee*, October 8, 1920, 1.

<sup>38</sup> “Program at Shiloh Baptist Church of Unusual Interest,” *Washington Post*, June 30, 1930, 9.

<sup>39</sup> “Church Notes,” *Chicago Defender*, November 10, 1928, A10.

in these outreach projects gained an understanding about some of the issues of health and employment that many black Washingtonians faced. But in addition to those directly involved, members of these churches could also learn about some of these issues by attending weekly services.

Within their church organizations, Black women devoted considerable energy to assisting black Washington's elderly population. In 1902, Baptist women and men across the city united to raise money to build the Stoddard Baptist Home, a nursing home for retired Baptist ministers and their wives. In 1919, black women from seventeen different Baptist churches across the city united to raise \$7,000 for the home.<sup>40</sup> Throughout the 1920s, members of various religious, civic, and educational institutions visited residents of the home and raised money for its maintenance, including the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) and the Phyllis Wheatley Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA), the O Street Vocational School, Nineteenth Street Baptist Church, and Shiloh Baptist Church in Northwest, and Zion Baptist Church in Southwest.<sup>41</sup> And African American women and men in Anacostia, mostly members of the Campbell ME Church, raised money to construct a Non-Sectarian Home for elderly residents of that area. Throughout the 1920s, African

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<sup>40</sup> "Drive is On to Pay off the Bonded Debt on the Stoddard Baptist Home," *Washington Bee*, April 12, 1919, 4.

<sup>41</sup> "Locals, Society, Clubs," *Washington Tribune*, April 1, 1922, 5; "Locals and Society," *Washington Tribune*, December 23, 1922, 3; "Locals and Society," *Washington Tribune*, June 16, 1923, 2; "Baptist Women Played Santa," *Washington Tribune*, January 10, 1925, 6; "Society and Club," *Washington Tribune* December 26, 1925, 2; "Helping Hand Club Visits Stoddard Baptist Home," *Washington Tribune*, July 2, 1926, 2; "Matron of Stoddard Given Testimonial," *Washington Tribune*, September 30, 1927, 3; "Church News," *Washington Tribune*, February 3, 1928, 5; and "19<sup>th</sup> Street Church Members visit Old Folks' Home," *Washington Tribune*, January 3, 1930, 3.

American women affiliated with Campbell ME Church and the National Sewing Council held picnics to raise money for the home.<sup>42</sup>

In addition to offering social services through employment bureaus and clinics, church organizations conducted food drives and delivered meals to vulnerable residents across the city, especially elderly and poor residents. African American women played an important role in these projects. At Shiloh Baptist, the Poor Saints' Band under the presidency of Alice Early assembled forty food baskets for the aged and poor at Thanksgiving 1923; the church's Christian Endeavor Society planned to deliver one hundred Christmas baskets to needy residents across the city.<sup>43</sup> At Friendship Baptist Church in Southwest Washington, Anna L. Dorsey, a seamstress who was the president of the Queen of Sheba Missionary Circle, organized a campaign to deliver Thanksgiving baskets and money to poor black Washingtonians.<sup>44</sup>

Women at Zion Baptist Church's "Ladies Auxiliary" in Southwest had been engaged in outreach for decades. In 1903 this auxiliary had been instrumental in the church's efforts to open and operate a soup kitchen where its members served 2,500 meals during the winter and "furnished wood and coal and provisions to 690 persons and clothes and shoes to many more."<sup>45</sup> Zion women's activism persisted into the

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<sup>42</sup> "Picnic and Lawn Fete in Anacostia," *Washington Tribune*, July 11, 1925, 2; "Barry Farms" *Washington Tribune* June 17, 1927, 9; "Barry Farms," *Washington Tribune*, July 8, 1927, 4; and "Barry Farms News," *Washington Tribune*, November 18, 1927, 4.

<sup>43</sup> "Church to Distribute Food," *Washington Post*, December 22, 1923, 9.

<sup>44</sup> "Thanksgiving Baskets Distributed," *Washington Tribune*, December 3, 1926, 4; Fourteenth Census of the United States, Washington City, 1920, Enumeration District 121, Sheet 10B.

1920s. In December 1927, a group of women “united in giving Christmas cheer to many shut-ins.” These women raised money to fill eighty-six baskets with “all of the delicacies of the season,” including a fresh chicken for each recipient. This inclusion of a chicken was especially significant because meat was very expensive in the 1920s.<sup>46</sup>

In 1907, Mary Emma Cabaniss, a dressmaker, organized the Helping Hand Club at the Nineteenth Street Baptist Church in Northwest Washington. The purpose of this club was to “aid the aged and infirm and to carry into their lives and homes expressions of love and encouragement.”<sup>47</sup> Members paid 25¢ to join and monthly dues of 10¢. Initially, only members of Nineteenth Street Baptist Church were permitted to join, but the club’s success soon attracted women and men of other churches and religious denominations. By the end of the 1920s, the club had nearly 300 members and the vast majority were women. All of the proceeds of membership fees, monthly dues, and the bequests of several deceased members were pooled toward the clubs’ activities, including an Old Folks’ Dinner that raised money for the Stoddard Baptist Home and food baskets delivered to poor and elderly residents of the city at both Christmas and Easter. The Helping Hand Club viewed the Old Folks’ Dinner as “not a mere dinner of herbs given to the needy” but “one gala day which

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<sup>45</sup> “Relief Work Suspended,” *Washington Post*, April 13, 1903, 12.

<sup>46</sup> “Church and Sunday School,” *Washington Tribune*, January 6, 1928, 6; “Extraordinary Rise in Prices of Meats Is Expected Soon,” *Washington Post*, January 24, 1923, 7; and “Shortage of Meat,” *Washington Post*, January 18, 1926, 6. For an excellent study about the ways in which black women used food to build community, see Psyche Williams-Forsen, *Building Houses Out of Chicken Legs: Black Women, Food, and Power* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006).

<sup>47</sup> *History of the Helping Hand Club of the Nineteenth Street Baptist Church* (Washington, D.C.: Associated Publishers, Inc., 1948), 4-5.

will live with them through the ensuing months.”<sup>48</sup> Club members also visited residents of St. Elizabeth’s, a mental hospital for black Washingtonians, Blue Plains, the federal, government’s home for the “poor and aged,” and the Stoddard Baptist Old Folks Home, offering everyone packages with “candy, fruit, and a dime.”<sup>49</sup> Over the years, the Helping Hand Club added meat in the food baskets, arranged for coal and firewood delivery, orchestrated a clothing drive, convened a monthly mending circle, and visited the homes of elderly, poor, and mentally ill residents of Washington, assisting them in tasks ranging from house cleaning to grocery shopping. The club also purchased a house for leprosy patients in Africa, naming it the “Helping Hand Shack.”<sup>50</sup>

The vast outreach work of the Helping Hand Club required hundreds of black women across Washington, D.C. to participate in elaborate fundraising drives and campaigns. Members staged pageants and held “silver rallies” where women were asked to contribute quarters, not dimes. They sewed a quilt, charging 10¢ for each fabric square, upon which the name of each contributor was embroidered. The women of the Helping Hand Club then presented the quilt to the pastor of Nineteenth Street Baptist Church, Walter H. Brooks, and used the proceeds from the fabric squares to buy meat for the Christmas baskets.<sup>51</sup> Membership in the Helping Hand Club and the many other church-based organizations enabled African American

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<sup>48</sup> *History of the Helping Hand Club*, 21.

<sup>49</sup> “19<sup>th</sup> Street Church Members visit Old Folks’ Home,” *Washington Tribune*, January 3, 1930, 3.

<sup>50</sup> *History of the Helping Hand Club*, 39.

<sup>51</sup> *History of the Helping Hand Club*, 10.

women to hone their fundraising skills. In pooling money and holding fundraising drives, they repeatedly saw that seemingly small acts could lead to large results.

Within churches, bonds of collectivity and an ethic of care and compassion were instilled and continually and explicitly reinforced, sometimes through a church bulletin. A letter in a 1924 column of Shiloh Baptist's *Shiloh Herald* reminded members that their church had "the reputation of being the 'Church with the Welcome'" and urged that they work to preserve this "reputation by making all persons come to the Church welcome. Shake hands with them; Invite them to come again; Share your Hymn-books then; and let them know you are pleased to have them at your Church." The writer felt it necessary to offer this admonition as the church's expanding congregation was causing the church's "homelike feeling" to decline.<sup>52</sup> Carefully tracking the progress of the church building fund, another issue in the *Shiloh Herald* published a "Conversation" meant to encourage members to pledge money. In this dialogue, the "first member" asked the "other member" why she has not pledged money. The "other member" replied, "I never make any pledges. I don't know how much I can give." This response caused the "first member" to declare, "Well, I am sure you don't belong to any insurances or societies because you have to pledge to pay them so much a week, so much a month." She then encouraged her to "pledge a small sum so that the church will know you are standing by Old Shiloh."<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> "Church Notes," *The Shiloh Herald*, 4, no. 32 (November 1924): 5 in Reel 1, Shiloh-NYPL.

<sup>53</sup> "A Conversation," *The Shiloh Herald* 4, no. 10 (March 1924): 4, Reel 1, Shiloh-NYPL.

This column encouraged people to think about the concept of a pledge and make a consistent, ongoing commitment to the institution.

Women and men drew upon these values in moments of illness and tragedy. When Sarah Bush's husband was killed in a railroad accident in October 1922, members of the Women's Missionary Convention of the District of Columbia, under the leadership of Anna C. Williams, immediately responded. Gathering at Burrville Baptist Church in Northeast Washington, they raised enough money to present Bush with "a beautiful black waist, handkerchiefs, money for her first ton of coal, and groceries of every description." They noted that she was a "faithful worker in the activities of the Tabernacle Baptist Church."<sup>54</sup> In their political organizing and activism, black women drew upon this foundation of care and compassion.

### **African American Women, Mutual Benefit, and the Politics of Collectivism**

African American Washingtonians also participated in a rich and vibrant political life through their membership in mutual benefit associations and fraternal orders.<sup>55</sup> Like churches, these organizations, helped to strengthen black women's political skills of fundraising, publicity, and public speaking, as well as instill in them

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<sup>54</sup> "Women's Missionary Convention," *Washington Tribune*, October 7, 1922, 2.

<sup>55</sup> For works that discuss the importance of mutual benefit associations to African American political life, see Elsa Barkley Brown, "Womanist Consciousness: Maggie Lena Walker and the Independent Order of Saint Luke," *Signs* 14, no. 3 (Spring 1989): 610-633; Craig S. Wilder, *In the Company of Black Men: The African Influence on African American Culture in New York City* (New York: New York University Press, 2001); Theda Skocpol and Jennifer Lynn Oser, "Organization Despite Adversity: The Origins and Development of African American Fraternal Associations," *Social Science History* 28, no. 3 (Fall 2004): 367-437; Martha S. Jones, *All Bound Up Together: The Woman Question in African American Public Culture* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007); Stephen Kantrowitz, "'Intended for the Better Government of Man': The Political History of African American Freemasonry in the Era of Emancipation," *Journal of American History* 96, no. 4 (March 2010): 1001-1026; and Ortiz, *Emancipation Betrayed*, 101-127.

the power of collective participation. Theda Skocpol, Ariane Liazos, and Marshall Ganz, theorizing about the significance of fraternal orders to African American political life, conclude that participation taught members such important administrative skills as “how to conduct meetings according to Roberts Rules of Order, keep honest secretarial and financial records, select materials for lodge programs, organize special events, and run committees.”<sup>56</sup> Many African American women drew upon the skills practiced in mutual benefit and fraternal orders as they organized their political campaigns.

Mutual benefit associations and fraternal orders were widespread in Washington and had large memberships. City directories, newspapers, and organizational histories indicate that African American Washingtonians belonged to at least 162 mutual benefit and fraternal orders during the 1920s.<sup>57</sup> Black Washingtonians paid dues to chapters of national fraternal orders, including the Masons, the Royal Arch, the Knights of Templar, the Scottish Right, the Order of the Eastern Star (OES), the Odd Fellows and its female counterpart, the Household of Ruth; the Knights of Pythias and its female counterpart, the Order of Calanthe, the International Order of Good Samaritans, and its female counterpart, the Daughters of Samaria, and the Independent Order of Saint Luke (IOSL). But black Washingtonians also founded and sustained local mutual benefit associations, such as the Ladies Cliff Rock Association, the Northeast Relief Association, the National

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<sup>56</sup> Theda Skocpol, Ariane Liazos, and Marshall Ganz, *What A Mighty Power We Can Be: African American Fraternal Groups and the Struggle for Racial Equality* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 84.

<sup>57</sup> This count is based on a close reading of black and white newspapers in Washington, D.C. throughout the 1920s as well as the 1930 *Boyd's Directory*.

Sewing Council, the Crispus Attucks Relief Association and Ladies Auxiliary, the Workers' Relief Association, and the Sterling Relief Association.

While the precise number of women and men who belonged to mutual benefit and fraternal orders is unknown, it was almost certainly a high figure. During the 1920s, black Washingtonians registered large numbers in mutual benefit associations with national memberships (see figure 4). For instance, the Independent Order of Saint Luke, the Odd Fellows, and the Household of Ruth each had more than 8,000 members across the city.<sup>58</sup> City directories indicate that black women paid dues to thirty-seven different Household of Ruth chapters across the city, while 2,800 black men belonged to thirty-five different chapters of the Order of the Eastern Star.<sup>59</sup> Black Washingtonians registered more members in two local chapters of the Elks—Columbia Lodge with 2,749 and Morning Star Lodge with 2,739—than any other lodge across the country.<sup>60</sup> And large numbers of Washingtonians supported local organizations. In 1924, the Ladies' Cliff Rock Relief Association claimed a membership of 2,750 women.<sup>61</sup> These examples indicate that large numbers of black Washingtonians participated in some aspect of collectivist associational life in the 1920s.

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<sup>58</sup> "Colored Church Services," *Washington Post*, April 25, 1925, 4; and "New Lodge Temple Will Cost \$150,000," *Washington Post*, April 19, 1931, M5.

<sup>59</sup> Mrs. S. Joe Brown, *The History of the Order of the Eastern Star Among Colored People* (Des Moines, IA: Order of the Eastern Star, 1925), 75.

<sup>60</sup> "95,000 Colored Elks Reported in Country," *Washington Post*, August 26, 1926, 8.

<sup>61</sup> "Colored Services Tomorrow," *Washington Post*, September 27, 1924, 9.

**Figure 4: African American Membership in Mutual Benefit Societies and Fraternal Orders in Washington, D.C., in the 1920s as a Percentage of the African American Population**

Name	Sex	Percentage
Odd Fellows	Men	14 percent of black male population
Household of Ruth	Women	11 percent of black female population
Independent Order of Saint Luke	Women and Men	7 percent of total black population
Elks: Morning Star Lodge	Men	5 percent of black male population
Elks: Columbia Lodge	Men	5 percent of black male population
Ladies Cliff Rock Relief Association	Women	5 percent of black female population
Order of the Eastern Star	Women and Men	3 percent of total black population

**Sources:** “Table Eight: Composition and Characteristics of the Population for Census Districts: 1920,” in *Fourteenth Census of the United States*, Vol. III Population (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1923), 181; “Colored Church Services,” *Washington Post*, April 25, 1925, 4; “New Lodge Temple Will Cost \$150,000,” *Washington Post*, April 19, 1931, M5; Mrs. S. Joe Brown, *The History of the Order of the Eastern Star Among Colored People* (Des Moines, IA: Order of the Eastern Star, 1925), 75; “95,000 Colored Elks Reported in Country,” *Washington Post*, August 26, 1926, 8; and “Colored Services Tomorrow,” *Washington Post*, September 27, 1924, 9.

Mutual benefit and fraternal associations served several functions. Many of them offered economic benefits. In paying weekly or monthly dues, African Americans created insurance against insecurities or in times of illness. For women and men who earned meager weekly wages and lacked government- or employer-based insurance, mutual benefit associations literally sustained members and their families during periods of sickness. Some associations also hired a physician to treat members who were ill. And many offered a death benefits fund, which covered

burial and funeral costs as well as money to family members. In addition, these associations offered dignity and respect to members who had died. For instance, members of the Queen Deborah Council Number 1 met to celebrate their organization's anniversary in April 1925. This fraternal order traced its origins to 1886. At this celebration, chaired by Mabel Pryor, a coal dealer, leaders delivered detailed reports on their activities, and the organization took time to commemorate the dead through eulogies.<sup>62</sup> This respect paid to members who were deceased offered women and men an important site to commemorate the life and accomplishments of members who were no longer with them. Such rituals endowed women's and men's lives with dignity and character.

Membership in a mutual benefit association mattered tremendously for working-class members in at times of illness or death. In 1923, laundress Ella J. Holmes submitted an "appreciation" to the *Washington Tribune*. She had suffered a "painful accident" and wished to extend thanks to "her many friends, the Ladies of the Cliff Rock Relief Society, the B. T. Washington Helpers, and all who rendered her aid." "I am better and able to be out now," she reported.<sup>63</sup> Holmes's identification of the people who had helped her—friends and members of mutual benefit associations—indicates the important role that these organizations played in the lives of black Washingtonians. Holmes was a laundress who worked from her home. During her injury, she would not have been able to work, and thus the financial

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<sup>62</sup> "Lodge and Fraternal News," *Washington Tribune*, April 25, 1925, 3.

<sup>63</sup> "Appreciation," *Washington Tribune*, July 28, 1923, 2. For Holmes in the census, see Fourteenth Census of the United States, Maryland, Brentwood, Prince Georges County, 1920, Enumeration District 96, Sheet 3A.

assistance from her mutual benefit associations would have enabled Holmes and her husband, who worked as a cook in a hotel, to remain financially afloat. But Holmes's affiliations with these groups also provided important friendships that helped to sustain her in bouts of loneliness and sadness. "Being a member in good standing of a mutual aid association," the historian Paul Ortiz writes, "often meant the difference between life and death, dignity and shame."<sup>64</sup> In all of these ways—insurance, medical care, a proper funeral, and just knowing that there were those who cared for you—membership in a mutual benefit association elevated the quality of life for black Washingtonians.

Like churches, mutual benefit associations strengthened consciousness about being part of a community. In 1920, for example, black women in Washington founded the Washington and Vicinity Methodist Episcopal Minister's Wives Association under the leadership of Fannie M. Clair, the wife of Bishop Matthew Wesley Clair of the Asbury ME Church. Operating as a mutual benefit association, members paid monthly dues which were used by the Sick Committee to offer practical assistance as well as a morale boost to members who became ill, by dispensing funds to the sick member and "purchas[ing] a plant" for her.<sup>65</sup> The women of this association also spearheaded concerts and pageants as fundraising ventures to raise money for poor citizens across the city. In their Monday afternoon monthly meetings, which rotated at different members' houses across the city, they

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<sup>64</sup> Ortiz, *Emancipation Betrayed*, 102.

<sup>65</sup> "Minutes of the Methodist Episcopal Ministers' Wives Association of Washington and Vicinity," March 7, 1921, Reel 5, Asbury M.E. Records, Manuscript Division, Asbury-NYPL.

debated how they would define themselves and the significance of the community they were creating. At a May 1925 meeting members ironed out the details of their obligations upon the death of members and of others within the community. The minutes of the meeting note that this “matter brought up quite a discussion, involving the question as to whether or not we ought to turn out in a body except when asked by the family of the deceased to do so.” Members voted, ultimately deciding that “we will turn out in a body for members unrequested, but only for others by request of the family, the president, or representatives in either case to confer with the family as to where we will be seated.”<sup>66</sup> Mutual benefit societies were a space in which black women in Washington, D.C., deliberatively negotiated obligation and considered how they should represent themselves to the larger public.

African Americans often used their organizational ties in mutual benefit and fraternal organizations in pressing for civil rights, and African American women and men in Washington, D.C., gained valuable political skills and a sense of collective consciousness through the rituals and programs of the various associations. Fourteen percent of all African American women in Washington, D.C., belonged to thirty-seven different Household of Ruth chapters that met across the city during the 1920s. The scholars Theda Skocpol, Ariane Liazos, and Marshall Ganz note that the Household of Ruth designated eighteen women to hold office in each chapter, in addition to women who served on standing committees.<sup>67</sup> “African Americans who participated in fraternal lodges did not just learn organizational skills and duties by

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<sup>66</sup> “Minutes of the Methodist Episcopal Ministers’ Wives Association of Washington and Vicinity,” May 25, 1925, Reel 5, Asbury M.E. Church Records, Manuscript Division, Asbury-NYPL.

<sup>67</sup> Skocpol, *What A Mighty Power We Can Be*, 82.

holding office,” they argue. “Repeatedly, all members heard the responsibilities of each office clearly spelled out in the elaborate installation rituals performed whenever a new set of officers took over.”<sup>68</sup> For the Household of Ruth, the rituals dictated that each officer “kneel around the altar” and repeat their prescribed duties. Not only did the incoming officer hear her pledge, but all members of the local chapter heard the duties as well.<sup>69</sup>

The Independent Order of St. Luke (IOSL) is another important mutual benefit association with a strong presence in the city. The order’s local headquarters was on 13th and U Streets in Northwest Washington.<sup>70</sup> But its members also met in locations all across the city. For instance, when the order marked its thirtieth anniversary in 1925, celebrations were held both in Northwest at Shiloh Baptist Church and in Southwest at Metropolitan AMEZ Church.<sup>71</sup> By 1925, 8,000 women and men, organized in sixty-five councils across the city, were members of the ISOL.<sup>72</sup> In June 1926, the IOSL’s principal national officer, Right Worthy Grand Secretary Maggie Lena Walker, traveled from the organization’s headquarters in Richmond, Virginia, to Washington, D.C. where she addressed a large crowd at Metropolitan AME Church as part of the “St. Luke’s 500 Membership Drive.” In the ISOL, as many other mutual benefit societies and church-based organizations, a broad spectrum of people had opportunities for leadership. For example, more than 125

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<sup>68</sup> Skocpol, *What A Mighty Power We Can Be*, 86.

<sup>69</sup> Skocpol, *What A Mighty Power We Can Be*, 86.

<sup>70</sup> “Locals and Society,” *Washington Tribune*, June 23, 1923, 2.

<sup>71</sup> “Locals and Society,” *Washington Tribune*, May 2, 1925, 2.

<sup>72</sup> “Colored Church Services,” *Washington Post*, April 25, 1925, 4.

members in Washington were charged with planning the “500 Membership Drive.”<sup>73</sup> The principal membership captains were Elizabeth B. White, who was employed as a servant, government clerk Ferdinand D. Lee, and an M. N. Pearce. The following month, 619 black Washingtonians became new members of the ISOL and were formally initiated at a meeting at Metropolitan AME Church.<sup>74</sup>

In addition to supporting its members individually at times of sickness and death, the local chapter of the ISOL also had a sustained presence in the community. For instance, in October 1928, ISOL members gathered at Berean Baptist Church to hear a sermon by the Reverend William H. Randolph, in which he expounded upon the “object and purposes of fraternal and benevolent organizations and their responsibilities to the educational, business, and industrial development of the negro.” Following this address, members gathered to create an educational department for the ISOL.<sup>75</sup> And when a building at Nannie Helen Burroughs’s National Training School (NTS) burned to the ground, Maggie Lena Walker journeyed to Washington, D.C., where she stated that, “the Fraternal Organizations of this country should raise a hundred thousand dollars among themselves to put up a complete building as their contribution to the education of the Negro Girl.”<sup>76</sup> These examples illustrate the ways

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<sup>73</sup> “National Head of St. Luke’s to Be in City for Grand,” *Washington Tribune*, June 18, 1926, 1.

<sup>74</sup> “St. Luke’s Initiates Over 600 At Big Mass Meeting,” *Washington Tribune*, July 2, 1926, 1; Fourteenth Census of the United States, Washington City, 1920, Enumeration District 278, Sheet 1B; and Fourteenth Census of the United States, Washington City, 1920, Enumeration District 199, Sheet 1B.

<sup>75</sup> “Educational Rally Held by Order of St. Luke,” *Washington Post*, October 30, 1928, 8.

<sup>76</sup> “Mrs. Maggie Walker Advocates Help,” *Washington Tribune*, August 6, 1926, 7.

in which black Washingtonians interacted with the local chapters of national mutual benefit associations.

Black Washingtonians also participated in a vibrant political life through their leadership and membership in local associations. In 1903, black men in Washington founded the Crispus Attucks Relief Association, while black women founded the Ladies Auxiliary of the Crispus Attucks Relief Association.<sup>77</sup> This organization offered members sick benefits, death benefits, and many social activities. By the 1920s, the organization was issuing members \$150 upon their death.<sup>78</sup> Julia West Hamilton, a clerk in the Bureau of Printing and Engraving, had served as president of this organization since its founding. In 1921, an article noted that she had been “elected 15 consecutive times.” During the 1920s, Hamilton raised money for the Phyllis Wheatley YWCA and the NAACP’s Legal Defense Fund, testified before Congress about the need for a National Negro Memorial, joined the Colored Women’s Republican League, the National Association of Wage Earners, and the National League of Republican Colored Women, served as president of the District Federation of Colored Women’s Clubs, and, in 1930, was elected president of the Phyllis Wheatley YWCA<sup>79</sup> Having been elected fifteen times by her peers in the

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<sup>77</sup> *Constitution and By-Laws of the Crispus Attucks Relief Association of Washington, D.C.* (Washington, D.C.: Smith Brothers Printing, 1903).

<sup>78</sup> “Bureau and Georgetown Topics,” *Washington Bee*, February 12, 1921, 4.

<sup>79</sup> For these activities, see “YWCA Notes,” *Washington Tribune*, February 17, 1923, 6; “Two Black Societies Merge,” *Washington Tribune*, November 10, 1924, 1; “Women Arouse City on Behalf of the Sweet Case,” *Washington Tribune*, December 26, 1925, 1; “Statement of Mrs. Julia West Hamilton, President Women’s Relief Corps Auxiliary to Grand Army of the Republic and President of Washington and Vicinity of Federation of Women,” *Public Buildings and Grounds No. 3 Hearings Before the Committee on Public Buildings and Grounds House of Representatives 70th Cong., 1st sess., 1 February 1928* in Reel 18, Frames 64-82, Mary Church Terrell Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of

Ladies Auxiliary of the Crispus Attucks Relief Association no doubt helped to instill in Julia West Hamilton an important level of confidence, and her years as president at the association helped to sharpen the administrative, public speaking, and fundraising skills necessary for these broader leadership roles she subsequently played.

In 1900, Mary Watson Webster, a housewife, and several of her friends and neighbors living in Hillside and Barry Farms, neighborhoods, which were in in Southeast Washington, formed the National Sewing Council, Incorporated. This organization distributed clothes to needy residents of Washington. Members could join the organization by donating two new plain articles of clothing or money. Rather than paying money each month, members' dues consisted of spools of thread, pins, needles, and other sewing supplies.<sup>80</sup> Over the years, members of the National Sewing Council expanded their outreach efforts. They established a sewing school for girls in Southeast Washington. And in 1908, they decided to raise money to construct a Non-Sectarian Home for elderly residents of Anacostia. Women participated in elaborate fundraising drives at the Campbell ME Church.<sup>81</sup> In 1920, when women at Campbell ME Church formed an auxiliary within the church to the Colored Women's Republican League, Fannie Shipley, an active member of the

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Congress, Washington, D.C. (hereafter cited as) MCT-LC); and "Julia West Hamilton Elected President of Y," *Washington Tribune*, February 14, 1930, 1.

<sup>80</sup> Hutchinson, *The Anacostia Story*, 132-133.

<sup>81</sup> For information about the National Sewing Council, see W. E. B. Du Bois, *Efforts for Social Betterment among Negro Americans* Atlanta University Publications, No. 14 (Atlanta: Atlanta University Press, 1909), 44 and "Anacostia News," *Washington Bee*, June 26, 1920, 5.

National Sewing Council, was elected president of the Republican organization.<sup>82</sup>

For Shipley, membership in a mutual benefit association had functioned as a bridge to other forms of activism.

Mutual benefit societies offered women opportunities for leadership that provided a basis for their future political work. For instance, Mary Alice Parker was an active member of the Household of Ruth as well as the Order of the Eastern Star. From at least the late nineteenth century, she served as the most Worthy and Grand Superior of the Household of Ruth of America, which meant that she was active in both local chapters in Washington and the national organization. Until her death in 1928, Parker was continually elected into her leadership position.<sup>83</sup> Mary Alice Parker used the skills and ideals of collectivism that she gained from her work with the Household of Ruth as she pursued activist causes in the 1910s and 1920s. Affiliation with the Household of Ruth enabled Mary Alice Parker to develop important skills of public speaking as she frequently addressed both local and national bodies of the organization.<sup>84</sup> In May 1911, for example, she lectured the Christian Endeavor Society at the Third Baptist Church on “Lessons from the Great Lives: Ruth” and in April 1926, she delivered a lecture at a local mass meeting of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People to kick off their spring

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<sup>82</sup> “Anacostia News,” *Washington Bee*, June 26, 1920, 5.

<sup>83</sup> “At the National Capital,” *Freeman*, September 23, 1916, 8.

<sup>84</sup> See, for instance, “Household of Ruth: The Triennial Convention,” *Washington Bee*, August 27, 1898, 5.

registration campaign.<sup>85</sup> Parker was also a member of the Sterling Relief Association. This organization, composed of teachers and attendance officers, used the ideas of fraternalism to raise money to enable poor children to attend school by supplying them with shoes, stockings, braces, glasses, books, and streetcar fare.<sup>86</sup> So too did Parker become a member of the Colored Women's Republican League in 1920.<sup>87</sup> Tracing Mary Alice Parker's political process through fraternal orders, relief associations, and political organizations suggests the ways in which skills and ideas from previous organizational affiliations flowed into her political activism

Charity Smothers was also active in fraternal orders. She was a committee member of the Queen Esther Chapter of the Order of the Eastern Star and president of District 1, Household of Ruth.<sup>88</sup> In addition to providing sick and death benefits, membership in these organizations undoubtedly taught Smothers skills of leadership, fundraising, and public speaking, and also locked her into a community united by bonds of reciprocity. She was also an active congregant at Metropolitan AME Church in Northwest Washington, where, in addition to attending Sunday services, she served as president of the Trustees Volunteer Club, which held pageants and concerts to raise money for the maintenance of the building.<sup>89</sup> During the 1930s,

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<sup>85</sup> "The Week in Society," *Washington Bee*, May 13, 1911, 5; and "Local N.A.A.C.P. Engages Noted Speakers," *Washington Tribune*, April 2, 1926, 1.

<sup>86</sup> "Work of the Sterling Relief Association," *Washington Tribune*, February 6, 1924, 2.

<sup>87</sup> "The League of Republican Colored Women," *Washington Bee*, October 2, 1920, 4.

<sup>88</sup> "Society," *Washington Tribune*, December 2, 1927, 2 and "Eastern Star Meeting is Enthusiastic," *Washington Tribune*, February 28, 1925, 3.

<sup>89</sup> "Pageant at Metropolitan," *Afro-American*, February 18, 1928, 4.

Smothers drew upon the skills and contacts she had acquired from these religious and fraternal experiences to broaden the scope of her outreach. She worked as an important fundraiser in a \$15,000 campaign to construct a new building at Nannie Helen Burroughs's National Training School.<sup>90</sup> And in March 1932, in the midst of the Great Depression, she solicited money from citizens, a bank, a bakery, a sausage vendor, and a grocery store to feed 3,000 unemployed black and white men a meal every Friday at noon inside Metropolitan AME Church.<sup>91</sup> Charity Smothers's organizational and fundraising skills from fraternal orders and church groups laid the foundation for her activism in the 1930s.

Individual members often used mutual benefit associations to organize their political campaigns. Throughout the 1920s, mutual benefit associations pressed for the interests of black workers, both in the local and federal government. Colonel William Baker Ladue, a member of the District's Board of Commissioners, received a delegation from the Civic Center of Affiliated Associations, the Equal Rights League, the Cliff Rock and Columbia aid associations, and several churches in March 1929. The delegation, which comprised both women and men, presented Ladue with a "graphic chart" of the employees in his department who were "above the grade of a messenger." African Americans held only 1 percent of these positions. This same delegation had visited each of the other to make the same presentation about their

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<sup>90</sup> "Plan to Raise 15,000 for Miss Burroughs's School for Girls," *Pittsburgh Courier*, March 7, 1931, A10.

<sup>91</sup> "Church Feeds 3,000 Jobless in 2 Months," *Baltimore Afro-American*, March 19, 1932, 5.

departments.<sup>92</sup> The Civil Liberties Bureau of the Elks was also active in urging the federal government to desegregate its office buildings, cafeterias, and restrooms. Within their mutual benefit associations, African American women weighed in on the administration of Assistant Superintendent of Schools Roscoe Bruce and submitted resolutions for his removal. Black women waged recruitment campaigns for membership in the NAWE, the YWCA, and Republican organizations within mutual benefit associations. The NAWE's membership policy—where members could earn 25¢ for each recruit—mirrored the practice of many mutual benefit associations. In their Silent Parade against lynching in 1922, black women marched with their mutual benefit associations. Mutual benefit associations, then, offered black women constituencies from which to recruit for their political organizations, models for those organizations, spaces in which to discuss political issues, and a group to back people up in their campaigns for desegregation and anti-lynching.

## **Conclusion**

Churches and mutual benefit associations formed the backbone of black women's politics in Washington, D.C. In these institutions, black women honed their skills of public speaking, recruitment, and publicity. Through their institutions, black women learned about some of the major issues facing black Washingtonians. And they instilled in their members an ethos of collectivism. In their day-to-day political organizing, African American women drew on the lessons, resources, and ideologies of churches and mutual benefit associations.

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<sup>92</sup> "Job Favoritism in District Building," *Baltimore Afro-American*, March 9, 1929, 2.

## **Chapter 2: “I Wonder if You Thought to Say, I’ll Go to the YWCA Today”: Politics in the Phyllis Wheatley YWCA**

### **Introduction**

In December 1920, hundreds of African American women gathered on Rhode Island Avenue in LeDroit Park in Northwest Washington to dedicate their brand-new Young Women’s Christian Association (YWCA) building. Black women had received most of the money to construct this facility from the national YWCA’s War Work Council, which had conceived of it as a “demonstration building for colored work.”<sup>1</sup> In celebration of the opening, 600 members of the Girl Reserve performed a pageant for two nights and leaders staged a dedication ceremony featuring local and national speakers. The dedication of this new building marked only one phase of black women’s ongoing YWCA work in Washington, D.C. Washington’s black YWCA traced its origins to 1905, when members of the Booklovers Club, composed principally of teachers and housewives, issued a call to a meeting at Berea Baptist Church “to consider the advisability of organizing a Young Women’s Christian Association” in order to locate employment and lodgings for migrant women. One month later, on May 5, 1905, eleven Booklovers officially organized as a YWCA and incorporated under the name “The Colored Young Women’s Christian Association.” Within this organization, black women created programs to assist and educate African American women and girls across the city, conducting their outreach work in modest

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<sup>1</sup> “Minutes of the Committee on Colored Work,” New York City, 9 March 1918 in Folder 10, Box 710, Young Women’s Christian Association Papers, Sophia Smith Collection, William Allan Neilson Library, Smith College, Northampton, Massachusetts (hereafter cited as YWCA-SSC).

buildings that could accommodate only a few guests and lacked centralized meeting spaces.<sup>2</sup> When the national YWCA had its first convention in 1906, this organization was one of only four associations for black women in the country that met the qualifications for recognition as an affiliate.<sup>3</sup>

The YWCA's first headquarters was located in two rooms in the old Miner Institution Building on the corner of Maryland Avenue and 4 ½ Street in Southwest Washington. The Y leaders considered this a dangerous neighborhood; one member carried a "police whistle as protection to and from the meeting at night," and an official history of the Y reports that "the women always went in groups, never alone."<sup>4</sup> Five years later, leaders moved the headquarters across town to a three-story house located at 429 T Street in Ledroit Park, a middle-class neighborhood in Northwest Washington that was close to Howard University.<sup>5</sup> This new headquarters could accommodate a total of fifteen boarders. Leaders at the YWCA purchased the building for \$4,000 and paid the mortgage in two years.<sup>6</sup> During the 1910s, the YWCA offered classes, sports teams, and clubs for black women and girls living across the city. Leaders also advocated on behalf of black women in Washington,

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<sup>2</sup> "A History of the Phyllis Wheatley Young Women's Christian Association, 1905-1930," 4 located in Folder 9, Box 1, Collection 109, Young Women's Christian Association Papers, Washingtoniana Collection, Martin Luther King, Jr. Library, Washington, D.C. (hereafter cited as YWCA-Washingtoniana).

<sup>3</sup> Nancy Marie Robertson, *Christian Sisterhood, Race Relations, and the YWCA, 1906-1946* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2007), 4.

<sup>4</sup> "A History of the Phyllis Wheatley Young Women's Christian Association, 1905-1930," 4, YWCA-Washingtoniana).

<sup>5</sup> "YWCA," *Washington Bee*, December 10, 1910, 5.

<sup>6</sup> "A History of the Phyllis Wheatley Young Women's Christian Association, 1905-1930," 4, YWCA-Washingtoniana.

D.C., by lobbying President William Howard Taft against the execution of Mattie Lomax, a black woman who had killed her husband, by protesting the “opening of a five-cent movie theater on Sunday,” and by petitioning for the appointment of a matron at the bathing beach at the Tidal Basin to supervise the swimmers.<sup>7</sup>

When the United States entered World War I in 1917, the YWCA’s small headquarters severely limited its outreach efforts. Hundreds of black women and men streamed into Washington, D.C., in search of employment, and the YWCA building quickly filled beyond capacity. The organization’s facilities were not large enough either to accommodate these war workers or to enable YWCA leaders to orchestrate significant outreach efforts. These concerns about a lack of building space prompted members to petition the national YWCA’s War Work Council for money to construct a new headquarters. The War Work Council ultimately complied and issued \$200,000 to Washington’s Phyllis Wheatley YWCA, conceiving of the structure as a “demonstration building for colored work.”<sup>8</sup> As with other YWCAs built with War Work Council funds, the building was constructed after the war had ended. Emmett J. Scott, a Special Assistant to the Secretary of War, shepherded the project through as a war time measure.<sup>9</sup> In dedicating their building in 1920, African American women inaugurated a new era of their organization because they would be able to conduct their work on a larger scale.

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<sup>7</sup> “History of the Phyllis Wheatley Young Women’s Christian Association,” 7, YWCA-Washingtoniana.

<sup>8</sup> “Minutes of the Committee on Colored Work,” New York City, 9 March 1918 in Folder 10, Box 710, YWCA-SSC.

<sup>9</sup> “History of the Phyllis Wheatley Young Women’s Christian Association,” 10, YWCA-Washingtoniana.

Black women conceived of the YWCA as a space to empower, educate, assist, and advocate for black women and girls living throughout the city, as well as a place to offer safe and wholesome recreational activities. YWCA work was political work. Leaders at the YWCA worked to improve black women's labor prospects by operating an employment bureau in the building, personally investigating potential job opportunities, and offering classes in dressmaking and sewing to equip black women with occupational skills. Black women in the YWCA also worked as advocates for African American women during the 1920s by protesting the memorial to the faithful slave, "Mammy," and denouncing segregation in the offices of the federal government and the city's swimming pools.

Black women's YWCA politics often involved the building itself. During the 1920s, Washington, D.C.'s practices of racial segregation and exclusion denied African American women access to many commercial and recreational spaces across the city, including hotels, swimming pools, parks, movie theaters, auditoriums, and playgrounds. Through the YWCA's gymnasium, lobby, parlor rooms, and campsites, leaders sought to provide Washington's black women and girls with opportunities for wholesome recreation and leisure. Leaders also used the rooms in the building to accommodate residents from different economic backgrounds, including students, service workers, clerks, teachers, and unemployed women, as well as out-of-town visitors. And many different political organizations—including the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, the Colored Women's Republican League, and the Women's Political Study Club—held meetings in of the

various rooms of the building throughout the 1920s. The YWCA's building thus became an important institutional home for black women's political organizing.

An important part of black women's political work at the YWCA involved the growth and maintenance of the organization. Women at the YWCA conducted fundraising, publicity, and recruitment campaigns. In order to attend to the day-to-day activities at the YWCA—paying bills for water, heating, and maintenance, sending secretaries to attend national conferences, supporting clubs, offering programs, and providing housing for women and girls—black women had to raise a substantial amount of money each year. During the 1920s, these annual costs ranged between \$10,000 and \$20,000. To meet these financial obligations, black women in the YWCA pursued strategies of fundraising by reaching out to black institutions located throughout Washington, D.C., including churches, organizations, the press, schools, and businesses. They also circulated information about the organization by publishing a weekly column in the *Washington Tribune*, as well as asking ministers to mention the YWCA in their Sunday sermons. In addition to fundraising and publicity, leaders at the YWCA also worked to increase the organization's membership. They aspired to make the organization city wide by staging recruitment drives in schools and churches located in different neighborhoods. In all of these projects of fundraising, publicity, and recruitment, African American women in the YWCA worked hard to sustain and expand the organization.

Centering black women's political history in Washington, D.C., on the people who moved in and out of the YWCA underscores the multiplicity of political causes

for which black women in D.C. organized in the 1920s.<sup>10</sup> Programs at the YWCA also serve as a reminder that black women's politics and organizing involved not only rhetoric and mobilization, but also such pragmatic concerns as securing adequate meeting rooms, locating shelter, and providing meals. This black woman owned-and-managed-building provided the means to meet the political necessities that emerged in the work of women's activism in 1920s-Washington.

### **The New Headquarters on Rhode Island Avenue**

The YWCA's new headquarters was a 15,519 square-foot building, four stories in front with a two-story wing in the rear. The red-brick building featured a five-bay façade and a limestone portico flanked by Doric columns (see figure 5). It was adorned with limestone details, a prominent cornice, YWCA seals, and a sign announcing the "Phyllis Wheatley Club." Situated on the corner of Rhode Island Avenue and Ninth Streets in Northwest Washington, the T-shaped building contained

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<sup>10</sup> For African American women's work in the YWCA, see Judith Weisenfeld, *African American Women and Christian Activism: New York's Black YWCA* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998); Cynthia Neverdon-Morton, *Afro-American Women of the South and the Advancement of the Race, 1895-1925* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1989), 207-222; Anne Meis Knupfer, "'If You Can't Push, Pull, If You Can't Pull, Please Get Out of the Way': The Phyllis Wheatley Club and Home in Chicago, 1896-1920," *Journal of Negro History* 82, no. 2 (Spring 1997): 221-231; Adrienne Lasch-Jones, "Struggle Among Saints: African American Women and the YWCA, 1870-1920," in *Men and Women Adrift: The YMCA and the YWCA in the City*, ed. Nina Mjagkij and Margaret Spratt (New York: New York University Press, 1997), 160-187; Kimberly Crandall Bowling and Kriste Lindenmeyer, "How Did a Multiracial Movement Develop in the Baltimore YWCA, 1883-1926," *Women and Social Movements in the United States, 1600-2000* 7 (2003); Rose M. Murdock, "The Persistence of Black Women at the Williams Avenue YWCA," *Journal of Women's History* 15, no. 3 (Autumn 2003): 190-196; and Stephanie Yvette Felix, "Committed to their Own: African American Women Leaders in the YWCA: The YWCA of Germantown, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, 1870-1970" (Ph.D. diss., Temple University, 1999). One scholar who has linked the architecture of YMCA buildings with the activities inside is Paula Lupkin. See *Manhood Factories: YMCA Architecture and the Making of Modern Urban Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010).

a handsome lobby with a tablet proclaiming “To the Glory of God In Service for Our Young Women,” forty-three rooms, one double room, communal bathrooms, a gymnasium equipped with showers, a cafeteria, offices, and a Social Hall with a fireplace. The southwest wing contained one large room, which could be divided into three smaller rooms by partitions. Furnished with rose-colored rugs and curtains, YWCA women called these rooms the “Rose Rooms.”<sup>11</sup> Originally YWCA leaders wanted their headquarters to have a swimming pool, but since this building was planned during the war when housing for black women was scarce, President Frances Boyce decided to construct additional dormitories. African American women used this space, which integrated a residence hall with a cafeteria, gymnasium, offices, an auditorium, and meeting rooms, and transformed it into a place to conduct various forms of activism.

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<sup>11</sup> Suzanne Ganschinietz, “Nomination Form: National Register of Historic Places, Phyllis Wheatley YWCA,” September 7, 1983 (in author’s possession).

**Figure 5: The Phyllis Wheatley YWCA in the 1920s**



**Source:** Postcard in the author's possession.

Frances Boyce personally selected the site at 911 Rhode Island Avenue in Northwest Washington. Located only one mile away from the previous headquarters on T Street, the new building was situated prominently in the black residential neighborhood of LeDroit Park and close to many African American institutions, including churches, schools, and lodges. It was only a few blocks away from Shiloh Baptist Church, the Lott-Carey Baptist Foreign Mission Society, Scottish Rite Hall, and the Temple of the Knights of Jerusalem. In addition, it was fewer than two miles away from the city's three black high schools, Dunbar High School, Armstrong High School, and Miner Normal School, as well as Howard University. Close proximity to these schools, churches, and lodges enabled YWCA leaders to offer programmatic

activities at these places as well as invite members of institutions to visit the headquarters. The headquarters was fewer than two miles away from Union Station, the city's central train station, which made it a convenient destination for weary travelers. The YWCA's location within close proximity of many different institutions in black Washington made it an accessible site for students, travelers, and residents of LeDroit Park.

African American women used the headquarters on Rhode Island Avenue to showcase their autonomy in the YWCA movement. In Washington, D.C., as in cities across the country, two YWCA branches existed, one for black women and one for white women. But what distinguished Washington from other cities was the fact that both YWCAs were independent organizations. Beginning in 1910, national YWCA regulations allowed only one affiliate in each city, all other associations in the city to be a branch of the central Y. In practice, that meant that in most cities where both black and white women organized a Y, the white YWCA was designated the "central association" while the black Y.W.C.A was a branch. This relationship meant that a member of the central association served on the branch's board, the central association authorized all of the branch's activities, and the central association absorbed any of the branch's debts.<sup>12</sup> In Washington, D.C., however, where it appears that the black women's association had become an affiliate of the national Y before any local white association was recognized, the awkwardness of a white associate being subordinate to a black one was avoided by leaving the two independent. This left the black Y fully independent in its programming and decision

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<sup>12</sup> Robertson, *Christian Sisterhood*, 32.

making but also fully responsible for raising its own finances.<sup>13</sup> The outbreak of World War I in 1917 strained both the resources and volunteers at the black YWCA. The building adequately housed fifteen, but was now pressed to extend accommodations to many more. The combined impacts of food shortages, migration, and a lack of safe, affordable, and adequate housing prompted black YWCA women to petition the national YWCA's War Work Council for funding to assist their war-time outreach. The War Work Council, funded by the War Department, dispensed funds to black and white branches across the country, although the Council disproportionately funded African American women's war outreach.<sup>14</sup> In their petition to the War Work Council, black Washington's YWCA women detailed their shortage of housing and resources, which was forcing women to go without "food and shelter," as well as the "knotty problem between the colored girl and the uniform."<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Robertson, *Christian Sisterhood*, 32, 191. The historian Jacqueline Moore writes that the Phyllis Wheatley YWCA in D.C. preceded the white YWCA. See Moore, "Anna Julia Cooper: Educator, Clubwoman, and Feminist," in *The Human Traditions: Portraits of African American Life*, ed., Nina Mjagakji (New York: Scholarly Resources, Inc., 2003), 77. And in her autobiography, Dorothy Height recounts an oral tradition of Frances Boyce saying to the white YWCA, "Since we were organized first, we think it would be very good if you would become our branch." See Dorothy Height, *Open Wide the Freedom Gates: A Memoir* (New York: Perseus Book Group, 2003), 97-98. The white YWCA, however, did incorporate first, filing their Articles of Incorporation in March 1905 while the black YWCA did not file their Articles of Incorporation until June 1905. See "Women Form New Association," *Washington Post*, March 2, 1905, 3; and "A History of the Young Women's Christian Association," 4, YWCA-Washingtoniana.

<sup>14</sup> In April 1917 the War Department founded the Commission on Training Camp Activities, which distributed funds to seven organizations in efforts to reach a broad spectrum of American citizens: the American Library Association, the Jewish Welfare Board, the Knights of Columbus, the Salvation Army, the War Camp Community Service, the Young Men's Christian Association, and the Young Women's Christian Association. Out of the War Work Council's three million dollar budget in 1917, white administrators earmarked only \$200,000 for black women. For additional information, see Robertson, *Christian Sisterhood*, 47.

In January 1918, the War Work Council responded by dispatching social worker and YWCA employee Cordella Winn to assist women in D.C. Winn, who remained in D.C. for six months, suggested to the black YWCA that they might affiliate with the local white YWCA as a branch in order to “promote the work in Washington.” But the white YWCA rejected this suggestion, noting that they did not want to bear the financial responsibilities.<sup>16</sup> There seems to have been little interaction between the two Washington Ys, but the white women in the YWCA in D.C. seemed to be aware of their black peers’ financial responsibilities with the opening of their new headquarters. In January 1922, white women at the YWCA’s Grace Dodge Hotel that had a “no tipping commandment” decided that when tips “could not be prevented,” they would “donate them to the Phyllis Wheatley (colored) YWCA”<sup>17</sup>

African American women in the YWCA keenly understood the responsibilities of fundraising, recruitment, and outreach that lay ahead with the dedication of their new headquarters. “The eyes of the country are upon this Phyllis Wheatley at this particular time,” the YWCA’s newspaper column announced right before the opening in 1920, “and many predictions have been made.” The column posed the question, “Will they measure up to the trust of a \$200,000 building which has been given to this community and which is wholly directed by our own women?”<sup>18</sup> Black women used

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<sup>15</sup> “A History of the Phyllis Wheatley Young Women’s Christian Association, 1905-1930,” 8.

<sup>16</sup> “History of the Phyllis Wheatley YWCA,” 8.

<sup>17</sup> “Unwelcome Tip Evil Solved in Novel Way,” *Washington Post* 28 January 1922, 7.

their work at the YWCA to demonstrate their fitness for self-government and autonomy.

One of the clearest expressions of black women's desire for independence at the YWCA involved the name of the organization. In January 1923 the national YWCA contacted the black YWCA in Washington, D.C., inquiring if YWCA leaders would "desire to accept the title to property" provided they could cover the "legal expenses."<sup>19</sup> Within a week, YWCA President Frances Boyce accepted the offer, but asked the YWCA to adjust the organization's wording in the deed. "We have at present inscribed on our building 'Phyllis Wheatley Club,'" Boyce wrote, "and the Board would greatly appreciate, if when making out the deed, the word 'club' be eliminated, as we prefer to insert the letters YWCA instead."<sup>20</sup> By changing the name from "club" to "YWCA," black women perhaps selected this new title to showcase the range of services, programs, and activities available at the organization and demonstrate that their movement was larger than a club. Three months later, leaders and members voted unanimously to formally change the name of their organization and adjust their articles of incorporation to "Phyllis Wheatley Y.W.C.A.," thereby connecting their organization to a renowned black poet.<sup>21</sup> In dedicating their new headquarters in 1920, and in receiving the formal deed of their property and changing

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<sup>18</sup> "Phyllis Wheatley YWCA Notes," *Washington Bee* November 5, 1920, 1.

<sup>19</sup> Letter from M. E. Townsend, New York, to Frances Boyce, Washington, D.C., 31 January 1923, Reel 681, YWCA-SSC.

<sup>20</sup> Letter from Frances Boyce, Washington, D.C., to M. E. Townsend, New York, 6 February 1923 (emphasis in original) in Reel 168, YWCA-SSC.

<sup>21</sup> "Daily Legal Record," *Washington Post*, April 27, 1923, 8; "Certification of Change of Name of Colored Young Women's Christian Association to Phyllis Wheatley Young Women's Christian Association," 28 March 1923 in Reel 168, YWCA-SSC.

their name in 1923, black women in the YWCA redefined the public image of their organization and worked to assert their autonomy.

In August 1923, only months after members of the Phyllis Wheatley YWCA had re-named their organization and acquired the deed to their property, President Frances Boyce attended a YWCA conference in New Jersey. An article about this conference noted that Boyce “was the recipient of many sympathetic remarks” because the Phyllis Wheatley “lacked affiliation with the aid of the local F Street [white] Y.” It is unclear whether black or white women, or both, made these comments. But the article noted that “Mrs. Boyce emphatically replied that she and her organization” were “proud of the distinction of the record they are making here in Washington because colored women are managing and controlling their own work.”<sup>22</sup> In this way, members of the Phyllis Wheatley YWCA conveyed their autonomy and independence to a national community of black and white YWCA workers.

### **Organizing in the YWCA**

African American women engaged in publicity, fundraising, and recruitment campaigns to nurture and sustain the growth of the Phyllis Wheatley YWCA. One important publicity strategy involved the press. Beginning in 1922, African American women began to circulate information about the YWCA to black Washington through a weekly column in the black newspaper, the *Washington Tribune*. The black press wire reprinted many of these stories in widely read newspapers across the country, including the *Pittsburgh Courier*, the *Chicago*

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<sup>22</sup> “YWCA Notes,” *Washington Tribune* 4 August 1923, 2.

*Defender*, and the *Baltimore Afro-American*. These columns offered detailed information about weekly activities at the YWCA, guests lodging at the headquarters, and black women's work on political issues. By maintaining a weekly newspaper column, black women's YWCA activities became a sustained presence in black Washington's political culture.

In addition to their public relations work in the black press, the YWCA also reached out to black Washingtonians through the city's numerous churches. For instance, YWCA leaders invited a different minister to conduct a vesper service at the headquarters each Sunday in the gymnasium. They always thanked the pastor each week in their newspaper column, thereby spreading awareness that various ministers had visited the headquarters. Forging alliances with ministers was smart since they connected to so many Washingtonians on a weekly basis and could therefore circulate information about the Phyllis Wheatley YWCA across the city. YWCA women also attempted to work with churches by using other parts of their building. In January 1923, the YWCA opened its fundraising drive by inviting all of black Washington's ministers and their wives to an "afternoon tea" in one of the parlor rooms. In their column, leaders noted, "[It] Y has always attempted to work with the churches and demonstrate that the YWCA work and training make better churches rather than being a rival of the churches." They then thanked Reverend Bennett of Calvary Episcopal Church for donating "two sewing machines" that were "much appreciated by the Sewing Classes."<sup>23</sup> In another column, YWCA leaders noted that they had the support of "the ministers of the Baptist Union, the M.E. Church, the AME, and the AMEZ and other churches" who "endorse the work of the YWCA work and are

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<sup>23</sup> "YWCA News," *Washington Tribune*, January 27, 1923, 6.

backing them up in their campaign.”<sup>24</sup> By publicly acknowledging the support of churches and ministers, YWCA women connected with central institutions and figures in black Washington. Their constitution also stipulated that the advisory board be composed of “nine members, both men and women, chosen from members of Christian churches.”<sup>25</sup> Through these strategies of forging alliances with churches and maintaining a weekly presence in the press, African American women leaders spread awareness about their organization and its mission to provide lodgings and activities for women and girls across the city.

In order to raise money to sustain activities, pay bills, and initiate new programs, the Phyllis Wheatley YWCA held annual fundraising drives. For black women in Washington, fundraising and membership drives were a part of everyday life because they occurred in churches, mutual benefit associations, and political organizations, such as the NAACP.<sup>26</sup> These fundraising drives demonstrate the day-to-day work of sustaining the organization. Each year, members were divided into teams with captains. In 1924 the captains organized their teams in a “friendly rivalry,” with each team rallying under encouraging slogans. Frances Boyce, the YWCA president, led the “Go Get ‘Ems,” while teacher Emma Merritt, the secretary

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<sup>24</sup> “YWCA News,” *Washington Tribune*, February 23, 1923, 6.

<sup>25</sup> “Constitution,” undated in Reel 168, YWCA-SSC.

<sup>26</sup> Organizing, membership, and fundraising drives occurred frequently in churches and mutual benefit associations across black Washington. Women and men participated as organizing captains. For instance in November 1926, women and men competed in two teams to raise money for the John Wesley AMEZ church. The newspaper reported that, “The financial rally contest between the men and the women closed Tuesday night with the women leading.” See “John Wesley Church,” *Washington Tribune*, November 9, 1926, 4.

who had “successfully headed so many drives,” chaired the “Live Yeer’s.”<sup>27</sup> As the director of primary education in the elementary schools, a board member of the NAACP, and the treasurer of Ladies Mutual Relief Association, Merritt’s contacts across the city helped her to raise money. When Meritt became ill at the start of the 1924 drive, YWCA leaders expressed concern about the fate of the campaign. “The YWCA is opening a budget campaign with the greatest handicap at its back,” an article noted, because Merritt, “who for its twenty years had been leader of all campaigns,” was “sick.” The article ended by noting, “Her faithful coworkers, unwilling to have the campaign fail because of her temporarily away, are working with great zeal.”<sup>28</sup> Although these campaigns were an important part of the day-to-day life of the YWCA, they required a great deal of work in both their planning and execution. The YWCA also worked with local women’s organizations to raise money. For instance, in December 1924, the Pollyannas, a women’s group, staged a “Pollyanna Revue” for the YWCA at the Lincoln Colonnade, netting the organization \$700.<sup>29</sup>

But despite the work of seasoned political activists like Merritt, these fundraising drives did not always reach the desired results. In 1927, black women in the YWCA did not raise enough money to rent a campsite for the summer, forcing them to stage camp activities throughout Washington. The leaders checked out dozens of books from the library, orchestrated weekly swimming classes, and staged

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<sup>27</sup> “Locals and Society,” *Washington Tribune*, March 8, 1924, 2; and “YWCA News,” *Washington Tribune*, February 17, 1923, 6.

<sup>28</sup> “YWCA Starts Budget Campaign,” *Washington Tribune*, April 23, 1923, 8.

<sup>29</sup> “Pollyanna Revue Nets Local YWCA \$705.25,” *Washington Tribune*, January 10, 1925, 5.

activities on nearby tennis courts.<sup>30</sup> This setback prompted leaders to devote remarkable energies to organizing their 1928 campaign, which shows the ways that black women in the YWCA used institutions in Washington, D.C., and their own building to raise money. In March 1928, the Board of Directors, including teachers Merritt and Marion P. Shadd and government worker Julia West Hamilton, had met and decided that they needed to raise money for three principal projects: more dormitory space, a permanent campsite for girls, and annual bills. The women had \$20,000 as their goal for that year. At the mass meeting to kick off the campaign, the Board of Directors brought in an outside speaker to discuss fundraising strategies. This campaign would not be about “door-to-door canvassing,” but, would involve reaching out to people known to contribute money. YWCA women organized into nineteen different teams, each headed by a captain. Each night, women gathered at the headquarters to report their successes and then ate dinner together. YWCA women held a “slogan contest” at the two black high schools in Washington, D.C., challenging students to name the campaign. Ultimately, the captains selected car names, with the “Dodge,” “Lincoln,” and “Hudson” teams competing against each other. When the drive was concluded, leaders planned “an automobile parade as soon as the campaign closes, with the winning machines beautifully decorated in the lead.”<sup>31</sup>

In the following week, women doubled their efforts to raise money. First, on Saturday, the YWCA leaders organized a lecture series called “Veteran’s Day.” These speakers were not war veterans, but rather, nine veterans of previous

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<sup>30</sup> “Summer Program for Y Girls Has Variety,” *Washington Tribune*, June 18, 1927, 8.

<sup>31</sup> “YWCA Notes,” *Washington Tribune*, March 16, 1928, 2.

fundraising drives from 1905 to 1928 who offered encouraging words.<sup>32</sup> That week, noted teacher and political activist Mary Church Terrell served as the guest on a radio program, describing the work of the YWCA.<sup>33</sup> In addition, the YWCA persuaded all of the five black movie theaters in Washington to screen the short film “Come to Camp,” which displayed images of the YWCA girls at Highland Beach, the resort in Annapolis where up to fifty women and girls attended camp each summer.<sup>34</sup> And at the end of the year, the YWCA held a bazaar and the girls of the YWCA presented the “playlet” entitled “One-Hundred Dollars Wanted.”<sup>35</sup> The donations for this fundraising drive came from 2,593 different people, and contributions ranged from 10¢ to \$500, which shows that black women approached people from all different economic classes for financial support.<sup>36</sup> Although black women failed to reach their goal of \$20,000, they succeeded in raising enough money to pay most of their bills and construct additional dormitory space. The girls went to camp that year, and leaders planned a “reunion” in October the YWCA headquarters where the ““Y fireplace”” would serve as the “campfire.”<sup>37</sup> In 1929, thirty-eight different Washingtonians submitted suggestions for the YWCA’s membership drive slogan.

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<sup>32</sup> “Two 200 and 18 100 donations received by YW,” *Washington Tribune*, March 9, 1928, 9.

<sup>33</sup> See Frances Boyce, Washington, D.C., to Mary Church Terrell, Washington, D.C., 8 March 1928, in Frame 296, Reel 6, Mary Church Terrell Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C., (hereafter cited as MCT-LC).

<sup>34</sup> “Two 200 and 18 100 donations received by YW,” *Washington Tribune*, March 9, 1928, 9.

<sup>35</sup> “YWCA Plans Monster Charity Dance,” *Washington Tribune*, December 18, 1928.

<sup>36</sup> “YWCA News,” *Washington Tribune*, April 20, 1928, 5.

<sup>37</sup> “YWCA News,” *Washington Tribune*, September 13, 1928, 4.

The winning slogan was “I wonder if you’ve thought to say, I’ll go join the YWCA today.”<sup>38</sup> These fundraising campaigns illuminate ways that YWCA women reached into churches, black businesses, schools, and the rooms in their own headquarters to raise money for their organization and spread awareness of its work to offer safe and affordable housing and activities.

In 1928, fundraising drives underwent a dramatic change when the Phyllis Wheatley YWCA became one of twenty-six organizations in Washington, D.C., to join the Community Chest. This membership enabled the YWCA to use the Community Chest as a fundraiser.<sup>39</sup> In 1929, one year after the Phyllis Wheatley YWCA had joined the Community Chest, leaders held a dinner in February to report that they had received \$5,000. Their goal was to garner “100 one-hundred contributions in the Community Committee.”<sup>40</sup> The YWCA’s decision to change its mode of fundraising suggests that perhaps leaders wanted to focus less on raising money and more on the organization’s programmatic activities.

### **Living in the Building**

Floors two, three, and four of the headquarters were dormitory spaces, consisting of forty-three single rooms, one double room, and communal bathrooms. During the 1920s, a total of 391 black women stayed in the headquarters as

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<sup>38</sup> “Phyllis Wheatley YWCA,” *Washington Tribune*, November 1, 1929, 6.

<sup>39</sup> “Combined Charity Drive for \$1,000,000 To Inaugurate City’s Community Chest,” *Washington Post*, November 18, 1928, M26.

<sup>40</sup> Clubs and Organizations *Washington Tribune*, February 1, 1929, 2 and 4.

permanent guests and 5,868 black women passed through as travelers.<sup>41</sup> Costs for weekly room and board varied between \$2 and \$5, depending on the resident's age and the type of room she occupied. In 1921, a newspaper article described the current residents, consisting of "four teachers, three seamstresses, ten government department and clerical workers, seventeen in private service, and nine students."<sup>42</sup> The article also noted that it was "difficult for a woman to secure rooms in Washington" because "few homes" would "take a working woman in and a colored woman finds almost all doors closed to her."<sup>43</sup>

The 1930 census sheds further light on the women who took up residence at the YWCA. The thirty-nine residents that year ranged in age from seventeen to thirty nine and were born in nineteen different states, as well as Canada, Haiti, and Guinea-Bissau. Occupationally, three were waitresses, six were clerical workers, eight were students, and thirteen were domestic workers. Of the remaining nine women, one was a hospital technician, one worked as a printer's assistant, one was the matron, and the other six did not have an occupation listed in the census.<sup>44</sup> Both of these residence lists indicate that some form of domestic service work was the predominant occupation for residents of the YWCA. Residency at the Y, in fact, might have enabled black women to avoid live-in service with their employers.<sup>45</sup> The six clerical

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<sup>41</sup> "A History of the Phyllis Wheatley Young Women's Christian Association, 1905-1930," 21, YWCA-Washingtoniana.

<sup>42</sup> "Phyllis Wheatley YWCA," *Washington Bee*, October 29, 1921, 3.

<sup>43</sup> "Phyllis Wheatley YWCA," *Washington Bee*, October 29, 1921, 3.

<sup>44</sup> For the YWCA women, see Fifteenth Census, Washington City, 1930, Enumeration District 21, Sheet 11A.

workers reflected Washington's local economy, where many citizens labored in federal government positions. Based on the occupational profile of women workers living at the Y in the 1920s, it appears that the organization offered safe and financially reasonable housing for women who worked at service and clerical jobs. The demand for rooms sometimes exceeded the capacity. In February 1928, the YWCA's newspaper column noted, "43 applicants had to be disappointed because of the lack of bedrooms." YWCA leaders referred the rejected applicants to "investigated rooms in private homes."<sup>46</sup> Thus even when women could not be accommodated at the headquarters, YWCA leaders worked to locate safe housing in private homes.

The YWCA was also a residence for students. The headquarters' close proximity to the city's three black high schools as well as Howard University made it a convenient dormitory. Sometimes parents in neighboring states of Virginia and North Carolina sent their children to Washington, D.C., to attend high school, since they considered the city's schools superior to those in southern states.<sup>47</sup> A newspaper column about the YWCA note, "after the graduation exercises of this week, a number of regular guests will be leaving for various parts of the country."<sup>48</sup> Another column a year later congratulated Louise Madella, "one of our girls" who "deserves much credit for having worked daily in the government services while attending night

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<sup>45</sup> Elizabeth Clark-Lewis, *Living In, Living Out: African American Domestic Workers in Washington, D.C., 1900-1940* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1994).

<sup>46</sup> "YWCA Goal Set at \$20,500 in Campaign," *Washington Tribune*, February 17, 1928, 1.

<sup>47</sup> Jacqueline Moore, *Leading the Race: The Transformation of the Black Elite in the Nation's Capital, 1880-1920* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1999), 188.

<sup>48</sup> "YWCA Notes," *Washington Tribune*, June 21, 1924, 2.

school at Howard and graduating in 1925.”<sup>49</sup> Thus, in addition to assisting women workers, the YWCA facilitated the education of female students by ensuring their parents of a safe and supervised place for their daughters to stay.

Women who lived at the Y belonged to the Hostess Club. Throughout the 1920s, this organization elected leaders annually and planned activities, such as monthly club meetings, dinners, parties, picnics in Rock Creek Park, and visits to soldiers in the hospital. A residential secretary monitored the behavior and activities of the women and girls who lived or stayed at the YWCA, and residents were required to follow stringent rules. For instance, every year on New Year’s Day, the Phyllis Wheatley YWCA held an open house, and residents were required to keep their doors open for inspection. And members of the Hostess Club were expected to attend dinners for residents. For instance, at a dinner in November 1922, Residence Director Lillian McRae “addressed the Club on ‘Our Relation to the YWCA movement.’”<sup>50</sup> This talk perhaps centered on the independence of the Phyllis Wheatley YWCA in Washington. Residents were also required to attend Sunday Vesper Services, and members of the Hostess Club occasionally conducted services throughout the 1920s.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> “Y.W.C.A News,” *Washington Tribune*, June 13, 1925, 2.

<sup>50</sup> “YWCA Notes,” *Washington Tribune*, November 4, 1922, 3.

<sup>51</sup> William Henry Jones, *Recreation and Amusement Among Negroes in Washington, D.C.: A Sociological Analysis of the Negro in an Urban Environment* (Washington, D.C.: Howard University Press, 1927), 61. For instances when members of the Hostess Club were in charge of Vespers, see, for instance, “YWCA News,” *Washington Tribune*, November 22, 1924, 6; “YWCA News,” *Washington Tribune*, March 21, 1925, 6; and “YWCA News,” *Washington Tribune*, March 18, 1928, 8.

YWCA residence secretaries monitored the activities of residents and steered them toward wholesome leisure and entertainment by providing such activities in the building. In his study of African American recreation in Washington, D.C., sociologist William Henry Jones noted subtle tensions that existed between the residents and the residence secretary, which often revolved around the presence of men. “During vacation season, after all the schools have closed and most of the ‘Y’ girls have returned to their homes,” he remarked, “the ‘Y’ seems to have taken on a ‘stiffness’ which makes one somewhat restless and self-conscious while subjected to its atmosphere.” He also observed that, “the [man] will find himself being casually but soberly and sternly gazed at by the more matronly women.”<sup>52</sup> Jones’s discussion of the interactions between male visitors and the residence secretaries indicate that tensions might have existed between residents and residence secretaries as well.

Leaders of the YWCA reached out to migrant women. During the 1920s, as 800,000 African Americans traveled from southern cities, towns, and rural communities to Northern and Midwestern cities, many passed through Washington on the train.<sup>53</sup> The Phyllis Wheatley YWCA assisted women and children who became stranded in Washington D.C., whether they missed their connection, lost their money, or were unable to continue on their journey. For these women and their children, the YWCA became a refuge. The YWCA maintained a Travelers’ Aid Bureau, which met migrants and took them to the YWCA. Once they arrived, the YWCA’s Social

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<sup>52</sup> Jones, *Recreation and Amusement*, 60.

<sup>53</sup> For discussions of African American migration in the 1920s, see James Gregory, *The Southern Diaspora: How the Great Migration of Black and White Southerners Transformed America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005).

Services Bureau worked to locate women's northern relatives while providing warm clothes, shelter, and food. The Social Services Bureau also convened a monthly sewing circle specifically to repair clothes for migrants.<sup>54</sup> YWCA leaders termed this work the "side lights on the Northern migration," believing that they were "rendering a real service in this respect." An emergency room with three beds on the third floor of the Y building had been set aside specifically for migrant women who were stranded and unable to pay for lodging.<sup>55</sup> That YWCA leaders designated one of the rooms in their building for women unable to pay underscores their consciousness about problems confronting poor and migrant women traveling to the North. In describing their outreach by providing shelter, a YWCA column reminded readers, "such incidents go to show that one aim of the YWCA is service."<sup>56</sup> It was a deeply political act for black women in the YWCA to be able to use rooms in a building they owned and managed to accommodate women and children in moments of distress. The dormitory rooms at the YWCA were important for offering shelter to both middle-class and working-class women.

### **Playing and Learning in the Building**

Below the dormitories, women conducted a range of activities on the first floor, using the variety of the spaces in the building to orchestrate different projects. During the 1920s, YWCA leaders broadened their course offerings beyond languages, knitting, and dancing to include orchestra, craftwork in china painting and flower

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<sup>54</sup> "YWCA News," *Washington Tribune*, September 15, 1923, 3.

<sup>55</sup> "YWCA Helping Those Move North," *Washington Tribune*, July 14, 1923, 3.

<sup>56</sup> "YWCA Girls, Distressed Folks," *Washington Tribune*, September 21, 1928, 2.

making, gymnastics, drama, and weight loss. The educational committee of the YWCA believed that these classes offered wholesome activities for Washington women. In the gymnasium, they held fashion shows for teenagers and pet shows for young girls. In addition to these classes and activities, the YWCA sponsored clubs that reached out to particular communities of women. The Industrial Club, for instance, was composed of women workers. Hattie E. King, the Club's secretary, organized members according to their occupations in laundry, domestic labor, clerical positions, and sales, studying their working conditions and ways to improve them. In addition, King attended national YWCA Business and Industrial Conferences across the country and staged "echo" meetings for her members to learn about topics discussed at the conferences. In conducting echo meetings, YWCA women exposed members to the content of the conferences, thereby enabling all to be part of the community. Women in the Industrial Club attended membership socials and shared meals together. The membership social in 1927 used the space of the headquarters to display on the walls "Slides, films, charts, and exhibitions of girls in industry" for all who attended.<sup>57</sup> The industrial club also offered classes in dressmaking, enabling members to learn a skill that might allow them to leave domestic employment and other low-paying jobs with poor working conditions.<sup>58</sup> And having an "Industrial Club" enabled women who worked at different jobs to forge connections with others and meet in a social setting that took their work seriously. In addition to the Industrial Club, the YWCA also offered an employment bureau for girls and women in Washington. Between 1921 and 1931, YWCA women located a total of 1,629 jobs

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<sup>57</sup> "YWCA News," *Washington Tribune*, April 22, 1927, 9.

<sup>58</sup> "Ladies Take Notice," *Washington Tribune*, June 24, 1922, 8.

for women in D.C. YWCA staff members personally contacted employers, thus working to make sure that women would work in safe environments.<sup>59</sup>

When women and girls were unable to visit the headquarters, the YWCA staged events across the city. The Girl Reserve, composed of girls between the ages of seven and seventeen who could join the YWCA for 50¢ a year, met in schools and churches across the city. In the 1920s, the Girl Reserve established clubs in the junior and senior high schools across D.C., as well as Union Wesley AMEZ, Metropolitan AME, St. Paul AME, Zion Baptist, Trinity Baptist, Ivy City NE, and the Southeast Welfare House. Members of the Girl Reserve groups participated in social events, community service, and recreational activities. Nearly every Saturday morning, girls in the Girl Reserve gathered at the YWCA headquarters with streetcar tokens and a bagged lunch to hike across Washington, reaching such destinations as Rock Creek Park and the newly dedicated Lincoln Memorial. They also visited soldiers in the hospital and prepared food baskets for elderly residents. By reaching out to girls in their schools and churches, the YWCA worked to attract a diverse population of members, not just girls who lived near the headquarters.

Leaders crafted activities at the YWCA that would introduce women and girls to notions of proper leisure and recreation. During the 1920s, black Washington offered a range of recreational activities, including dance halls, pool halls, movie theaters, cabarets, speakeasies, and an amusement park.<sup>60</sup> Many African American

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<sup>59</sup> “History of the Phyllis Wheatley YWCA,” 21, YWCA-Washingtoniana.

<sup>60</sup> See Jones, *Recreation and Amusement*; Marya McQuirter, “Claiming the City: African Americans, Urbanization, and Leisure in Washington, D.C., 1902-1957” (Ph.D. diss., University of Michigan, 2000); and Garrett Peck, *Prohibition in Washington, D.C.: How Dry We Weren’t* (Charleston: The History Press, 2011).

women leaders denounced these activities as unwholesome. One of the founders of the Phyllis Wheatley YWCA, Rosetta Lawson, was active in temperance activities in the 1920s.<sup>61</sup> And YWCA President France Boyce was a member of the Women's Christian Temperance Union at the Fifteenth Street Baptist Church.<sup>62</sup> YWCA leaders, then, worked to steer black women and girls toward proper recreational activities at the headquarters. For instance, they invited black women to come to the headquarters to enjoy the space. A newspaper article noted that the "the lounge is homelike with its wicker furniture and tables covered with periodicals, so that one feels inclined to linger for a friendly chat or for a moment of quiet in a busy day."<sup>63</sup> Black women leaders designed wholesome activities for women and girls. A Halloween Party in 1922 consisted of a three-legged race and apple bobbing.<sup>64</sup> YWCA leaders allowed black women to dance, but held all dances inside the building's gymnasium in order to supervise behavior.<sup>65</sup>

During the summer, YWCA leaders rented a campsite in Highland Beach, Maryland, and invited girls, charging a nominal fee. YWCA leaders brought their ideas about proper leisure to summer camp. The camp's activities bespeak its innocence. In 1923, YWCA girls feasted on watermelon, wove baskets, told stories,

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<sup>61</sup> "Women's Organization Elects Officers," *Washington Tribune*, December 13, 1924, 5.

<sup>62</sup> "Locals and Society," *Washington Tribune* February 18, 1924, 2.

<sup>63</sup> "Charm, Asset in Girls' New 'Y' Buildings," *Chicago Defender*, January 14, 1922, 5.

<sup>64</sup> "YWCA Notes," *Washington Tribune*, November 4, 1922, 3.

<sup>65</sup> "YWCA News," *Washington Tribune*, February 19, 1926, 5; and "YWCA News," *Washington Tribune*, January 27, 1928, 10.

played games, and sang songs. The camp's "mascots" were "two lizards, three chickens, and two tiny puppies." And the directors issued campers "awards for patriotism, spirit, and knowledge."<sup>66</sup> A 1925 newspaper column stated that campers had enjoyed such activities as swimming, crabbing, fishing, tennis, and boating.<sup>67</sup> In the late 1920s, leaders staged fundraising campaigns to purchase a permanent campsite. In 1930, they bought three acres on Black Walnut Creek near Highland Beach. One year later, they expanded the site by purchasing three additional acres and constructing offices, a recreation hall, a dining hall, and a kitchen. In total, the camp could accommodate one hundred.<sup>68</sup> Leaders named the new campsite "Clarissa Scott" in honor of teacher and YWCA worker Clarissa Scott Delaney, daughter of Howard University professor Emmett J. Scott, who had died in 1927. This name was also fitting because Clarissa Scott's father had worked with the YWCA's War Work Council to construct the Phyllis Wheatley's YWCA headquarters in 1920.<sup>69</sup> Leaders of the YWCA hoped that the new campsite would be a "great benefit to health" and promote girls' "building of character" through the "well planned and definite program carried out under expert supervisors."<sup>70</sup> YWCA leaders used the camp as a site to expose girls to wholesome amusements (see figure 6).

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<sup>66</sup> "YWCA Camp Notes," *Washington Tribune*, September 8, 1923, 2.

<sup>67</sup> "YWCA Camp," *Washington Tribune*, July 11, 1925, 3.

<sup>68</sup> "A History of the Phyllis Wheatley Young Women's Christian Association, 1905-1930," 27-28, YWCA-Washingtoniana.

<sup>69</sup> "Mrs. Scott Delaney Buried Thursday," *Baltimore Afro-American*, October 15, 1927, 2; and "Camp Opens Soon at Highland Beach," *Washington Post*, May 31, 1931, S10.

<sup>70</sup> "A History of the Phyllis Wheatley Young Women's Christian Association, 1905-1930," 29, YWCA-Washingtoniana.

**Figure 6: Photograph of YWCA Girls at Camp Clarissa Scott, 1930**



**Source:** “YWCA Camp for Girls,” Addison Scurlock Photograph Collection, Smithsonian Museum of American History Archives Center, Washington, D.C.

This Addison Scurlock photograph depicts twenty-one YWCA girls at camp.<sup>71</sup> They are all dressed in bathing suits and each is holding a ball. Behind the girls in the center of the photograph is an unidentified man who perhaps transported the girls to camp. This image conveys not only the wholesome nature of this experience, but also

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<sup>71</sup> Addison Scurlock operated a renowned photography studio in Washington, D.C. throughout the twentieth century. For more information, see John Jeffrey Fearing, “African-American Image, History, and Identity in Twentieth-Century Washington, D.C. as Chronicled through the Art and Social Realism Photography of Addison N. Scurlock and the Scurlock Studios 1904-1994” (Ph.D. diss., Howard University, 2005).

the sheer pleasure of attending YWCA camp. Nearly every girl in this photograph is smiling.

YWCA leaders also sponsored these activities to protect black women and girls from the segregation and exclusion that existed in their city. In 1920s-Washington, African Americans had access to few opportunities for swimming. Officials in the federal Department of Buildings and Grounds banned African Americans from the bathing beach at the Tidal Basin, and until 1928, African American Washingtonians had access to only one swimming pool.<sup>72</sup> The new Phyllis Wheatley YWCA building was originally designed to accommodate a swimming pool, but leaders had to abandon it to make room for more dormitory space. In 1923, the Phyllis Wheatley YWCA held a conference where attendees discussed the need for “a swimming pool where segregation will not humiliate and embarrass the young women.”<sup>73</sup> Through summer camp, then, YWCA leaders offered an alternative space for girls to swim in the summer and avoid the crowds in the Washington’s only black pool. They also held swimming classes to teach girls how to swim before they attended camp.<sup>74</sup>

In addition to offering wholesome recreational activities, the YWCA also invited speakers to educate the entire community. During the 1920s, the YWCA was a place where members could learn about international issues. This engagement with internationalism existed on several levels. Several missionaries spoke to YWCA

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<sup>72</sup> In 1928, the city opened another swimming pool for African Americans. See “Pool for Colored People Opens Today,” *Washington Post*, 14 July 1928, 16.

<sup>73</sup> “YWCA Notes,” *Washington Tribune*, February 3, 1923, 6.

<sup>74</sup> “YWCA News,” *Washington Tribune*, June 20, 1925, 2.

women about their travels in principally African and Caribbean countries and attendant efforts to spread Christianity. For instance, in July 1922, Fannie M. Clair, a missionary in the Methodist Episcopal Church and head of the Travelers' Aid Bureau, spoke to members about her recent trip to Africa, offering a gendered account of her visit. Her first impression was that "sight of numerous men at the port when the vessel arrived, clamoring for work." She remarked, "no women were in sight," but "farther removed from the wharf the women were seen carrying children and other burdens attached to their back." Clair told the YWCA that she was "impressed by the eagerness of the African girls for an education" but lamented that many were "sold at an early age into marriage." She ended her talk by making a "plea for YWCA to assist the women and children of Africa."<sup>75</sup> A few months later, a missionary who had recently traveled to Liberia named "Miss Harris" addressed the YWCA women at Sunday Vespers and stated that there was "much missionary work to be done" in spreading Christianity because most Liberians were more inclined to practice Islam.<sup>76</sup> And in 1925, the YWCA welcomed Ellen Wilson, who had returned from missionary work in Asia, Africa, and the Caribbean. She delivered an address for members entitled "What are you doing to help foreign missions?"<sup>77</sup> It is not surprising that these different missionaries spoke at the YWCA in the 1920s because the organization was explicitly Christian.

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<sup>75</sup> "YWCA Notes," *Washington Tribune*, July 29, 1922, 9. The article did not indicate which countries in Africa where Fannie Clair had traveled.

<sup>76</sup> "YWCA Notes," *Washington Tribune*, November 4, 1922, 3.

<sup>77</sup> YWCA Notes," *Washington Tribune*, January 17, 1925, 3.

In addition to missionaries, the YWCA also hosted speakers to discuss the culture and politics of other countries. The countries discussed in the 1920s—Haiti, Japan, and Russia—closely correlated with the imagination of black internationalism in this period. In December 1921, the YWCA hosted Madame Inouye, who was the head of Domestic Science Department at the Tokyo Women’s College. In honor of her visit, YWCA women displayed the Japanese flag and cherry blossoms throughout the headquarters, making “the interior scene of the building very foreign looking.”<sup>78</sup> The historian Marc Gallicchio has argued that African Americans viewed Japan as an ally during the 1920s because they saw the country as “an important symbol of racial progress and a potential ally against racial progress,” which helps to explain why YWCA women hosted a Japanese guest in 1921.<sup>79</sup> In December 1926, W. E. B. Du Bois delivered a lecture at the YWCA on his recent trip to Russia. The recent revolution had piqued the interest of Du Bois and other black intellectuals who were curious about whether Communism could create a more just society.<sup>80</sup> And one year later, in February 1927, Harriet Gibbs Marshall, the founder of the Washington Conservatory of Music and School of Expression, spoke to YWCA about the “political situation” in Haiti, where her husband, Napoleon Boneapart Marshall, served as a clerk for the U.S. Legation. She also “displayed many beautiful articles of

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<sup>78</sup> “YWCA Notes” *Washington Tribune*, December 3, 1921, 2.

<sup>79</sup> Marc Gallicchio, *The African American Encounter with Japan and China* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 59.

<sup>80</sup> “YWCA News,” *Washington Tribune*, December 17, 1926, 2. For information on Du Bois’s travels in Russia in 1926, see David Levering Lewis, *W. E. B. Du Bois: The Fight for Equality and the American Century, 1919-1963* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2000), 183-206. Du Bois also wrote an article about this trip. See W. E. B. Du Bois, “My Recent Journey,” *The Crisis* 33, no. 12 (December 1926): 64-65.

handiwork” crafted by Haitians.<sup>81</sup> The “political situation” to which she referred was the 1915 U.S. occupation of Haiti, which lasted until 1934. Napoleon Marshall later denounced the U.S. occupation, citing violence and corruption, and it is possible that Harriet Marshall articulated some of those critiques in her lecture.<sup>82</sup> While both the black and white press covered the politics and culture of these countries during the 1920s, visiting the YWCA enabled black women throughout Washington to hear about these places firsthand. Leaders at the YWCA also infused their activities with international culture. For instance, in 1923, the Girl Reserve recreated “Barnum’s Circus” inside gymnasium; it featured “King Tut Entertainment” making it an, “Egyptian Evening.”<sup>83</sup> And in December 1927, the Girl Reserve staged a “Carnival of Nations” that featured song and dance from Egypt, Hawaii, Spain, and the Netherlands.<sup>84</sup> During the 1920s, leaders at the YWCA sponsored guest lectures and staged activities to raise awareness about international issues and culture.

Women affiliated with the YWCA used the organization as a space to weigh in on political issues, both in Washington, D.C., and across the country. Living at the YWCA or moving in and out of the building would have offered a woman quite a political education during the 1920s. For instance, in January 1925, the YWCA’s

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<sup>81</sup> “YWCA News,” *Washington Tribune*, April 22, 1927, 9.

<sup>82</sup> See Napoleon Boneapart Marshall, *New York World*, February 10, 1929, as cited in Brenda Gayle Plummer, “The Afro-American Response to the Occupation of Haiti, 1915-1934,” *Phylon* 43 (June 1982): 139-140; and “Our Policy on Haiti Scored in Debate,” *New York Times*, December 22, 1929, 20. For more information on the U.S. occupation of Haiti, see Mary A. Renda, *Taking Haiti: Military Occupation and the Culture of U.S. Imperialism, 1915-1940* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001).

<sup>83</sup> “YWCA Notes,” *Washington Tribune*, November 3, 1923, 2.

<sup>84</sup> “YWCA Notes,” *Washington Tribune*, December 2, 1927, 5.

Booklover's Hour discussed NAACP Assistant Secretary Walter White's recent book on lynching, *Fire in the Flint*.<sup>85</sup> Women in the YWCA also banded together as a group to protect the image of African American women. In January 1923, white women in the United Daughters of the Confederacy proposed to erect a monument in Washington, D.C., honoring the "faithful slave, Mammy." The prospect of the Mammy Memorial outraged African American citizens across the nation, prompting vocal dissents in the black and white press and angry letters sent to congressmen.<sup>86</sup> Black women leaders at the Phyllis Wheatley YWCA responded in several ways. First, they issued a collective statement denouncing the proposed monument. In their message, the members of the Phyllis Wheatley board argued that they were speaking for "the colored women of the city of Washington." Black women perhaps used the Phyllis Wheatley YWCA as a political organization because it contained the largest membership of women and girls living in different parts of the city and belonging to a range of churches. "The colored women of the city of Washington," they wrote,

do not like to be vividly reminded of the unfortunate condition of some of our ancestors, as were the helots of Greece or the serfs of Russia. The old mammy as a slave, however well she may have performed her part as foster mother to many of the progeny of the South, represents the shadows of the past. Such irritants are not conducive to the harmony of citizenship.

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<sup>85</sup> YWCA Notes," *Washington Tribune*, January 17, 1925, 3.

<sup>86</sup> For African American responses to the Mammy Memorial, see Micki McEyla, *Clinging to Mammy: The Faithful Slave in Twentieth-Century America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 152-153.

This statement was reprinted in national publications, such as the *Literary Digest* and the very first issue of *Time Magazine*.<sup>87</sup> In addition to this critique, black YWCA women “carried the Resolution to Vice-President Coolidge and Speaker Gillette.” *Time Magazine*, in fact, credited women at the Phyllis Wheatley YWCA with striking down the proposal.<sup>88</sup> In addition, Gretchen McRae, a black woman stenographer who was active in ending civil service segregation in the 1920s, spoke to the YWCA about her activities as well as her attendance at the NAACP Convention in Los Angeles. The YWCA’s weekly column noted that, “her report should bristle with interest for the Y members.”<sup>89</sup> In all of these activities—clubs, classes, speakers, and advocacy—African American women conducted many different forms of activism through their affiliation with the Phyllis Wheatley YWCA.

### **Meeting at the Building**

Some women and men in Washington selected the YWCA headquarters as the site in which to anchor their organizations. In the 1920s, more than fifteen educational, religious, and professional throughout the city met at the headquarters. These groups included church organizations, such as the AME Superintendents and the Lutheran Church Club; mutual benefit societies such as the Ladies Beneficial Union and the Progressive Relief Association; college alumni clubs for graduates of Hampton, Tuskegee, and Storer; professional organizations such as the Washington

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<sup>87</sup> “The Black Mammy of the South,” *Literary Digest* 76, no. 13 (1923): 56; and “Black Mammy,” *Time Magazine* 1, no. 1 (3 March 1923): 6.

<sup>88</sup> “Black Mammy,” 6.

<sup>89</sup> “YWCA Notes,” *Washington Tribune*, October 5, 1928, 2.

Council of Social Workers, the Poro Club, the Hairdressers' Association, and the College Women's Club. And members of the NAACP held all of their monthly meetings at the YWCA headquarters in the 1920s. In 1926, six law students from Howard University, including two women, staged a "mock trial" in the Rose Rooms at the headquarters.<sup>90</sup> The appeal of the YWCA for these different black Washingtonians was likely because the building contained multiple meeting rooms, enabling different groups to meet at the same time, its proximity to three streetcar lines, and its location in a thriving section of Washington.

Through its cafeteria and kitchen, the YWCA tried to attract black Washingtonians. A column reported, "A group of Madam Walker agents took lunch in the cafeteria this week."<sup>91</sup> Students at the O Street Vocational School used the cafeteria and kitchen in the YWCA to practice their serving and domestic science skills.<sup>92</sup> The YWCA also tried to encourage black Washingtonians to in the cafeteria. For instance, in 1926 the leaders began to invite "housewives and their families" to eat dinner there each Thursday.<sup>93</sup> And the YWCA held an annual Thanksgiving dinner for black Washingtonians.<sup>94</sup> In the 1920s, YWCA leaders enhanced the cafeteria by adding a soda fountain and a sandwich bar.<sup>95</sup> But despite these efforts,

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<sup>90</sup> "YWCA News," *Washington Tribune*, February 5, 1926, 2.

<sup>91</sup> "YWCA Notes," *Washington Tribune*, July 29, 1922, 8.

<sup>92</sup> "Parent-Teacher Activities at Smothers School," *Washington Tribune*, May 14, 1926, 5.

<sup>93</sup> "YWCA News," *Washington Tribune*, October 8, 1926, 4.

<sup>94</sup> "YWCA News," *Washington Tribune*, November 21, 1925, 2.

<sup>95</sup> "General Notes," *Washington Tribune*, December 11, 1921, 5; and "YWCA News," *Washington Tribune*, September 13, 1929, 4.

the cafeteria did not generate significant income. In the mid-1920s, the YWCA began to lose money through their cafeteria, suggesting this was because the building was not located in the “business section of the city.”<sup>96</sup> By the end of the 1920s, YWCA leaders leased out the cafeteria to individual women to manage.

When African American women founded partisan political organizations in the 1920s, many of them selected the YWCA parlors for their meeting space. In September 1920, political activist Mary Church Terrell founded the Colored Women’s Republican League (CWRL) inside the YWCA and convened its weekly meetings at the headquarters.<sup>97</sup> And four years later, lawyer Jeannette Carter founded the Women’s Political Study Club (WPSC), which also held weekly meetings at the YWCA headquarters.<sup>98</sup>

The YWCA headquarters’ multiple meeting rooms enabled these political organizations to meet separately as well as collaborate on different projects. For instance, when President Calvin Coolidge was inaugurated in 1925, members of the National League of Republican Colored Women (NLRCW) and WPSC held joint events at the YWCA. When NLRCW members from across the country traveled to the city for the inauguration, they stayed at the YWCA and took their meals in its cafeteria. They attended an all-day conference, planned by the WPSC and held in the Social Hall that included “speeches and reports covering the political activities of women in different sections of the country.” The WPSC also held a reception for the

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<sup>96</sup> “History of the Phyllis Wheatley YWCA,” 25, YWCA-Washingtoniana.

<sup>97</sup> “The League of Republican Colored Women,” *Washington Bee*, October 2, 1920, 4.

<sup>98</sup> “To Discuss Equal Rights for Women,” *Washington Tribune*, May 25, 1928, 4.

visiting women in the “Rose Rooms.”<sup>99</sup> In addition to the NLRCW and WPSC inauguration activities, members of the Girl Reserve entertained out-of-town visitors that week with a “picnic in the gymnasium,” charging 10¢ for admission.<sup>100</sup> With this picnic, members of the Girl Reserve could meet distinguished women leaders, such as National Association of Colored Women (NACW) president Mary McLeod Bethune. The YWCA’s weekly column expressed delight that “so many visitors crossed our threshold” during the inaugural week. The inauguration in 1925 illustrates ways that black women used the different spaces in the building to bridge their different levels of activism. Many local and national women gathered at the YWCA headquarters that week to hear about women’s activism around electoral politics and reconnect with friends and colleagues. And members of the Girl Reserve staged a picnic to earn money for their organization and celebrate the inauguration with each other. The YWCA’s diversity of spaces allowed for these gatherings to occur simultaneously.

The YWCA’s dormitories were important for black women who traveled across the country and struggled to find a hotel in Washington, D.C., a city that practiced racial segregation. In her discussion of early black YWCA branches, worker Addie Hunton noted the importance of YWCA buildings in New York and Boston for black women travelers who could “stop in the Association homes” when they faced segregation or exclusion at hotels and boarding houses.<sup>101</sup> With the

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<sup>99</sup> “Inaugural Attracts Women in Politics,” *New York Amsterdam News*, March 4, 1925, 3.

<sup>100</sup> “YWCA Notes,” *Washington Tribune*, March 14, 1925, 2.

<sup>101</sup> Addie W. Hunton, *Beginnings Among Colored Women* (New York: National Board of the YWCA, 1913), 12 as quoted in Robertson, *Christian Sisterhood*, 42.

dedication of its headquarters, the Phyllis Wheatley YWCA was able to accommodate more out-of-town guests. In August 1922, when clubwomen from all parts of the country traveled to Richmond, Virginia, for the NACW's annual meeting, some stayed in Washington, D.C., at the YWCA. Part of the reason Washington, D.C., had so many visitors for a Virginia meeting was because this convention coincided with the dedication of the Frederick Douglass house in Southeast Washington, D.C. The YWCA's column declared that the week of the convention "has been one of the busiest times in the history of the Y." On Saturday, the building was open from eight in the morning until ten at night, entertaining more than 500 visitors. "The building," the column noted, "was taxed to its utmost capacities in finding comfortable sleeping quarters for the many visitors, but by turning the gymnasium and club rooms into dormitories more than 100 guests were advocated."<sup>102</sup> Thus by creating more dormitory space in the gym and club rooms, the Phyllis Wheatley used its building to house traveling black women who would be barred from most hotels in Washington, D.C.

Black women political activists also used the YWCA as an impromptu meeting space. In February 1921, a group of local and national black women gathered in Washington to meet with members of the National Women's Party. First, the women congregated at the Nineteenth Street Baptist Church, where they strategized about what they would say to the chair of the National Women's Party, Alice Paul. They then "passed down Eye Street, then Connecticut Avenue to Jackson place. On the second floor in the large reception hall, they greeted Miss Paul." Here

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<sup>102</sup> "YWCA News," *Washington Tribune*, August 15, 1922, 5.

they asked her to “lend her aid toward the enforcement of the Nineteenth Amendment to the Constitution, which would give the 5,000,000 colored women the right to vote.” Paul was not receptive, and waves of disappointment appeared among the group. Then, as an article notes, “[t]he delegation left with a greater determination to go on and press the battle. They went to the Phyllis Wheatley YWCA building.” Here, they enjoyed a “luncheon” and then “held another meeting.”<sup>103</sup> This episode illustrates black women’s use of the different parts of the YWCA building, tailoring them to their political work. All of these examples illuminate ways that black women used the YWCA building as a space to orchestrate their political work in the 1920s, ranging from meetings to receptions and dinners.

## **Conclusion**

All of these different components of the YWCA—the dormitories, classes, clubs, dinners, and parties, as well as outreach work across the city—contributed to the organization’s growth. In 1905, the year of its founding, the YWCA had 193 members; twenty years later, that number climbed to 3,555 women and girls across Washington.<sup>104</sup> Of this membership, between 1,500 and 2,000 voted each year about leadership.<sup>105</sup> While black men in Washington, D.C., belonged to the 12th Street Young Men’s Christian Association (YMCA), this organization was neither nearly as large nor as active as the Phyllis Wheatley YWCA. For instance, in 1925 the

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<sup>103</sup> “Colored Women Present Memorial,” *Washington Bee*, February 19, 1921, 4.

<sup>104</sup> “History of the Phyllis Wheatley YWCA,” 22; and “Washington’s Phyllis Wheatley YWCA Home Cost Sum of 217,000,” *Chicago Defender*, October 24, 1925, A1.

<sup>105</sup> “History of the Phyllis Wheatley YWCA,” 21, *YWCA-Washingtoniana*.

12<sup>th</sup> Street YMCA had a membership of fewer than 1,000; 450 boys and 500 men. In a study on African American recreational patterns in Washington, D.C., sociologist William Henry Jones noted that the 12th Street YMCA was “not so highly organized as the YWCA” and featured only calisthenics, checkers, boxing, wrestling, and basketball.<sup>106</sup> The differences in membership patterns between the YWCA and the YMCA might be explained by considering the fact that African American boys enjoyed more opportunities for recreation in the playgrounds and sports teams in Washington, D.C.<sup>107</sup>

Although the YWCA had a large membership, its leaders continually pursued strategies to bring the organization into neighborhoods throughout the city. Through the Girl Reserve, they formed clubs in schools and churches across the city. And sometimes they staged activities in different churches. For instance, in July 1924, they held a Vespers Service at an AMEZ Church in Southwest Washington.<sup>108</sup> But the YWCA’s leaders had ambitions to expand the organization even further. When Julia West Hamilton, a clerk at the Bureau of Printing and Engraving, took the helm of the organization in 1930, she recommended that “we return to the original custom of holding public meetings quarterly in the different churches of the District, including all denominations of evangelical character, for the purpose of popularizing

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<sup>106</sup> Jones, *Recreation and Amusement*, 63.

<sup>107</sup> In her annual reports, Director of Playgrounds Susie Root Rhodes continually emphasized that African American boys enjoyed more opportunities for games and recreation at D.C.’s playgrounds than African American girls. See, for instance, *Eleventh Annual Report of the Department of Playgrounds of the District of Columbia for the Year ended June 30, 1922* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1922).

<sup>108</sup> “YWCA Notes,” *Washington Tribune*, July 19, 1924, 3.

and expanding the work of our Association among the Christian element and especially among young colored women of our community.”<sup>109</sup> Hamilton’s suggestion indicates that perhaps the YWCA was not as widespread in other parts of the city. It also indicates that the YWCA was not currently working with storefront churches, where women wielded especially significant influence and leadership.

Despite efforts to expand the YWCA, leaders succeeded in creating a cross-class organization composed of a diversity of members. The YWCA’s history noted that its membership was composed of women from all different parts of the city. “Side by side in committee work,” the history noted, “have been members of the Board of Education, highly paid school officials and humble housewives, college-trained women and women who could not write their names, women in the springtime of life and gray-haired grandmothers.”<sup>110</sup>

With its dedication on Rhode Island Avenue leaders and members of the YWCA used the various rooms in the headquarters to pursue and sustain their activism, whether it was assisting migrants, reaching out to women workers, providing safe lodging for women and girls, or offering classes for women. In so doing, the activities of the Y educated black women about the value of collectivism. In 1920 black women at the YWCA faced a serious challenge of raising enough money to meet the annual costs of their new headquarters. They did not always raise enough money, but African American women affiliated with the YWCA practiced important political skills of fundraising, publicity, and public speaking. With the ownership of their building, African American women realized the importance of

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<sup>109</sup> History of the Phyllis Wheatley YWCA,” 17-18, YWCA-Washingtoniana.

<sup>110</sup> “ History of the Phyllis Wheatley YWCA-Washingtoniana,” 22.

having an autonomous space to conduct their politics, whether it was holding a meeting, housing a migrant, or educating a student. All of these concerns flowed into black women's organizing and activism at 911 Rhode Island Avenue in Northwest Washington.

## Chapter 3: Organizing the District Union: The National Association of Wage Earners at the Local Level

### Introduction

In March 1921, Nannie Helen Burroughs issued an invitation to the “colored-American women of the United States” to join her in organizing the National Association of Wage Earners (NAWE). Burroughs imagined women from “all walks of life,” including “cooks and clerks, field hands and parlor maids, teachers and laundresses, dressmakers and charwomen, beauty culturists and factory workers, boarding-house keepers and trained nurses, business women, and the army of unclassified toilers North, South, East, and West” banding together in the NAWE. She hoped to enlist 10,000 women, who “in turn would enlist another 10,000.” By organizing together, she argued, black women workers could fight for wages that would allow them to live decently, collectively address grievances against employers, lobby for national legislation affecting women’s labor, broaden their employment opportunities, sharpen skills to become more efficient at their jobs, assist each other with some basic necessities of employment, such as uniforms, and bring a professionalism to all jobs, including those in domestic and other personal service work.<sup>1</sup> As Burroughs campaigned for the new organization, she pointed out that while white men had the American Federation of Labor and white women benefited

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<sup>1</sup> Nannie Helen Burroughs, Washington, D.C., to “My Dear Friend,” March 26, 1921 as quoted in “National Association of Wage Earners,” *Washington Bee*, April 4, 1921, 1; “National Association of Woman Wage Earners,” *Norfolk Journal and Guide*, April 23, 1921, 4; “National Association of Wage Earners,” *The Competitor* 3, no. 4 (June 1921): 26; and Letter from Nannie Helen Burroughs, Washington, D.C., to My Dear Friend, 21 October 1921 in Folder 8, Box 308, Nannie Helen Burroughs Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C., (hereafter cited as NHB-LC).

from the National Women's Trade Union League, "our women have no organization standing with them in their struggle for economic advancement and protection."<sup>2</sup>

Through personal letters, announcements in newspapers and magazines, and appeals at national meetings such as the International Working Women's Convention and the Woman's Convention of the National Baptist Church (WC), Burroughs aimed to enroll an initial membership that could organize NAWE branches across the country.<sup>3</sup>

By the founding conference in November 1921, the NAWE had attracted fifty-two women from twenty-six states, including Washington, D.C., to become members. Over the next five years, 1,820 women and men from thirty-seven states joined the NAWE. Although the NAWE developed a national constituency, more than 60 percent of those who joined lived and labored in Washington, D.C., making this branch, called the District Union, the largest in the organization. Historians of labor and political history have noted the existence of the NAWE, principally situating it within the panoply of black women's national organizations that emerged in the 1920s and analyzing it based on its founding mission.<sup>4</sup> This chapter narrows

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<sup>2</sup> "Negro Women Unprotected," undated, Anna Kelton Wiley Papers, Folder 4, Box 256, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. (hereafter cited as AKW-LC)

<sup>3</sup> See "To The National Women's Trade Union League of America from Representative Negro Women of the United States In behalf of Negro Women Laborers of the United States," 4 November 1919, First International Congress of Working Women, Washington, D.C. in National Trade Union League Papers, Microfilm Reel 25, Frames 545-547, National Trade Union League Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. (hereafter cited as NTULP-LC). Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham notes that Burroughs presented her plan for the labor organization that would become the NAWE at the 1920 meeting of the Woman's Convention. See Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 218-219.

<sup>4</sup> The NAWE receives brief mention in a number of historical works. For example, Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham describes how the NAWE embodied a "politics of

the field of inquiry to the local level, centering on the District Union,<sup>5</sup> where 1,121 black women and men from diverse occupations joined between 1921 and 1926.<sup>6</sup> (By comparison, the next largest branch was located in New York, where eighty-four

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respectability” which emphasized the dignity of black women’s domestic labor. Higginbotham situates the ideological program of the NAWE as extending from Burroughs’s work in her Training School and her activism in the Women’s Conference of the Baptist Church. Sharon Harley describes the NAWE as a “short-lived” organization that forged alliances between capital and labor. Deborah Thomas devotes an entire diss. chapter to the NAWE, focusing principally on the process of organizing the national organization. She positions the NAWE as extending beyond the goals of the Training School through its work of political and labor organizing. She casts the NAWE as a success for its ability to attract so many working-class women, citing the Great Depression as one of the chief causes for the organization’s demise. Thomas’s diss. is the only work that looks at who the members were, analyzing the occupational makeup and states of residency of the membership as well as the activities and programs the NAWE developed over the 1921-1926 period. I build on her work and, by focusing in at this local level in the city with the majority of the membership make clearer patterns in membership and organizing. See Evelyn Brooks Barnett, “Nannie Burroughs and the Education of Black Women,” in *The Afro-American Woman: Struggles and Images*, ed. Sharon Harley and Rosalyn Terborg-Penn (Port Washington, NY: Kennikat Press, 1978), 100-102; Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women’s Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 218-221; Sharon Harley, “Nannie Helen Burroughs: ‘The Black Goddess of Liberty,’” *Journal of Negro History* 81, nos. 1-4 (Winter-Autumn 1996): 66 and Deborah Gisele Thomas, “Workers and Organizers: African-American Women in the Work Force and Club Movement, 1890-1930” (Ph.D. diss., Brown University, 1998),” 219-252.

<sup>5</sup> The NAWE constitution called for the organization of state, local, and district unions throughout the country, thus the materials on the NAWE sometimes refer to the work of district unions. The Washington, D.C. chapter also came to be known as the District Union. See, for example, “With the Clubs,” *Chicago Defender*, November 29, 1924, A2; and “The National Association of Wage Earners, Incorporated,” *Washington Tribune*, January 16, 1926, 3.

<sup>6</sup> The data on the NAWE membership comes from membership cards, logbooks, and one letter located in Folders 1, 2, and 3, Box 308, NHB Papers, LOC. The membership cards—containing members’ names, street addresses, occupations, and name of person who recruited them—are found in Folders 1 and 2. The logbook lists the names, street addresses, and dates that members joined the NAWE. For a letter from one recruiter, listing the names of the women and men she enlisted, see Sadie T. Henson, Washington, D.C., to I. Frontes Wood, Washington, D.C., January 1923, in Folder 1. Calculating the total number of entries for all of these sources, I counted 708 members from the membership cards, 51 members from the letter, and 1,797 members from the logbook. I then eliminated 736 duplicate names for a membership total of 1,820, including one white woman, Anna Kelton Wylie. The only other historian to count the memberships, Deborah Thomas, found 1,787. See Thomas, “Workers and Organizers,” 242. The records do not allow for an analysis of how many who were initially recruited maintained their membership.

members joined.<sup>7</sup>). District Union members enjoyed particular advantages over their peers in other states since Burroughs lived and worked in the city and her National Training School in the city became a site for organizing the NAWE. In addition, the NAWE's national headquarters opened in Washington, D.C., in 1924, offering classes, programs, and resources. Close proximity to the national NAWE explains why more people joined in Washington than in other places across the country, but even there it was not inevitable that such an organization would appeal to African Americans or that individuals from diverse backgrounds would register large memberships. An on-the-ground look at the NAWE in Washington, D.C., reveals the ways in which the branch's leadership crafted a two-tiered recruitment process, intervened in local labor issues, and situated the organization within existing sites of women and men's organizing and activism. This chapter argues that it is in the organizing as much or more than the rhetoric and national statements that the goals and viewpoint of the NAWE can be understood. Over 1,000 women and men saw hope in the NAWE. How and why these people came to the organization is the subject of this chapter.

This chapter looks concretely at the day-to-day life of the largest branch of the NAWE, illuminating the methods employed in organizing and sustaining the District Union. Specifically, this chapter analyzes the process by which different members joined, examines how this local adapted the national agenda, and charts the Washington-specific activities that the District Union spearheaded. Burroughs often

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<sup>7</sup> While the NAWE was a national organization there was no sizeable bloc of members outside Washington, D.C. The next largest memberships (by state)—Maryland (74), Pennsylvania (72), Virginia (65), Connecticut (48), Indiana (30), Illinois (30), Kansas (29), Colorado (28), and New Jersey (26)—demonstrates that comparatively few women and men joined other locals.

described the NAWE as offering a specific, constructive program for black women wage earners; it was in the District Union that this vision was most fully realized.

The branch's leadership skillfully designed its recruitment process so that many black Washingtonians—office workers, neighborhood residents, newspaper readers, or church members—would encounter an opportunity to join the organization. African American residents of Washington, D.C., transmitted information in diverse locations across the city, often based upon the type of labor they performed, the neighborhood where they lived, the organizations and institutions to which they belonged, the businesses they patronized, and the families they created. By crafting a democratic recruitment process—whereby both paid organizers and ordinary members could bring women and men into the organization—District Union leaders enabled recruiters to mine the vast knowledge networks and institutional, work-based, and neighborhood connections among residents of the city, whereby one teacher might recruit her colleague, a laundress could tap her next-door-neighbor, and an attendance officer might introduce the organization to a maid in her mutual benefit association. This process of two-tiered recruitment helped to draw diverse members to the branch.

The District Union worked to gather a diverse membership by making labor a central focus of the organization. Attracting members from different occupational backgrounds proved a continuing challenge to black women's political organizing and activism.<sup>8</sup> The District Union, then, deliberately worked to attract a diverse

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<sup>8</sup> For instance, in her history of African American women's organizing, the historian Deborah Gray White notes, "[s]eldom did African-American women organize across class lines." See *Too Heavy a Load: Black Women in Defense of Themselves, 1884-1994* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1999), 17. And in her study of the National Association

membership roster. First, the local union elected a cross-class leadership board, composed of an attendance officer, a dressmaker, a teacher, a laundress, a waitress, a hairdresser, a servant, and a live-in ladies maid. Having a diverse leadership board enabled these women to reach into their own labor networks to circulate awareness about the organization. Next, the District Union conducted labor advocacy campaigns, which aimed to attract particular communities of workers. For instance, in 1923 leaders in the District Union initiated an organizing drive to attract domestic workers. This drive—which consisted of newspaper articles and door-to-door canvassing—coincided with Nannie Helen Burroughs’s testimony about the plight of servants at a Women’s Bureau conference. These organizing campaigns convinced over 100 personal servants to become members that year. Furthermore, when the federal government reduced the wages and hours of charwomen, the NAWE staged a mass meeting to protest these injustices, which attracted government workers to join the organization. And sometimes members attached their own, labor-specific interests onto the mission of the District Union. For instance, live-in servants lobbied for the headquarters to feature dormitory rooms so that women did not have to sleep at their place of employment. In electing a leadership board composed of women from different occupational backgrounds and in conducting labor campaigns, the District Union worked to gather a cross-class membership.

The District Union attracted members, raised money, and sustained day-to-day activities by forging connections with important sites of organizing and

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of Colored Women, the historian Tullia Kay Brown Hamilton’s sampling of 108 leaders found that while 73percent worked outside of the home, 67 percent were teachers. See “The National Association of Colored Women, 1896-1920” (Ph.D. diss., Emory University, 1978), 45.

mobilization across black Washington. During the 1920s, some of these political spaces included churches, fraternal orders, the press, and hundreds of social, political, and religious organizations. Over 60 percent of black Washingtonians belonged to a church in the 1920s, making them important places for disseminating ideas, gathering constituencies, and raising money.<sup>9</sup> To reach church members, the District Union publicized its organization through Sunday sermons and weekly bulletins, such as the *Shiloh Herald*, held meetings in churches, and collaborated with different organizations such as the Helping Hand Club at the Nineteenth Street Baptist Church.<sup>10</sup> The District Union also worked to connect with the thousands of black Washingtonians affiliated with mutual benefit and fraternal orders.<sup>11</sup> By adopting a “profit-sharing feature” that promised tangible returns from active membership through recruitment and a death benefits fund, the NAWE’s policies mirrored some practices of mutual benefit and fraternal associations across the city. By 1926, officers in both the Gethsemane Auxiliary of the Knights of Templar and the Royal Circle of Friends registered memberships in the District Union. The organization also used the press to recruit members, circulating information through periodic articles and a weekly column in the black newspaper, the *Washington Tribune*, as well as

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<sup>9</sup> These statistics were calculated using the numbers from “Table 38,” *Religious Bodies: 1926*. (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1926), 730. I correlated these numbers with the black population of Washington in 1925. See *Report of the Commissioners of the District of Columbia for the Year Ended June 30, 1917* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1917), located in RG 351, Entry 9, National Archives, Washington, D.C.

<sup>10</sup> “The National Association of Wage Earners,” *Shiloh Herald*, March 1924, Reel 1, Shiloh Church Records, Manuscript Division, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library, New York City (hereafter cited as Shiloh-SCRBC); and “Helping Hand Club for the Wage Earners,” *Washington Tribune*, May 25, 1928, 6.

<sup>11</sup> City directories and newspapers indicate that African American Washingtonians belonged to at least 162 mutual benefit and fraternal orders during the 1920s.

articles in other black and white newspapers, such as the *Washington Post*, the *Pittsburgh Courier*, and the *Chicago Defender*. By 1924, at least 6,000 black Washingtonians subscribed to the *Washington Tribune* and many read the *Washington Post*.<sup>12</sup> Reaching out to newspaper readers was a wise decision for gathering members into the organization.

Finally, the District Union worked to tap into the constituencies of the myriad social and political organizations across the city. This process operated on several levels. Women who joined the District Union often introduced the organization to members of their existing associations. By the organization's demise in 1926, women the same church organizations, fraternal orders, neighborhood associations, and even 500 clubs had joined the District Union. But in addition to these informal associations, the District Union formally affiliated with the National Federation of Women's Clubs of Washington and Vicinity. This organization, a local chapter of the National Association of Colored Women (NACW), included over thirty-two clubs, and the District Union gathered members from both the leadership board as well as members of the individual clubs.<sup>13</sup> This relationship enabled the District Union to benefit from some of the organizing and fundraising work of the Federation of Women's Clubs.<sup>14</sup> The District Union also associated with the local Phyllis

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<sup>12</sup> For the circulation statistics of the *Washington Tribune*, see *N. W. Ayer and Son's American Newspaper Annual and Directory* (Philadelphia: N. W. Ayer and Son, 1924), 158. For information on black readership of the *Washington Post*, see William Henry Jones, *Housing of Negroes in Washington, D.C.* (Washington, D.C.: Howard University Press, 1930), 123.

<sup>13</sup> For information on the National Federation of Women's Clubs of Washington and Vicinity, see Elizabeth Lindsay Davis, *Lifting As They Climb* (Washington, D.C.: National Association of Colored Women, 1933), 409-411.

Wheatley Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA). In 1924, the NAWE opened a headquarters on Rhode Island Avenue, only a few blocks away from the YWCA. This headquarters—featuring dormitories, a cafeteria, practice rooms, and a social space—echoed the multiple functions of the popular YWCA. In both buildings, members could eat a meal, take classes, enjoy social visits, or board for a modest price. By adopting many of the amenities of the YWCA, the District Union designed its headquarters to match existing practices of black women's outreach work and activism. Many YWCA women—secretaries, members, and even boarders—joined the District Union. By working with churches, adopting a profit-sharing feature to attract members of fraternal orders, sending press releases to local newspapers, affiliating with the National Federation of Women's Clubs of Washington and Vicinity, and offering similar services as the local YWCA, the District Union strategically connected with some of the important spaces of black women's organizing and activism in Washington, D.C. Cumulatively, the two-tiered recruitment process, labor campaigns, and alliances with black women's existing organizing traditions helped to convince 1,121 women and men to join the District Union between 1921 and 1926.

Exploring how members joined the District Union demonstrates that African American women's politics was attached to existing organizational and institutional networks, personal relationships, households, and labor experiences. Tracing—in some cases mapping—the process by which 1,121 women and men became members of the District Union illuminates the web of connections that united members across Washington's landscape of streets, buildings, and houses. African American

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<sup>14</sup> "Locals and Society," *Washington Tribune*, November 22, 1924, 2.

women's politics depended upon these existing associations both to gather constituencies as well as to sustain the everyday work of organizing and activism.

## **Origins**

Nannie Helen Burroughs's ideas for the NAWE can be traced to several sources. In 1909, with the support of the Woman's Convention of the Baptist Church, she founded the National Training School for Girls (NTS) in Deanwood, a neighborhood in Northeast Washington. Governed by the mission "Support Thyself, Work. To Thine Own Powers Appeal," the NTS trained African American women in a skill, whether it was domestic labor, cooking, laundry work, sewing, missionary outreach, or clerical work. Burroughs was cognizant that black women were trapped in personal service labor, earning low wages with little power and dignity. She believed that training women in domestic work and other service jobs would enable them to earn higher wages and respect in their jobs, as well as be better housekeepers.<sup>15</sup> Burroughs incorporated many of her ideas from the NTS—especially the importance of training for service labor and the dignity of work—into the NAWE. But she also broadened her goals by envisioning the NAWE as a national-based movement through its membership, lobbying presence to influence labor legislation, business that would manufacture uniforms and employ women, and cooperative where members could earn money through recruitment.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> For information on the Training School see Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent* and Victoria Wolcott, "'Bible, Bath, and Broom': Nannie Helen Burroughs's National Training School and African-American Racial Uplift," *Journal of Women's History* 9, no. 1 (Spring 1997): 88-110.

In addition to the NTS, Burroughs had been an active member of the Woman Wage Earner's Association (WWEA), a World War I-era organization that aimed to improve black women's labor prospects. In January 1917, two Washington residents—lawyer Jeannette Carter and beauty culturist Julia P. Coleman—founded the WWEA in Northwest Washington. The WWEA had goals similar to those Burroughs put forth in founding the NAWA four years later; both organizations proposed to increase the efficiency of black women's labor, allow women to address grievances against employers, and create a practice house.<sup>17</sup> The WWEA's stated goals were more concerned with the basic needs of black women workers, such as shelter and subsistence, and less about influencing labor legislation. The WWEA held regular meetings every Sunday between January and July 1917, where the organization invited guest speakers to discuss topics including women's work in the war effort, how to improve working conditions, and the importance of mutual benefit associations to the labor movement. The organization also created an employment bureau, steering members toward jobs and planted vegetable gardens across the city

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<sup>16</sup> The historian Sharon Harley notes that in 1929, the National Training School had 102 students, eight teachers, and four assistants and staff members. See Harley, "Nannie Helen Burroughs," 65.

<sup>17</sup> Speech of Jeannette Carter to the Ladies of Allied Associations, undated, in Folder 4, Box 1, Jeannette Carter Papers, MSRC. See "Woman Wage Earners Association Met," *Washington Bee*, March 31, 1917, 2. It is possible that the Woman Wage Earners' Association was active in black women stemmers' strikes for a living wage in Norfolk, Virginia in 1917. For scholarly treatments of this organization, see Rosalyn Terborg-Penn, *African American Women and the Struggle for the Vote, 1850-1920* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), 75; Tera W. Hunter, "'The Women are Asking for BREAD, Why Give them STONE?': Women, Work, and Protests in Atlanta and Norfolk During World War I," in *Labor in the Modern South*, ed. Glenn T. Eskew (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2001), 68-69; and Nikki J. Brown, *Private Politics and Public Voices: Black Women's Activism from World War I to the New Deal* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 7.

and on a farm in Herndon, Virginia.<sup>18</sup> Although the WWEA was based in Washington, D.C., it is possible that black women founded a branch in Norfolk, Virginia.<sup>19</sup> At the June 1917 mass meeting, Nannie Helen Burroughs addressed the WWEA alongside NACW leader Mary Talbert in the Second Baptist Church. She also attended a fundraiser for the organization in 1918.<sup>20</sup> The WWEA appears to have disbanded in 1918 and it is unclear how many black women joined the organization. But eight women who had been active in the WWEA, including housewife Bessie Briggs, attendance officer Sadie T. Henson, dressmaker Marian Butler, maid Elizabeth Carter, stenographer Mary Kimball, community center organizer Julia Mason Layton, clerk Julia West Hamilton, and Julia P. Coleman, all joined the local branch of the NAWE when it was organized several years later. Burroughs's ideas regarding labor organizing mirrored, but also, expanded, the work of the WWEA.

In addition to this organizing background, Burroughs was also familiar with the research of social scientist Elizabeth Ross Haynes. During World War I, as a graduate student, Haynes had worked in the Department of Labor's Women in Industry Service Bureau, where she compiled data on African American women's hours, wages, and working conditions in domestic service positions. She later published these findings in a 1923 *Journal of Negro History* article entitled "Negroes

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<sup>18</sup> "Woman Wage Earners," *Washington Bee*, April 17, 1917, 1; "Gardening," *Washington Bee*, May 12, 1917, 4.

<sup>19</sup> Two articles appeared in the *Norfolk Journal and Guide*, detailing the WWEA. In the first article, the editor urged Norfolk women to "think it over." See "Our Woman Wage-Earners," *Norfolk Journal and Guide*, March 3, 1917, 4 and "Notes of the War," *Norfolk Journal and Guide*, April 28, 1917, 4.

<sup>20</sup> "Woman Wage Earners' Association," *Washington Bee*, June 9, 1917, 1.

in Domestic Service in the United States.” Haynes’s research, in addition to detailing the low wages and long hours that black domestic workers faced, pointed to the need for training and literacy programs so that servants could perform work in technologically advanced households. Through training programs, Haynes argued, black women would be able to earn higher wages and reduce their turnover rates.<sup>21</sup> A member of the National Association of Colored Women, Haynes, along with Burroughs and other NACW women in 1919, Burroughs issued a statement to the first International Congress of Working Women in Washington, D.C., asking attendees for their “active cooperation in organizing the Negro women workers of the United States into unions that they may have a share in bringing about industrial democracy and social order in the world.”<sup>22</sup>

And in May 1920, when the Minimum Wage Board of the District of Columbia set all (white) women’s wages at sixteen dollars and fifty cents per week—except for (black) laundresses at fourteen dollars and fifty cents—Burroughs expressed outrage, arguing that “[t]his piece of class legislation should be repudiated by public protest.”<sup>23</sup> Four months later in an address to the Twentieth Annual

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<sup>21</sup> See Elizabeth Ross Haynes, “Negroes in Domestic Service in the United States: Introduction,” *Journal of Negro History* 8, no. 4 (October 1923): 398-413; and Barnett, “Burroughs and the Education of Black Women,” 100-101.

<sup>22</sup> The black women who issued this statement included: Elizabeth C. Carter, Mamie R. Ross, Leila Pendleton, Dr. A. G. Green, Eva A. Wright, Mary Church Terrell, Nannie Helen Burroughs, Carrie Roscoe Bruce, Carrie Williams Clifford, and Elizabeth Ross Haynes. See “To The National Women’s Trade Union League of America from Representative Negro Women of the United States In behalf of Negro Women Laborers of the United States,” 4 November 1919, First International Congress of Working Women, Washington, D.C. in National Trade Union League Papers, Frames 545-547, Microfilm Reel 25, NTULP-LC.

Women's Convention of the National Baptist Church, Burroughs issued a clarion call for a union to ensure that black women's labor interests would be protected through legislation. "The only possible way for the Domestic Workers to get what others will demand and finally get," Burroughs argued, "is to organize their own unions."<sup>24</sup>

All of these different streams of knowledge—the NTS, the WWEA, Haynes's research, and outrage over the minimum wage law—helped to shape Burroughs's ideas for the NAWE. Her leadership position at the NTS introduced her to black women who struggled to earn decent wages as service workers while receiving little respect from their employers. Attendance at WWEA events alerted Burroughs that some black women in Washington were interested in organizing collectively for better wages and hours, and she was able to participate in an organization that attempted this process. Conversations with Elizabeth Ross Haynes might have informed her about the need for broader training programs. And the passage of the minimum wage law in D.C. helped to convince her that black women needed a union to lobby for just legislation. Locating the origins of the NAWE within Burroughs's longer efforts to improve conditions for black women workers helps to contextualize the founding points of the organization. The NAWE would address bread-and-butter issues of wages and hours, improve workers' dignity through uniforms, training

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<sup>23</sup> Letter from Nannie Helen Burroughs, Washington, D.C., to Archibald Grimké, Washington, D.C., 14 May 1920 in Folder 571, Box 28, Archibald Grimké Papers, Series 39, AG-MSRC.

<sup>24</sup> See, "The Industrial Situation," *Annual Report of the Executive Board and Corresponding Secretary of the Women's Convention, Auxiliary of the National Baptist Church*, Vol. 18, September 4-8, 1918, 39 in St. Louis, MO and "The Domestic Worker," *Annual Report of the Executive Board and Corresponding Secretary of the Women's Convention, Auxiliary of the National Baptist Church*, Vol. 22, September 12-13, 1920, Indianapolis, Indiana, both in MRL Reports, Rare Book Room, Burke Library, Union Theological Seminary, Columbia University, New York City (hereafter cited as WC-Burke).

programs, and a grievance process, and lobby for national legislation. The goals of the NAWA, then, addressed many of the labor problems that Burroughs identified throughout the 1910s.

For black women workers in Washington, D.C., few labor opportunities existed outside of personal service. In 1920, 83 percent of black women in Washington worked in personal service occupations; 45 percent worked as domestics, 25 percent worked as laundresses; 6 percent worked as charwomen, and 4 percent worked as waitresses. The remaining service workers labored in various jobs, such as stewardesses, untrained nurses, and cleaners.<sup>25</sup> Additionally, 1 percent worked as hairdressers, 4 percent worked as dressmakers and seamstresses, 2 percent worked as teachers, and 2 percent worked as printers and printers' assistants. While black women's high rates of service work in Washington closely paralleled labor patterns of other southern or mid-Atlantic cities, such as Atlanta or Baltimore, Washington, D.C., residents did enjoy prospects for federal employment. Most black women workers in the federal government labored as messengers, elevator operators, and charwomen, but these jobs offered steady wages, labor stability, and the possibility of advancement.<sup>26</sup> Weekly wages for those who worked as domestics ranged between

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<sup>25</sup> *Fourteenth Census of the United States: Population: Occupations. Males and Females in Selected Occupations* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office (GPO), 1923), 897-900. The occupational census used the generic category of personal service to encompass the myriad forms of personal service, such as cooks, live-in servants, maids, and domestic workers.

<sup>26</sup> In 1920 in Atlanta 87 percent of black women worked in personal service, with the majority concentrated in laundry (38 percent) and domestic service (38 percent). The same was true for Baltimore, where 85 percent of black women worked in personal service with laundresses (31 percent) and domestic servants (46 percent) dominating the occupations. For these occupational figures, see *Fourteenth Census of the United States*, 1055-1059. For the importance of federal service to black workers, see Eric S. Yellin, "In the Nation's Service:

\$10 and \$12 a week; wages for cooks and laundresses were between \$10 and \$20; and for waitresses wages ranged between \$9 and \$10.<sup>27</sup> A survey of black domestic workers revealed that most toiled in other homes for ten hours or more each day.<sup>28</sup> For black women in Washington, the NAWE's program to increase wages, address grievances against employers, and expand job opportunities was essential, which helps to explain local interest in the organization.

### **Organizing the National Association of Wage Earners**

One month after Burroughs's call for memberships, eight women in Washington, D.C., joined the NAWE. Three of these women lived in the Capitol Hill neighborhood of Southeast Washington, including laundresses Cora Webb and Sarah Price, as well as milliner and furniture upholsterer Carrie Payne. How they learned about the organization or if they had any previous connection to Burroughs is unknown. But it is not surprising that the remaining five members lived in Deanwood, because this working-class neighborhood was also home to Burroughs's NTS. In fact, two women who lived and worked at the Training School, stenographer

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Racism and Federal Employees in Woodrow Wilson's Washington" (Ph.D. diss., Princeton University, 2007).

<sup>27</sup> For black women's and men's weekly earnings in Washington, D.C., see Haynes, "Negroes in Domestic Service," 421; and Lorenzo J. Greene and Myra Colson Callis, *The Employment of Negroes in the District of Columbia* (Washington, D.C.: Association for the Study of Negro Life and History, Inc., 1931), 38-39 and 81.

<sup>28</sup> Haynes, "Negroes in Domestic Service," 426.

Ida Wood and social worker Ella Whitefield, became members.<sup>29</sup> And three women who lived within close proximity to the campus joined as well, including laundresses Margaret Arter and Estelle Chew, as well as hairdresser Lucy J. Broadus. While these women did not work at the NTS, they appear to have been enmeshed in Burroughs's networks. In 1912 Margaret Arter had donated \$5 to fund a room at the NTS and she continued to raise money for the school throughout the 1920s.<sup>30</sup> In 1921, Lucy Broadus had participated in a fundraising campaign for the NTS at the Zion Baptist Church in Deanwood.<sup>31</sup> By July, two more members had joined the NAWE. In June Janie Cole Bradford, a teacher, joined the NAWE, followed one month later by Eva C. Chase, the principal at Slater Elementary School. These initial membership patterns suggest that women who lived in the same neighborhoods and labored at similar occupations reached into their networks to informally recruit friends and fellow workers.

By the founding conference in November 1921, fifty-two women, representing twenty-six states including Washington, D.C., had already become members. Between November 10 and 14, black women from different parts of the country streamed into Washington, D.C., to attend the founding meetings for the NAWE. Burroughs had selected these dates because they coincided with Armistice Day and President Warren G. Harding's conference on the limitation of arms in the

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<sup>29</sup> See, for instance, *Eighth Annual Report of the Executive Board and Corresponding Secretary of the Women's Convention, Auxiliary of the National Baptist Church*, September 1908, Lexington, Kentucky, 12, WC-Burke.

<sup>30</sup> "Training School Dedication Services Held for a New Hall," *Washington Bee*, April 13, 1912, 2 and "Girls' Training School Starts Fund Campaign," *Washington Tribune*, November 12, 1926, 1.

<sup>31</sup> "Lincoln Heights and Deanwood News," *Washington Bee*, November 26, 1921, 5.

nation's capital, which signified "the birth of a new world." "When you think of the meaning of the occasion and our contribution to it," Burroughs wrote in the letter inviting participants to the meeting, "we could not select a better time to call the women together to organize for advancement along economic, social, and political lines."<sup>32</sup> By connecting the founding meeting of her organization with this global conference, Burroughs issued a strong message that the NAWE—and its mission of organizing black woman wage earners across the country—matched the significance of Harding's summit. At this founding meeting, members devised the governance for the organization, ratified a Constitution, and outlined short-term and long-term goals for the NAWE. A national board of officers who represented different states presided over the NAWE, along with District and State Directors and an advisory Council. Each state and city would have local district unions.<sup>33</sup> Members decided to convene annually in Washington, D.C., each November. Membership would be open to "females not under sixteen years of age who are engaged in any honorable trade, profession, or calling as a means of livelihood, and 'household engineers' of servantless homes." The NAWE would be a "profit-sharing enterprise" whereby members could gain financial benefit from goods produced by the organization, and especially, from their work as recruiters. Anyone recruiting another member would

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<sup>32</sup> Letter from Nannie Helen Burroughs, Washington, D.C., to "My Dear Friend," 20 October 1921 in Folder 8, Box 308, NHB-LC.

<sup>33</sup> The national officers were all members who had held leadership positions with the National Association of Colored Women, including Nannie Helen Burroughs (president, Washington, D.C.); Mary McLeod Bethune (vice-president, Florida); Minnie L. Bradley (executive secretary, Connecticut); Maggie Lena Walker (treasurer, Virginia); Elizabeth C. Carter (chair, investment board, Massachusetts); Lizzie Fouse (registrar, Kentucky); Georgine Kelly Smith (chair, advisory council, New York); and Maude A. Morrisett (recording secretary, Pennsylvania). See Nannie Helen Burroughs, Washington, D.C., to J. W. Davis, Denver, 23 August 1922 in Folder 8, Box 308, NHB-LC.

“receive twenty-five cents out of each dollar secured by her for membership fee.” Provisions were made for the financial support of both the locals and the national: “where Unions are formed, twenty-five cents per member must be left in the local treasury, the National receiving fifty cents of the membership fee.”

In addition to the logistical details of memberships and finances, the members discussed labor relations. The NAWE decided, “no local organization may call a strike without the sanction of the Board of the Directors. The Board of Directors may not call a strike until they have resorted to all methods of conciliation.”<sup>34</sup> By deliberately inserting a clause about the possibility of a strike, the members sent a message that the NAWE was meant to be a labor union. This national meeting affirmed members’ commitment to organizing as many women as possible to seek strength in collectivism, thereby improving black women’s economic situations across the nation.

The NAWE provided for some women to become official organizers. Those wanting to recruit in this capacity or organize a local branch were asked to complete a questionnaire assessing their organizing skills. Inquiries about organizational affiliations and church memberships suggest that the NAWE hoped to tap into existing organizations and institutions. And questions asking whether organizers were “timid” or “easily discouraged” attempted to weed out indifferent women, but also revealed the level of difficulty in recruiting members. The questionnaire did not ask the occupational or employment history of the potential organizer, but rather, focused heavily on both their understandings of black women’s employment

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<sup>34</sup> “Constitution: National Association of Wage Earners, Incorporated,” in Folder 3, Box 308, NHB-LC.

situations in their cities as well as potential to forge alliances among women of different economic standings. For instance, one question asked if in their city “engineers of servantless households” were interested in joining with domestic workers to raise the standard. This question underscores that the NAWE was imagined as a broad alliance of women from all different economic situations, banding together to collectively improve labor conditions. Other questions required organizers to name occupations in their city open to black women, state domestic workers’ weekly wages in their city, and assess whether they could organize a hundred domestic workers in a union.<sup>35</sup>

These questions illuminate ways that the NAWE both conceived of recruitment methods and imagined their ideal constituencies. Burroughs and other founders asked about existing organizations and churches because they hoped that the NAWE could gather members by working within these institutions. And posing questions about occupations open to black women, wages for domestic workers, and alliances between household engineers and servants suggests that they envisioned a broad constituency of members—a variety of wage earners joined by those women who were homemakers. The detailed questions Burroughs asked in this organizing form points to her understanding that the real work of successfully organizing a national labor union for black women wage earners would be conducted on the local level.

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<sup>35</sup> “NAWE Questionnaire,” in Folder 3, Box 308, NHB-LC.

## **Sequence of Memberships in the District Union**

The founding conference registered a strong impact in Washington because sixty-one new members joined in November 1921. These members came from a wide range of occupations, suggesting broad interest in such an organization among black women in D.C., including eight domestic servants, seven housekeepers, seven teachers, six government clerks, five dressmakers, four beauty culturists, four hairdressers, two housewives, two charwomen, and an attendance officer, a librarian, a cook, a laundress, a maid, a merchant, a nurse, a secretary, a servant, a social worker, a stenographer, an undertaker, a YWCA secretary, and one who did not list her occupation. One man joined that month, government clerk James Henson, who was married to member Sadie T. Henson. The following month, seven more women and one man joined, including a housekeeper, a community center secretary, a teacher, a dressmaker, a government clerk, a charwoman, a domestic, and a letter carrier. Despite this initial interest in the organization, the District Union grew slowly in its first year (see figure 7). Between January and October, 1922, only thirty-three more people joined. It was not until the annual meeting in November, which attracted forty-two members that the District Union began to grow. Between November 1922 and July 1923, the District Union enrolled 289 new members. The largest number of recruits in one month occurred in May 1924, when eighty-three people joined; for the year as a whole, the District Union enrolled 403. Between 1921 and 1926, a total of 942 black women and 179 black men joined the District Union.

**Figure 7: Sequence of Memberships in the District Union**

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	Total
<b>1921</b>	0	0	0	8	0	1	1	0	0	0	62	8	<b>80</b>
<b>1922</b>	2	5	0	1	5	0	0	4	11	6	42	22	<b>98</b>
<b>1923</b>	14	35	75	15	19	18	39	0	0	2	67	31	<b>315</b>
<b>1924</b>	11	3	49	73	83	44	16	5	0	27	69	23	<b>403</b>
<b>1925</b>	28	38	33	40	13	0	15	2	1	5	8	3	<b>186</b>
<b>1926</b>	14	6	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	<b>22</b>
<b>1928</b>													<b>2</b>
<b>Unknown</b>													<b>15</b>
<b>Total</b>													<b>1121</b>

Source: Folders 1, 2, and 3, Box 308, NHB Papers, LOC. The numbers 1-12 denote months.

### Recruiting in the District Union

One of the important ways that the District Union gathered a cross-class membership was through recruitment. The records of the District Union list 105 people who recruited 392 members, or 35 percent of the total, into the organization.<sup>36</sup> Some recruiters were individual members who enlisted one or two others, thus earning 25¢ for each member. But Burroughs also encouraged women to view recruitment as a job, whereby individuals could enlist dozens of members and supplement their income, or even make recruitment a full-time job. One flier noted that, “an energetic woman can earn ten or twenty dollars a week by securing NEW MEMBERS on the twenty-five percent basis.”<sup>37</sup> Of course a woman would have to recruit forty to eighty members each week to earn this kind of money. No one in the

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<sup>36</sup> It was most common for members to list a single person as a recruiter. However, in several instances, members list two different people, a church, or even themselves, such as “her” or “herself.” In order to recognize members who consider themselves recruited into the organization, I have preserved these different categories.

<sup>37</sup> “The Way to Make Money,” in Folder 8, Box 308, NHB-LC.

District Union came close to those figures: fifty-nine members brought in one other person, fifteen brought in two, eight brought in three, five brought in four, four brought in five, and fourteen enrolled six or more members. The work of recruiters—members who enlisted one or two of their neighbors or co-workers along with official organizers—contributed to the growth of the local branch.

The largest recruiter for the District Union was Sadie Tignor Henson. She joined at the founding meeting in November 1921, listing her occupation as a housekeeper. During the 1910s, Henson had worked as a parole officer in the public schools, traveling to different institutions to enforce attendance policies. Henson had also been active in the WWEA, where she delivered a lecture to the organization on ways to reduce truancy among girls in the city.<sup>38</sup> In 1923, Henson, who had recruited six members in the previous year, served as both the local president and principal organizer for the District Union, enrolling a total of fifty members. She canvassed diverse parts of the city, recruiting members from Northwest, Northeast, and Southeast Washington (see figure 8). Henson tapped a mixture of working-class and middle-class women and men, including maids and chauffeurs, butchers, printers, and government workers, as well as teachers, a social worker, a lawyer, a pharmacist, and a funeral home director. Available records do not designate those Burroughs accepted as official organizers but, given the pace and geographic scope of her recruiting, it is likely that in early 1923 Henson was acting in that capacity.

Mapping Sadie Henson's neighborhood, institutional, labor, and organizational connections across Washington helps to contextualize her diverse

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<sup>38</sup> "Wage Earners," *Washington Bee*, April 17, 1917, 1.

recruitment patterns. She had grown up in Southwest Washington. Her father had worked in business while her mother, in addition to raising seven children, had been active in Zion Baptist Church and was “prominent in civic and fraternal movements.”<sup>39</sup> Upon her marriage to James A. Henson, the couple moved across town to Northwest Washington. Both were active in mutual benefit associations. James, who worked for the Bureau of Printing and Engraving, held a leadership position in the Workers’ Relief Association, while Sadie served as an officer in Chapter Number 3 of the Gethsemane Order of the Knights of Templar.<sup>40</sup> Five of Henson’s recruits to the District Union—live-in servant Clarissa Chapman, housekeepers Martha Wilkinson and Gertrude Smith, housewife Mary Moore, and clerk Ida Price—were also officers in the Gethsemane Order.<sup>41</sup> And Henson’s job as an attendance officer required her to travel to different schools across the city, thus acquainting her with a variety of neighborhoods.<sup>42</sup> In addition to labor and fraternal networks, Henson also held leadership positions in different organizations across the city. In 1920 she was elected treasurer of the Federation of Women’s Clubs of Washington and Vicinity.<sup>43</sup> And she served as secretary of the Zion Baptist Church

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<sup>39</sup> This information comes from the obituary of Henson’s mother, Lottie Tignor. See “Mrs. Lottie Tignor Dead,” *Washington Bee*, June 8, 1918, 1.

<sup>40</sup> In March 1922, Henson’s husband, James, was elected secretary of the Workers’ Relief Association. See “GPO Notes,” *Washington Tribune*, April 1, 1922, 2.

<sup>41</sup> “Church and Sunday School,” *Washington Tribune*, April 27, 1928, 5.

<sup>42</sup> “School Heads Back from Vacation,” *Washington Post*, September 5, 1923, 10.

<sup>43</sup> Davis, *Lifting As They Climb*, 409.

Sunday School.<sup>44</sup> All of these different affiliations with neighborhoods, churches, mutual benefit associations, schools, and organizations flowed into Henson's work as a recruiter, enabling her to attract members who lived in different parts of the city and worked at a variety of jobs.

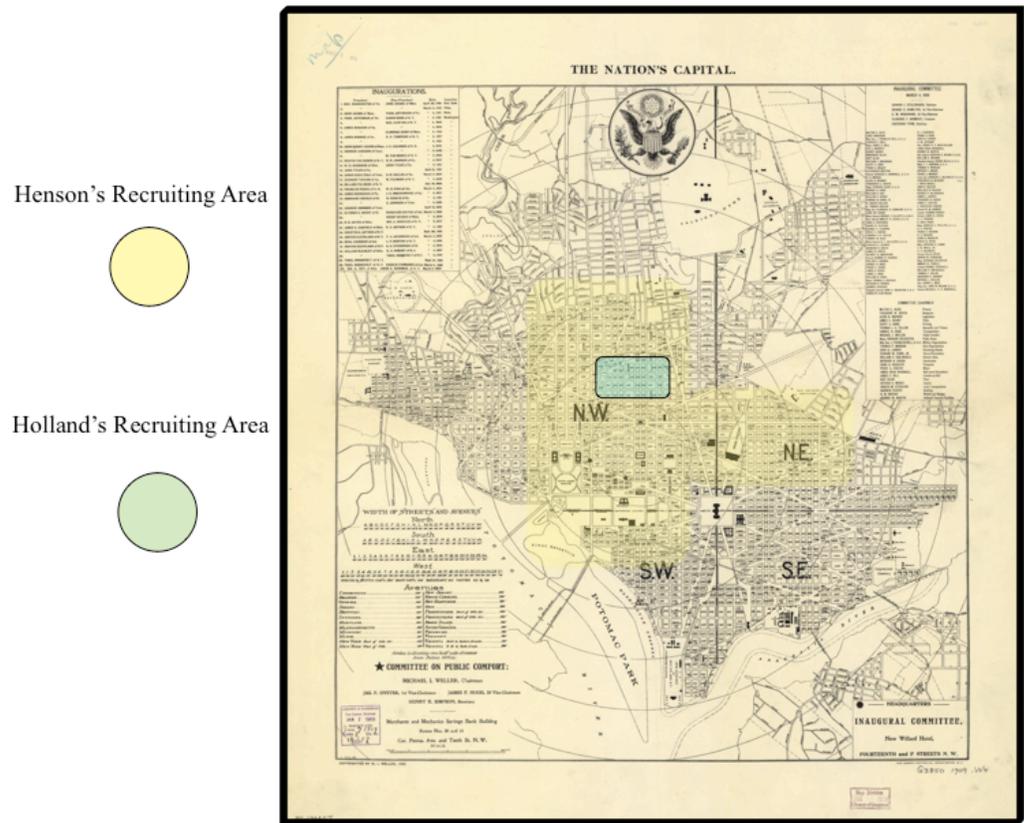
In September 1923 Sadie Henson returned to the public schools as an attendance officer, but she continued to recruit members to the organization. In January 1924 Henson, perhaps because of her success at bringing others into the organization, was re-elected president of the District Union.<sup>45</sup> Two months later, three attendance officers in the public schools, including the chief, joined the NAWE. Even though Henson was not officially listed as their recruiter, it is likely that it was Henson who had discussed the organization with them.

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<sup>44</sup> See "Zion Baptist Church Sunday School," *Washington Bee*, October 11, 1913, 1 and "Celebrating Children's Day in Washington, D.C.," *Baltimore Afro-American*, June 19, 1937, 19.

<sup>45</sup> "Under the Capitol Dome," *Chicago Defender*, January 19, 1924, 6.

**Figure 8: Sadie Henson’s and Lucy Holland’s Recruiting Areas**

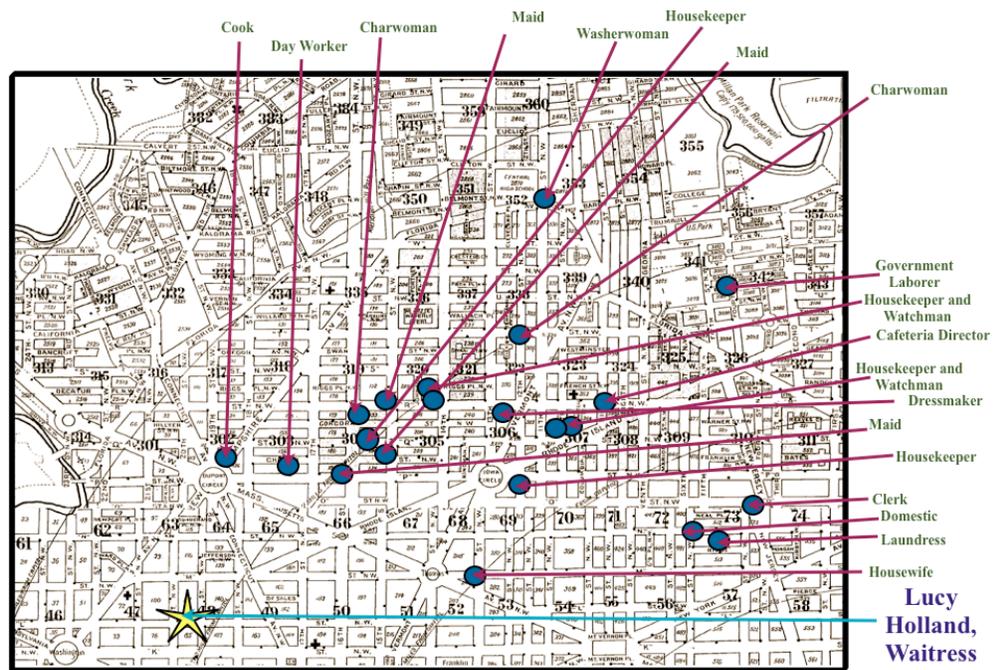


**Source:** *The Nation's Capital: Washington, D.C.* (Washington, D.C. Norris Peters Company, 1909). Accessed through the Geography and Map Reading Room, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

Lucy E. Holland, a single waitress in her twenties, worked as another important recruiter for the District Union. She expressed an eagerness for the organization right away, filling out a membership card in November 1921 where she listed “herself” as her own recruiter. The following month, she recruited housewife Mary Smith and her husband, watchman Charles Smith. Wesley Thornton, a janitor who boarded with the Smiths, joined as well. Unlike Sadie Henson, Lucy Holland recruited closer to her home, enlisting members from a discrete geographic area and

primarily engaged, like herself, in working-class jobs. Holland’s recruits included four maids, three watchmen, three housekeepers, two charwomen, two domestics, two hairdressers, two laundresses, two who did not list their jobs, and a cafeteria director, a clerk, a cook, a dayworker, a dressmaker, a government laborer, and one housewife. None of her recruits had a professional occupation. All but six of her twenty-seven recruits lived within thirteen blocks of her home on L Street in Northwest D.C. (see figure 9).

**Figure 9: Map of Lucy Holland’s Recruits in Northwest Washington**



**Source:** *Sanborn Maps* Washington, D.C., 1927-1928, Vol. 3, 1928, Sheet 0b.

Mahala J. Hill, a seventy-year old, live-in ladies maid and seamstress, recruited sixteen members to join the District Union. Hill was born in Virginia in the 1850s. Census records indicate that by 1870 she migrated to Washington, D.C.,

worked as a servant, and lived in a house with other black women and men, specifically, a laborer, a laundress, and another servant.<sup>46</sup> By 1900 she moved into a house on K Street. Mahala Hill's relative, Lucy Bagby, owned this house, accommodating a coachman, a cook, a barber, and a laundress.<sup>47</sup> In 1903, Hill moved a couple of blocks across K Street to work as a live-in servant for the president of Riggs Bank, Charles C. Glover, and his family.<sup>48</sup> Although there was a high turnover rate for servants in the Glover household, Mahala Hill remained with the family until the 1930s. Upon Glover's death in 1936, he willed Hill three thousand dollars, along with a trust fund of four thousand dollars in "school bonds in Leesburg Virginia." This inheritance, larger than any other servant, was in recognition of Hill's "faithful service."<sup>49</sup> Mahala Hill attended Sunday services at the Nineteenth Street Baptist Church in Northwest Washington. She joined the church's Helping Hand Club, attending monthly meetings, paying dues, and helping to assemble baskets for poor and elderly residents across the city.<sup>50</sup> She also raised money to construct the buildings at Nannie Helen Burroughs's NTS.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Eighth Census of the United States, 1870, Washington City, Ward One, 283.

<sup>47</sup> I am unclear about the relationship between Mahala Hill and the Bagby family listed in the Census. Mahala Hill is listed as the "sister" to head-of-household Lucy Bagby. See Eleventh Census of the United States, Washington City, Census Enumeration District 37.

<sup>48</sup> *Boyd's Directory*, 1903, 479; and Thirteenth Census of the United States, 1910, Washington City, Census Enumeration District 57, Sheet 7A.

<sup>49</sup> See "White Banker Wills \$12,500 to Servants," *Baltimore Afro-American*, March 14, 1936, 4 and "Glover Estate Totals Million; Will Probated," *Washington Post*, April 20, 1943, 8.

<sup>50</sup> *The History of the Helping Hand Club of the Nineteenth Street Baptist Church* (Washington, D.C.: The Associated Publishers, 1948), 85.

During the 1920s, Hill drew upon these different experiences to recruit sixteen women and men to the District Union. Two of her recruits, L. B. Winston and Ruth Johnson, were also live-in servants who worked at the same elite residence on Connecticut Avenue. Additionally, Hill recruited three other servants, two cooks, two laundresses, two dressmakers, one seamstress, one ladies maid, one teacher, one clerk, and one minister, the Reverend Walter H. Brooks who served as pastor of Hill's Church, Nineteenth Street Baptist Church. Half of Hill's recruits, then, were women who toiled as servants in the homes of white Washingtonians. And she also recruited women who performed both service and skilled work inside of their homes, such as laundresses, dressmakers, and a seamstress. All of Hill's recruits held a job. When the District Union selected its leaders in January 1926, Mahala Hill was elected chaplain. In this leadership position, Hill was required to attend monthly meetings on Thursday evenings.<sup>52</sup> Hill's life as a live-in servant, a recruiter for the District Union, and a chaplain in the leadership board demonstrate that black women who labored in even the most demanding jobs were able to carve spaces for politics and activities.

In addition to Henson, Holland, and Hill, William H. Lester, a watchman, recruited a number of members. The log of paid commissions shows that Lester received \$4.25 in November 1923 for seventeen recruits; although there is no record linking new members that month with their recruiter, it can be noted that eighteen men joined the District Union in this month; it is probable that Lester was responsible

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<sup>51</sup> Although the articles list her as "Mrs. Mahala Hill" she was the only one with that name living in Washington, D.C. between 1910 and 1930. See, "The Training School," *Washington Bee*, April 6, 1912, 1; and "The Training School, Dedication Services Held for a New Hall," *Washington Bee*, April 13, 1912, 2.

<sup>52</sup> "National Association of Wage Earners, Incorporated," *Washington Tribune*, January 15, 1926, 3.

for these memberships. Juxtaposing the recruitment patterns between Sadie Henson, Lucy Holland, Mahala Hill, and William Lester underscores how each member infused the District Union with their everyday knowledge, networks, keenly informed by their social and geographic locations in Washington, D.C. Henson's networks reached black Washingtonians living in different neighborhoods and working at diverse jobs, whereas Holland's recruits were deeply connected to the working-class culture of her own neighborhood. Mahala Hill invited her fellow live-in servants and other working-class women, as well as a minister, while Lester worked to widen the scope of District Union members to include greater numbers of men.

While some members, like Henson and Holland, recruited members over a period of time, very often, organizers brought in members in only one period of time. For instance, Emma Williams, a maid, joined the District Union in May 1923. Two years later in January she recruited fellow domestic worker, Anna Smith, to join the organization. And two months later, she recruited six women, including laundress Irene Ashton, cook Mary Butler, seamstress Ida Wallace, day worker Susie Show, and Rosetta Scott and Willie Leak, neither of whom listed an occupation. Signing up a group of members within a week or a month meant that the recruiter could earn a couple of extra dollars.

In the recruitment process, members often looked internally toward their own labor networks. For instance, Corenna Garrett, a dressmaker, joined in March 1923 and one year later she recruited another dressmaker, Cecelia Morgan. In November 1924, Louisa Parker, a postal employee, filled out a membership card, listing herself as the recruiter and in that same month recruited another postal employee, N. K.

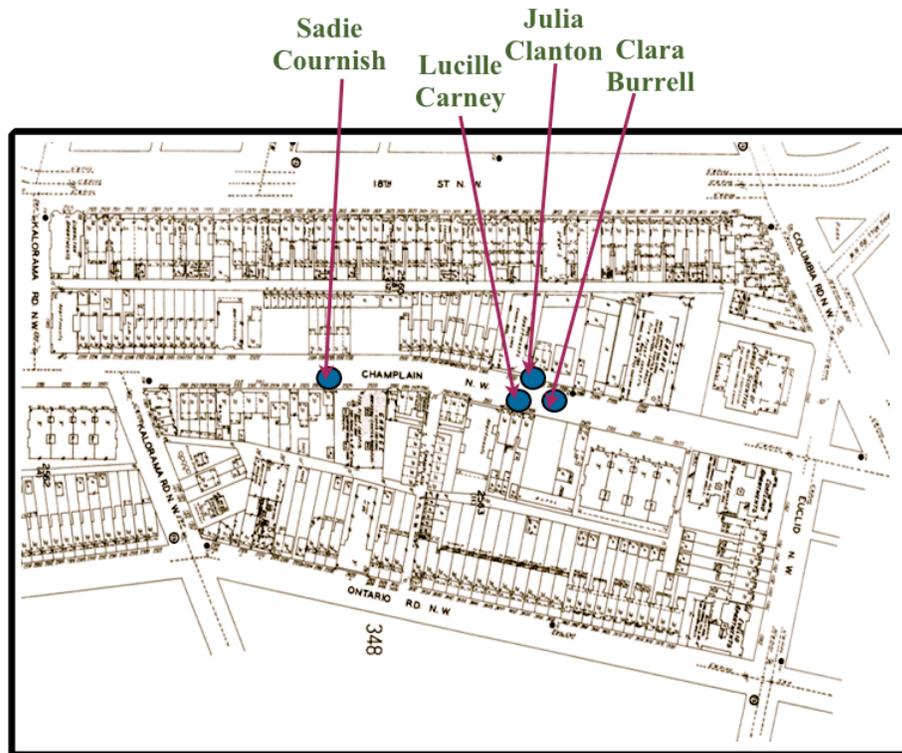
Madella. B. H. Good, a cook, also worked as a recruiter in 1923. In the previous two years, only one cook had joined the organization. But in 1923, eleven cooks joined. Janie C. Bradford, a teacher, joined the District Union right away in 1921. Over the next few years, she recruited three fellow teachers to join the organization. Bradford's recruits also extended beyond her own labor contacts and reached into her household. She convinced her husband, a postal worker, as well as two boarders to join the District Union. One of her boarders, Elizabeth Cole, worked as an operator in the Bureau of Printing and Engraving, perhaps connecting Bradford with government clerks Margaret Key Kelson, Gladys Duncan, Mamie Braxton, and Annie Dismuke, as well as charwoman Edna Hunter. Bradford's last recruit, Harriet Dabney, worked as a messenger in the Post Office and might have known Bradford's husband. The diverse life experiences, household arrangements, and jobs among recruiters in the District Union contributed to the organization's cross-class membership.

Sometimes recruiters seem to have targeted specific workplaces. For instance, in January 1923 a total of forty-seven women and men became members. Seven of these women worked for the Bureau of Printing and Engraving as operatives. Tracing the occupational patterns in recruitment suggests that the District Union encouraged members to canvass their worksites, thereby enlisting members and initiating conversations about labor problems.

For those black women in Washington who labored as laundresses, their neighborhood was their workplace, and thus, their site for recruitment. In March 1926, laundress Irene Butler joined the District Union and was soon followed by her

boarder and fellow laundress Margaret Garner. Butler and Garner’s neighbor, Gertrude Snyder, joined soon after (see figure 10).

**Figure 10: Laundresses on Champlain Street, Northwest Washington**



**Source:** *Sanborn Maps* Washington, D.C., 1927-1928, Vol. 3, 1928, Sheet 347.

Neighborhood streets may have been the place where laundresses discussed labor issues, forged political connections, and transmitted knowledge about organizations and activities. The historian Tera W. Hunter has theorized about the ways that working-class women engaged in political activism, connecting workspaces to the transmission of ideas and community building. She writes that “[I]aundry work

was critical to the process of community building because it encouraged women to work together in communal spaces within their neighborhoods, fostering informal networks of reciprocity that sustained them through health and sickness, love and heartaches, birth and death.<sup>53</sup> The data from the District Union suggests that laundresses in Washington forged similar connections by practicing recruitment in their streets.

But laundresses were not the only members who used their streets to recruit members. Mabel Scott, a housewife living on 15th Street in Northwest Washington, joined in May 1924 and in November she recruited her neighbor, dressmaker Emma Smith. Minnie Minnow, a hairdresser, joined in November 1921 and in November 1924, recruited cook Sadie Deans, who was now living in her house. Housekeeper Novella Nelson joined in November 1921 and in November 1924 recruited two women on her street, domestic worker Mary Atkins and seamstress Mary Hodge. The roster book brims with these street-based connections between recruiter and recruit.

Lillian McRae, who lived and worked at the Phyllis Wheatley YWCA as a secretary, tapped diverse members inside and outside of the building. Two of her recruits, seamstresses Mary Rouzee and Mabel Cole, lived at the Phyllis Wheatley YWCA. As residential secretary, McRae would have supervised these boarders by taking their weekly fees, sharing meals, and involving them in the Hostess Club. McRae also tapped a colleague, fellow YWCA secretary Sadie Harper. And she recruited Wesley Thorton, a janitor who lived one block away from the building. It is

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<sup>53</sup> See Tera W. Hunter, *To 'Joy My Freedom: Southern Black Women's Lives and Labors After the Civil War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 62.

unclear whether McRae's remaining recruits—live-in cook Susie Francis, seamstress Velma Diggs, and clerk Sara Fraction—were affiliated with the Y. McRae's recruiting patterns illustrate how she wove her diverse YWCA connections into her politics and organizing.

Based upon the analysis from this recruitment process, several conclusions about black women's organizing patterns in the District Union can be made. The two-tiered recruitment strategy of hiring official organizers and encouraging member-to-member recruitment resulted in a diverse, cross-class membership. Formal organizers such as Henson, Holland, Hill, and Lester helped to draw members from diverse backgrounds into the District Union. But equally important were the ordinary members who tapped their fellow workers, neighbors, friends, boarders, and family. The work of these 105 women and men listed by others as having recruited them helped to disseminate news of the NAWE into many different spaces across Washington, throughout neighborhoods, households, worksites, and streets, marking all of these as sites of political activism. Although it is impossible to discern the precise motivations for each membership, the collective labor of teachers, laundresses, servants, chauffeurs, government workers, and hairdressers to join this organization demonstrates that the District Union's message resonated with a wide range of black workers in Washington, D.C.

Recruiters mirrored the occupational backgrounds of NAWE members. Twenty-seven percent toiled in personal service occupations and 14 percent worked as skilled laborers out of their homes, such as hairdressers, dressmakers, and seamstresses. Nine percent were housewives and mothers, 10 percent were

professional workers, and 11 percent worked in clerical occupations. These recruiters helped to generate an occupationally diverse membership, tapping 37 percent of members who worked in service occupations, 8 percent who worked in clerical jobs, 12 percent who worked as professionals, 17 percent who were housewives or mothers, and 15 percent who performed skilled work inside of their homes.

### **Organizational and Institutional Networks**

Another way that women and men in Washington joined the District Union was through organizational and institutional networks. The great challenge for any new organization in attracting a large membership was to secure connections with the women and men already affiliated with the hundreds of church groups, social clubs, and fraternal orders across the city, who could then circulate information into the mass-base constituencies of their networks.

Nannie Helen Burroughs strategically staged the NAWE's founding meetings in different buildings across the city, including the Phyllis Wheatley YWCA, the NTS, and the John Wesley AMEZ Church, thereby fastening connections between her new organization and a range of women's existing networks. Throughout the 1920s, a large number of YWCA staff members, volunteers, and boarders all joined the District Union. Staff members included president Frances Boyce along with secretaries Lillian McRae and Hattie King.<sup>54</sup> Volunteers registered memberships as well, including clerk R. P. Hamlin who was an enthusiastic fundraiser along with entertainment committee member and teacher Alice McNeil.<sup>55</sup> And nine YWCA

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<sup>54</sup> See, for instance, "General Notes," *Washington Tribune*, December 11, 1921, 1.

<sup>55</sup> See "YWCA Notes," *Washington Tribune*, February 17, 1923, 6; and "YWCA News," *Washington Tribune*, May 19, 1923, 3.

boarders joined, including domestic workers Alma Scott and Sarah Belle Hundley, teacher Rosetta Boston, seamstresses Mary Rouzee and Mabel Cole, cook Janie Butler, hairdresser and teacher Frankie Myrick, and Miss Lancaster and Miss Boalwear, who did not list their occupations.<sup>56</sup> The close proximity between the Phyllis Wheatley YWCA and the NAWE's headquarters was perhaps another factor in sparking these memberships.

The District Union also gathered members from the NTS. Aside from the initial two members, Ella Whitefield and Ida Wood, the District Union attracted sixteen women who listed the National Training School as their home address, including beauty culturist Fannie Blackburn, clerk Emily Boyer, clerk and stenographer Gladys McGuffey, cooks Addie Smith and Sallie Johnson, hairdresser Bertha Brown, housekeeper Willa Greene, lady worker Audrey Brown, music teacher A. A. Glaze, stenographers Elinora Felmmings and Elizabeth Tucker, students Clara Walker and A. L. Brown, and teachers Paulina Obendolfer, A. C. Briggs, and C. S. Morrell.

Networks at the Nineteenth Street Baptist Church, especially the Helping Hand Club, were important, although this is somewhat more difficult to track.<sup>57</sup> In April 1921, teacher Janie Bradford, an active participant in the Helping Hand Club, became one of the first members of the District Union. At least six other women

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<sup>56</sup> This is based upon the members who listed 901 Rhode Island Avenue NW as their home address, which was the location of the YWCA in the 1920s.

<sup>57</sup> The absence of a membership roster for the Helping Hand Club in the 1920s has forced me to consult newspaper articles, which only mentioned women who served in the organization's leadership positions or attended events.

from the Helping Hand Club—including Secretary Mary F. Thompson, teacher Emma B. Hall, clerks Grace Howard and Sallie A. Franklin, housekeeper Carrie Kenny, and dressmaker Carrie Brown—also joined. The pastor of Nineteenth Street Baptist, the Reverend Walter H. Brooks joined as well. In November 1924, it was Brooks who offered “the dedicatory blessing” before the new headquarters was “thrown open to the public for inspection.” And in 1928 Janie Bradford organized a “Silent Night” fundraiser for the wage earners.<sup>58</sup> Nineteenth Street Baptist, like other churches, was an important institution for circulating awareness and initiating conversations about the District Union. Its existing organizations, such as the Helping Hand Club, provided spaces where women were already meeting together and discussing their own and their community’s needs.

The evidence suggests that fraternal orders were also important spaces for nurturing membership growth. For instance, in November 1921, two officers in the Royal Circle of Friends—dressmaker Marian Butler and BPE clerk Bertha King, joined the District Union. The following year, masseuse and president of the organization, Susie R. Saunders, joined the organization.<sup>59</sup> Between 1923 and 1924, Sadie T. Henson recruited most of the officers of the Gethsemane Auxiliary 3 of the Knights of Templar to become members of the District Union. But other officers in the order, including cook Sadie Deans and dressmaker Ethel Jenifer, became

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<sup>58</sup> “Helping Hand Club Holds Reception,” *Washington Tribune*, February 11, 1927, 5; “Women Dedicate New Home at First Annual Meeting of Organization,” *Washington Tribune*, November 15, 1924, 1; and “Helping Hand Club for the Wage Earners,” *Washington Tribune*, Mary 25, 1928, 6.

<sup>59</sup> “Royal Circle of Friends Lodge Organized,” *Washington Tribune*, March 11, 1927, 3.

members as well.<sup>60</sup> Members affiliated with these fraternal orders, then, appear to have encouraged others to join the District Union.

Connections among women engaged in outreach organizations also sparked memberships. In April 1921, laundress Margaret Arter, who served as the co-chair of the membership committee of the Ever Ready Club, joined the District Union. By November 1921, the other co-chair of the membership committee, dressmaker and fellow Deanwood neighbor, Lulu Eaglin, joined as well, along with the vice-president, secretary Mary F. Thompson.<sup>61</sup> In 1921 teacher Leila Amos Pendleton joined the District Union. In 1907, Pendleton had founded the Social Purity League, which worked to “spread the doctrines of purity by working along the educational and preventative lines with our girls through the distribution of literature and the through mass meetings held with students in schools and universities.” By 1924, the current president of the Social Purity League, clerk Bessie Clay, had joined the NAWE.<sup>62</sup> In 1923, teacher Lillian Naylor Fitzhugh joined the District Union. The following year, two women who were active with Fitzhugh in the Frances Harper Chapter of the Women’s Christian Temperance Union (WCTU), including chiropractor and laundress Rosetta Lawson and YWCA president Frances Boyce, joined as well.<sup>63</sup>

Black women’s social clubs could also transform into political networks. For instance, three women who belonged to the same 500 club, clerk Elizabeth Cole,

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<sup>60</sup> “Gethsemane Chapter Officers Entertained,” *Washington Tribune*, April 27, 1928, 5.

<sup>61</sup> “Ever Ready Club Holds Mass Meeting,” *Washington Tribune*, April 1, 1927, 6.

<sup>62</sup> “Anniversary of the Social Purity and Patriotic Leagues,” *Washington Tribune*, May 30, 1925, 2.

<sup>63</sup> “Locals and Society,” *Washington Tribune*, February 28, 1924, 2.

dressmaker Carrie Ford, and charwoman Edna Hunter, all became members of the District Union between 1923 and 1924. Janie C. Bradford recruited both Cole and Hunter, while Ford did not list a recruiter.<sup>64</sup>

The District Union also established formal affiliation with the Federation of Women's Clubs of Washington and Vicinity. By the organization's demise, many women who held leadership positions in this organization became members of the District Union, including attendance officer Sadie T. Henson, dressmaker Marian D. Butler, masseuse Susie Saunders, teachers Leila Pendleton and Janie Bradford, chiropractor Rosetta Lawson, clerk Elizabeth Cole, housewife Jacqueline Cuney, and housewife Clara Taliaferro.<sup>65</sup>

In tracing these different connections, important conclusions can be reached about black women's organizing patterns in the District Union. As the above examples illustrate, many District Union members contained multiple affiliations with churches, fraternal orders, social clubs, and outreach organizations. In some cases, it is impossible to attribute a woman's membership to a single person, organization, or neighborhood connection. This evidence suggests a process whereby women in Washington, D.C., learned about the District Union from attending different organizational meetings, engaging in a conversation with a neighbor, or reading a newspaper. Hearing about the organization from more than one source probably helped to reinforce its importance. Looking at membership across these different church, fraternal, and social, and outreach affiliations also helps to illuminate the

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<sup>64</sup> "Society and Club: Mrs. Jabez Lee Entertains," *Washington Tribune*, February 4, 1927, 2.

<sup>65</sup> Davis, *Lifting As They Climb*, 409-411.

ways that black women's politics was inextricably linked with these different organizational connections. Throughout the six years of its existence, District Union members introduced the organization to members of these associations. Through both informal recruitment and formal affiliation, the District Union reaped the benefits of these associations, whether it was in securing a meeting space, holding a fundraiser, or benefiting from these connections. Recognizing the inner workings of this process not only demonstrates the hard work of politics, but also, attests to the fact that black women's organizing and activism depended upon these social, fraternal, and church-based connections for everyday survival. Not all recruitment was person-to-person; the NAWE also staged membership campaigns and attracted members through its labor initiatives.

### **Membership and Labor Campaigns**

Leaders in the District Union orchestrated a series of membership and labor campaigns to draw black Washingtonians into the organization. Every November, in commemoration of its anniversary, the NAWE convened an annual meeting and the District Union held its own "echo" meeting where labor issues were discussed and new members joined. Both the national and echo meetings were held in black churches. It was in November of each year that large numbers of women and men in Washington, D.C., became members of the District Union.<sup>66</sup> One of the distinguishing features about these November and December memberships was the

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<sup>66</sup> In November 1922, 42 new members joined; in November 1923, 44 new members joined; in November 1924, 45 new members joined; and in November 1925, 6 new members joined.

appearance of men. Until November 1922, only three men had joined the local NAWE. Two of them, James Henson and Clarence Bradford, were married to women very active in the District Union, Sadie T. Henson and Janie Bradford. The other man worked as an unskilled laborer and lived in Deanwood, within close proximity to both the NTS as well as many District Union members. But in November 1922, fifteen men joined and in December ten men joined.

Although Burroughs and other leaders described the NAWE as an organization intended for “women wage earners,” men were encouraged to support it. A flier about the NAWE succinctly conveyed the gender politics, whereby all dues-paying women were considered “active” members, while men were “associate members.” Underneath these different positions was the statement “*Men should back the women up in this effort.*”<sup>67</sup> The NAWE, then, positioned itself as an organization where women were able to wield more status as members than men. The statement that men should support women might have referenced the multiple times when black women had supported black men in labor movements by forming wives’ auxiliaries to the Pullman Porters or postal workers.<sup>68</sup> Despite the explicit message that men could not be full members, black men representing many different occupations composed sixteen percent of the District Union membership.

In addition to the annual November meeting, the District Union also staged membership drives in churches. In March 1924, the District Union circulated a letter

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<sup>67</sup> Undated flier (emphasis in original), “Why You Should Join the National Association of Wage Earners, Incorporated,” AKW-LC.

<sup>68</sup> See, for example, the Ladies’ Auxiliary of the Washington Branch of the National Alliance of Postal Employees, “Tea Party and Musicale,” *Washington Tribune*, June 24, 1927, 3.

to local Washington members, requesting that their pastors mention the NAWE in church. “We want everybody in Washington,” the letter read,

men and women, who are interested in the welfare of our working women to come...Please see that this notice is read in your church on Sunday morning. Ask the pastor to make special mention of it. The working women stand by the Churches. I know that Church-pastors included-will stand by them.<sup>69</sup>

One church, Shiloh Baptist, publicized the NAWE in its church bulletin that month, thus encouraging congregants to join the organization.<sup>70</sup> It is not surprising, then, that in March, April, and May 1924—the months of deliberate recruitment in churches—205 women and men joined the District Union. In March, Nannie Helen Burroughs remarked to the president of the National Consumers’ League, Florence Kelly, “I am delighted to tell you that the colored women throughout the country are responding in a most unusual way, and the women of this city are more enthusiastic over the movement than anything that has been presented to them.”<sup>71</sup> These recruitment campaigns helped to bring hundreds of NAWE members into the organization. They also encouraged ministers to join the District Union. By the organization’s demise, eleven ministers and one bishop joined the organization, and their wives often followed. For instance, the Reverend Leonard E. Keiser and his wife, Fannie, became

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<sup>69</sup> Letter from Nannie Helen Burroughs, Washington, D.C., to “My Dear Friend,” Washington, D.C., 20 March 1924 in Folder 121, Box 3, Collection 102, Mary Church Terrell Papers, Manuscript Division, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Founders Library, Howard University, Washington, D.C.

<sup>70</sup> Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent*, 219.

<sup>71</sup> Nannie Helen Burroughs, Washington, D.C., to Florence Kelly, New York, 25 March 1924 in Folder 9, Box 39, NHB-LC.

members together. The District Union often met in Keiser's church, Walker Memorial Baptist. Seeing a minister join the organization may have encouraged his congregants to join.

Of course, essential to the NAWE's attractiveness to black Washingtonians were its labor initiatives. On January 12, 1923, Nannie Helen Burroughs attended the Women's Industrial Conference at the Department of Labor's Women's Bureau. There she delivered a pointed address, discussing the contradictions of white women pressing for better wages and working conditions for white women industrial workers while neglecting to consider the black women's labor that enabled their activism. "These same women are able to give a great deal of tries," Burroughs argued, "for the reason that they have in their kitchens, laundries, nurseries, dining rooms, and bedrooms domestic servants who are responsible for the comfort, health, and happiness of their homes." She urged the women at the conference to consider regulating the hours and conditions of their domestic workers. She ended by linking her testimony with the work of the District Union to assist domestic workers. "The colored women of this city have organized to secure for our group just what we are demanding," she noted. "We need your cooperation."<sup>72</sup> A transcript of Burroughs's address appeared on the front page of the *Washington Tribune*, the local black

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<sup>72</sup> See "Makes Plea for Women Who Work: Miss Burroughs Champions Cause for Domestic Workers before the Conference," *Washington Tribune*, January 20, 1923, 1; and *Proceedings of the Women's Industrial Conference Called by the Women's Bureau of the United States Department of Labor, Washington, D.C., January 11, 12, and 13, 1923* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1923), 100-102. In this government testimony, Burroughs noted, "There is a movement on foot on the part of colored women to form a national association of wage earners. In fact, such an organization is now in its incipiency."

newspaper, thereby alerting Washingtonians of the District Union's campaign to assist domestic workers.

In tandem with Burroughs's testimony, the District Union initiated its 1923 labor drive to recruit domestic workers. District Union president Sadie T. Henson established a headquarters at 920 U Street, the offices of the local Murray Brothers Printing Company. An article noted that "[m]embership secretaries will work in every section of the city soliciting members."<sup>73</sup> In the first week, the process was slow. A newspaper article noted that the "inclement weather...somewhat hampered this house to house canvassing, but all workers are expected to get started by the end of the week."<sup>74</sup>

This door-to-door campaign was slow but incrementally helped expand the membership. Based on recruits, it appears that canvassers worked principally in Deanwood, the area of the National Training School. Of the fourteen new members who joined in January 1923, ten were women who resided in Deanwood, including four domestic workers, one maid, one keeper of children, one hairdresser, one housekeeper, one teacher, and one mother. In November 1923, four domestic workers on Champlain Street in Adams Morgan, a neighborhood in Northwest Washington joined the District Union. Three women, Lucille Carney, Clara Burrell, and Julia Clanton lived in an apartment building at 2307 Champlain Street and joined at the same time, as did their neighbor Sadie Cournish, who lived up the street at 2320 Champlain Street.

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<sup>73</sup> "Starts Drive for Women," *Washington Tribune*, January 20, 1923, 1, 6.

<sup>74</sup> "Miss Burroughs Pushing Plan to Organize Women," *Washington Tribune*, January 27, 1923, 1.

By the end of the year, 134 women working in service occupations joined the District Union, making them fifty-three percent of the District Union's 1923 new recruits. The methods of door-to-door canvassing—recruiting members in their streets and neighborhoods—might have reached service workers when mass meetings, press coverage, organizational and institutional connections, and personal letters did not.

While the main focus of much of Burroughs's organizing was domestic laborers, the District Union also worked to improve labor conditions of a range of workers. One group was charwomen. Approximately nine percent of black Washingtonians, as well as nine percent of District Union members, worked for the federal government.<sup>75</sup> In July 1924, the federal government's civil service's reclassification board reduced the hourly wages of charwomen to 40¢ an hour, limited their hours to three a day, and eliminated pay on Sundays and holidays, which meant that charwomen earned fewer than \$6 a week. These pernicious wage and hour reductions prompted black and white women workers to protest these salary reclassifications and demand a "living wage."<sup>76</sup> By September the District Union joined these protests. An article noted that Nannie Helen Burroughs had "consented to swing the full force of her organization behind the government workers." White

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<sup>75</sup> A figure for the precise number of civil service workers in 1924 was unavailable, but in 1931, it was estimated that 71,159 workers were employed for the government in Washington, D.C. For a breakdown of black workers in civil service positions in 1928 see "Negroes in the United States Service at the close of Fiscal Year Ended June 30, 1928" in Folder 10, Box C-403, NAACP Papers, Part I, Series C, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C., and for a discussion of the total number of workers see Greene and Callis, *The Employment of Negroes in the District of Columbia*, 58.

<sup>76</sup> "Black and White Women Protest Salary Reclassification," *Washington Tribune*, July 26, 1924, 1.

charwomen organized a mass meeting at the (white) Central High School. Black charwomen, in cooperation with the District Union, organized a “monster mass meeting” at the (black) Cleveland Elementary School to protest the low wages. An article on the meeting commented on the presence of the District Union, noting that, “all women workers will join a cooperative movement with other government workers and make a nation wide appeal for relief.”<sup>77</sup> At this point, a total of eighteen charwomen in the federal government were members of the District Union, along with forty-nine others who worked for the government in various capacities, such as clerks, messengers, elevator operators, and stenographers. Nine percent of the District Union worked for the government, making a significant number vulnerable to government reclassification, which explains why the local union championed the cause. That September, the month of the mass meeting, one charwoman and three government workers joined the organization. In this instance, District Union members benefited from the presence of Nannie Helen Burroughs as well as the work of the local branch to arrange the meeting and lend their support to the government workers.

Cumulatively, the combined impacts of two-tiered recruitment, organizational and institutional networks, membership drives, and labor campaigns helped to attract a diverse community of black Washingtonians to join the District Union. Mapping the ways that women and men from different neighborhoods, networks, and occupational backgrounds joined the organization helps to illuminate the different sites of politics and modes of organizing.

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<sup>77</sup> “Holds Monster Mass Meeting,” *Washington Tribune*, September 20, 1924, 1.

## Demographics of Membership

The average member of the District Union was a married woman who labored in a service job, was in her forties, and rented a house or apartment.<sup>78</sup> Almost half of all women members of the District Union, 46 percent, toiled in service positions (see figure 11). Among these service workers, 33 percent worked as domestic servants and cooks, 6 percent worked as laundresses, 2 percent labored as charwomen, and 2 percent worked as waitresses. The remaining labored in various service occupations. In Washington, D.C., the fact that the majority of District Union members labored in some form of personal service mirrored the overall labor demographics of black women where 83 percent toiled as service workers. But the District Union also attracted significant numbers of black women who worked in jobs that had a stronger proportional representation in the organization than the 1920 Occupational Census. For instance, 5 percent of District Union members worked as beauty culturists and hair dressers, while they only composed 1 percent in the census; 10 percent of members labored as seamstresses and dressmakers while they represented only 4 percent in the census; 4 percent of members were employed as clerks while they only composed 2 percent in the census; and 7 percent of District Union members worked as teachers and attendance officers, while within the city as a whole only 2 percent were employed as teachers. The significant representation of members in these other jobs—hairdressers and beauty culturists, seamstresses and dressmakers, clerks, and teachers—indicates that the organization appealed to women in these forms of work, but also that the recruitment process encouraged women to reach into their

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<sup>78</sup> This is based upon my investigation of the 1920 and 1930 manuscript census in Washington, D.C.

occupational networks to attract members within either their workspaces or their web of work-related contacts. And the fact that 15 percent of District Union members worked only inside of their homes—as housewives, mothers, and housekeepers—indicates that the message of the organization resonated with these women as well.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> I acquired women’s occupations through several sources: their membership cards, the NAWE logbook, and the 1920 and 1930 manuscript census in Washington, D.C. Often times, women listed several different occupations or their listed occupation was different in the census. I tried to honor women’s stated occupations in the logbook or on their membership cards. The only exception was when women listed their occupation as “housekeeper” which could mean they worked as servants in other houses or were the housekeepers of their own house. The occupations listed in Figure 5 are my attempts to sort women’s myriad occupations into different categories. “Domestic,” for example, includes women who identified as maids, servants, houseworkers, and many other jobs. The women not included in the table toiled at jobs that are not represented in the occupational census, such as entertainers, musicians, caterers, politicians, and merchants.

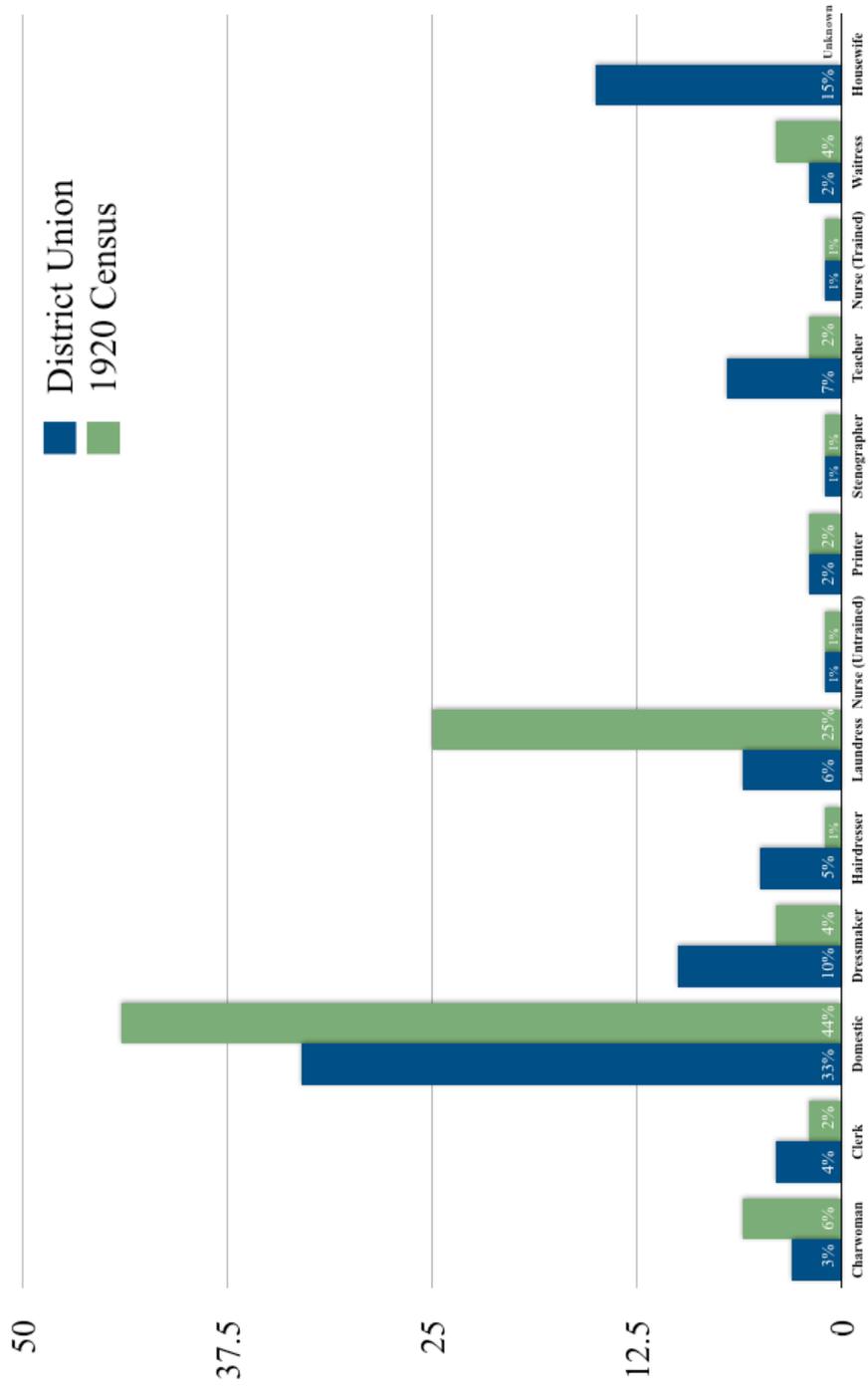


Figure 11: Women’s Occupations in the District Union and 1920 Census

In addition to women, the District Union also succeeded in gathering a cross-class community of men. Very often, men's occupations in the District Union closely mirrored their representation in the census. For instance, 7 percent of District Union members worked as laborers while 8 percent of black men in Washington, D.C., toiled as laborers. Similarly, 7 percent in the District Union worked as chauffeurs, while 7 percent of black men in D.C. were employed as chauffeurs; 7 percent of members labored as express men and 7 percent of black men in Washington also worked as express men; and both 6 percent of District Union members and 6 percent of black men in D.C. worked as janitors. But among other occupations, black men's proportional representation in the District Union eclipsed their proportional representation in Washington, D.C. This was most common among professional men because 7 percent of District Union members worked as ministers while only 1 percent of black men in D.C. worked as ministers; 2 percent worked as lawyers in the District Union while less than 1 percent of black men in Washington, D.C. labored as lawyers; and 2 percent of District Union members were physicians, dentists, and druggists, while they composed only 1 percent of black men in Washington, D.C.

Overall, the District Union succeeded in attracting a cross-class membership. Mapping the process by which each member joined demonstrates that attracting women and men from diverse occupations was not inevitable, but rather, required careful work of recruiting, labor campaigns, canvassing, and connections with organizational and institutional networks. When the headquarters opened in November 1924, the 46 percent of members who identified as service workers had an

opportunity to sharpen their skills, increase their professionalism, and improve their wages.

### **Opening of the Headquarters**

In November 1924 the NAWE opened a headquarters on Rhode Island Avenue, which enabled the District Union to increase its activities.<sup>80</sup> The headquarters' location in Northwest—nearby important black neighborhoods of Logan Circle and LeDroit Park, close to local institutions, such as Howard University, the Phyllis Wheatley YWCA, and the John Wesley AMEZ Church, and within walking distance to two streetcar lines—made it a convenient and accessible site for many black Washingtonians.

Ideally Nannie Helen Burroughs had hoped to construct a new building, which would provide employment possibilities and living space. The “three story factory with space for machinery on the first floor, offices and shipping rooms on the second, and dormitories for 20-25 women on the third floor” she envisioned was, however, too expensive an endeavor for the resources of the NAWE.<sup>81</sup> But the difficulties of financing such a venture ultimately persuaded her to purchase an existing building. As this photograph illustrates, the NAWE's headquarters was a sprawling, four-story, Victorian brick building trimmed with limestone detail that prominently occupied the

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<sup>80</sup> See “Women Purchase Headquarters on R. I. Avenue,” *Washington Tribune*, March 1, 1924, 1; “The National Association of Wage Earners, Incorporated,” *Washington Tribune*, March 8, 1924, 1 and “Along the Banks of the Potomac,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, March 8, 1924, 13.

<sup>81</sup> Letter from Nannie Helen Burroughs, Washington, D.C., to Mrs. H. W. Lackley, Kansas City, 20 May 1922, Folder 18, Box 39, NHB-LC.

corner of Rhode Island Avenue and Twelfth Streets (see figure 12). This large building easily accommodated both practice rooms as well as bedrooms. Upon the purchase of the headquarters, Burroughs told a reporter from the *Washington Tribune* that “the organization will show the world what Negro women can do in a labor movement.”<sup>82</sup>

**Figure 12: NAWE Headquarters, 1115 Rhode Island Avenue, Northwest DC**



**Source:** Folder 8, Box 308, NHB Papers, LC.

When the NAWE headquarters opened its doors in 1924, it helped to centralize activities for the District Union. Local president Sadie T. Henson spearheaded the activities along with Miss Reed, the house director, and Mary Kimball, the publicity director. In 1926, Kimball moved into the building,

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<sup>82</sup> “Women Purchase Headquarters on R.I. Avenue,” *Washington Tribune*, March 1, 1924, 1.

presumably to assist members at the headquarters more fully as well as enjoy the benefits of a dormitory room.<sup>83</sup> Each month, local members of the District Union gathered at the headquarters on Thursday evenings for their monthly meetings. And each day, members of the District Union visited the headquarters to take classes to sharpen their skills as service workers, perfecting their crafts in the practice dining room, kitchen, and living rooms of the headquarters. These classes accommodated workers in a variety of service jobs. As a flier for the headquarters noted, “[i]f a woman applies for a job as a cook, she will be given meat, bread, and pastry...If she wants a position as waitress, she will be require to set up the table, serve a meal, and tell what she knows about serving and caring for the dining room and its appurtenances.” The classes also involved “drills in the ethics and fundamentals of their profession.”<sup>84</sup> Through the clothing cooperative at the headquarters, workers could share uniforms and supplies. An article in the NAWE’s newspaper column in the *Washington Tribune* celebrated the success of these classes, noting that “[a] member of our practice class states that after two weeks service her wages have been increased and the madam has decided to remain home and invite guests to Thanksgiving dinner.”<sup>85</sup> Once workers successfully completed a training class, they received a Service Rating Card (which was also sent to their employers) and could

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<sup>83</sup> *Boyd’s Directory*, 1926, 573.

<sup>84</sup> The District Union often circulated a wish list of donations for the practice house, including aluminum cooking utensils, china dishes, flat irons, small clocks, an ice box, kitchen tables, brooms, table cloths, blankets, comforters, spreads, unbleached sheets, towels, pillow cases, refrigerators, rugs, and clothes trees. See “List of Needs for Equipping the Practice House,” in Folder 8, Box 308, NHB-LC. See also, “A Domestic Service Practice House,” Folder 4, Box 245, AKW-LC.

<sup>85</sup> “The National Association of Wage Earners, Incorporated,” *Washington Tribune*, November 28, 1925, 3.

also place their names on a roster for potential employers. A member of the District Union noted that the classes in particular, and the organization as a whole offered “truly a practical solution of our vexed industrial problem.”<sup>86</sup> Rewarding service workers for improving their skills by issuing them a service rating card and issuing uniforms not only helped workers to legitimize their labor, but also indicated to their employers their value as workers, enabling them to earn more money and dignity on the job.

Members learned how to plan elegant afternoon teas and dinner parties and were instructed in “standards of courtesy, habits of conduct” and taught “the proper use of leisure.”<sup>87</sup> The headquarters, then, offered a site for hundreds of members of the District Union to polish their skills, receive certified training in labor and etiquette, and share uniforms, all of which would enhance their credentials as workers. The classes at the headquarters epitomize what the historian Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham has termed, the “politics of respectability” that blended courtesy, cleanliness, and morality with activism, which in the NAWE translated into better wages, hours, and dignity for domestic servants.<sup>88</sup> District Union members enjoyed a clear advantage over members in other states because they were able to enjoy the benefits of the organization through practice classes, lectures on labor concerns, and social activities.

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<sup>86</sup> “The National Association of Wage Earners, Incorporated,” *Washington Tribune*, January 8, 1926, 3.

<sup>87</sup> “The National Association of Wage Earners,” *Washington Tribune*, December 19, 1925, 3; “The National Association of Wage Earners,” *Washington Tribune*, February 26, 1926, 3; and “Home Plans to Train Colored Domestics,” *Washington Post*, November 10, 1924, 11.

<sup>88</sup> Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent*, 187.

One year after the headquarters opened, the District Union expanded its work to locate employment opportunities for servants. Nannie Helen Burroughs contacted the Housekeepers' Alliance, a group of white women in Washington, D.C., who were committed to promoting efficiency, cleanliness, stability, and dependability among their servants. She sent the organization pamphlets, invited members to the headquarters for tea and sandwiches (served by District Union members enrolled in classes), and inquired if they would consider hiring members who had successfully completed courses at the Headquarters. The members consented.<sup>89</sup>

This alliance positioned the District Union to serve as a third-party to mediate relationships between employers and employees. For instance, Burroughs sent a "help wanted" card for white women in the Housekeepers' Alliance to complete. The type of information that Burroughs requested was an attempt to offer domestic workers information about their potential job. By asking employers to list a "probable wage," Burroughs gently pushed them to commit to paying domestic workers a particular amount before they accepted the job. And by requesting that employers chart directions to their house via streetcars, she eased the process by which domestic workers located their jobs. In the 1920s, although some state governments, such as Washington, D.C., had begun to enact protective legislation to regulate women's and children's working hours and wages, personal servants were excluded from these laws. The relationship with the Housekeepers' Alliance, then, offered a means by which black servants in Washington could seek better hours, wages, and protection in their jobs. Burroughs asked even more detailed questions in

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<sup>89</sup> Nannie Helen Burroughs, Washington, D.C. to Anna Kelton Wiley, Washington, D.C., February 17, 1925 in Folder 2, Box 67, AKW-LC.

an “Employer’s Chart” which attempted to elevate the quality of life for servants. For instance, some her questions included employers to list arrangements for servants to attend church, improve their mind, care for their children, and locate safe housing and amusement in the city.<sup>90</sup> These questions, then, attempted to ensure that servants could have time to care for their children as well as attend church, but also maintain a wholesome and dignified lifestyle. Although little evidence exists about subsequent interactions between District Union members and employers from the Housekeepers’ Alliance, it can be noted that training programs at the headquarters remained popular throughout the 1920s, attracting interest around the country. In March 1926, publicity director Mary Kimball noted that, “Applications are being registered from every part of the country. Since a large part of the workers are unskilled, training is the keynote to success.” She then added “[t]his week has witnessed several additional applicants for training as maids.”<sup>91</sup>

In addition to the activities that already occurred in the building, members of the NAWE still imagined opening a factory and mail order house at the headquarters, thereby furnishing additional employment opportunities for black women. A flier articulated the nationalist vision that undergirded the factory and mail order house. “Do you realize what it will mean to the whole race,” the flier asked, “when thousands of women back a movement like this? It means employment; it means

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<sup>90</sup> “Employer’s Chart: Economic and Human Relations,” Folder 8, Box 308, NHB-LC.

<sup>91</sup> See, “The National Association of Wage Earners, Incorporated,” *Washington Tribune*, March 19, 1926, 4.

influence; it means respect from others; it means strength for all.”<sup>92</sup> The idea of a mail order house captured a key component of black economic nationalism, enabling African Americans collectively profit from a business that would employ black women and shield them from labor in white homes.<sup>93</sup> Businessmen in the city pledged money to support the power machines. As men donated money, Burroughs circulated news of their support. In an article entitled “Business Men Pledge Aid to Wage Earners,” a sampling of the more than one hundred men who donated money to the NAWE was listed. The article noted that men offered this support to wage-earning women “Because they are the backbone of our race.”<sup>94</sup> For some of these businessmen, donating money to the NAWE was probably an expression of their support for Burroughs and all black women in the city. But for other men, the donation might have been personal. These men might have had a wife, sister, or mother who worked as a servant in white homes. The power machines—when running—represented a vision of black women’s economic autonomy, thereby enabling them to leave low-paying and dangerous domestic labor to work for the NAWE.

In addition to the factory, NAWE members also imagined the headquarters as only the start of multiple buildings to accommodate live-in servants. In November 1924, at the time of the headquarters’ grand opening, Burroughs described the

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<sup>92</sup> “The National Association of Wage Earners,” Folder 4, Box 256, AKW-LC.

<sup>93</sup> For information on black economic nationalism, see John Bracey, Jr., August Meier, and Elliott Rudwick, eds., *Black Nationalism in America* (Indianapolis: Bobbs Merrill, 1970).

<sup>94</sup> “Business Men Pledge Aid to Wage Earners,” *Washington Tribune*, December 20, 1925, 1.

NAWE's visions of opening "a chain of dormitories for the accommodation of women who do not want to live at their places of employment."<sup>95</sup> This goal of "chain dormitories" had not been part of Burroughs's original plan when she initiated the NAWE in 1921. But by November 1924, a total of thirty-four live-in servants had joined the District Union. Although it is impossible to know what kinds of conversations occurred here, it is probable that these live-in domestic servants in Washington, D.C., worked to push their own, particular needs onto the vision of the NAWE. And it appears that women in the city used the headquarters as a dormitory and cafeteria. Fees for dinner at the headquarters were \$14 a month, which would have been somewhat of a reasonable rate for service workers who earned between \$8 and \$12 a week.<sup>96</sup> A newspaper column in 1925 remarked, "new regular boarders are coming to us almost daily. We are pleased to have them and extend a welcome to many more."<sup>97</sup> Although the identities of these boarders could not be located through the census or city directories, their presence suggests that they were service workers who either used residency at the headquarters to avoid a live-in situation or as a springboard to their own house or apartment. In this way, the NAWE's headquarters

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<sup>95</sup> "National Association of Wage Earners Hold Their First Annual Meeting," *New Journal and Guide*, November 22, 1924, 7.

<sup>96</sup> Note from Nannie Helen Burroughs, undated, folder 8, Box 40, NHB-LC and for black women's and men's weekly earnings in Washington, D.C., see Elizabeth Ross Haynes, "Negroes in Domestic Service: An Introduction," *Journal of Negro History* 8, no. 4 (October 1923): 421 and Lorenzo J. Greene and Myra Colson Callis, *The Employment of Negroes in the District of Columbia* (Washington, D.C.: Association for the Study of Negro Life and History, Inc., 1931), 38-39 and 81.

<sup>97</sup> "Wage Earner News," *Washington Tribune*, December 19, 1925, 3.

resembled the nearby YWCA by offering rooms at reasonable rates for women who did not earn very much money.<sup>98</sup>

In addition to using the dormitory rooms to assist servants and other women who did not earn very much money, other parts of the building also accommodated Pullman Porters. A 1928 newspaper column about the organization noted the existence of the “Pullman Porters’ Rooms, which are arranged particularly for the use of these men.”<sup>99</sup> The District Union had three men who toiled as Pullman porters—Zachariah Berry, Samuel McCalister, and Marshall Anderson, as well as Hannah Warren, who worked as a cleaner for the Pullman Company. In addition to these men and women who explicitly noted a Pullman connection, others worked as porters and expressmen on trains. These “Pullman Porter” rooms in the headquarters might have served as the space for meetings among Brotherhood of the Sleeping Car Porters members in Washington, resembling their building in New York City.<sup>100</sup>

Studying the ways that members of the District Union both used and imagined this building offers an important lens into both their everyday needs as workers as well as their visions for a better world. Between 1924 and 1927, black women in

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<sup>98</sup> The 1930 census lists thirty-nine residents at the YWCA. Occupationally there were three waitresses, six clerical workers, eight students, and thirteen domestic workers. Of the remaining nine women, one was a hospital technician, one worked as a printer’s assistant, one was the matron, and the other six did not have an occupation. Both of these residence lists indicate the high numbers of domestic workers who stayed at the YWCA. As domestic labor was the largest occupation for African American women in the 1920s—and domestic workers in Washington earned between ten and twelve dollars a week—it is logical that the YWCA would house women who worked in this service job. Residency at the Y, in fact, might have enabled black women to avoid live-in service with their employers. See Fifteenth Census of the United States, Washington, D.C., Enumeration District 21, Page 11A.

<sup>99</sup> “The National Association of Wage Earners,” *Washington Tribune*, April 13, 1928, 4.

<sup>100</sup> Melinda Chateauvert, *Marching Together: Women of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998), 25.

Washington, D.C., gathered at the headquarters for monthly meetings and weekly training classes to improve the individual and collective status of service workers. And women used the ample rooms in the building to share uniforms. As well, some women lived in the dormitories while Pullman Porters rested in designated rooms throughout the building. The different buildings in the headquarters, then, pragmatically assisted workers in their daily struggles for advancement. But beyond day-to-day survival, members also envisioned this building as an instrument for broader economic advancement through a factory and mail-order house. While these dreams never materialized, the work of the headquarters to assist women workers cannot be discounted. Members also used this building to orchestrate social events and fundraising ventures, which further illuminate the everyday work of sustaining the organization.

### **Social Activities and Fundraising in the District Union**

As the largest NAWE branch in the country, District Union members disproportionately bore the burden of financing the organization through both their membership fees and activities. An article in the NAWE's column in a black Washington newspaper noted, "[i]t is urgent that new members and renewals should be reported regularly. It must be borne in mind that our headquarters, which is the property of our organization, is being paid for from donations from those who believe in our cause."<sup>101</sup> The Washington memberships, renewals, and donations helped to keep the NAWE financially afloat.

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<sup>101</sup> "The National Association of Wage Earners, Incorporated," *Washington Tribune*, March 26, 1926, 4.

In addition, District Union members coordinated a range of fundraising activities. These different ventures illuminate the holistic nature of black women's activism and organizing, blending economic, social, and cultural values. In November, members prepared and served a "pre-Thanksgiving Dinner" fundraiser. Every December the NAWE held a bazaar and Christmas sale. The District Union, in fact, encouraged all black Washingtonians to purchase their Christmas gifts at the headquarters, thus supporting an important organization and buying "Dainty Art Work and Beautiful Colored Dolls."<sup>102</sup> In 1914, the WC had created "Negro Doll Clubs" to help young black girls feel pride and beauty. Because of Burroughs's strong ties with the WC, the NAWE might have adopted this program.<sup>103</sup> Selecting African American dolls as a component of their fundraising venture further underscores the NAWE's message of emphasizing the dignity of wage earners, and by extension, black women. The NAWE also spearheaded a stocking campaign, selling "stocking cards" to help pay for the factory. The front of the stocking read, "Do not throw this stocking away/Lest you throw away an opportunity/To give a deserving girl a chance/To learn a trade and earn a living." These stocking cards were then hung on the Christmas tree in the living room of the headquarters.<sup>104</sup> By showcasing these stockings in a prominent room in the building, the NAWE helped to

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<sup>102</sup> "The National Association of Wage Earners, Incorporated," *Washington Tribune*, December 5, 1925, 3.

<sup>103</sup> See Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent*, 194 and Michele Mitchell, *Righteous Propagation: African Americans and the Politics of Racial Destiny After Reconstruction* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 182-184.

<sup>104</sup> The back of the stocking card read, "A Christmas Gift to Help Buy Power machines, Open a factory, Make Dresses, Aprons, and Caps, and thus Give Employment to our Girls." See Nannie Helen Burroughs, Washington, D.C., to the Berg Sales Company, Waterton, New York, 24 September 1925 in Folder 9, Box 33, NHB-LC.

illustrate the individual contributions of each person in financing the organization. All of these activities—while raising much needed money for the organization—also disseminated a message that black women workers in Washington, D.C., embodied ideals of hard work, dignity, professionalism, and proper decorum.

Individual members helped to sustain the day-to-day work of politics, especially fundraising, by connecting the District Union to their own organizational networks. One of the District Union's most important affiliations was with the local chapters of the Federation of Women's Clubs of Washington and Vicinity. For instance, in November 1924, around the time that the headquarters opened, Janie C. Taylor, a hospital maid and president of the Federation of Women's Clubs in Northeast Washington, held a benefit concert for the Wage Earners' China Fund inside of the Contee AMEZ Church in Deanwood. This concert showcased the talents of laundress, District Union member, and noted elocutionist Bessie Love Queen.<sup>105</sup> By holding this fundraising concert in Deanwood, Janie Taylor not only attracted the many members who lived in this neighborhood, but also connected the organization to the constituents of the Federation of Women's Clubs in Northeast. The relationship between the District Union and the Federation of Women's Clubs of Washington and Vicinity was perhaps meant to be a reciprocal one. Members of this organization and its many affiliated clubs joined the District Union and participated in fundraising ventures. And, in turn, District Union members were expected to support the programs of the Federation of Women's Clubs of Washington and Vicinity. For instance, a newspaper column reminded members that “[b]eing a member of the

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<sup>105</sup> “Locals and Society,” *Washington Tribune*, November 22, 1924, 2.

National Federation of Women's Clubs, the local union of the National Association of Wage Earners is expected to attend en masse the Douglass Day celebration, Sunday afternoon, at the Metropolitan Baptist Church."<sup>106</sup> Douglass Day was one of the organization's important, annual events, and might have raised money to support the maintenance of the nearby Frederick Douglass Memorial in Southeast Washington.<sup>107</sup> By forging a relationship with the local chapter of the NACW, the District Union could enjoy access to the organization's myriad networks and associations.

In 1926 the District Union elected a leadership board, composed largely of members who were seasoned in recruitment and represented different neighborhoods and occupations. These women included an attendance officer, a dressmaker, a teacher, a clerk, a housewife, a domestic, a hairdresser, a ladies maid, and a waitress. This local branch spearheaded social activities for members. District Union members could play in the Wage Earners' orchestra, participate in the Bible Study class, and compete on the two baseball teams, the Wage Earners and the Wage Spurners.<sup>108</sup> These activities demonstrate ways that this organization sought to build community among members. All of the activities the District Union staged—fundraisers, dinners, classes, and teams—upheld the dignity and respectability of women wage earners.

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<sup>106</sup> "National Association of Wage Earners, Incorporated," *Washington Tribune*, February 12, 1926, 4.

<sup>107</sup> Davis, *Lifting As They Climb*, 410 and "Douglass Day," *Washington Tribune* 27 September 1924, 3.

<sup>108</sup> "The National Association of Wage Earners, Incorporated," *Washington Tribune*, November 21, 1925, 3; and "Locals and Society," *Washington Tribune*, August 20, 1926, 2.

The District Union sought to create a familial atmosphere in their organization. Their newspaper column, which ran in the *Washington Tribune* between November 1925 and March 1926, blended news about the national organization and the local branch. For instance, it contained information on sick members, celebrating that “[n]urse Felton, 740 Columbia Road Northwest, is well on the Road to Wellville and will soon be as Active as Ever for the Wage Earners” and expressing condolences to members on deaths in their families.<sup>109</sup> It also urged members to bring their entire families to the headquarters for a meal, such as the “special Thanksgiving Turkey Dinner” or to rent a room to stage a holiday party. The District Union staged events such as the “Get Acquainted Fete” for members to meet each other socially. The column announced that NAWE members were “sisters interested in a common cause.”<sup>110</sup> By employing a language of family, the District Union worked to cement social bonds among members.

In addition to working within black Washington’s political culture through churches and the press, the District Union also worked to situate its organization within American political culture. When Calvin Coolidge was inaugurated in March 1925, black women and men from all over the country traveled to Washington, D.C., to attend. The NAWE sought to assist some of these travelers by “having an open house during the entire Inauguration Week.” A column announced that “[v]isitors to the city may ‘drop in’ at any time between the hours of ten am and ten pm for rest,

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<sup>109</sup> “The National Association of Wage Earners, Incorporated,” *Washington Tribune*, November 21, 1925, 3; and “The National Association of Wage Earners, Incorporated,” *Washington Tribune*, January 2, 1926, 3.

<sup>110</sup> “The National Association of Wage Earners, Incorporated,” *Washington Tribune*, February 5, 1926, 2.

refreshments, or conference.”<sup>111</sup> Here black women positioned their headquarters as both a space where visitors must come to learn about the work of the organization, but also a site where they could rest and enjoy a meal. In Washington, D.C.’s segregated landscape—where black women and men were excluded from many white hotels and restaurants—these types of services for visitors were essential. Black women’s political organizing and activism always addressed these concerns of food and shelter. All of these activities, such as social clubs, communal dinners, and concern for each other’s welfare, were rooted in patterns of black women’s activism and ethics in Washington, D.C., often housed in institutions such as mutual benefit associations, labor unions, and church organizations.<sup>112</sup>

The District Union also staged events and orchestrated campaigns to expose members to labor and political issues, often held in churches across Washington. For instance, in November 1924, members gathered in Shiloh Baptist Church to hear Eugene Kinkle Jones, head of the National Urban League, speak about “The Negro’s Opportunity in Industry.” An article in *Opportunity* called this meeting “inspiring.”<sup>113</sup> And in 1923 and 1925, the Women’s Bureau in the U.S. Labor Department convened two conferences on women’s industrial labor. Representatives from the NAWA attended both conferences and advocated on behalf of local and national members. After the 1926 conference, the District Union staged its own

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<sup>111</sup> “Wage Earners Will Keep Open House,” *Washington Tribune*, February 21, 1925, 2.

<sup>112</sup> See, for instance, Elsa Barkley Brown, “Womanist Consciousness: Maggie Lena Walker and the Independent Order of St. Luke,” *Signs* 14, no. 3 (Spring 1989): 610-33.

<sup>113</sup> “The National Association of Wage Earners,” *Opportunity* 2, no. 2 (December 1924): 383.

“Echo” meeting at the Mount Bethel Baptist Church, discussing the activities of the conference, along with issues that would particularly concern its Washington members. Both Nannie Helen Burroughs and Morris Murray of the local Murray Brothers Printing, spoke. Murray presented the “Employer’s Point of View” and Burroughs discussed “how higher standards are being accepted and adopted in some institutions where colored women are employed.” The column noted that it was an “enthusiastic” meeting—and members left “feeling encouraged to continue their well directed efforts in building up a strong organization that will help them get the rights enjoyed by other groups of wage earners.”<sup>114</sup> In this way, the NAWE reached out to a local black business, offering information that would directly benefit its members. And in 1925 the NAWE wrote to the D.C. Board of Commissioners, protesting against the Ku Klux Klan’s intention to parade in Washington, D.C.<sup>115</sup> Here the NAWE intervened on behalf of its national and local members. The people who would have been most affected by this parade were NAWE members in D.C.—and these members thus benefited from close proximity to the national organization.

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<sup>114</sup> The local D.C. women who attended the Industrial Conference included Julia West Hamilton and Nannie Helen Burroughs. For information on this meeting, see “Colored Women to Study Industrial Conditions,” *Washington Post* 18 January 1926, 4; and for information on the echo meeting, See “The National Association of Wage Earners, Incorporated,” *Washington Tribune*, January 29, 1926, 8.

<sup>115</sup> See letter from Daniel E. Carges, Washington, D.C., to National Association of Wage Earners, July 16, 1925, Vol. 231, Entry 11, RG 351: Records of the Board of Commissioners, National Archives, Washington, D.C.

## **Situating the District Union within the Web of Women's Activism**

The last members joined the District Union in 1926. Memberships likely stopped because in May 1926, a fire burned down one of the buildings at Burroughs's National Training School, resulting in a twenty thousand dollar loss.<sup>116</sup> The leadership board of the District Union responded by organizing a picnic fundraiser to finance a new building. For 10¢, black Washingtonians could partake in tennis, croquet, swimming, an open air concert, an abundance of "punch and 'Judies'" and enjoy a baseball game played "between the euphoniously named Wage Earners and the Wage Spurners."<sup>117</sup> Burroughs shifted many of her energies toward raising enough money to rebuild her school.

The significance of the District Union was not the idea (which was not new), but rather, the ways that leaders attached it to rich organizing traditions practiced among black women in Washington, D.C. The recruitment process demonstrates ways that black women situated the District Union within the knowledge networks of their everyday life, circulating information in their neighborhoods, workplaces, street corners, churches, and organizational affiliations. The activities of the District Union mirrored existing patterns in black women's activism, combining a political agenda with social activities, programmatic events, and bonds of reciprocity through a death benefits fund, Thanksgiving dinners, and the language uniting members as "sisters in a common cause."

Casting the organization as short-lived neglects to consider two central factors. The District Union—like all radical social movements—aimed to alter

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<sup>116</sup> "National Training School Has Fire," *Washington Tribune*, May 28, 1926, 1.

<sup>117</sup> "Locals and Society," *Washington Tribune*, August 10, 1926, 2.

structural power relationships in the United States by giving domestic workers decent wages and hours, and legislation, as well as offering employment through a factory and mail order house. Even when “landmark” labor legislation was passed a decade later in the 1930s through the Social Security Act, domestic workers and farmers were not included as beneficiaries. The climate of 1920s America was hostile to the visions of District Union members. And although the District Union stopped holding meetings, recruiting members, and staging events, neither the ideas that underpinned it nor the organizing traditions that bolstered it disappeared.

Following the collapse of the District Union, some of the members of the Federation of Women’s Clubs of Washington and Vicinity preserved some of the organization’s ideas by creating an industrial center, attending labor conferences, and opening an employment bureau. Marian D. Butler, a dressmaker, member of the District Union, and activist in many political and religious causes throughout the city, became the president of the Industrial Department. In July 1928, the Industrial Department held a rally at Lincoln Colonnade.<sup>118</sup> And in March 1929, members of the NACW’s Industrial Department held a three-day conference at the headquarters to discuss “establishing closer contact between the colored women and industrial workers throughout the United States, and to plan a constructive program that will meet the needs of the Negro.”<sup>119</sup> The following month in April at the NACW’s National Convention, members discussed labor and industrial concerns extensively. Guest speakers from the AFL and American Negro Labor Congress stressed the need for “increasing the efficiency of the colored woman worker.” And the Industrial

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<sup>118</sup> “Industrial Center,” *Washington Tribune*, July 27, 1928, 1.

<sup>119</sup> “Unions are Planned of Colored Women,” *Washington Post*, March 31, 1929, M7.

Chair of the NACW, Mazie Mossell Griffin, emphasized the necessity of training programs to be established on the local level. The members decided to designate June as “national industrial month” in their drive to secure a constituency of five thousand women workers. The members also decided to create an employment placement bureau inside of the NACW’s headquarters where “House dresses will be manufactured as the basis of financial independence.”<sup>120</sup> The following month in May, Marian Butler attended the National Industrial Conference in Washington and held a rummage sale to raise money for the planned Industrial Center.<sup>121</sup> Six years later—in the midst of the Great Depression—Marian Butler spoke at one of the sub-sessions of the Congress for Job Insurance at the Washington Auditorium.<sup>122</sup> Although very little information is known about the Industrial Center, its existence suggests ways that black women continued to express concern for the plight of workers, especially those in the service occupations.

Sketching out the biographical profile of some District Union members can also help to illuminate how women preserved some of the organization’s ideas and wove them into their everyday lives. In 1927, District Union member Hattie King, who was now working for the YWCA as the Industrial Secretary, held a membership social. Here she displayed “slides, films, charts, and exhibitions of girls in

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<sup>120</sup> “Convention Closed by Colored Women,” *Washington Post*, April 8, 1929, 14.

<sup>121</sup> “Federation Meets,” *Baltimore Afro-American*, May 25, 1929, 2.

<sup>122</sup> “Congress for Job Insurance Hears Many Speakers,” *Baltimore Afro-American*, June 12, 1925, 6.

industry.”<sup>123</sup> King might have learned about some of these issues from her attendance at one of the District Union’s echo meetings and transported that knowledge into her YWCA work. And the world-renowned artist Elizabeth Catlett painted pictures, designed collages, and carved sculptures that depicted black working women and men. Catlett was not a member of the District Union; she was only ten years old at the time. But her mother, seamstress and teacher Mary Catlett, and grandmother, sewer Louisa Catlett, had both been members. The fact that her mother and grandmother expressed a concern for the collective well being of African American women wage earners suggests that they might have imbued similar ethics and values within their family. Studying the District Union exposes the ways that African American women’s everyday life experiences, knowledge networks, and families shaped their political activism.

Charting the day-to-day work of organizing, recruiting, and sustaining the District Union illuminates the churches, neighborhood networks, fraternal orders, and labor alliances that flowed into women’s political activism. The National Association of Wage Earners was an organization that drew upon the resources of black women’s existing national organizations, including the Woman’s Convention of the Baptist Church and the National Association of Colored Women. But in Washington, D.C., the District Union became deeply connected with local churches, fraternal orders, neighborhood networks, labor alliances, the press, and political organizations. The District Union, like all political movements, relied upon these networks for constituencies, fundraising, and even day-to-day survival. Mapping the connections

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<sup>123</sup> “YWCA News,” *Washington Tribune*, April 22, 1927, 9.

between political activism and the black institutional culture that nurtured this work helps to position the District Union as only one expression of African American women's ongoing work for labor justice.

## Chapter 4: “The Future of Our Children is at Stake”: The Politics of Educational Reform

### Introduction

The public school system in Washington, D.C., is an important site to examine African American women’s politics, organizing, and activism. In 1920, African American students were 30 percent of the children enrolled in schools, and by 1930 that figure climbed to 33 percent.<sup>1</sup> In addition, the city’s forty-seven black public schools offered employment opportunities for teachers; women especially benefitted. In 1920, 2 percent of all employed black women worked as teachers; by 1930, that percentage rose to three. However, less than 1 percent of black men worked as teachers throughout the decade. Schools also hired black administrators, such as principals and attendance officers, and employed service workers, including cleaners and janitors.<sup>2</sup> Although the public school system in Washington, D.C., was segregated by race, the Board of Education stipulated that an African American Assistant Superintendent oversee the black schools and that three African Americans sit on the nine-person School Board.

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<sup>1</sup> For the number of African Americans enrolled in school, see *Report of the Commissioners of the District of Columbia for the Year Ended June 30, 1917*. Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1917 (1917-1931) located in RG 351, Entry 9, National Archives, Washington, D.C. and for African Americans’ population in the city, see *Fourteenth Census of the United States* Volume III: Population 1920 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office (GPO), 1922); and *Fifteenth Census of the United States*, Volume III: Population, Parts I and II (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1932).

<sup>2</sup> *Fourteenth Census of the United States: Population: Occupations. Males and Females in Selected Occupations* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1923), 897-900; and *Fifteenth Census of the United States: 1930: Occupation Statistics, United States Summary* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1932), 11-14.

The quality of black public schools across Washington, D.C., varied greatly. Differences in these schools—building conditions, facilities, and grade levels—often depended upon geographic location in the city. For instance in the 1920s, the only black high schools were located in Northwest, forcing African American students living in Southeast, Southwest, and Northeast to travel a significant distance to continue their education beyond middle school. And many of the elementary schools in Southeast, Southwest, and Northeast were overcrowded and sorely in need of structural upgrades. Parental and civic activism for improvements in local schools, then, often illuminated stark differences in the distribution of educational resources in neighborhoods across the city.

During the 1920s many African American women in Washington, D.C., helped to organize, launch, and sustain a diverse set of movements to improve their school system. Many different issues animated black women's campaigns for educational reform. In 1919, the black community learned that a white art teacher, H. M. Benleot Moens, had been taking lewd photographs of African American schoolgirls. This news prompted thousands of citizens to participate in a citywide movement to fire Moens and any other teacher who assisted him. Some citizens also called for the resignation of the Assistant Superintendent of Schools, Roscoe C. Bruce. In addition, African American Washingtonians debated whether married women and mothers should be allowed to teach in the city's public schools. And throughout the decade, black citizens living in different neighborhoods throughout the city pressed the School Board to allocate resources for their local schools, lobbying for such improvements as playgrounds, building additions, and the construction of

African American high schools and middle schools across the city. But African American parents, educators, and civic activists understood that educational resources amounted to more than school buildings. In order to children to exceed academically, they needed doctors' visits and dental checkups, school clothes and shoes, streetcar fare, and books.<sup>3</sup> Cumulatively, all of these different movements—working to fire teachers and administrators they deemed incompetent, debating the employment of married teachers and mothers, and appealing for resources for schools and students—fell under the purview of educational reform.

While large numbers of black women participated in movements for educational reform, many approached these matters from different vantage points. Black women's various life experiences—including geographic location in the city, economic status, family life, friendships, and organizational and institutional connections—helped to shape their understandings about matters of educational justice. For instance, African American women disagreed about whether or not married women should teach in the public schools. Some women grounded their opposition within a discourse of morality, while others launched materialist critiques, pointing to the scarcity of teaching opportunities for single women. Black women's life experiences, then, helped to influence the substance of their campaigns for educational reform. Appreciating this spectrum of agreement and difference that typified black women's political debates around educational reform adds a richer complexity to the inner workings of African American activism.

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<sup>3</sup> For evidence of these views among black women in Philadelphia, see Lisa Levenstein, *A Movement Without Marches: African American Women and the Politics of Poverty in Postwar Philadelphia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 122.

African American women worked to improve the education of children and reform the school system in many different capacities, whether it was organizing a campaign, signing a petition, attending a neighborhood civic gathering, raising money for poor students, testifying before Congress, or picketing meetings of the School Board. In all of their different types of activism, black women relied heavily on important sites of organizing and mobilizing across the city, including churches, fraternal orders, neighborhood civic associations, worksites, the press, movie theaters, neighborhood streets, and social and political organizations. Black women reached into all of these different elements of black political culture to organize, mount, and sustain their diverse movements for educational reform. Tracing the day-to-day workings of black women's educational activism reveals how they wove sites of black political culture into their organizing and mobilization across the city.

Black women situated their organizing and activism for educational justice within the city's local and federal spaces. Women and men used the local spaces of their neighborhood streets and worksites to exchange information and circulate knowledge about different matters of educational justice. And in many of their campaigns, black women took advantage of their powerful location in Washington, where the boundaries between local and national politics swirled, to improve their school system. During the 1920s, the local government in D.C. and the U.S. Congress both exercised control over the school system. Judges in Washington, D.C. appointed members of the School Board to serve three-year terms. Members of the School Board in turn, appointed the Superintendent and Assistant Superintendent of the school system. School Board members also submitted funding recommendations

to Congress, but the Senate's Committee on the District of Columbia appropriated the money. And the Senate's Committee on the District of Columbia maintained final control over the D.C. school system, periodically convening hearings and reordering the structures of governance. African American women activists, then, consciously crafted their political campaigns to reflect the fact that both the federal and local government exercised control over the school system. By transporting their activism into public, visible spaces across the city, including civic squares, meetings of the School Board, the press, and Congress, black women raised their local, educational issues to citizens living in Washington, D.C., the federal government, and the nation.

Most studies of educational politics in Washington, D.C., have either focused on individual schools or concentrated on elite figures, such as teachers, school board members, and administrators.<sup>4</sup> And many histories of African Americans and educational activism describe movements for integration.<sup>5</sup> This chapter moves

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<sup>4</sup> Several historians have written about the school system in Washington, D.C. in the twentieth century prior to integration, but most scholars have focused on elite institutions. The notable exception is Marya McQuirter, whose article on parent activism at the Browne Junior High School and competing notions of equality best matches my focus. Jacqueline Moore contends that the African American elite battled between 1880 and 1920 to wrest control of the school system from white administrators. Sharon Harley, in her study of African American women teachers in Washington, D.C., argues that these women were convinced that their high levels of education and profession as teachers imbued them with the responsibility to "uplift" the black community. And Henry S. Robinson concentrates principally on the remarkable achievements of Dunbar graduates and faculty. See Marya McQuirter, "'Our Cause is Marching On': Parent Activism, Browne Junior High School, and the Multiple Meanings of Equality in Post-War Washington," *Washington History* 16, no. 2 (Fall/Winter 2004-2005): 66-82; Jacqueline Moore, *Leading the Race: The Transformation of the Black Elite in the Nation's Capital* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1999), 86-110; Sharon Harley, "Beyond the Classroom: The Organizational Lives of Black Female Educators in the District of Columbia, 1890-1930," *Journal of Negro Education* 51, no. 3 (Summer 1982): 254-265; and Lillian Dabney, "The History of Schools for Negroes in the District of Columbia, 1807-1947" (Ph.D. diss., Catholic University of America, 1949).

<sup>5</sup> See, for instance, V. P. Franklin, *The Education of Black Philadelphia: The Social and Educational History of a Minority Community, 1900-1950* (Philadelphia: University of

beyond campaigns for racial integration and a focus on individual schools to trace the process of black women's diverse movements for educational reform across the city. Rather than simply documenting African Americans' activism for justice in the school system, this chapter seeks to understand the motivations that undergirded this activism, examining how black women's life experiences animated their campaigns for educational justice.

### **African Americans and the Washington, D.C. Public Schools**

By the 1920s, African American Washingtonians had debated the politics of their public schools for generations and were seasoned reformers. The origins of the black public school system in Washington, D.C., dated back into the Civil War era. In 1862, Congress had allocated money to establish a system of public schools for African American children in Washington, D.C. The Interior Department appointed a group of black Washingtonians to serve on the Board and oversee the schools. For nearly forty years, black Washingtonians sat on their own School Board and wielded a significant amount of control over their school system. But in 1900, Congress reorganized the school system by appointing a white superintendent to be in charge of all of the schools and selected black and white Assistant Superintendents to oversee the black and white school systems, respectively. Along with this reorganization, Congress ordered the creation of an integrated School Board with seats for three black members. The judges of the District of Columbia appointed School Board

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Pennsylvania Press, 1979); Michael W. Homel, *Down From Equality: Black Chicagoans and the Public Schools, 1920-1941* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1984); and Davison M. Douglas, *Jim Crow Moves North: The Battles Over Northern School Integration* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

members for three-year terms. While African Americans in Washington, D.C., lost power in this reordering in 1900, they still enjoyed a fair amount of control over their school system with School Board seats and the Assistant Superintendent position.<sup>6</sup>

The Board of Commissioners required the School Board to allocate money to black and white schools commensurate with their demographic representation in Washington, D.C.<sup>7</sup> In 1925, for instance, the city had invested \$3,775,000 in the property of black schools and \$10,600,000 in the property of white schools. Annually, the city spent \$127 on its black students and \$147 on its white students. This financial disparity was significant and in no way were black schools comparable to white schools in Washington, D.C. They lacked, for instance, high schools in many neighborhoods where African Americans lived and adequate classroom space in many elementary and middle schools. But examined comparatively against the U.S. South, the racial divide between black and white schools was smaller. In many southern states, funding for white students often vastly exceeded funding for black students. For instance, schools in South Carolina in 1925 allotted \$5.90 for their black students and \$60.12 for their white students.<sup>8</sup> Washington's reputation for better schools was one of the many reasons that many black families chose to leave the South and migrate to Washington, D.C.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Dabney, "The History of Schools for Negroes in the District of Columbia," 160-220.

<sup>7</sup> Dabney, "The History of Schools for Negroes in the District of Columbia, 1807-1947," 221.

<sup>8</sup> For these and more figures, see Monroe N. Work, *Negro Year Book: An Annual Report of the Negro, 1925-1926* (Tuskegee: Negro Year Book Press, 1926), 293.

African Americans in Washington enjoyed more political representation in their educational system than their peers in the South. The fact that black schools had their own black superintendent meant that, in theory, this superintendent would be politically accessible and sensitive to the needs of African American students. In addition, black Washingtonians had three seats on the School Board and citizens could write to the Board of Commissioners if they were dissatisfied with a particular member and request that the person’s appointment not be re-instated.<sup>10</sup> Throughout the late 1910s and 1920s, many prominent African Americans served on the District of Columbia School Board, where they were able to weigh in on issues of funding, the curriculum, and the overall policies of the schools (see figure 13).

**Figure 13: African American School Board Members, 1920-1930**

Name	Years	Length
Mrs. Coralie Cook	1914-1926	12 years
Mr. Fountain Payton	1915-1921	6.9 years
Dr. J. Hayden Johnson	1916-1937	21 years
Mr. William L. Houston	1921-1924	3 years
Reverend Fraklyn F. Bennett	1924-1933	9 years
Mrs. Mary A. McNeil	1926-1938	12 years

**Source:** “Length of Service of Members of the Board of Education,” Vertical File, Directories, Board, Sumner Archives.

And in addition to these formal positions, African American Washingtonians could register complaints with the Board of Education. Within their neighborhood civic associations and educational organizations, black residents wrote to both the School Board and the Board of Commissioners, requesting the hiring and firing of teachers and staff, appealing for money for additions and new schools, and making

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<sup>9</sup> Jacqueline Moore, *Leading the Race: The Transformation of the Black Elite in the Nation’s Capital, 1880-1920* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1999), 188.

<sup>10</sup> Dabney, “The History of Schools for Negroes,” 201-202.

suggestions to improve the overall quality of the public schools. African Americans' peers in southern states lacked this political power of accountability. The historian Adam Fairclough notes that African Americans in the South in the early twentieth century might have been able to participate in school committees, but were largely banned from school boards and had no voice as to the distribution of funds.<sup>11</sup> Comparing the differences between black schools in D.C. and the U.S. South reveals that black Washingtonians enjoyed significantly more political representation, either through administrative positions, School Board appointments, or through the lobbying power of their local organizations. But despite these advantages, the overall quality of the public schools in Washington, D.C., very much depended upon geographic location in the city.

### **Origins of the Parents' League**

In 1918 an educational controversy erupted in the school system that engaged black women and men across the city and led to the formation of a large advocacy organization, the Parents' League. In 1916, the Board of Education of Washington, D.C., welcomed the Dutch anthropologist H. M. Bernelot Moens to Washington. Moens had requested to work with black schoolchildren for his anthropological study about racial equality. After he arrived, Moens petitioned the School Board to photograph the city's black schoolchildren, explaining that he needed these images for his study. In May 1917, the chair of the School Board, Dr. John Van Schaik, Jr., granted Moens permission to undertake his study. Moens rented an apartment in the

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<sup>11</sup> Adam Fairclough, *A Class of Their Own: Black Teachers in the Segregated South* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 102.

Burlington Apartment on Vermont Avenue in Northwest Washington. But when he asked a black child and her mother to visit him, the racial restrictions in the apartment building forced her to “ride in the freight elevator with the garbage cans” to see him. When the girl arrived at Moens’s apartment, she was “so indignant and disgusted that she told him she would not come back again.” The racial segregation of the city, then, prompted Moens to rent an apartment in a black neighborhood to ensure that he could conduct his study with African American schoolchildren. Charlotte Hunter, a teacher at Dunbar, rented Moens a room in her property at Eleventh Street in Northwest Washington, charging him thirty dollars a month. Hunter, who lived on P Street with her mother, visited the property every day for general upkeep. Hunter also located schoolchildren who could be used for Moens’s study and accompanied them to the Smithsonian Museum where Moens took photographs of them.<sup>12</sup>

In January 1917, the principals of Dunbar High School and Armstrong Manual and Training School wrote to Roscoe C. Bruce, the assistant superintendent in charge of black schools, expressing concern that Moens was taking inappropriate pictures of female students.<sup>13</sup> Bruce then contacted Superintendent Ernest L. Thurston, who launched an investigation of Moen’s behavior.<sup>14</sup> Ten months later on

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<sup>12</sup> See testimony of Charlotte Hunter in *Public School System of the District of Columbia: Hearings before the Select Committee of the United States Senate* 66th Cong., 2nd Sess., Pursuant to Senate Resolution 310: Raising a Select Committee of Five Senators to Investigate the Public School System of the District of Columbia (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1920), 1283.

<sup>13</sup> See G. C. Wilkinson, Washington, D.C., to Roscoe C. Bruce, Washington, D.C., 12 January 1917 and A. S. Newman, Washington, D.C., to Roscoe C. Bruce, Washington, D.C., 15 January 1917, both quoted in the *Public School System of the District of Columbia, Hearings before the Select Committee of the United States Senate*, 995 and 1005.

<sup>14</sup> Letter from the U.S. Attorney of the District of Columbia to S. M. Kendrick, secretary, NAACP Branch, April 1919, in Folder 558, Box 27, Archibald Grimké Papers,

October 25, 1918, federal authorities broke into Moens's rented room on Eleventh Street in Northwest Washington. Here federal authorities discovered a box of sixty-seven photographs; forty were "obscene prints and pictures" of female students at Armstrong and Dunbar High Schools posed in "obscene, impudent, and indecent postures." District of Columbia police subsequently arrested Moens and sent him to jail, where he awaited trial.<sup>15</sup>

The trial, *U.S. v. H. M. Benloet Moens*, began on Monday, March 24 and lasted for nearly a week. The attorneys for Moens summoned dozens of witnesses, ranging from anthropologists and ethnologists working at the Smithsonian to students from Armstrong and Dunbar. One pupil at Armstrong School, Ruth Barnaby, testified that Charlotte Hunter forced her to pose nude for Moens.<sup>16</sup> During the trial, Moens insisted that he took the photographs for "scientific, artistic, and anatomical studies."<sup>17</sup> It was unclear whether Charlotte Hunter was aware of the explicit nature of Moens's photographs. The jury found Moens guilty and sentenced him to prison for one year. The details of this scandal, including the photographs and the alleged cooperation between Moens and Hunter, inspired black citizens across the city to launch a protest movement to protect students.

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Moorland Spingarn Research Center, Manuscript Division, Founders Library, Howard University, Washington, D.C., (hereafter cited as AG-MSRC).

<sup>15</sup> See *U.S. v. Herman M. Bernelot Moens*, October 1918, criminal case file 34490, Supreme Court of the District of Columbia, Criminal Case 34, Box 28, RG 21, National Archives, Washington, D.C.

<sup>16</sup> "Moens is Found Guilty," *Washington Bee*, April 5, 1919, 1.

<sup>17</sup> Details of Moens's statements about the photographs can be found in *Herman M. Bernelot Moens, Appellant v. United States*, October 1919, page 2, Case 3306, Briefs Box 329, RG 276, National Archives, Washington, D.C.

On March 23, 1919, the day before the trial began, a group of black women and men held a meeting inside of the Metropolitan AME Church at 1518 M Street where they discussed corruption in the city's public schools. At this meeting, participants formed the Parents' League, an advocacy organization, and elected Frances Serrill Tanner, the wife of the pastor at Metropolitan AME, as president.<sup>18</sup> Other officers included lawyer Edmond Scott, treasurer Thomas Johnson, and Irene A. Jurix, a secretary at the Phyllis Wheatley YWCA.<sup>19</sup> One of the underlying questions about the Parents' League is how Frances Tanner, a woman who had lived in Washington, D.C., for fewer than two years, assumed this leadership position and went on to lead a mass movement of citizens across the city.

Frances Serrill had been born in Darby, Pennsylvania in 1876.<sup>20</sup> In 1896, she married Carleton Tanner, an AME minister from a prominent family.<sup>21</sup> Tanner's father, Benjamin Tanner, had served as a bishop in the AME Church. And Tanner's mother, Sarah E. Tanner, helped to create the AME Woman's Parent Mite Missionary Society in the nineteenth century. Around 1900, Frances S. Tanner gave birth to Sarah, the couple's only child. The Tanner family moved to Pittsburgh, where Carleton worked as the pastor of the Brown Chapel. In 1902, Carleton Tanner

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<sup>18</sup> The precise origins of the Parents' League can be found in the testimony of Anna Evans Murray, *Public School System of the District of Columbia*, 1214.

<sup>19</sup> Fourteenth Census of the United States, 1920, Washington City, Enumeration District 206, Sheet 8B.

<sup>20</sup> Fourteenth Census of the United States, 1920, Washington, D.C., Enumeration District 13, Page 11A.

<sup>21</sup> "Personals," *Christian Recorder*, September 10, 1896.

traveled to South Africa, where he served as a missionary for two years.<sup>22</sup> At some point between 1908 and 1910, Carleton Tanner became the minister at Big Bethel AME Church in Atlanta, the city's largest AME church with a membership of 2,800.<sup>23</sup> As the pastor at Big Bethel, Carleton Tanner became an important advocate for black workers in Atlanta. For instance, in 1910 he published a letter in the *Atlanta Constitution* about the unfairness of a law that required laundresses to be tested for tuberculosis, but did not test their employers. "Why confine this examination to the women who do the washing," Tanner asked, "and not examine those who have the washing done?"<sup>24</sup> Two years later he published another letter in the paper about the high, \$50 fee that peddlers had to pay to receive a license. Tanner pointed out that not only did this fee prevent many men and women from making an "honest, though meager living," but it also affected the consumers, who purchased goods from peddlers and were now forced "pay a higher price for their wood, charcoal, coal, and coke." Tanner argued that this matter interested him precisely because his "work" was "among that class of people who are affected by this new law."<sup>25</sup> In addition, Carleton Tanner worked with other ministers across the city to raise funds for a black YMCA, pressed for the construction of an institution to reform "wayward boys," and

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<sup>22</sup> For information on the Tanner family, see R. R. Wright, Jr., *The Bishops of the African Methodist Episcopal Church* (Nashville: A.M. E. Sunday School Union, 1963), 323-326 and William Seraile, *Fire in His Heart: Bishop Benjamin Tucker Tanner and the A.M.E. Church* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1998), 177-178.

<sup>23</sup> "A Distinguished Minister," *The Crisis* 14, no. 5 (September 1917): 258.

<sup>24</sup> "Washerwomen Question Still Being Discussed," *Atlanta Constitution*, March 25, 1910, 9. For an expanded discussion about the racial and gender implications of tuberculosis, see Tera W. Hunter, *To Joy My Freedom: Southern Black Women's Lives and Labors after the Civil War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 187-218.

<sup>25</sup> "Letters from People: The Peddler's License," *Atlanta Constitution* 1 February 1912, 1.

established an employment bureau and training program for domestic servants inside of his church.<sup>26</sup> Tanner's activities at Big Bethel suggest that he served as an important, political activist in voicing the concerns of his working-class congregants to the city of Atlanta. While Frances Tanner's name was never included in any of these different activities, it is possible that Carleton Tanner discussed these issues inside of his household and even strategized with his wife.

In 1917, the Tanner family moved to Washington, D.C., where Reverend Tanner assumed the pastorate at the Metropolitan AME Church.<sup>27</sup> This church had been founded in 1838 and was called the "National Cathedral of African Methodism in the Nation's Capital"; Frederick Douglass was a prominent member. Since its founding, many black Washingtonians had used this building to stage political rallies and meetings. The main church featured a central seating area filled with wooden pews as well as a large, elegant balcony that extended above on either side. During the 1920s, Metropolitan AME could accommodate 2,500 people, more than any other black church in Washington.<sup>28</sup>

As the pastor of Metropolitan, Carleton Tanner was immensely successful in raising money and increasing church memberships. A newspaper article noted that during Tanner's five year stint at Metropolitan, he burned the mortgage, "raised

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<sup>26</sup> See "Fund for Colored YMCA Growing," *Atlanta Constitution*, May 11, 1913, D2; "Special Reformatory Endorsed by Negroes," *Atlanta Constitution*, April 18, 1910, 2; and "Negro Labor Exchange Organized by Church," *Atlanta Constitution* December 8, 1910, 3.

<sup>27</sup> "Dr. C. M. Tanner Transferred," *Washington Bee*, May 12, 1917, 2.

<sup>28</sup> For information on Metropolitan A.M.E., see *Metropolitan A.M.E. Church: One Hundred Twenty-Fifth Anniversary Celebration*, MLCM, Reading Room, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. For the building's seating capacity, see *Metropolitan African Methodist Episcopal Church: A Journey Through History* (Washington, D.C.: Commission on Public Relations, undated), 6 (pamphlet in author's possession).

\$72,385, installed electric lights, the system heating plant, carpeted the main auditorium, painted the building inside and out, and added 832 new members.”<sup>29</sup> Tanner also developed a reputation for reaching out to his congregants in moments of distress. In October 1918, during a devastating flu epidemic in the city, Tanner took out an ad in the *Washington Post* where he offered to “visit all sick, if notified.”<sup>30</sup> And during Tanner’s tenure, black citizens across the city continued to use the building as a space to hold political meetings and activities. Shortly after Tanner became the pastor, Ida B. Wells spoke to a packed audience in Metropolitan about the riot in East St. Louis.<sup>31</sup> The activities at Metropolitan during Carleton’s stint at pastor indicate that many different black Washingtonians visited this church for worship, political activities, and social welfare. Carleton Tanner also delivered the benediction and the invocation of the 1918 commencement exercises at Dunbar High School.<sup>32</sup>

While Frances Tanner’s name never appeared beside any of these fundraising, outreach, or political activities at Metropolitan, it is quite possible that, as a minister’s wife, she was active in the day-to-day workings of her husband’s church.<sup>33</sup> But regardless of her level of involvement, Frances Tanner’s location inside of the bustling Metropolitan church and parsonage would have put her in contact with as

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<sup>29</sup> “Ebenezer Church Gets New Pastor,” *Baltimore Afro-American*, May 5, 1922, 12.

<sup>30</sup> “Methodist Episcopal,” *Washington Post*, October 26, 1918, 3.

<sup>31</sup> “Mrs. Ida Wells Barnett,” *Washington Bee*, September 15, 1917, 5.

<sup>32</sup> “Exercises at Dunbar High,” *Washington Post*, June 18, 1918, 7.

<sup>33</sup> The only evidence of Frances Tanner’s church activities that I have been able to locate was that in 1923, she delivered the welcome address at a fundraising rally at Bethel Church in Chicago, where her husband was pastor. See, “Bethel Women Win,” *Chicago Defender*, September 1, 1923, 5.

many as 3,000 church members each week, as well as the women and men who visited the building to attend mass meetings and rallies.<sup>34</sup> And her marriage to Carleton Tanner might have connected her to other ministers throughout the city as well as their wives. The Tanner's daughter, Sarah, was seventeen year old when the family moved to Washington. She might have made friends with high school students, thereby connecting her mother to other parents of school-age children. All of these circumstances help to suggest how Frances Tanner, a woman who had resided in Washington, D.C., for only two years, could organize a mass movement of citizens across the city.

One week after the Moens trial ended and he was sentenced to prison, the Parents' League held another meeting. Five hundred concerned citizens gathered inside of the Metropolitan AME Church, where they voted that Roscoe C. Bruce should be "dismissed."<sup>35</sup> It was not surprising that public anger about the school system included a critique of the Bruce administration; frustrations with his administration were issues of long-standing concern to black citizens of Washington, D.C.

In 1907, the D.C. School Board appointed Roscoe C. Bruce to become the Assistant Superintendent of the black schools, the second person to hold this position. Bruce, the son of famed Mississippi Senator Blanche K. Bruce, had been born in

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<sup>34</sup> "Their Silver Anniversary: A Great Social Event," *Washington Bee*, January 13, 1917, 1.

<sup>35</sup> "Mass Meetings Held Under the Auspices of the Parent's League," Vertical File: "Investigation of the Activities of the D.C. Public Schools—Roscoe C. Bruce," Charles Sumner School Archive of the Washington, D.C. Public School System, Washington, D.C., (hereafter cited as Sumner).

Washington, D.C., attended M Street High School, studied at Exeter Academy in New Hampshire, and graduated from Harvard University. Between 1901 and 1906, Roscoe Bruce worked with Booker T. Washington at Tuskegee, until his appointment in Washington. Bruce's arrival in Washington, D.C. and administrative position coincided with waves of skepticism and distrust in the black community. Having just lost power to exercise direct control over their school system only a year earlier, African Americans articulated disappointment that their new school Superintendent had just trained at Tuskegee. Many white members of the Board favored industrial education for African Americans and Bruce's appointment only exacerbated concerns.<sup>36</sup>

From the outset, teachers, parents, and School Board administrators expressed skepticism about his appointment. In 1909 a group of black parents circulated a petition calling for his resignation.<sup>37</sup> And six years into his administration, three black members of the school board, including Robert R. Horner, the Reverend William V. Tunnell, and Caroline Wilder Harris, voted against their white counterparts to terminate Bruce's appointment, citing charges of "unlawful promotions and demotions."<sup>38</sup> One of those demotions was his termination of W. Bruce Evans as the principal of Armstrong Manual and Training School. Evans's brother-in-law, Daniel Murray, worked as an assistant in the Library of Congress and

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<sup>36</sup> "Roscoe," *Washington Bee*, September 15, 1906, 4. For a detailed discussion about concerns with the Bruce administration, see Moore, *Leading the Race*, 95-107.

<sup>37</sup> Another summary of frustrations with the Bruce administration can be found in William B. Gatewood, *Aristocrats of Color: The Black Elite, 1880-1920* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990), 337-339.

<sup>38</sup> "Roscoe Conkling Bruce Vindicated," *Baltimore Afro-American*, March 23, 1912, 1.

sued the School Board to have him reinstated. That same year, the *Washington Bee* termed Bruce the “most despised man in the city.”<sup>39</sup> Frustrations with Bruce in 1919, then, can be contextualized by pointing to a twelve-year history of unpopularity among many African Americans in Washington, D.C. And discontent with Bruce also reflected broader struggles for black control and autonomy over the school system.

### **“Every Church and Denomination Will Speak”: Organizing and Activism in the Parents’ League**

Between 1919 and 1921, leaders in the Parents’ League organized one of the largest mass movements in black Washington. The evidence suggests that more black women and men participated in activities of the Parents’ League than any other political movement in the city during the 1920s. The Parents’ League held meetings in dozens of churches across the city that drew thousands of black Washingtonians, circulated a petition, picketed meetings of the School Board, forced the Board of Education to launch an internal investigation, and ultimately, testified before Congress about corruption in the public schools.

The Parents’ League enlisted the support of ministers across the city. The Executive Board contained many ministers, including Carleton Tanner from Metropolitan AME, the Reverend J. Milton Waldron, the pastor of Shiloh Baptist Church, the Reverend J. H. Callis, pastor at Metropolitan AMEZ Church, the Reverend James L. Pinn from First Baptist in Georgetown, and the Reverend William

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<sup>39</sup> “Again Stricken,” *Washington Bee*, July 31, 1915, 4.

D. Jarvis from New Bethel Baptist Church.<sup>40</sup> Judge Robert R. Horner, who had previously voted to oust Bruce from the school system, joined the Executive Board, as well. Having the support of ministers from different denominations, including AME, AMEZ, and Baptist, meant that the Parents' League could use these different churches to hold their meetings as well as circulate information about the organization to communities of black citizens across the city.

From the outset, the Parents' League relied heavily on black churches across the city, using them in many different capacities. Churches provided meeting spaces that could accommodate large groups of citizens. Between March and August 1919, activists in the Parents' League staged weekly meetings in churches across the city, which drew crowds ranging from several hundred to several thousand people. The first couple of meetings occurred in Metropolitan AME. This was not at all surprising since, as the wife of Carleton Tanner, Frances Tanner had access to both the space of the church. She also established the headquarters for the Parents' League at the church's parsonage, located at 1444 Q Street in Northwest Washington. But by the middle of March, activists held meeting in other churches in Northwest, including John Wesley AMEZ and Shiloh Baptist. These meetings drew large crowds; during the week of April 19, a newspaper article estimated that close to 15,000 citizens gathered inside of the John Wesley AMEZ Church to strategize about the Moens case.<sup>41</sup> And by the end of April, these meetings spread to other parts of the city. In Northwest, citizens gathered in John Wesley AMEZ Church. In Southeast, black

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<sup>40</sup> For a list of the Executive Board, see Frances Tanner, Washington, D.C., to Frank Ballou, September 1, 1920, Vertical File: Parents' League, Sumner.

<sup>41</sup> "Fifteen Thousand Assemble," *Washington Bee*, April 19, 1919, 1.

Washingtonians gathered at the CME Church, where the Barry Farms Citizens' Association typically met. And in Hillside in Southeast, citizens met at the Non-Sectarian Home.<sup>42</sup> Activists also used businesses for meeting spaces. Managers of six movie theaters across the city, including the Blue Mouse, Dudley, Foraker, Hiawatha, Howard Theater, Jewel, and Mid City Theater, donated their spaces for public meetings.<sup>43</sup>

School Board officials estimated that 17,650 Washington citizens attended twelve mass meetings under the auspices of the Parents' League between March and April 1919.<sup>44</sup> These mass meetings offer an important lens to consider the collective, political behaviors of participants. The fact that thousands of citizens participated suggests the strength of black organizing culture in Washington. Although the identities of attendees are largely unknown, bits of newspaper articles can offer clues about the palpable, political character of these meetings. For instance, in May 1919, newspapers estimated that 1,800 black citizens attended a meeting at the Nineteenth Street Baptist Church. Following speeches by a number of leaders, including Frances Tanner, Carleton Tanner, and Martha Waldron, the wife of J. Milton Waldron, the pastor at Shiloh Baptist, members in the pews participated in a vote to see who was in favor of Bruce's dismissal. The *Washington Bee* noted that, "the entire house of

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<sup>42</sup> "Hundreds Brave Storm: The Board of Education Must Act," *Washington Bee*, May 24, 1919, 1.

<sup>43</sup> Untitled and undated flier from Vertical File: "Investigation of the Activities of the D.C. Public Schools – Roscoe Bruce and Charlotte Hunter," Sumner.

<sup>44</sup> "Mass Meetings under the Auspices of the Parent's League," in Vertical File: "Investigation of the Activities of the D.C. Public Schools – Roscoe Bruce and Charlotte Hunter," Sumner.

1,800 people stood. There was no dissenting vote”<sup>45</sup> Other times, articles underscored the overflowing crowds that filled churches across the city, pointing to the large numbers of people as a way to measure collective sentiment. An article from the *Washington Bee* from mid-April covered a Parents’ League meeting where a reported crowd of 15,000 citizens filled every available space in Metropolitan AME. “If there is any doubt about the way the citizens of Washington feel regarding developments in the Moens case,” the article reported, “it was all banished last Tuesday evening, when both the main auditorium, the large lecture room of the church, and both side entrances were stagnated by a mass of people—not less than fifteen thousand—to register their protest against the colored school system.” When Roscoe Bruce entered the church, “hissers came thick and fast from all parts of the house.”<sup>46</sup>

Details about citizens’ political behavior in these meetings illuminate the collective nature of participation. In gazing across the sea of church pews to see hundreds of other faces, black citizens could feel a sense of legitimacy in their collective, political activism. Participating in efforts to “hiss” Bruce signaled his widespread dislike. And in standing up to vote with fellow meeting participants, citizens could feel an important sense of solidarity in the righteousness of their cause. It is perhaps not surprising that these political meetings occurred in churches because this balance between the individual and the collective mirrored the practices of many African American church services. Just as large numbers of African American

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<sup>45</sup> “To Appeal to Congress,” *Washington Bee*, May 17, 1919, 1.

<sup>46</sup> “15,000 Assemble,” *Washington Bee*, April 19, 1919, 1.

Washingtonians gathered in churches each Sunday to recite prayers, listen to sermons, sing songs, hear testimonials, and cast votes, these political meetings of the Parents' League reflected characteristics of these weekly religious rituals. Religious scholars C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya contend that black politics was deeply attached to the rituals of church services. The behaviors of audience members during political events, such as rallies or mass meetings, mirrored the "style of response found among black church congregations."<sup>47</sup> Churches were spaces where black women practiced skills of fundraising, mass mobilization, and community building. But the ceremonial, ritualistic, and musical aspects of church services also helped to instill in participants modes of political behavior and expression, which they subsequently transported into other political movements. These examples from mass meetings, then, demonstrate the ways that the Parents' League was deeply attached to the political culture rooted churches and strategically tapped into black Washingtonians' collective behaviors to press for reform in matters of educational justice.

In addition to offering meeting spaces, leadership, and models of collective participation, churches also figured prominently in shaping the ways that activists understood their political power. For instance, at one meeting of the Parents' League in April, Frances Tanner threatened that, "[i]f the Board of Education doesn't act, five

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<sup>47</sup> Charles Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African American Experience* 13th ed. (Durham: Duke University Press, 1990), 234. My thinking on this issue has also been influenced by reading Lawrence Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977); Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993); Hunter, *To Joy My Freedom*; and Bettye Collier-Thomas, *Jesus, Jobs, and Justice: African American Women and Religion* (New York: Random House, 2011).

thousand colored citizens will storm Congress. Every church and every denomination will speak.” Tanner’s political language reflected the reality that African Americans were using churches as their spaces for mobilization. The fact that black Washingtonians maintained 150 churches signaled their internal strength as a community. And Tanner’s twenty-three year marriage to Carleton Tanner and experiences as a minister’s wife in Pittsburgh, Atlanta, and now, Washington, D.C., had taught her important lessons about the ways that African Americans could use churches as vehicles to press for political reforms.

And Frances Tanner, like many activists in the city, also strategically drew on her location in Washington, D.C., by threatening to “storm Congress.” This political language suggested the ways that activists acknowledged their close proximity to the federal government. And in the Parents’ League mass meetings, like many different episodes in educational reform, Tanner straddled different levels of politics by suggesting that she would bring a local issue in the Washington public schools to a national body of the U.S. Congress.

The Parents’ League recruited prominent Washingtonians to endorse their cause by serving as speakers at their mass meetings. W. Calvin Chase, the editor of the *Washington Bee*, delivered addresses at many different meetings across the city. The fact that Chase was so involved with the Parents’ League resulted in front-page coverage of these meetings in the *Washington Bee* for several weeks, thereby informing the black community about the day-to-day activities of this movement. Nannie Helen Burroughs, the president of the National Training School (NTS), also spoke at many meetings. Burroughs’s broad networks among Baptist and National

Association of Colored Women (NACW) women meant that she could disseminate information to large groups of people. She often brought students to the meetings. For instance, at one meeting in April 1919, twelve students from the NTS “electrified” the audience by singing the song, “We Fight Everybody’s Battles But Our Own.”<sup>48</sup> Frances Tanner not only gathered important citizens to serve on the Board of the Parents’ League, but she also selected influential speakers to support her cause.

The Parents’ League also enlisted the support of different organizations across the city to endorse their movement. By the end of May, a diverse assortment of organizations, churches, and Masonic lodges, representing different parts of the city, had voiced their support for the Parents’ League. All of these bodies called for the resignation of Roscoe Bruce (see figure 14).

**Figure 14: Organizations, Churches, and Institutions Opposed to Bruce**

<b>Organization</b>	<b>Quadrant</b>
Young Ladies' Protective Association	NW
Columbia Aid Association	NW
North East Boundary Citizens' Association	NE
Barry Farms Citizens' Association	SE
Phyllis Wheatley YWCA	NW
Garfield Heights Home School Association	SE
Hillsdale Citizens' Association	SE
Central Northwest Citizens' Association	NW
Eagle Crusaders: Vermont Avenue Baptist Church	NW
Julia McHenry Auxiliary Garrison, Number 2	NW
Peoples' Seventh Day Adventist Church	NW
Rising Son Lodge, No. 1356	NW
Public Interest Citizens' Association of East Washington	NE
Civic Alliance	NW

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<sup>48</sup> “West Washington Ablaze: Two Meetings Held in two churches,” *Washington Bee*, April 26, 1919, 1.

As this table illustrates, a large number of churches, fraternal orders, and neighborhood civic groups were opposed to Bruce and supported the Parents' League, representing different neighborhoods across the city.

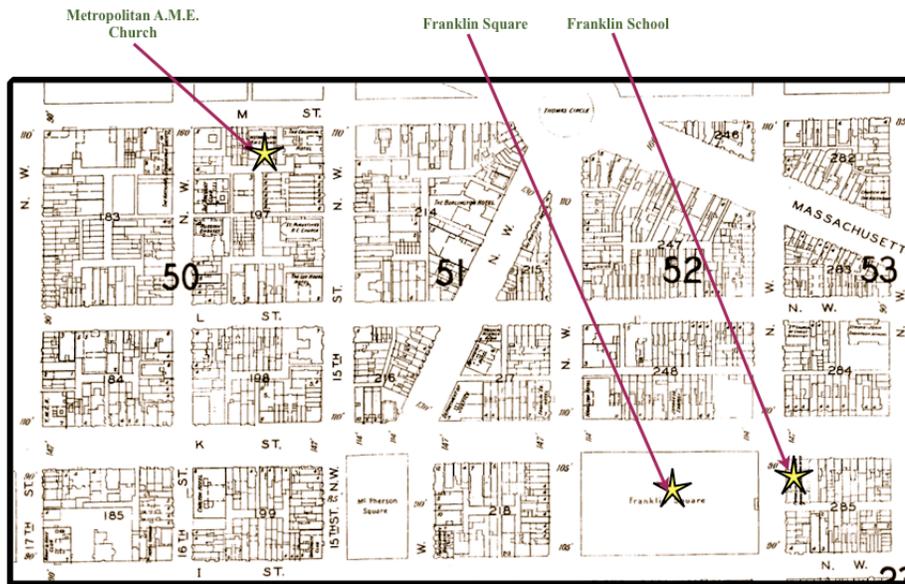
By the first week of May, the Parents' League strategized about ways to increase the visibility of their protests. Leaders and members selected three tactics, including attendance at School Board meetings, pickets outside of the Franklin School where Board of Education administrators worked, and a petition.<sup>49</sup> Members of the Parents' League first decided to picket the Franklin School. This building was a site laced with histories of African American activism around educational politics. In 1869, minister Sella Martin insisted that his six-year old daughter, Josie, should be permitted to attend the white Franklin School since it was located closer to their house than the local black school. One African American member of the School Board, George Vashon, gave Josie Martin a "ticket" to attend. But when Josie Martin tried to attend classes on the first day, she was not permitted. Ultimately the city government ruled that because Martin had a ticket, the school was legally obligated to allow her to attend. But Josie Martin's school attendance did not pave the way for integration of the school system.<sup>50</sup> Administrators in the Board of Education had offices in this school in the 1910s. And the School Board held their meetings as well. But the "Franklin School" also meant Franklin Square, a prominent civic space in downtown Washington, flanked between Massachusetts Avenue and McPherson Square and located very close to the White House (see figure 15).

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<sup>49</sup> "Pickett Franklin School," *Washington Bee*, May 3, 1919, 1.

<sup>50</sup> For information on the Josie Martin case, see Kate Masur, *An Example for All the Land: Emancipation and the Struggle over Equality in Washington, D.C.* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 168-171.

**Figure 15: Franklin Square, Franklin School, and Metropolitan AME Church**



**Source:** *Sanborn Maps*, Washington, D.C., 1927-1928, Vol. 1, Sheet 0b.

As this map illustrates, Franklin Square occupied a prominent location in downtown Washington. And, coincidentally, it was located only four blocks away from the Metropolitan AME Church, which was very convenient for Frances Tanner.

Beginning in the middle of May, a group of citizens in the Parents' League began to picket Franklin Square. For fifteen months, women, a few men, and some children picketed the afternoon meetings of the School Board, which occurred once a month at the Franklin School. They also staged demonstrations twice a day between seven and ten in the morning and from three until six in the afternoon, forcing Roscoe Bruce to exit the building “by the back way.”<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> “Still Determined to Get Bruce,” *Baltimore Afro-American*, June 20, 1919, A6.

Photographs of protestors appeared in both the *Washington Bee* as well as the *Baltimore Afro-American* (see figure 16). This photograph illustrates the prominence of women picketers and the large size of their signs. This same photograph also appeared in the *Baltimore Afro-American*, listing “Mrs. Carl M. Tanner” in the center.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> “Parents’ League Pickets Washington Board,” *Baltimore Afro-American*, July 4, 1919, A1.

**Figure 16: Photograph of Protestors, June 1919**



**Source:** *Washington Bee* June 21, 1919, 1. Frances Tanner is pictured in the center.

In this photograph, a couple details distinguish Frances Tanner from the rest of the picketers. First, she is standing in front of all of the other demonstrators, and rather than raising her sign in the air, Frances Tanner confidently grips it from the bottom. This positioning allows her body to be parallel with the sign itself. And while all of the other signs contained messages urging school reform and representing their organization, such as “the Future of Our Children is at Stake,” “We Are Going to Congress,” and “The Parents’ League,” Frances Tanner’s sign read “2 Parents Moved Moens, How Come 20,000 Parents Can’t Remove Bruce.” Tanner’s message signaled the numerical power of the Parents’ League. As the president of this organization, Tanner deliberately constructed herself as the political leader of this movement. And she positioned herself in this photograph to illustrate her leadership.

In standing in front of the Franklin School, the Parents' League faced Franklin Square, thereby making their activism visible not only to administrators and School Board members, but also, black and white citizens across Washington, D.C. And the close proximity between Franklin Square and the White House signaled that perhaps federal officials also witnessed this activism.

In addition to picketing, members of the Parents' League also began to attend School Board meetings. The meeting minutes for May 7, for instance, note the presence of a "large delegation of citizens." At this meeting, the Parents' League presented the Board of Education with a "monster" petition; the *Washington Bee* estimated that 11,000 citizens had signed it.<sup>53</sup> The following month in June, the meeting minutes noted that another "large company" had assembled in the Board Room and that the Board of Education would be "uninfluenced by any public clamor."<sup>54</sup> These brief remarks about the size of the crowds indicate the ways that members of the Parents' League used their physical presence—both in front of the Franklin School and inside of it—to press for reform.

The Parents' League petition stated that, "Roscoe C. Bruce has, by his many acts of omission and commission, forfeited the confidence and lost the respect of the parents of the children in the Public Schools of the District of Columbia." Members of the Parents' League called for the "immediate removal for the good of the service."<sup>55</sup> While the entire petition could not be located, fragments of the document

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<sup>53</sup> Minutes of the Board of Education, May 7, 1919, page 4, Sumner; "Eleven Thousand Sign Monster Petition," *Washington Bee*, May 10, 1919, 1.

<sup>54</sup> Minutes of the Board of Education, June 11, 1919, page 4, Sumner.

<sup>55</sup> "How to Organize A Local Parents' League," *Washington Bee*, May 17, 1919, 4.

containing 239 names and street addresses can offer some preliminary clues about the process by which citizens signed as well as the demographics of Parents' League supporters.

The fact that the Parents' League gathered 11,000 signatures in such a short period of time underscores the high degree of organization in the black community. In April 1919 at a Parents' League meeting at John Wesley AMEZ Church, leaders had decided that, "every section of this city will be organized, local clubs are being organized, and a monster petition is being signed to memorialize Congress."<sup>56</sup> While the process by which people signed this petition remains somewhat unclear, fragments of this document can help to illuminate some possible theories.

The petition suggests that people signed in the streets of their neighborhoods, at their jobs, and, perhaps, at meetings of the Parents' League. For instance, some of the pages of the petition list the names and addresses of women and men who lived on streets within the same neighborhood (see figure 17). Within LeDroit Park, a neighborhood near Howard University in Northwest Washington, on the 300 block of Elm Street, Thos Butler, a laborer at the Bureau of Printing and Engraving, signed as did his neighbor who lived across the street, Alice Chells, who worked as a chambermaid in a hotel.<sup>57</sup> Also on the 300 block of Elm Street, Nelson G. Emonds, a porter in a store, signed along with his next-door-neighborhood, Emma Bridgeford,

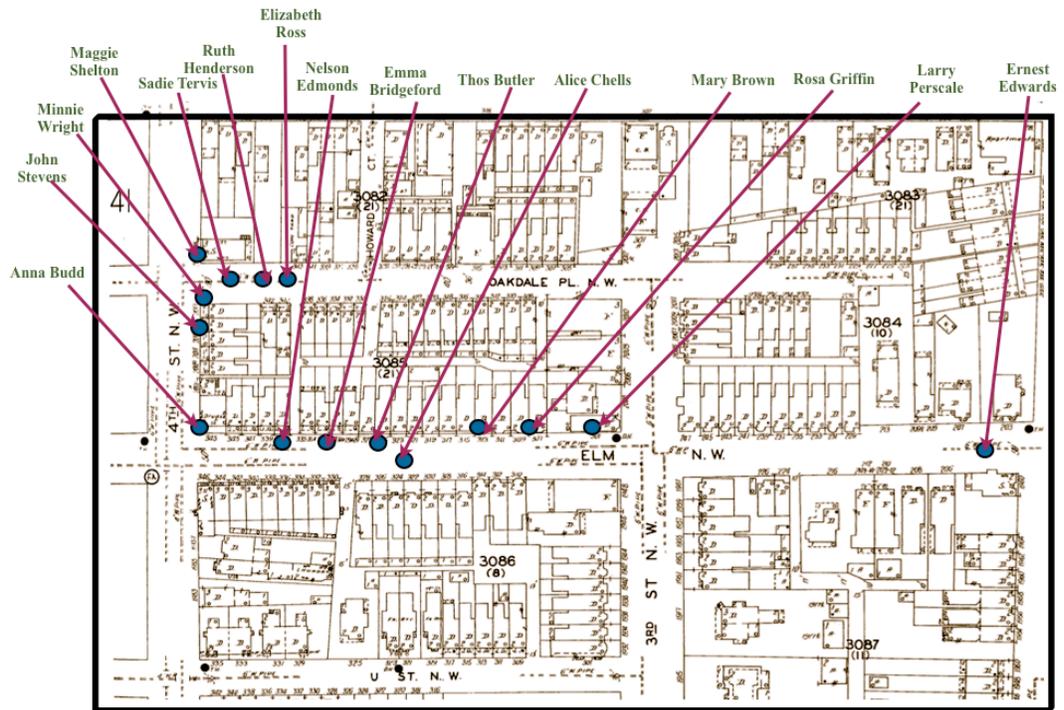
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<sup>56</sup> "15,000 Assemble," *Washington Bee*, April 19, 1919, 1.

<sup>57</sup> For Thos Butler in the census, see Fourteenth Census of the United States, Washington City, Enumeration District 208, Sheet 6A and for Alice Chells in the census, see Fourteenth Census of the United States, Washington City, Enumeration District 207, Sheet 3B.

who labored as a charwoman for the federal government.<sup>58</sup> The fact that women and men who all lived within walking distance of each other on Elm Street, Third Street, Fourth Street, and Oakdale Place appeared on the same page of the petition suggests that either a canvasser knocked on doors in this neighborhood or one resident asked his or her neighbors to sign.

**Figure 17: Petition Signers in LeDroit Park, Northwest Washington**



Source: *Sanborn Maps*, 3, 1927-1928, Sheet 342.

These signers were working-class residents, laboring at jobs such as a chambermaid, a porter, a hairdresser, a charwoman, a stenographer, a laborer, and several housewives. This example illustrates ways that women and men working in

<sup>58</sup> For Nelson Edmonds and Emma Bridgeford in the census, see Fourteenth Census of the United States, Washington City, 1920, Enumeration District 207, Sheet 4A.

service, clerical, and skilled professions used their neighborhood streets as their places of political activism.

But another page of the petition, however, listed the names of twenty-three men who lived on diverse streets in different neighborhoods across the city. Among the fourteen men located in the census and city directory, all worked as skilled or unskilled laborers for the federal government (see figure 18). Many worked in the Government Printing Office (GPO).

**Figure 18: List of Men on Page 11**

Page	Title	First	Last	#	Street	Quadrant	Occupation	Source
11	Mr.	Elisha	Carey	40	N Street	NW	Laborer: Gov	City Directory
11	Mr.	Aaron	Garner	403	T Street 3rd	NW	Laborer: GPO	City Directory
11	Mr.	William	Garnett	815	Street Sumner	SW	Labor: Gov	Census
11	Mr.	George	Henson	59	Road	SE	Laborer: GPO	Census
11	Mr.	William	Johnson	302	E Street	SW	Labor: Gov	Census
11	Mr.	Wesley	Neal	24	I Street 28th	SW	Labor: Gov Skilled	Census
11	Mr.	Louis	Poindexter	1421	Street First	NW	Labor: Gov Skilled	Census City
11	Mr.	James	Roy	501	Street 56th	SW	Labor: Gov	Directory
11	Mr.	Levi	Scott	333	Street Virginia	NE	Driver: Gov Foreman:	Census
11	Mr.	Frank	Sellman	102	Avenue Bowen	SW	Laborer: GPO	Census City
11	Mr.	Lewis	Taylor		Avenue	SE	Laborer: GPO	City Directory
11	Mr.	Charles	Thomas	1337	C Street	NW	Laborer: GPO	City Directory
11	Mr.	Eli	Whitley	1013	Q Street	NW	Labor: Gov Operator	Census City
11	Mr.	Sylvester	William	635	Dahlia	NW	Laborer: Gov	City Directory

The concentration of men from a single occupation at what was probably a single worksite suggests that someone circulated a petition and these men used their workplace to participate in political activism. The Government Printing Office

employed large numbers of African Americans, making it an ideal space to circulate a petition.<sup>59</sup>

Households also functioned as important spaces for the circulation of political knowledge. For instance, husbands and wives who lived in the same house sometimes signed the petition together. Dressmaker Ida B. Honesty signed, as well as her husband, postal clerk John Honesty.<sup>60</sup> Laborer Council D. Nixon signed, along with his wife, housewife Fannie Nixon.<sup>61</sup> Fifty-five year old laborer George Watson signed, along with his wife, cook Eliza Watson and their son and daughter-and-law, laborer John Watson and maid Ella Watson.<sup>62</sup> And sixty-three year old laborer at the Bureau of Printing and Engraving Jack Brown signed, as did his wife, fifty-four year old laundress Lillie Brown. The Reverend William Ephraim, who was forty-eight years old, signed the petition, as did his wife, forty-two year old cleaner, Annie Ephraim.<sup>63</sup>

Other pages of the document contained the names of women and men who lived in different neighborhoods and labored at different types of jobs, indicating that perhaps citizens signed the petition at the market, on the streetcar, at church, or at an

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<sup>59</sup> Eric S. Yellin, "In the Nation's Service: Racism and Federal Employees in Woodrow Wilson's Washington" (Ph.D. diss., Princeton University, 2007).

<sup>60</sup> In the 1920 census, Ida Honesty's husband's name is listed as Walter. However, the matching street address and occupation all lead me to believe that he was known as John Honesty. See Fourteenth Census of the United States, Washington City, Enumeration District 40, Sheet 13A.

<sup>61</sup> Fourteenth Census of the United States, Washington City, Enumeration District 252, Sheet 11B.

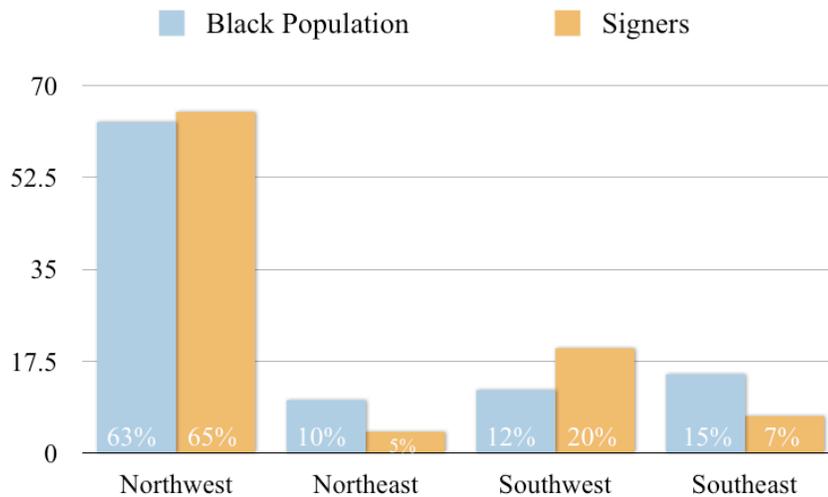
<sup>62</sup> Fourteenth Census of the United States, Washington City, Enumeration District 60, Sheet 2B.

<sup>63</sup> Fourteenth Census of the United States, Washington City, Enumeration District 191, Sheet 12B.

organizational meeting. The recovered fragments of this petition, then, suggest the diversity of spaces—streets, worksites, the press, and churches—where black Washingtonians engaged in political activism.

Fragments of this petition also allow some lens into the demographics of those who advocated for Bruce’s firing. Of the 239 signers, 54 percent were women and 41 percent were men.<sup>64</sup> The majority of signers, 65 percent, lived in Northwest, while 20 percent lived in Southwest, 7 percent lived in Southeast, and 4 percent lived in Northeast (see figure 19).

**Figure 19: Geographic Distribution of Signers**



As this graph illustrates, the petition signers represented different sections of the city and often matched the overall black population in these areas. The high percentage of signers from the Southwest section of the city illustrates that many citizens there called for Bruce’s removal.

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<sup>64</sup> These percentages do not add up to 100 because I am unable to identify five percent of the signers by sex and three percent by geographic quadrant.

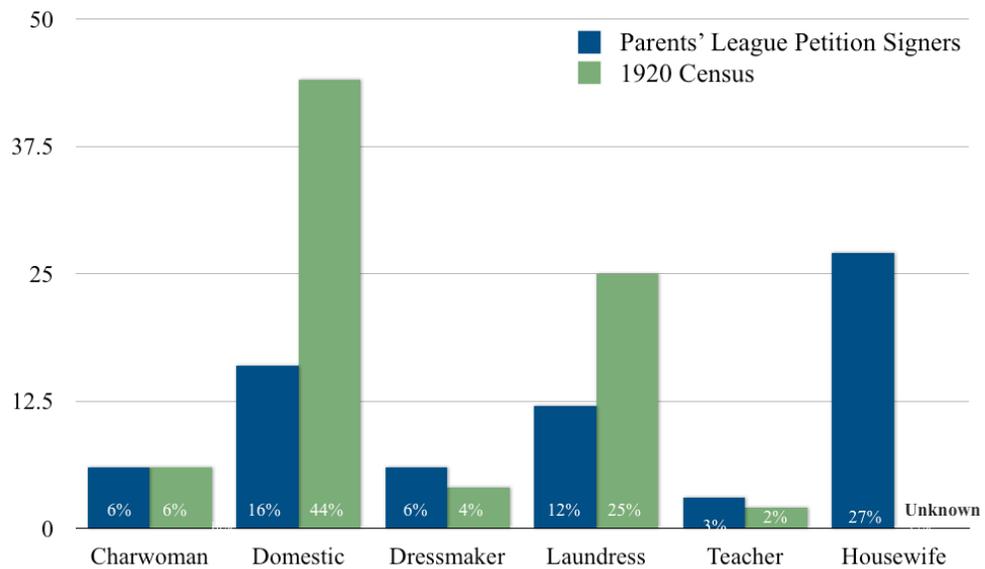
This petition also lends insight into the constituencies that endorsed the Parents' League's message. Nineteen percent of women signatories, and 13 percent of men signatories, were single adults with no children living in their houses. By widening the bounds of their political community to include all African Americans, and not only parents, the Parent's League sent a clear message that children, schools, and the ousting of Bruce were issues that concerned all black Washingtonians.

The fragments of this petition also suggest that signers were mostly working-class women and men in Washington, D.C. Eighty-five percent of signers rented their houses, 7 percent were boarders or roomers in other houses, and 8 percent owned their own houses. Black women who signed the petition labored at many different kinds of jobs, including domestic service, laundry work, and dressmaking (see figure 20). The vast majority were housewives. Only three teachers signed the petition.<sup>65</sup>

**Figure 20: Black Women's Occupations in the Parents' League Petition and 1920 Census**

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<sup>65</sup> *Fourteenth Census of the United States: Population: Occupations. Males and Females in Selected Occupations* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office (GPO), 1923), 897-900.



The data on men who signed the petition reveals significantly less variety. Seventy percent of men worked as laborers, 8 percent worked as servants, 7 percent worked as ministers, 6 percent worked as clerks, 5 percent worked as messengers, and 2 percent worked as expressmen and porters. It is not surprising that so many ministers signed since they composed an important part of the Parents' League, including J. Milton Waldron, the pastor at Shiloh. The laborers who signed worked at many different jobs sites, including the Government Printing Office, the Bureau of Printing and Engraving, and the Navy Yard.

Although this petition is only a small sampling, it can offer important, demographic insights into the coalition that called for Bruce's resignation. First, these names indicate that it was not an elite coalition that worked for Bruce's resignation. These signers were not doctors, lawyers, and teachers, but rather, government laborers, laundresses, and housewives. Although the leaders of the

Parent's League were married to ministers and other professionals, their organizational coalition was not as elite. The vast majority of these signers rented, and did not own, their houses. Next, African Americans across the city, including parents, grandparents, single people, and childless couples, expressed heightened levels of dismay with Bruce and his administration. Finally, these signers specifically, and the petition more broadly, illustrate that opposition to Bruce existed across the city.

All of these different protest instruments, including mass meetings, the petition, and the public demonstrations, paid off. On June 30, 1919, the School Board conducted an internal investigation of Bruce. They arranged for a series of nine sessions of interviews, gathering a total of 739 pages of testimony. Their majority report blamed Charlotte Hunter. As the report noted, “[a] single teacher had been guilty of the gravest indiscretion in permitting herself to become interested in the alleged scientific work of Moens. Doubtless she aided him in ways to some extent unknown to school authorities.”<sup>66</sup> The Report dismissed the efforts of the Parents' League for a multitude of reasons. First, as they noted, the petition “carries just over 2,000 signatures.” Next, these signatures “may have been written by one and the same hand.” And finally, the chief reason to dismiss this activism was that “Nine-tenths of the signatures are those of women and girls.” Sexism was rampant throughout the report. The report defended Bruce, declaring that the most egregious errors had been committed not by Moens or Bruce, but by the Parents' Association,

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<sup>66</sup> Washington, D.C. Board of Education, “Majority Report,” Folder 90, Box 4, Roscoe Conkling Bruce Papers, Manuscript Division, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Founders Library, Howard University (hereafter cited as RCB-MSRC).

an organization that women operated. As the report noted, the Parents League had “encouraged popular gatherings and aroused these gatherings to some degree of fury against the authorities by voicing all sorts of rumors.” The Report conceded that “[w]hile justice may have been the object of some portion of the League, the methods adopted to reach that desirable end could never meet with the approval of respectable and law abiding citizens.”<sup>67</sup> Here they criticized the Parent’s League’s public demonstrations.

Because the School Board’s report did not call for Bruce’s resignation, black women and men in the Parent’s League continued their activism through meetings and public picketing. In April 1920, the Senate’s Committee on the District of Columbia convened a series of hearings on the state of schools in Washington, D.C, focusing in particular on the corruption that had accumulated under Bruce’s tenure. Members of the Parent’s League all testified to the incapacities of Roscoe Bruce. The Senate report concluded that Bruce had “lost the respect and confidence of the people.”<sup>68</sup>

In September 1920, School Superintendent Frank W. Ballou corresponded with the Parent’s League and he agreed to consider firing Bruce upon his return from vacation. He wrote to Frances S. Tanner, the head of the Parent’s League, thanking her for ending her picketing. The fact that Ballou expressed gratitude to the Parent’s League for stopping their picketing suggests that these protests were causing embarrassment for the School Board and Board of Education, who might have been

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<sup>67</sup> “Majority Report,” Folder 90, Box 4, RCB-MSRC.

<sup>68</sup> “The Washington Public School Situation: Extracts from the Hearing before the Senate Committee of the United States Senate (Resolution 310)—With Comments,” 8.

under pressure from congressional leaders. Tanner told Ballou that his “commendation of the Parent’s League for its failure to appear as pickets at Franklin School last Wednesday” was “a little premature.” She continued, noting that, “our absence was due to the promise you made to give us an answer upon your return from vacation.” Ballou had informed Tanner that he would give serious consideration to firing Bruce, but took no action. Since Tanner was upset that Bruce was still assistant superintendent, she informed Ballou that, “[w]e are now preparing banners appropriate to the new situation and will appear promptly at your next meeting of the board.”<sup>69</sup>

Although neither the Board of Education nor the Senate’s Committee on the District of Columbia recommended that Bruce be fired, he finally requested a “leave of absence” in May 1921, moving to West Virginia to teach in a rural school.<sup>70</sup> This move delighted Tanner, although she was adamant that the move should be more permanent. As she argued, “[w]e want Bruce removed from the system altogether. This is what we have contended for. If his leave of absence means that he is in reality leaving the schools, then we are satisfied. If it means his return at a later time, then we will renew our fight.”<sup>71</sup> After Bruce left the school system, members of the Parent’s League stopped their pickets at the Franklin School. But the organization continued to meet and advocate for resources for black schools.

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<sup>69</sup> F. S. Tanner, Washington, D.C., to Frank W. Ballou, Washington, D.C., 6 September 1920 in Vertical File: “Parent’s League,” Sumner.

<sup>70</sup> Letter from Roscoe C. Bruce, Washington, D.C., to the Superintendent of Public Schools, Washington, D.C., 18 May 1921 in Vertical File: “Official Reports of Roscoe C. Bruce,” Sumner.

<sup>71</sup> “Bruce Gives Up in Washington School Dispute,” *Chicago Defender*, May 28, 1921, 3.

The activities of the Parents' League helped to raise awareness about educational politics throughout the city. Through careful organizing in churches, mass meetings, the petition, pickets, and Congressional testimony, leaders and members worked very hard to fire Roscoe Bruce and they succeeded. But many members of the organization desired reforms that extended beyond the Bruce administration. Not only did African American Washingtonians desire more control over their school system, but they also wanted a more equitable distribution of resources for black students across the city. The vast majority of African Americans' educational activism during the 1920s was centered on securing more resources for local schools and students.

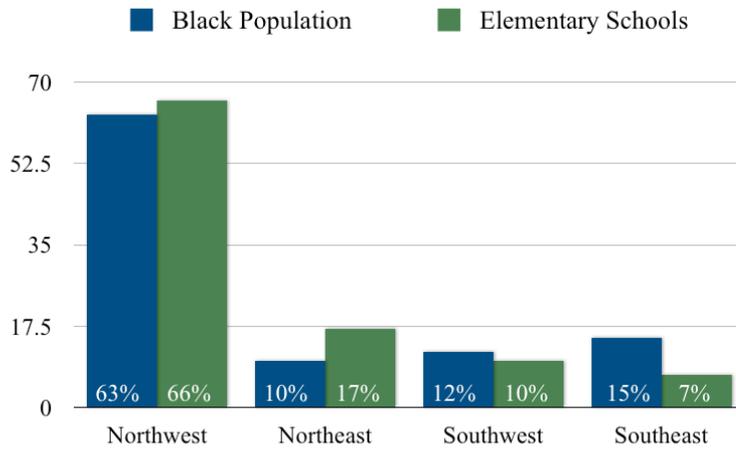
### **Washington, D.C. Schools and the Politics of Location**

During the 1920s, Washington's black citizens enjoyed access to forty-seven elementary, middle, and high schools, along with several nigh schools, normal schools, reform schools, and vocational schools, thereby offering myriad educational opportunities for black students in D.C. But while some of these schools, such as the prestigious Dunbar or M Street High School, ranked supreme in the nation, others were deeply inadequate and located in remote areas.<sup>72</sup> Black schools in D.C. composed the tenth, eleventh, twelfth, and thirteenth school districts. Schools for African American students were not always even distributed across the city. Black residents in Washington, D.C., lived in all four quadrants of the city, but the majority of schools were located in Northwest (see figure 21).

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<sup>72</sup> See, for instance, "Stranger Needs Compass to Find One City School," *Washington Star*, October 20, 1920, 1.

**Figure 21: African American Elementary Schools and Neighborhood Composition in the 1920s**



**Source:** *Boyd's Directory and Ready Reference* and *Fifteenth Census of the United States*

As this table illustrates, the number of elementary schools was not always proportionate to the black population. While the number of elementary schools in both Northwest and Northeast reflected African Americans' demographic representation, in both Southwest and Southeast, the percentage of residents outnumbered the percentage of elementary schools.

This disparity in school funding prompted African American citizens to band together within their neighborhood civic associations, parent-teacher organizations, and advocacy groups to press for better resources for their students. These civic meetings, which were almost always held in churches throughout the city, occurred monthly. The administration of each neighborhood civic association, composed of a president, vice-president, secretary, treasurer, often led meetings. During the 1920s, black women held few positions in administration of civic bodies, but frequently

worked with parent-teacher associations and advocacy organizations. It appears that black women attended neighborhood civic meetings and voted to press the School Board to allocate more resources for students. Living in a neighborhood where the elementary, middle, and high school facilities were in need or repair or located far away prompted black women and men to advocate for students.

The lack of elementary schools was especially stark in Southeast, which contained only four elementary schools, including Payne, Birney, Garfield, and Giddings. To ease classroom crowding, African American Washingtonians gathered in their civic associations to demand new buildings, or at the very least, the construction of additional classrooms. Sometimes, their advocacy resulted in reforms. For instance, the Board of Education allocated money for an eight-room addition to the Burrville School and it was completed in 1921.<sup>73</sup> Citizens also worked to ensure that their children could keep their schools. For instance, in October of 1922, the School Board proposed to turn the Bowen School, a black elementary school in Southwest, into a white elementary school. The Southwest Civic Association expressed their opposition to this proposal by holding a meeting and vowing to refuse to allow this to happen.<sup>74</sup>

In addition to concerns about overcrowding and the loss of schools, African American parents expressed concerns about their children's safety in school. In September 1920, the parents of children enrolled in the Deanwood Elementary School believed that it was dangerous for their children to attend school in the midst of construction, fearing injuries as students entered and exited the building. After they

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<sup>73</sup> "Colored Schools Packed to Limit," *Washington Post*, September 14, 1921, 2.

<sup>74</sup> "Locals, Society, Clubs," *Washington Tribune*, October 14, 1922, 5.

wrote letters to Bruce and submitted petitions to the School Board, parents took collective action by threatening to withdraw their children from the school. As Bruce wrote, representatives of the Deanwood Citizen's Association visited his office to "inform me that action had been taken by the Parents of children attending the Deanwood School, to withdraw them by way of protest against the building operations now in process at the school." In response to the prospect of widespread absences, Bruce "talked to the building inspector, he said that he would have immediate erected a covered way leading to the door on each side of the building in order to protect the children from falling pieces of wood."<sup>75</sup>

In addition to construction, parents, citizens, and School Board members also expressed concern about the dangers of location in the city. In 1929, the Board of Education allotted funds for a health school for black students. The original site on Bladensburg Road was problematic because white realtors protested the possibility of black people. When Board members proposed another site at Twenty-Fourth Street and Benning Road, the "colored members of the board" expressed their opposition to the project "for fear of malaria because of its nearness to the river."<sup>76</sup> The Board of Education subsequently found another location for the school. This episode indicates that black representation on the School Board mattered. In southern states, African American Washingtonians had few opportunities to serve on the School Board, which limited the ways that African Americans could articulate their opposition to unjust

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<sup>75</sup> Letter from Roscoe Conkling Bruce, Washington, D.C., to the parents of children attending the Deanwood School, Washington, D.C., 30 September 1920 in Folder 575, Box 28, AG-MSRC. See also, Minutes of the Board of Education of the District of Columbia, 15 September 1920, Volume 11, page 8, Sumner.

<sup>76</sup> "Education News," *Washington Tribune*, February 1, 1929, 8.

policies. The collective work of parents, citizens, and School Board members helped to ease crowding and ensure safety for students enrolled in elementary schools.

Beyond the level of elementary school, the unequal distribution of school was much starker. In 1920, African American students in Washington, D.C., had access to only one middle school, Shaw, which was located in Northwest Washington and housed in the former M Street high school building. One middle school for African American students living in different neighborhoods across the city posed burdens of classroom space, distance, and money. In September 1920, School Superintendent Frank Ballou warned only a “limited number of pupils” could be “admitted to the seventh grade of the junior high school.” Because of the restrictions in space, prospective students had to apply to Shaw for admission, presenting their “discharge cards and scholarship records.” If the number of applicants exceeded the space available, students would be chosen based upon “scholarship and record of deportment.”<sup>77</sup>

Shaw Junior High’s inconvenient location for students living in different neighborhoods across the city prompted many different civic associations to vow to fight for the construction of more schools. In Northeast, at a citizens’ association meeting for African Americans living in Deanwood, Glendale, and Lincoln Heights, someone “pointed out that a Junior High school was badly needed in the far northeast section and that something should be done to secure one.” Not only would this be more convenient, but it would save “save those parents the extra expense who are

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<sup>77</sup> “School Opening,” *Washington Bee*, September 18, 1920, 2.

forced to send their children to the city for that purpose.”<sup>78</sup> Neighboring communities concurred. In 1921, the Southwest Civic Association issued a resolution and sent it to the Board of Education, indicating the “need for a junior high school in the Southwest section of the city.”<sup>79</sup> Two years later, the Southwest Civic Association sharpened their tone by taking out an ad in the *Washington Tribune* inviting all citizens to join the fight. “Prepare yourself ask for a junior high for the Southwest,” the ad read, “through notices published and given out in various meetings hereafter. Shall we meet to get together?”<sup>80</sup> Citizens in these neighborhood associations were not the only ones who recognized this inequality. In 1922, Garnet C. Wilkinson, the Assistant Superintendent who was in charge of African American schools, addressed the federated body of citizens’ associations and pointed out that there was only “one junior high school for colored pupils.” He suggested that there should be “three, one in each section of the city.”<sup>81</sup> These pleas from Wilkinson and civic bodies finally met with a response. In September 1923, the Board of Education ordered that an abandoned school building in Southwest, Randall, be converted into a Junior High for African American students, located at 1st and I Streets.<sup>82</sup> The opening of Randall in September 1923 coincided with the death of James Ellis, who was the treasurer of the

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<sup>78</sup> “Glendale, Deanwood, and Lincoln Heights,” *Washington Bee*, October 1, 1921, 8.

<sup>79</sup> Minutes of the Board of Education of the District of Columbia, April 6, 1921, 2, vol. 11, Sumner.

<sup>80</sup> “Local News,” *Washington Tribune*, January 20, 1923, 3.

<sup>81</sup> “Adequate Schools Urged for Colored,” *Washington Post*, October 28, 1922, 2.

<sup>82</sup> “New Randall Junior off to a flying start,” *Washington Post*, September 23, 1923, 40.

Southwest Civic Association and devoted member of Zion Baptist Church. Ellis had “pleaded hard for a new junior high school which he lived to see open at the beginning of the school term.”<sup>83</sup>

But opening Randall did not solve all problems. The building was old, dilapidated, and small. By the end of the first school year at Randall, the Southwest Citizens’ Association petitioned the Board of Education for a “modern junior high school to replace the present Randall Junior High School, now housed in an unsuited and decrepit building.”<sup>84</sup> By 1927, the Board of Education responded. Not only did they construct a new building for Randall, but they also allocated funds for another African American Junior High, Hine located in Northwest. While attending Junior High School still posed a burden to children living in Southeast and Northeast, the collective labor of African Americans in their citizens’ associations helped to increase the number of schools from one to three in ten years.<sup>85</sup>

Like Junior High, high schools were also unevenly distributed across Washington, D.C. Dunbar High School, Armstrong Manual Training School, and Miner Normal School were all located in Northwest Washington. Besides their location, these schools were filled to capacity. In 1921, Armstrong opened the school year with 700 students enrolled while Dunbar, which had just dedicated its building in 1917, had 1,500.<sup>86</sup> Just as in the fight for Junior High, parents and citizens living in

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<sup>83</sup> “Locals and Society,” *Washington Tribune*, September 14, 1923, 2.

<sup>84</sup> “Minutes of the Board of Education of the District of Columbia,” May 21, 1924, 3, vol. 14, Sumner.

<sup>85</sup> “Dedication Set for Schools,” *Washington Tribune*, October 21, 1927, 1.

<sup>86</sup> “Colored Schools Packed to Limit,” *Washington Post*, September 14, 1921, 2.

neighborhoods outside Northwest all petitioned for the construction of high schools in their neighborhoods. For instance, In March 1924, the Deanwood Citizen's Association met and vowed to secure a high school for their area. At the meeting, citizens announced that, "we will not cease fighting till we get it."<sup>87</sup> But for more immediate relief, citizens across the city also lobbied for reduced carfare for students.

Parents in Southeast, Southwest, and Northeast all strategized ways to ease the burdens of attending high school. During the 1920s, the prices of food, streetcar fares, and rent all surged, making Washington, D.C., a very expensive city to live.<sup>88</sup> African American parents of junior and high school aged students often bore an added expense of streetcar fares for their children. Many gathered in their civic associations to press the city to adopt a reduced streetcar fare for students. This activity illuminated both how parents advocated for their children's improved access to education, but also how these women and men imagined a more democratic city.

Residents in Anacostia, for instance, expressed concern at the high costs of streetcar fares. According to an article from 1920, residents of Anacostia were "hard hit by the 8 cents fare rates on the W., R., and E. Co's car system." These fares affected both parents, who were "going to work daily and their children" who were "attending the high schools. In some cases, as many as six members are compelled to

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<sup>87</sup> "Citizens of Deanwood Favor High School," *Washington Tribune*, March 8, 1924, 5.

<sup>88</sup> See, for example, "High Cost of Living in the District of Columbia: Hearings before a Subcommittee on the District of Columbia, United States Senate," 65th Cong., 1st sess., Senate Resolution 150 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1919), 35 and *passim*; William Henry Jones, *Housing of Negroes in the District of Columbia*, 133; and "Negro Tenants Hit Hard, Rev. Mr. Waldron Says," *Washington Post*, January 23, 1925, 16.

ride 96 cents worth daily, and it is quite a hardship.”<sup>89</sup> Given that weekly wages for black women ranged between \$10 and \$12, and for men between \$10 and \$15, families spent a large portion of their income on transportation costs for themselves and their children.<sup>90</sup>

Parents in Southeast were not the only ones who were affected by the fare hikes in 1920. In Northeast, residents of Deanwood convened a meeting of their civic association where they petitioned the School Board for “cheaper street car fares for schoolchildren.”<sup>91</sup> Three years later, residents in Southwest planned a special meeting of their civic body, the Southwest Civic Association, to address both the high costs and distance of high school. The newspaper notice announcing the meeting informed residents that, “For many years past we have been complying with the new law pertaining to our children and the public school and have been paying car fare and all other necessary expenses to send them to high schools in the Northwest section of the city.”<sup>92</sup> The article ended by inviting citizens to attend meetings to strategize ways to reduce streetcar fares. The Board of Education had enacted strict laws regarding compulsory school attendance. A 1925 law stated that all children between seven and sixteen were required to attend school. If parents did not comply,

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<sup>89</sup> “Anacostia News,” *Washington Bee*, May 15, 1920, 8.

<sup>90</sup> For black women’s and men’s weekly earnings in Washington, D.C., see Elizabeth Ross Haynes, “Negroes in Domestic Service: An Introduction,” *Journal of Negro History* 8, no. 4 (October 1923): 421; and Lorenzo J. Greene and Myra Colson Callis, *The Employment of Negroes in the District of Columbia* (Washington, D.C.: Association for the Study of Negro Life and History, Inc., 1931), 38-39 and 81.

<sup>91</sup> Minutes of the Board of Education of the District of Columbia, 20 October 1920, vol. 13, page 4, Sumner.

<sup>92</sup> “Local News,” *Washington Tribune*, January 20, 1923, 3.

they were subject to a fine or jail.<sup>93</sup> For residents in these neighborhoods in Northeast, Southwest, and Southeast, streetcar fares and proximity to high school were issues closely connected to their civil rights as citizens of Washington, D.C. While parents in these neighborhoods remained deeply concerned about streetcars, women and men in Northwest weighed in on reduced streetcar fares less frequently. At a meeting of the North Central Civic Association at the Dunbar High School under the presidency of Mrs. J. C. Wright, members called for reduced streetcar fares for students.<sup>94</sup> And white parents, especially those living in Southeast and Northeast, similarly advocated for reduced car rates.<sup>95</sup> This illustrates, then, how location in the city influenced black women's activism for educational reforms.

Ultimately, parents in these civic associations were successful. In December 1930, the Senate's Committee on the District of Columbia convened a hearing on reducing street car fares for students in Washington, D.C.<sup>96</sup> This hearing resulted in a bill, which passed in 1932 and reduced car fares for all students to 3¢. All school children under the age of eighteen traveling on streetcars between seven in the morning and seven in the evening could pay this reduced fare, using a purple ticket,

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<sup>93</sup> McQuirter, "Our Cause is Marching On," 75.

<sup>94</sup> "North Central Civic Association," *Washington Tribune*, October 19, 1928, 3.

<sup>95</sup> See, for instance, "Committee to Ask Low Car Fare for Students," *Washington Post*, November 3, 1927, 21 and "Parent-Teacher Activities," *Washington Post*, November 13, 1927, R11.

<sup>96</sup> *Reduced Car Fares for School Children: Hearings Before the Committee of the District of Columbia, United States Senate 71st Cong., 2nd sess., H.R. 12571: A Bill to Provide for the Transportation of School Children in the District of Columbia at a Reduced Rate of Fare* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1930).

which they obtained at designated agencies or school. Pupils enrolled in night school also qualified.<sup>97</sup>

Parents' collective activism in their neighborhood civic associations resulted in more democratic streetcar fares for students living across the city. Parents who participated in this process received a rich, political education in the process of policymaking. They could see firsthand how their demands to the Board of Education traveled to Congress and resulted in legislation. While parents living in other cities succeeded in obtaining reduced car fares and other reforms for students, their advocacy did not reach Congress.

In addition to advocating for high schools and junior high schools, civic associations also petitioned for night schools, which offered classes in the evenings for working people. In May 1924 citizens at Deanwood attended the meeting of the School Board, where they advocated for the "appointment of a matron" and the "establishment of a night school."<sup>98</sup> In Anacostia in Southeast, citizens lamented that the night schools had closed. For instance, in October 1922, members of the Hillsdale Citizen's Association met at the Birney School and discussed the pressing need for a local night school for residents of this area who wished to further their education at night. In 1920, the illiteracy rate among African Americans in Southeast was 8 percent and by 1930 it declined to 5 percent.<sup>99</sup> For illiterate adult men and

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<sup>97</sup> "Adult Car Fare Rise will be Considered," *Washington Post*, March 7, 1931, 2.

<sup>98</sup> "Minutes of the Board of Education of the District of Columbia," May 21, 1924, 3, vol. 14, Sumner Archives.

<sup>99</sup> "Table Eight: Composition and Characteristics of the Population for Census Districts: 1920," in *Fourteenth Census of the United States*, Vol. III Population (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1923), 181 and "Table 11: Composition of the District of

women, then, night school presented an opportunity to learn to read and obtain a better job. The president of the association, Dr. R. H. Shipley, noted that the “closing of the night schools...especially in Anacostia, had worked an unusual hardship for those desiring to attend.” Since people attending night school worked during the day, it was “now necessary for them to go across the bridge in order to attend schools. As many of those desiring to attend are working people, the distance from their homes to the present schools is too far to make it practical for them to attend.”<sup>100</sup> Despite these pleas, the School Board never constructed a night school in Southeast during the 1920s.<sup>101</sup>

In addition to schools, playgrounds for African American children were also very unevenly distributed across the city. Playgrounds were a relative new phenomenon in Washington, D.C., tracing their origins to 1902 when black and white progressives identified a need for children to play outdoors.<sup>102</sup> Twenty years later in 1920, playgrounds in Washington drew thousands of children each summer. Like schools, playgrounds were segregated by race. Washington’s director of playgrounds, Susie Root Rhodes, supervised both playgrounds, which were open all year, as well as school play yards, which were open only during the summer months. In 1921, African American children in Northwest could play at two playgrounds,

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Columbia by Tracts: 1930,” in *Fifteenth Census of the United States*, Volume III: Reports on Population (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1933), 390-391.

<sup>100</sup> “To Appeal for Night School in Anacostia,” *Washington Tribune*, October 14, 1922, 2.

<sup>101</sup> For a list of night schools, see *Boyd’s Directory*, 1930, 81.

<sup>102</sup> “City Playgrounds Number 70 after 25 Years’ Growth,” *Washington Post*, September 25, 1927, M24.

including Howard, which had the city's only swimming pool for black citizens, and also play at five different schoolyards during the summer. In Northeast, children could play at one playground all year and one play yard during the summer. In Southwest, children could play at two playgrounds all year long. But in Southeast, children could play in only two schoolyards during the summer; they had no playground to visit during the Fall and Spring.<sup>103</sup>

These regional inequalities prompted citizens living in Southeast and Southwest to expand opportunities for children to play during the year. Citizens living in Garfield, a neighborhood in Southeast that had a population of 1,000 school-age children and no playground, worked tirelessly to fix this problem. In 1917, the Garfield Citizens' Association asked the Board of Education that, "early consideration be given for the question of establishing a playground and enclosing it with a fence."<sup>104</sup> The Board of Education did not act on this, prompting the Garfield Citizens' Association to try to solve this problem on their own. They worked with the nearby Anacostia Citizens' Association to raise money for playground equipment and asked Susie Root Rodes, the director of playgrounds, if they could use the schoolyard at the Garfield School as a playground and keep it open in the summer months. A newspaper article noted this playground would be "entirely supervised by young colored women who volunteered for the work."<sup>105</sup> In August 1921, citizens in

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<sup>103</sup> *Eleventh Annual Report of the Department of Playgrounds of the District of Columbia for the Year ended June 30, 1922* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1922), 3-4.

<sup>104</sup> "Minutes of the Board of Education of the District of Columbia," May 2, 1917, vol. 9, 4, Sumner.

<sup>105</sup> "New Playground Ready," *Washington Post*, August 26, 1921, 14.

Southeast opened this playground, located at 25th Street and Alabama Avenue in Southeast Washington, featuring a wading pool, tennis and basketball courts, a baseball diamond, and a field for soccer and other games. But one year after its opening, an article in the *Washington Post* noted that attendance at this mid-sized playground greatly exceeded its capacity. An average of 700 children visited the playground on a daily basis, and this medium-sized plot of land could only comfortably accommodate between 200 and 300 people. This overcrowding meant that few children could play games; most “sat on the stone wall running along one side of the ground.” The wading pool area was “well-equipped but altogether too small for the children who come there to play and who must be given a chance to get out of the hot sun at midday.” This newspaper article concluded by noting that there was “no permanent playground for all the year-round play for colored children in the entire southeast.”<sup>106</sup> Black citizens across Washington expressed sensitivity toward securing extra playground space. In 1928, the Colored Union Benevolent Association, which had previously operated a cemetery, offered their land to expand the Garfield playground.<sup>107</sup>

Citizens in Barry Farms, another neighborhood in Southeast, also pressed the Board of Commissioners to construct a playground for children. In 1922, the Barry Farms Citizens’ Association wrote to the School Board, requesting “permission to clear lots for a playground and garden to benefit pupils at the Birney School.”<sup>108</sup> The

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<sup>106</sup> “Children Jammed into Garfield Park,” *Washington Post*, August 12, 1922, 2.

<sup>107</sup> “Minutes of the Board of Education of the District of Columbia,” vol. 19, November 7, 1928, Sumner.

Hillsdale Citizens' Association also asked the Board of Education to improve the playground at the Birney School.<sup>109</sup> The Barry Farms Citizens' Association also lobbied to install a "pattern bulb drinking fountain" at the Birney playground.<sup>110</sup> In 1924 the Barry Farms Citizens' Association asked the Board of Education to purchase the Eureka Park and convert it into a playground.<sup>111</sup> Two years later, citizens in Barry Farms invited "Sunday School children and their parents from every church in the district" to celebrate the dedication of their new playground.<sup>112</sup> Florence Matthews, the wife of a principal of a local school and mother of two children, became the director of the Barry Farms Playground where she orchestrated many different activities.<sup>113</sup> For instance in May 1927, she organized a May Day festival at the playground, involving more than 100 children.<sup>114</sup> The popularity of this playground prompted the Barry Farms Citizens' Association to petition to School Board to "purchase an additional half acre of land."<sup>115</sup>

By 1930, the collective work of African Americans in their citizens' associations paid off tremendously to make playgrounds spread more democratically

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<sup>108</sup> "Minutes of the Board of Education of the District of Columbia," November 1, 1922, vol. 13, 4, Sumner.

<sup>109</sup> "Minutes of the Board of Education of the District of Columbia," April 7, 1926, 15, vol. 16, Sumner Archives.

<sup>110</sup> "Barry Farms Notes," *Washington Tribune*, April 23, 1926, 4.

<sup>111</sup> "Barry Farm Notes," *Washington Tribune*, October 17, 1924, 3.

<sup>112</sup> "Barry Farm Notes," *Washington Tribune*, June 11, 1926, 2.

<sup>113</sup> Fifteenth Census of the United States, 1930, Washington City, Enumeration District 230, Sheet 12A.

<sup>114</sup> "Barry Farms has May Day Festival," *Washington Tribune*, June 3, 1927, 7.

<sup>115</sup> "Barry Farms News," *Washington Tribune*, April 19, 1928, 3.

across the city. In ten years, the number of playgrounds and schoolyards open for the summer increased from thirteen to twenty. In Northwest, children had two playgrounds and six schoolyards; in Northeast, children had one playground and five schoolyards; in Southwest children had two playgrounds, and in Southeast children had four playgrounds, one of which was a wading pool. As well, the Director of Playgrounds kept a couple of schoolyards open during the Fall and Spring to expand opportunities for play.<sup>116</sup>

But black citizens, parents, and teachers knew that educational barriers for children in Washington existed beyond the issue of geographic distance. Attending school meant having such necessities as school clothes and shoes, streetcar fare, and books and supplies. As well, chronic hunger, illness, and cavities could thwart students' abilities to pay attention in school and learn. These concerns for students' most basic needs prompted African American parents, citizens, and educators to band together to remedy these concerns. One important organization designed to meet these needs was the Sterling Relief Association, founded by Ida G. Richardson in 1910.

Richardson had been born in Washington, D.C., during the 1850s and was a member of the very first class of African Americans to graduate from school in the city. Richardson likely attended a Normal School because for two years she worked as a teacher in the city's public schools until she married George H. Richardson, a

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<sup>116</sup> *Nineteenth Annual Report of the Department of Playgrounds of the District of Columbia for the Year ended June 30, 1922* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1922), 3-4.

clerk.<sup>117</sup> They settled in a house on Eleventh Street in Northeast Washington. Between 1878 and 1889, Ida Richardson gave birth to three children, George, Virginia, and Erma.<sup>118</sup> All three of her children graduated from high school and Erma followed in her mothers' footsteps to become a teacher as well. Since the Richardson family lived in Northeast, Ida Richardson would have been deeply cognizant about the fact that her children had to travel across town to attend both Junior High and High School. In 1906, Ida Richardson became the very first attendance officer in the African American public schools. Her duties required her to track students' attendance patterns and locate truant children, earning her the title "Policeman Richardson."<sup>119</sup> In 1907, she banded together with other black women to create a local chapter of the International Laborers' Union called the Alpha Union. Richardson was elected president.<sup>120</sup> The International Laborers' Union worked to "advance the conditions of its members by getting higher wages for their work" and also offered funeral benefits and "excellent fraternal features."<sup>121</sup>

Ida G. Richardson drew on her childhood in Washington, D.C., her educational history, her family life, location in the city, work experiences, and fraternal connections in forming the Sterling Relief Association in 1910. The Sterling

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<sup>117</sup> Early biographical information on Ida Richardson comes from her obituary. I have been unable to track her early years, including specific details about her educational history, in either the census or newspapers. See, "Mrs. Richardson Dies at Residence," *Washington Post*, March 12, 1933, 10.

<sup>118</sup> Twelfth Census of the United States, Washington City, 1900, Enumeration District 119, Sheet 21.

<sup>119</sup> "A Splendid Record," *Washington Bee*, December 29, 1906, 5.

<sup>120</sup> "Ladies Organize," *Washington Bee*, July 20, 1907, 1.

<sup>121</sup> "Locals and Society," *Washington Bee*, December 8, 1906, 5.

Relief Association had two goals. First, it sought to prevent truancy by providing needy students with the basic necessities to attend school. Members of the Sterling Relief Association, composed of teachers, attendance officers, and citizens, organized and staged many different events to raise money for students. Teachers and attendance officers knew firsthand that a lack of supplies could result in students' chronic absence from school, or an inability to attend school at all. The Sterling Relief Association became a part of the National Federation of Women's Clubs of Washington and Vicinity, using those connections to assist with fundraising, publicity, and public education.<sup>122</sup> For instance, in 1918, the Sterling Relief held a fundraiser by staging a pilgrimage to the Frederick Douglass House in Anacostia in Southeast Washington, charging 10¢ admission.<sup>123</sup> The NACW was in the process of raising money to pay off the mortgage on this property. By affiliating with the local chapter of the NACW, Richardson was able to use those connections to benefit her own organization. The event featured lectures on Douglass's life and legacy, including an address by his son, refreshments, and performances by Sylvester Thomas's Orchestra. Many NACW women attended the event, along with Arabella Chase, who was active with Richardson in the Alpha Union.<sup>124</sup> This example illustrates how Ida Richardson infused the Sterling Relief Association with her organizational connections.

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<sup>122</sup> Elizabeth Lindsay Davis, *Lifting As They Climb* (Washington, D.C.: National Association of Colored Women, 1933), 409-411.

<sup>123</sup> "A Pilgrimage," *Washington Bee*, July 6, 1918, 8.

<sup>124</sup> "Pilgrimage to the Home of Frederick Douglass," *Washington Bee*, July 13, 1918, 4.

Every year in February, the Sterling Relief Association held a fundraiser for their organization. Over the years, these fundraising events varied, including pageants, a Valentine's Day Dance, a performance of the Howard Players, and church get-togethers.<sup>125</sup> They also worked cooperatively with the Tuesday Evening Club, an organization of social workers in Washington, D.C.<sup>126</sup> These fundraising ventures illustrate the ways that the Sterling Relief Association attached itself to important sites of organizing and mobilization across the city, working with different organizations, churches, and schools. A newspaper article in 1924 summarized the outreach efforts of the organization since its founding, noting they had supplied "250 pairs of shoes, 500 pairs of hose, glasses, braces, and car fare" to hundreds of students across the city.<sup>127</sup> In 1925, the "inclement weather" prompted the Sterling Relief to hold a Valentine's Day costume contest and dance specifically to raise money for shoes.<sup>128</sup> The fact that the organization was called a "relief society" suggests that fraternal ideas undergirded its ethos. It is unknown whether members actually pooled their money to buy their resources or whether they only raised money through fundraisers. But Richardson's connections with other fraternal groups suggest that she looked to this structure as a model for her own organization.

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<sup>125</sup> "Minutes of the Board of Education of the District of Columbia," vol. 11 March 19, 1919, Summer; "Sterling Relief Association," *Washington Tribune*, February 18, 1922,; "Locals and Society," *Washington Tribune*, February 17, 1923, 2; and "Pupils of Colored Schools Aid Own Relief by Benefit," *Washington Post*, June 14, 1925, 16.

<sup>126</sup> "The Fiftieth Conference of the International Council of Social Workers convened in Washington," *Washington Tribune*, May 19, 1923, 1.

<sup>127</sup> "Work of the Sterling Relief Association," *Washington Tribune*, February 16, 1924, 2.

<sup>128</sup> "Benefit for Needy Children," *Washington Tribune*, February 7, 1925, 2.

In addition to raising money for poor students, members of the Sterling Relief Association also sought to expose schoolchildren to African American History. Each year, the Sterling Relief Association sponsored a pilgrimage to the Frederick Douglass House for all black schoolchildren in the city. Affiliation with the NACW, which had dedicated the Douglass House in 1922, helped to facilitate these annual events. Ida Richardson always worked with the School Board to arrange these trips.<sup>129</sup> Thus the Sterling Relief Association not only worked to ensure that poor children would have the necessary supplies to attend school, but that students in every school could be exposed to African American history by visiting the home of a famous abolitionist, writer, and politician.

Situating Ida Richardson's work with the Sterling Relief Association within her life experiences illuminates the personal implications of this activism. As the member of the first graduating class of African Americans in the city, Richardson knew firsthand the importance of education for African Americans. And as an attendance officer, she would have interacted with many families who lacked the funds to furnish their children with the necessary supplies to attend school. As well, she would have been familiar with the curriculum in the public schools. While teachers worked to incorporate African American history into classes and events, especially with the advent of Negro History Week in 1925, it was also important to visit historical sites. All of circumstances reasons help to contextualize Ida Richardson's tremendous activism in the Sterling Relief Association.

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<sup>129</sup> "Minutes of the Board of Education of the District of Columbia," June 18, 1919, Sumner.

In addition to the Sterling Relief Association, the Parents' League also raised money for poor students. An article in 1924 discussed the hidden, but not less important, advocacy work of the organization. For the school year, the Parent's League, which represented "every strata of our daily life and every section of our city" had "furnished shoes to over a dozen children and clothing to twice that number, thus enabling them to continue their schooling." Members of the Parent's League discovered that lack of clothes and shoes had prevented school attendance among some children. The Parent's League, then, shielded school children from the "embarrassment of wearing worn clothes." The Parent's League formed a "regular sewing circle, whose duty is to be mend clothes of our unfortunate children... This year a number of local children have been rounded up for kindergarten class."<sup>130</sup> Parent-Teacher Associations also took part. For instance, when a parent-teacher association organized at the Phelps Vocational School in Northwest in 1929, one of the purposes was to "provide shoes and clothes to needy students."<sup>131</sup> These examples illustrate the ways that educational activism involved not only advocating for larger school buildings, but extended to cover basic necessities for students as well.

Parents at schools in several different neighborhoods also viewed dental care as fundamental to the health of their communities and petitioned the School Board for dental clinics inside of elementary schools. In April 1925, members of the Barry

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<sup>130</sup> "Parent's League Factor in Community Life," *Washington Tribune*, May 3, 1924, 1.

<sup>131</sup> "Phelps Parent-Teachers Organize," *Washington Tribune*, November 22, 1929, 2.

Farms' Citizen's Association asked for a dental clinic at their school.<sup>132</sup> In 1925, the parent-teacher Association at Randall Junior High School presented to the School Board the "The desirability of having a dental clinic to serve the pupils of the southwest section, was presented by the Parent-Teacher Association of the Randall Junior High School." At this same meeting, the Southwest Citizen's Association "submitted a request for a vocational school, which was denied."<sup>133</sup> In 1925, citizens in the Barry Farms Association asked for a dental clinic at the James G. Birney School.<sup>134</sup> In addition to dental care, parents also asked that schools should supply books. In 1929, parents in the Southwest Civic Association met in the Randall School and advocated for "free textbooks for high school pupils."<sup>135</sup> These requests including dental care and free textbooks illustrate ways that citizens in poor neighborhoods participated in movements for educational reform, imagining a more democratic city that would care for a wide range of students' needs.

Throughout the 1920s, parents, educators, and citizens worked to improve educational opportunities for students. Although many inequalities remained by 1930, this cohort of activists accomplished a great deal. They succeeded in their push for building expansions, the construction of more Junior High Schools, seven more playgrounds and schoolyards, and a reduced streetcar fare for students. Their

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<sup>132</sup> "Barry Farms Citizens Elect E. F. Hoffman," *Washington Tribune*, April 18, 1925, 5.

<sup>133</sup> Minutes of the Board of Education of the District of Columbia," December 16, 1925, 2, vol. 16, Sumner Archives.

<sup>134</sup> "Barry Farms Citizens Elect E. F. Hoffman," *Washington Tribune*, April 8, 1925, 5.

<sup>135</sup> "Civic Group Seeks New Firehouse," *Washington Tribune*, February 22, 1929, 1.

activism traveled from neighborhood civic meetings to the School Board to Congress. But regional inequalities in the city persisted. And the debate over whether married women should teach in the city's public schools illuminated the ways that location in the city influenced political beliefs.

### **The Politics of Married Women Teachers**

Throughout the 1920s, the question of whether married women and mothers should be employed as teachers in the public schools sparked debates in black and white communities across the city. Some of these conversations specifically addressed whether women who were also mothers should be employed as teachers, while others lumped mothers and married women into a single category. These debates raised important political questions, addressing such topics as the morality of mothers working outside of the home, the fair distribution of teaching opportunities across the city, and whether restricting the teaching profession to single women was discriminatory. Black women and men engaged in debates about the employment of married teachers in many different spaces across the city, including the press, neighborhood civic organizations, parent-teacher associations, on the streets, and in contentious meetings of the School Board. African American citizens approached this issue from different vantage points, influenced by their geographic location in Washington, their economic status, the politics of their households, and their organizational and institutional connections.

The issue of married teachers was a question of long-standing concern to black and white citizens in Washington, D.C. These debates were not unique to D.C.,

but rather, mirrored conversations that occurred in other cities during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.<sup>136</sup> In 1889, the School Board ruled that two teachers who had recently married could serve the rest of their term, but would not be re-hired, stating that, “a school teacher forfeits her position when she marries.”<sup>137</sup> The School Board’s decision to restrict married women’s employment registered a positive response in the black press. An article in the *Washington Bee* noted, “While the law was on the side of the teachers, public sentiment, as we said, was against them.”<sup>138</sup> In that same week, a gossip column in the paper posed the question, “Why is it that the recent Normal school graduates have failed to get their school after graduation?” The reply was that “married teachers” would not “resign.”<sup>139</sup> These critiques of married women’s employment in the late nineteenth century, then, often centered on offering more opportunities for single women. But the following year in

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<sup>136</sup> A history of the debates over married teachers remains to be written. Based upon my newspaper investigations, cities such as Atlanta, Philadelphia, Seattle, San Antonio, New York, Rochester, Baltimore, and Washington, D.C. all banned married teachers at some point in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The Great Depression in 1929 especially encouraged School Boards to place a ban on married teachers. For oral histories, see “Evelyn Witherspoon,” in *Living Atlanta: An Oral History of the City, 1914-1948* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1990), 145-146. For secondary accounts, see Doris Hinson Pieroth, *Seattle’s Women Teachers of the Interwar Years* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2004), 199-200; Sonya Ramsey, *Reading, Writing, and Segregation: A Century of Black Women Teachers in Nashville* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2008), 26-27; and Jennifer Lund Smith, “The Ties That Bind: Educated African-American Women in Post-Emancipation Atlanta,” in *Georgia in Black and White: Explorations in the Race Relations of a Southern State, 1865-1950*, ed. John C. Inscoe (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1994), 97-98. The literature on teachers who were also mothers is also thin. For the best account, see Patricia Carter, “Becoming the ‘New Women:’ The Equal Rights Campaign of New York City Schoolteachers, 1900-1920,” in *The Teacher’s Voice: A Social History of Teaching in Twentieth-Century America*, ed. Richard J. Altenbaugh (Washington, D.C.: The Falmer Press, 1992), 40-58.

<sup>137</sup> “Married Women in Office,” *Washington Post*, December 14, 1889, 4.

<sup>138</sup> “Married Teachers,” *Washington Bee*, December 28, 1889, 2.

<sup>139</sup> “They Say,” *Washington Bee*, December 28, 1889, 1.

1890, the School Board adjusted their position. They stated that marriage should not necessarily pose a threat to women's employment, but that at the beginning of each school year, teachers were required to inform the School Board about any changes of address and the Board of Education would determine whether this teacher could be reinstated.<sup>140</sup>

During the early twentieth century, black and white Washingtonians continued to discuss the issue of married women teachers. In 1907, the Board of Education passed "Rule 75," which reinstated the ban on married teachers.<sup>141</sup> But in this instance, the *Washington Bee* sided with married women teachers, arguing that, "the Bee doesn't object to married women teaching in the public schools."<sup>142</sup> Seven years later in November 1914, the Washington, D.C. Board of Education issued another policy, "Rule 45," which both barred married women from teaching in the Washington, D.C. public schools and fired all current married women teachers.<sup>143</sup> Board of Education officials based this decision on the belief that married women should work inside of their homes. This ruling engendered waves of outrage among black and white women in the city, prompting angry responses from the College Equal Suffrage League, the Women's Christian Temperance Union, and the General Federation of Women's Clubs.<sup>144</sup> These organizations protested the discriminatory

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<sup>140</sup> "The New School Year: An Important meeting of the Board of Trustees Last Night," *Washington Post*, September 10, 1890, 2.

<sup>141</sup> "Rules and By-Laws of the Board of Education of the District of Columbia," December 1907, in the Vertical File, Personnel Policy Rules: Married Teachers, 1900-1920s, Sumner.

<sup>142</sup> "A Social Clique," *Washington Bee*, November 7, 1908, 4.

<sup>143</sup> "Reopens School Issue," *Washington Post*, December 31, 1914, 14.

aspects of the law, insisting that women could balance work and family life. Caroline Wilder Harris, an African American member of the School Board, was one of the people opposed to barring married teachers.<sup>145</sup> While the white press, the *Washington Post*, criticized the rashness of the law, it ultimately concluded that only single women should work as teachers. “[a]s a general rule,” the editorial stated, “it is better to have unmarried women as teachers. Not only is it an excellent way for them to make their living, but from the standpoint of public policy, there is no fear that any home is being neglected.”<sup>146</sup> The following year in April 1915, a white married woman teacher, Gladys Strong Hellman, sued the Board of Education, claiming that her termination, based solely upon her recent marriage, was unjust.<sup>147</sup> In May, the Board adjusted their married teacher policy, preserving their ban on the hiring of married women teachers but allowing women teachers who married during the school year to keep their jobs until June.<sup>148</sup> In January 1916, the Circuit Division I Court in Washington, D.C. declared “Rule 45” “unreasonable” and ordered that the Board of Education should “restore Hellman to her former position and allow married women to teach in the public schools.”<sup>149</sup> The black press praised this decision, reasoning that,

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<sup>144</sup> Rally Against ‘Rule 45,’” *Washington Post*, March 26, 1915, 5.

<sup>145</sup> Information on Harris comes from, “Caroline Wilder Harris,” Vertical File: Personnel Policy, Rules, Married Teachers, 1900s-1910s,” Sumner and “Caroline Harris’ Funeral Held,” *Washington Post* 2 December 1939, 25.

<sup>146</sup> “Married School Teachers,” *Washington Post*, March 19, 1915, 6.

<sup>147</sup> “Sues to Be Reinstated,” *Washington Tribune*, April 20, 1915, 7.

<sup>148</sup> “Kind to Teacher Brides,” *Washington Post*, May 22, 1915, 14.

<sup>149</sup> “Married Teacher Wins,” *Washington Post*, January 6, 1916, 14.

“Why should married female teachers resign any more than married men?”<sup>150</sup> And an editorial in the *Washington Bee* opened the forum, soliciting responses from readers as to whether married women should teach in the public schools.<sup>151</sup>

Thus by the time black Washingtonians debated the issue in the 1920s, many were deeply familiar with the contours of the conversation. In May 1920, Anna Evans Murray, a member of the Parents’ League and active member of the Garnet Community Center where she served as the head of the child study club, testified before Congress about the state of schools in D.C. In her remarks, Murray included a critique of married teachers. Murray stated that she would like to “say a few words about... retention in the service of married teachers, young married teachers.... We are opposed to this because we tend to think it destroys family life.” When pressed about this issue, Murray suggested that married teachers “preferred the job to marriage.”<sup>152</sup> Murray’s organization, the Parents’ League, issued a more formal statement, which was published in the *Washington Bee*. In their message, members of the Parent’s League blended ideas about motherhood with a concern for women living in different parts of the city, who did not enjoy easy access to education or teaching. “The teaching profession,” their statement read, “is one which requires the best effort and pains if a teacher aims to be a credit to her profession and a success in the tutoring of children. And if a married woman is going to fill her sphere in the home well, she would hardly have the time or desire to continue as a teacher.” Their

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<sup>150</sup> “Public Men and Things,” *Washington Bee*, July 21, 1917, 8.

<sup>151</sup> “Should Married Women Teach,” *Washington Bee*, July 13, 1918, 6.

<sup>152</sup> “Public School System of the District of Columbia,” 1218.

statement continued, outlining their visions of men's roles as husbands, fathers, and breadwinners. "We believe that men who have a proper conception of married and home life," the statement read, "recognize this truth and are willing to support and keep their wives in the home and that right-thinking women reciprocate this idea. The public schools should not be a field of livelihood for women who desire to evade the duties and obligations of their marriage, when deserving single women who would be a credit to the schools and the profession are kept on the waiting list for lack of vacancies, or perhaps, pull." The Parent's League concluded their message by upholding notions of black, elite respectability, arguing that the "home" was the "cornerstone of our civilization. That is taught children in the schools, and any infringement on the rights of the home in this or any other matter tends to nullify the truths they teach."<sup>153</sup>

Despite the activism of Anna Murray and other members of the Parents' League, the School Board continued its policy of hiring married women teachers. But three years later, African Americans again broached the issue. In July 1923, the *Washington Post* reported that "parents and friends" of graduates of the Miner Normal School had issued a statement protesting the fact that many married teachers would return to the public schools in the fall. The petitioners charged that it would be "unjust... to force a majority of the normal school graduates out of positions." The article concluded by noting that this issue in Miner would soon affect the entire school system. "Considerable interest is to be attached to the treatment given the request by the committee and school officials," the article stated. "The interest is

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<sup>153</sup> "Parents' League and Married Teachers," *Washington Bee*, May 1, 1920, 1.

demanded by the fact that any action taken undoubtedly will set a precedent for the entire school system.”<sup>154</sup>

Three months later in October 1923, School Board member William L. Houston articulated the concerns from parents and students at Miner to his fellow School Board members, proposing that married women be barred from teaching in the public schools. Houston defended his recommendation based on the fact that “there is a large waiting list of normal school graduates and only a few vacancies every year.” He believed that the policy was unfair to single women wishing to enter the teaching profession as “over half of the teachers who marry in the service are said to hold on to their jobs. A large number also who have requested the two-year leave of absence during maternity period have returned to their work.”<sup>155</sup> Houston also expressed disappointment with the enthusiasm of current teachers, noting, “very little new blood has been in the local school system recently.”<sup>156</sup> But Houston’s opposition to married teachers was not entirely rooted in issues of equality of opportunity. He also remarked that the “home has the first call in a community” and that it was “impossible for a married teacher to spend from 8-10 hours in the classroom and give the same attention to her home as a woman who devotes all her time to the duties of a wife and mother. “No woman who is a mother,” Houston argued, “can give the same undivided and concentrated effort to her school work that she gave to her domestic

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<sup>154</sup> “Better Chance Sought for Normal School Graduates,” *Washington Post*, July 3, 1923, 2.

<sup>155</sup> “D.C. Plans to Bar Married Teachers,” *Baltimore Afro American*, October 26, 1923, 1.

<sup>156</sup> “D.C. Plans to Bar Married Teachers,” *Baltimore Afro American*, October 26, 1923, 1.

duties.” He ended his presentation by noting that the D.C. public school system contained “one-hundred and sixty-one women teachers who are married and only twenty-two have resigned in the past two years.”<sup>157</sup>

Houston’s remarks provoked reactions across Washington. A group of white women affiliated with the District of Columbia Federation of Women’s Clubs swiftly denounced this motion just days later, stating that “more stress should be put on efficiency than whether teachers were married.”<sup>158</sup> Other white communities, however, praised the proposal. For instance, the Georgetown Civic Association endorsed the proposal and “also urged that steps be taken to prevent married women from going to any but night schools,” noting that “married women are competing too closely with single girls.”<sup>159</sup> In black communities, reactions focused more on the fairness of the proposal. For instance, the Barry Farms Citizen’s Association, a civic organization in Southeast Washington, discussed the high numbers of married women teachers in the D.C. public schools.<sup>160</sup> Although this issue prompted conversations in communities across the city, the Board of Education failed to take decisive action to bar married teachers.

Four years later in 1927, the issue, again, resurfaced. Anna E. Murray continued her advocacy against married teachers. In March 1927, she testified to the Board of Education, lamenting the “dangerous” effects of married teachers on both

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<sup>157</sup> “Married Teacher Slams Door in Face of Normal School Grads,” *Washington Tribune*, October 27, 1923, 1.

<sup>158</sup> “Club Women Fight Teacher Proposal,” *Washington Post*, October 23, 1923, 1.

<sup>159</sup> “Decision on Barring Married Teachers Deferred by Board,” *Washington Post*, November 9, 1923, 11.

<sup>160</sup> “Barry Farms Citizen’s Association,” *Washington Tribune*, January 12, 1924, 1.

students and on family life. Furthermore, she decried the presence of married women at the Miner Normal School, claiming that their presence was “unwholesome” and that their maturity posed an unfair advantage to younger students.<sup>161</sup> This testimony soon spurred numerous letters to local newspapers. Writers pointed out that many families relied on women’s teaching income and that it was impractical to expect a single-payer household to support families.<sup>162</sup> The combined impacts of Murray’s activism and conversations in black and white newspapers prompted the School Board to ask each neighborhood civic association and parent-teacher association to raise the issue at a meeting and report back to the Board of Education.<sup>163</sup> A few days later, black and white citizens gathered at a Board of Education meeting designed to “acquaint District citizens with problems involved in proposals to discontinue employment of married women teachers in the public schools.” Although this was primarily a meeting about school policy, tempers flared as citizens expressed their opinions about married teachers. Lucy Swanton, a white woman married to a civil engineer and member of the Columbia Heights Citizens Association announced that married women teachers were “demoralizing to home life.” Stating that the question was primarily a moral one, Swanton contended that, “teaching school and presiding over a household was entirely too strenuous an undertaking for a woman.”

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<sup>161</sup> “Carusi is Elected Unanimously Head of School Board,” *Washington Post*, March 3, 1927, 22.

<sup>162</sup> See, for instance, “Views of the Readers on the Topics of the Day: Married Teacher Declares Economic Pressure, not Eagerness for Luxuries, is Causing Wives to Work to help Scanty Family Income,” *Washington Post*, May 29, 1927, S2; and “Lindbergh’s Training by his Mother Cited in Favor of Married Women Teachers,” *Washington Post*, June 5, 1927, S2.

<sup>163</sup> “Married Teachers’ Question to be Put to Public by Board,” *Washington Post*, May 19, 1927, 22.

She declared that married women “teach only for their salary and not with their heart in it, as do those who are unmarried.” On the other hand, Anna Kelton Wiley, a member of the white General Federation of Women’s Clubs, termed the ban on married women teachers “unfair discrimination.”<sup>164</sup> But the unnamed black woman representing Barry Farms who attended this meeting presented a slightly different reason for banning married teachers. She and her community members “said they believed the single girls should be given a chance to get teaching positions, which are not at all plentiful at the present time.”<sup>165</sup>

After months of meetings, in December the Washington, D.C. Board of Education compiled the opinions of black and white civic associations, parent-teacher associations, and individuals, integrating them into a streamlined report. Overall, these groups ruled in favor of married teachers. Of the seventy community groups, only seven, or 10 percent, believed that married women should not be permitted to teach in the public schools. But of these seven groups, four, or 57 percent, came from African American organizations.

Eleven African American groups weighed in on the issue of married teachers (see figure 22). They included the Anacostia Citizen’s Association, the Armstrong Technical High School Parent-Teacher Association, the Barry Farms’ Citizen’s Association, the Brightwood Citizen’s Association, the Garfield Citizen’s Association, the Logan Parent-Teacher Association, the Mott Parent-Teacher Association, the Parent’s League of the District of Columbia, the Shaw Junior High

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<sup>164</sup> “Row Develops at Session Over Married Teachers,” *Washington Post*, May 24, 1927, 1.

<sup>165</sup> “Married Teacher Opposition Fades,” *Washington Star*, May 24, 1927, 10.

School, the Southwest Civic Association, and the Wormley Parent-Teacher Association.

**Figure 22: Position of African American Civic Associations on Married Teachers, 1927**

<b>Name</b>	<b>Quadrant</b>	<b>Position</b>
Parents' League	City-Wide	Opposed
Armstrong Parent-Teacher Association	NW	Opposed
Brightwood Citizen's Association	NW	School Board Should Decide
Garfield Citizen's Association	SE	In Favor
Logan Parent-Teacher Association	NW	In Favor
Mott Parent-Teacher Association	NW	In Favor
Shaw High School	NW	In Favor
Wormley Parent-Teacher Association	NW	In Favor
Anacostia Citizen's Association	SE	No General Rule; Single Women Favored
Barry Farms Citizen's Association	SE	Opposed
Southwest Civic Association	SW	Opposed

**Source:** *Report of the Board of Education to the Commissioners of the District of Columbia, 1925-1926.* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1926), 16-18, Sumner.

As this table illustrates, every group in Northwest, including Brightwood, Logan, Mott, Shaw, and Wormley, either ruled in favor of married women teachers or did not make a judgment. The Parent-Teacher Association of Shaw, for instance, stated that, “[t]o exclude a woman teacher from the school because she is married is discriminatory.” These approvals of married women teachers in Northwest, then, can be traced to several factors. Residents of Northwest enjoyed relatively convenient access to the three high schools and completion and graduation did not pose as much of a challenge. And next, the majority of married women teachers lived in Northwest. The only association in Northwest that did not favor married teachers was the Armstrong Technical High School Parent-Teacher Association. They ruled that married teachers “barred single girls.” This one dissent in Northwest might be

explained by several factors. First, this parent-teacher association was composed of parents from all different parts of the city and, therefore, a coalition of cross-regional people weighed in on this decision. And as the only high school to oppose married women teachers, these parents might have experienced, first hand, the reality of their single daughters unable to find teaching jobs.

In Southwest and Southeast, citizens opposed married teachers. Parents in the Barry Farms Citizens' Association in Southeast stated that they were "opposed to further appointments of married women as teachers and as normal-school students." Parents in the Southwest Civic Association similarly stated that they were "opposed to further appointments of married women teachers or further admitting them in the normal schools." And the Parent's League weighed in on the question, stating that they were "against the employment of married women as teachers and against their admission to normal schools." The Anacostia Citizen's Association in Southeast stated "[n]o general rule should be adopted to disqualify married women as public-school teachers or as students. Each case should be judged on its merits" but that "where conditions are equal, preference should be given to unmarried women unless the married women by force of circumstances must support themselves or their families." The one group in Southeast to rule in favor of married teachers was Garfield.

In 1927, the superintendent noted, "[f]rom hurried statistics compiled yesterday, it is evident that there are nearly 800 married women now in the school system, or approximately 30 percent."<sup>166</sup> The issue ultimately died down and became moot. But black women's different opinions about this political issue, very often tied

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<sup>166</sup> "Married Teacher Opposition Fades," *Washington Star*, May 24, 1927, 10.

to their location in the city, illuminates that black women's politics was far from monolithic. By the end of the 1920s, 60 percent of urban school districts in the United States had passed laws banning the employment of married women teachers.<sup>167</sup> These conversations about married women teachers in 1920s-Washington reveal some of the fault lines that divided black women's politics by economic class and across diverse locations in their city. These debates help to underscore the ways that black women constructed their political knowledge around education.

## **Conclusion**

African American women waged battles throughout the 1920s to improve the school system. Their activism ranged from pressing for educational resources in various neighborhoods throughout the city, to attending to the holistic needs of students, and to expanding opportunities for teachers. Some women who participated in educational reform were first-time activists while others were seasoned in politics and organizing. But regardless of their level of experience, participating in educational reform instilled in black women very important lessons about the inner workings of politics in Washington, D.C., which involved a process of communication between neighborhood civic organizations, the city's local government, and the federal government.

Examining black women's activism through the prism of educational reform illuminates the importance of location in shaping political knowledge. Geographic

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<sup>167</sup> David M. Donahue, "Rhode Island's Last Holdout: Tenure and Married Women Teachers at the Brink of the Women's Movement," *History of Education Quarterly* 42, no. 1 (Spring 2002): 50-74.

distance from schools and playgrounds prompted large numbers of parents to press the School Board to construct schools and playgrounds across the city. This distance also caused some black women and men to work to adjust teacher hiring policies to expand opportunities for single women, who might have made many sacrifices to travel to high school each day.

Tracing black women's work for educational reform reveals that it was a process that required them to forge alliances with different sites of organizing across the city, including churches, fraternal orders, the press, neighborhood civic bodies, and social and political organizations. This tight level of organizing resulted in large numbers of participants. Frances Tanner's experiences in churches taught her about using these spaces as sites for organizing and activism, while Ida Richardson's work with fraternal orders encouraged her to model her political organization on the framework a mutual benefit association. But in addition to these individual leaders, hundreds of black women in this chapter worked as foot soldiers by attending meetings, signing petitions, raising money, and using their civic associations to lobby for educational reform. In working to fire Roscoe Bruce, fighting for reduced streetcar fares, playgrounds, and free textbooks, and weighing in on the issue of married women teachers, black women and men reached into spaces of black political culture to wage an early civil rights movement in their city, improving many different aspects of the school system. This varied cohort of black women activists helped to expand educational opportunities for many different students by the end of the decade.

## **Chapter 5: “Public Men, Women, and Things”: Republican Party Organizing**

### **Introduction**

In the fall of 1920, articles in the *Washington Bee* remarked upon black women’s recent activities in Republican politics. This increase in specifically partisan organizing was connected with the recent ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment in August 1920, which granted woman suffrage, as well as with the impending presidential election. One *Washington Bee* writer, the *Sage of the Potomac*, was so impressed with black women’s political acumen that he broadened his weekly column from “Public Men and Things” to “Public Men, Women, and Things.” In this column, he declared that he had “concluded to deal with women as well as men and things. Women have decided to place themselves on political and other equality with men hence they must receive what is to come.”<sup>1</sup> This increased participation in Republican organizations marked only one moment in black women’s longer history of formal political activism in the city.

African American women in Washington, D.C., occupied a distinctive position in Republican politics. During the 1920s, all legal residents of Washington, D.C.—regardless of race or sex—were disfranchised. The only Washingtonians who could vote were those who maintained residency in another state and could therefore cast an absentee ballot in those statewide and local elections. The historian Alexander Keyssar notes that by 1920, a total of twenty states would supply an

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<sup>1</sup> “Public Men, Women, and Things,” *Washington Bee*, December 11, 1920, 4.

absentee ballot to any resident whose job prevented their presence at the polls.<sup>2</sup> But even if most black women in the District of Columbia could not vote, they still participated in electoral politics through their Republican organizations. African American women spread awareness about the importance of voting, whether it was by encouraging every eligible black woman and man in Washington, D.C. to mail in their absentee ballots or traveling to neighboring states to encourage voting. By discussing the importance of voting, black women presented themselves as citizens to their friends, neighbors, and the nation. And black women seized on their location in Washington, D.C. to interact with a range of federal people, including politicians and civil servants. African American women addressed issues of concern to local black Washingtonians by weighing in on civil service employment. But the majority of black women's Republican activism centered on national issues, including the disfranchisement of black voters in the South, the passage of the Equal Rights Amendment, the appointment of black women as administrators in federal bureaus, and the nomination of Supreme Court justices.

Evidence from newspapers, personal correspondence, and organizational records suggests that it was a rather small and elite group of black women who participated in Republican organizing, or at least whose activities captured the attention of the black or white press. African American women who participated in Republican organizing reached into community-based networks, constructing the constituencies of these new partisan organizations by working to attract members through church, mutual benefit association, and neighborhood networks. Leaders of

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<sup>2</sup> Alexander Keyssar, *The Right To Vote: The Contested History of Democracy in the United States* (New York: Basic Books, 2000), 151.

these new organizations circulated information about day-to-day activities through the black press. These organizations held a few mass meetings to generate awareness to a large group of people, but largely recruited within members' existing networks.

African American women founded Republican organizations whose breadth of membership differed by geographical scope. The first type of organization was composed exclusively of black women who lived in Washington, D.C. During the 1920s, these partisan organizations included the Colored Women's Republican League (1920), the Auxiliary to the Colored Women's Republican League in Anacostia (1920), the Women's Republican Forum of Deanwood (1921), the Women's Political Study Club (1923), and the Absentee Voter's League (1924). The second type consisted of organizations that were founded in Washington, D.C., but whose membership was national in scope, including the Women's Republican League (1919) and the National Legislative Council of Colored Women (1923). National organizations founded elsewhere but with some Washington-based memberships formed the third type and the National League of Republican Colored Women (1924) fit into that category (see figure 23).

While all of these organizations worked to promote Republican Party politics, they pursued work on different levels. For instance, the Colored Women's Republican League was composed of a mix of absentee voters as well as women who could not cast ballots. This organization tried to reach out to voters and promote Republican politicians. On the other hand, nearly all of the members of the Women's Political Study Club were absentee voters. This organization, as its name indicated, was centered on voter education. The Absentee Voter's League was concerned only

with issues of absentee voting. And finally, the National Legislative Council of Colored Women focused largely on impending bills in Congress. Collectively, these different organizations—with their respective aims, constituencies, and memberships—illuminate the complexity of black women’s politics in 1920s-Washington, D.C., animated by such concerns as absentee voting, legislation, party platforms, and appointments and patronage.

**Figure 23: Black Women’s Republican Organizations in 1920s-Washington, D.C.**

<b>Name</b>	<b>Year</b>	<b>Constituency</b>	<b>Membership</b>	<b>Meeting Place</b>
Women's Republican League	1919	National	Republican Women	Monen Gray's House
CWRL	1920	Northwest Washington	Republican Absentee Voters and Non-Voters	YWCA
CWRL Auxiliary	1920	Anacostia	Republican Absentee Voters and Non-Voters	Campbell ME Church
Women's Republican Forum of Deanwood	1921	Deanwood	Republican Absentee Voters and Non-Voters	Unknown
WPSC	1923	Washington, D.C.	Republican Absentee Voters	YWCA
National Legislative Council of Colored Women	1923	National	All Black Women	Mazie Griffith's House
NLRCW	1924	National	Republican Women	Wage Earners HQ
Absentee Voters' League	1924	Washington, D.C.	Absentee Voters	Former Offices <i>Washington Bee</i>

Between 1920 and 1930, African American women dedicated a range of buildings to pursue their political interests, including the Phyllis Wheatley YWCA (1920), the National Association of Wage Earnings Building (1924), the Colored Women's Legislative Headquarters (1925), and the National Association of Colored Women Headquarters (1928). African American women understood that the spaces of their headquarters were not only for the use of locally based members, but also for the hundreds of black women who visited Washington, D.C. each year to attend meetings, conferences, receptions, conventions, and presidential inaugurations. All of these headquarters contained offices and meeting space, as well as dormitory space. Situated in the nation's capital, these headquarters could be host to and aid the political objectives not only of D.C. residents, but of black women from around the country. While historians acknowledge that black women's electoral political organizing increased in the 1920s, they have debated the degree to which African Americans participated in Republican politics and independent causes. Much of this historiography has focused on the activities of national organizations.<sup>3</sup> Those scholars who have examined on the ground mobilization for political causes and

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<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Rosalyn Terborg-Penn, "Discontented Black Feminists: Prelude and Passage to the Nineteenth Amendment," in *Decades of Discontent: The Women's Movement: 1920-1940*, ed. Lois Scharf and Joan M. Jensen (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1983), 261-78; Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, "'In Politics to Stay': Black Women Leaders and Party Politics in the 1920s," in *Unequal Sisters: A Multicultural Reader in U.S. Women's History*, ed. Ellen Carol Du Bois and Vicki Ruiz (New York: Routledge, 2001), 292-306; and Nikki J. Brown, *Private Politics and Public Voices: Black Women's Activism from World War I until the New Deal* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006). The major exception is Lisa Gayle Materson, *For the Freedom of Her Race: Black Women and Electoral Politics in Illinois, 1877-1932* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 11 and *passim*. Materson offers a grassroots case study of black women's partisan politics and organizing in Illinois, blending the perspectives of clubwomen and migrant women.

issues have done tremendous work, but have often stopped at the 1920 election.<sup>4</sup> This chapter examines black women's day-to-day organizing for Republican politics in Washington, D.C., as they seized on their federal location to give themselves the leverage of voters and used that on behalf of themselves and African Americans living across the country.

### **Woman Suffrage and Republican Organizing in Washington, D.C.**

The ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment in August 1920 coincided with the last few months of the presidential election, pitting Republican nominee Warren G. Harding against the Democratic nominee, James M. Cox. Many African Americans across the nation, and perhaps especially in Washington, D.C., felt a profound urgency to support Warren Harding. Eight years of a Democratic administration under President Woodrow Wilson—typified by the segregation of federal office buildings as well as declining opportunities for black civil servants—pushed many black Washingtonians to support the Republican candidate. As well, black Washingtonians were optimistic about a new administration, buoyed by Harding's campaign platform and his statements that the federal government should

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<sup>4</sup> See, for instance, Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore, *Gender and Jim Crow: Woman and the Politics of White Supremacy in North Carolina, 1896-1920* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), Tera W. Hunter, *To 'Joy My Freedom: Southern Black Women's Lives and Labors after the Civil War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), Jane Dailey, *Before Jim Crow: The Politics of Race in Post-Emancipation Virginia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), Steven Hahn, *A Nation Under Our Feet: Black Political Struggles in the Rural South from Slavery to the Great Migration* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), and Paul Ortiz, *Emancipation Betrayed: The Hidden History of Black Organizing and White Violence in Florida from Reconstruction to the Bloody Election of 1920* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).

make lynching a crime and that African Americans' wartime bravery entitled them to full citizenship. Black Washingtonians believed, or at least hoped, that Harding's administration would champion an agenda of racial equality.<sup>5</sup> And African American women, feeling a new citizenship status as voters even if they could not actually cast a ballot in D.C., often channeled this into support for a Harding presidency.

Nationally, leaders in the National Association of Colored Women (NACW) and Woman's Convention of the Baptist Church (WC) had supported the passage of woman suffrage. The NACW was optimistic that black women would help to cleanse some of the corruption in electoral politics. At the Twelfth Biennial Convention of the NACW in Tuskegee, Alabama in July 1920, the Convention notes stated that, "[i]t is our ambition that the club women shall purify not merely increase, the volume of the stream of politics, and that their interest in a candidate for office will extend to the ability to hold that office worthily."<sup>6</sup> The NACW embraced the cause of woman suffrage, but tempered this excitement with a focus on voter education. At the annual meeting of the Woman's Convention of the Baptist Church in Indianapolis, Indiana in September 1920, General Secretary Nannie Helen Burroughs offered a statement on "Suffrage Clubs" in the convention minutes. Here she suggested that "a suffrage club be organized in every church or that the women of three or four churches form a union organization." Burroughs, like many African American women, viewed woman suffrage also as an opportunity to "organize to re-enfranchise men." She

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<sup>5</sup> Richard B. Sherman, *The Republican Party and Black America From McKinley to Hoover, 1896-1933* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1973), 137; and Materson, *For the Freedom of Her Race*, 112.

<sup>6</sup> "Minutes of the Twelfth Biennial Convention of the National Association of Colored Women, July 12-16, 1920, at Tuskegee, Alabama," 40 as quoted in Materson, *For the Freedom of Her Race*, 111.

concluded by noting that, “to make headway, women must know how to use the ballot.”<sup>7</sup>

Even before the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment, black women had begun to form new Republican organizations in Washington, D.C. In 1919 Monen L. Gray, a South Carolina native who had worked as a teacher and seamstress, founded the national organization, the Women’s Republican League in Washington, D.C. Gray used the press, both the *Washington Bee* and the nationally circulated *Competitor*, to announce the formation of her organization.<sup>8</sup> The Women’s Republican League worked to educate black women about the Constitution, America’s legal framework, and elected politicians while also introducing them to important political issues. Gray established a headquarters inside of her own house at 1721 U Street in Northwest Washington and held meetings inside the Phyllis Wheatley Young Women’s Christian Association (YWCA) parlors. Her organization worked cooperatively with the NACW’s Citizenship Department. In January 1920, members of both organizations interviewed New York Republican Senator James W. Wadsworth about woman suffrage. Although Wadsworth promised to support the passage of woman suffrage, he admitted that, “he was still in doubt as to how a woman could take care of home and mix in politics.”<sup>9</sup> Gray also called for a national

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<sup>7</sup> “Suffrage Clubs,” in *Annual Report of the Executive Board and Corresponding Secretary of the Women’s Convention, Auxiliary of the National Baptist Church*, Volume 20, 12 September 1920 in MRL Reports, Rare Book Room, Burke Library, Union Theological Seminary, Columbia University, New York City (hereafter cited as WC-Burke).

<sup>8</sup> See “Letter to Women,” *Washington Bee*, August 20, 1921, 1 and “Negro Women’s National Republican League,” *The Competitor* 3, no. 2 (April 1921): 34.

<sup>9</sup> “Colored Women Strong for Senator Wadsworth,” *Washington Bee*, January 24, 1920, 6.

conference in Denver 1921, where members could strategize about various issues, such as the enforcement of the Nineteenth Amendment, an end to segregation, and the passage of an anti-lynching law. Gray expected 5,000 black women to attend this national meeting.<sup>10</sup> Gray argued that black women needed an independent political organization to advance their interests. Organizations with memberships of mostly white women, including the League of Women Voters and the National Woman's Party, did not engage in issues of racial justice. In her call for the conference, Gray announced that, "[c]olored Women now realize that if they would be free, they themselves must strike the blow."<sup>11</sup> While this organization did not last beyond 1921, Gray continued to be active in electoral activities, both in Washington, D.C., and across the nation.<sup>12</sup>

Only two days after the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment, political activist Mary Church Terrell and teacher Eva A. Chase implemented some of these strategies by ironing out the details for their new organization, The Women's Equal Rights League, No. 1, which was established as an auxiliary to the existing men's organization, the Harding and Coolidge Republican League No. 1 of Washington, D.C. Although both Terrell and Chase lived in the Northwest section of Washington, they envisioned their organization as representing black women from all neighborhoods in the city. Chase suggested that the opening meeting might occur "in

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<sup>10</sup> "Monen L. Gray Urges an Intensive Political Organization among Negro Women," *The Competitor* 3, no. 4 (June 1921): 32.

<sup>11</sup> "Monen L. Gray Urges an Intensive Political Organization among Negro Women," *The Competitor* 3, no. 4 (June 1921): 32.

<sup>12</sup> See, for instance, "A Letter to Women," *Washington Bee*, August 20, 1921, 1.

another section of the city—as a beginning of arousing people for our mass meeting.” She believed that “in going from section to section,” organizers could “meet new people” and “give publicity to the cause.”<sup>13</sup> In addition to visiting different parts of the city, Chase brainstormed about which networks the Women’s Equal Rights League could tap and how it might expand beyond the nation’s capital. She suggested that they contact Mary Alice Parker, who served as a “most worthy grand sovereign” of the Household of Ruth. This mutual benefit association would have its annual meeting in West Virginia in the following month and Chase estimated that this event would draw a crowd “rivalled only by that of the Washington inauguration.”<sup>14</sup> She also suggested that they reach out to Mildred T. Coleman, a corset worker and president of the Patriotic War Workers.<sup>15</sup> Coleman had helped to form this organization in 1918 to visit wounded soldiers at Walter Reed Hospital and offer them “fruit and other delicacies.” Eva Chase had participated in these activities in 1918.<sup>16</sup> Chase concluded by noting that through establishing contacts with these two women and their organizations, “we could urge the women [at these conferences] to go to their homes and organize clubs from which delegates could be selected and sent to our conferences.”<sup>17</sup> In this initial conceptualization of their new organization, Eva

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<sup>13</sup> Letter from Eva Chase, Virginia, to Mary Church Terrell, Washington, D.C., 20 August 1920, in Frame 74, Reel 5, Mary Church Terrell Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C., (hereafter cited as MCT-LC).

<sup>14</sup> Letter from Eva Chase, Virginia, to Mary Church Terrell, Washington, D.C., 9 September 1920, in Frame 86, Reel 5, MCT-LC.

<sup>15</sup> For Mildred Coleman in the census, see Fourteenth Census of the United States, 1920, Washington City, Enumeration District 14, Sheet 7A.

<sup>16</sup> “Patriotic War Workers Meet at the Winslow Building and Effect Organization,” *Washington Bee*, October 8, 1910, 8.

Chase offered suggestions to recruit a broad-based membership by drawing on the membership of mutual benefit societies and by holding meetings throughout the city.

It is unclear whether the Women's Equal Rights League, No. 1 was ever organized, however, in mid-September, a group of black women, including Mary Church Terrell and Eva Chase, founded the Colored Women's Republican League (CWRL) inside the parlors of the newly built Phyllis Wheatley YWCA on Rhode Island Avenue, rallying under the slogan, "Organize, Harmonize." But soon after she founded the CWRL, the Republican National Committee appointed both Mary Church Terrell and lawyer Jeanette Carter to tour mostly Northern states and encourage black women across the country to cast their votes for Harding. Right away, Terrell and Carter left Washington, D.C., for New York where they worked out of the Republican National Committee's headquarters. In her capacity as a national organizer, Terrell both delivered lectures in various cities and also contacted individual black women, asking them to get out the vote for the Republican Party. For instance, she wrote to women, "talk to every woman you meet about voting," thereby encouraging women to canvass their city for potential voters.<sup>18</sup> But although Mary Church Terrell encouraged voting, she could not cast a ballot. As she wrote in her autobiography, "[s]ince I had believed in woman suffrage all my life, I was happy in the prospect of being able to practice what I preached. I could not do this literally, however, for the District of Columbia where I had lived for thirty years, everybody

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<sup>17</sup> Letter from Eva Chase, Virginia, to Mary Church Terrell, Washington, D.C., 9 September 1920, in Frame 86, Reel 5, MCT-LC.

<sup>18</sup> Letter from Mary Church Terrell, New York, to "My Dear Friend," October 12, 1921, Frame 116, Reel 5, MCT-LC.

was disfranchised, men and women, black and white, old and young, crazy and sane alike.” She concluded by noting that, “[a]t least there was no political discrimination against anybody in the National Capital on account of race, sex, class, or condition.”<sup>19</sup> But the fact that Terrell encouraged voting illuminates the ways that she presented herself as a citizen, both to residents of Washington, D.C., and black women living across the country.

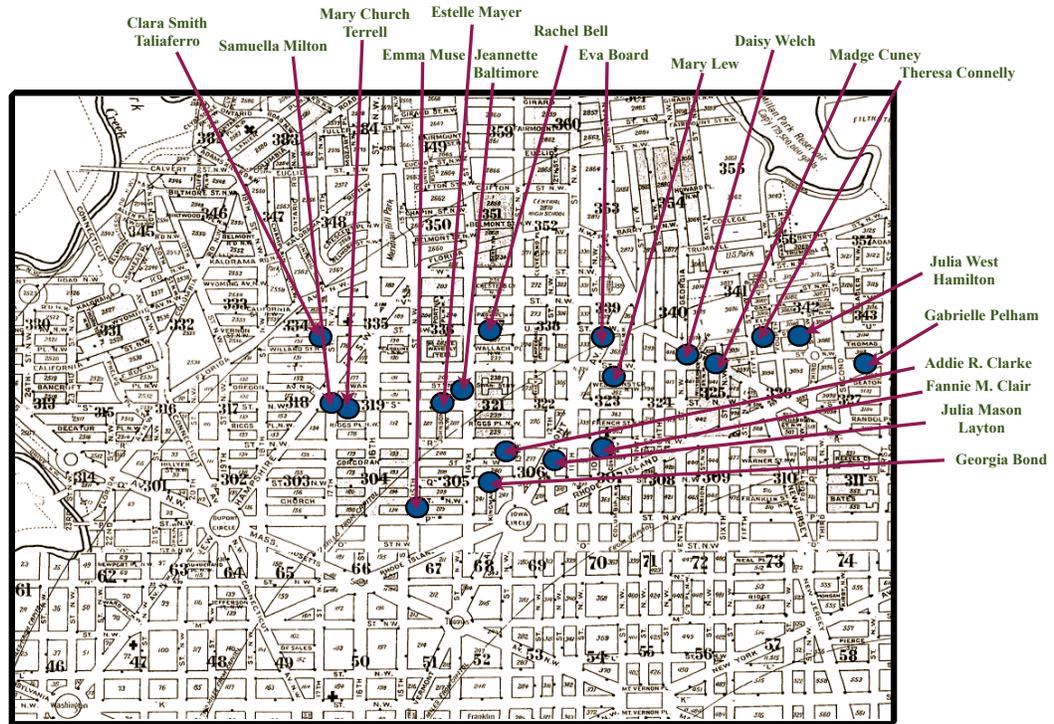
At its inception the CRWL’s leadership board, with one exception, was made up entirely of women from Northwest Washington, D.C., all of who lived in close proximity to each other. These included community center presidents Julia Mason Layton and Gabrielle Pelham government clerks Julia West Hamilton and Estelle Mayer, housewives Georgia Bond, Harriet Lee, Daisy E. Welch, Jeannette Baltimore, Samuella Milton, Mary Lew, Ida M. Young, Emma Muse, Clara Smith Taliaferro, Mary Whitley, Ida Young, and Fannie Mead Walker Clair, teachers Rachel Bell, Theresa Lee Connelly, Madge Cuney, Eva Chase, Mary Alice Parker, and Eva Board, beauty culturist and business owner Addie R. Clarke, lawyer Jeannette Carter, and Mary Coleman Dixon.<sup>20</sup> All of these women lived in within twelve blocks of each other in Northwest Washington, except for Ida M. Young who lived in Southwest (see figure 24).

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<sup>19</sup> Mary Church Terrell, *A Colored Woman in a White World* (New York: G. K. Hall and Company, 1996), 309.

<sup>20</sup> “The League of Republican Colored Women,” *Washington Bee*, October 2, 1920, 4.

**Figure 24: Board Members of the Colored Women’s Republican League, LeDroit Park**



Source: *Sanborn Maps* Washington, D.C., 1927-1928, Vol. 3, 1928, Sheet 0b.

As this map illustrates, the Board members of the CWRL all lived in relatively close proximity with one another in LeDroit Park in Northwest. Board members of the CWRL often had some social and organizational connections. For instance, Theresa Connelly and Estelle Mayer belonged to a bridge club that met on T Street, while Eva Board and Mary Church Terrell played bridge with another club, the Matrons that met at Board’s house on Q Street.<sup>21</sup> Gabrielle Pelham and Eva Chase both belonged to the R. W. Community Service League, an organization that raised

<sup>21</sup> “Mrs. Young Entertained,” *Baltimore Afro-American*, April 2, 1927, 2; and “Society,” *Baltimore Afro-American*, November 19, 1927, 3.

money for war veterans.<sup>22</sup> A number of board members were strong supporters of the YWCA. During the 1920s, three board members of the CWRL—including Julia Mason Layton, Mary Church Terrell, and Julia West Hamilton—also served on the board of the YWCA. Georgia Bond was a member of the YWCA’s Literature Lovers Club. Throughout the 1920s, Madge Cuney was a captain in the YWCA’s annual fundraising drives.<sup>23</sup> A number of Board Members of the CWRL were affiliated with the Washington and Vicinity Federation of Women, including Gabrielle Pelham, Mary Church Terrell, Mary Lew, Julia Mason Layton, Julia West Hamilton, and Rachel Bell.<sup>24</sup>

But while CWRL members shared some social ties and organizational connections, they also belonged to different networks. These diverse affiliations allowed CWRL members to circulate knowledge about this political organization into their web of connections. Some women brought diverse church networks to the CWRL. For instance, Harriet Lee, chair of the publicity committee, was the president of the Missionary Society at the Lincoln Temple Congregational Church.<sup>25</sup> Fannie M. Clair was married to Matthew Clair, the pastor at the popular church, Asbury M.E.

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<sup>22</sup> “Locals and Society,” *Washington Tribune*, February 7, 1925, 2; and “Lodge and Fraternal News,” *Washington Tribune*, March 8, 1923, 3.

<sup>23</sup> “YWCA Notes,” *Washington Tribune*, February 17, 1923, 6; and “D. C. Clubs,” *Baltimore Afro-American*, April 9, 1932, 17.

<sup>24</sup> “Women’s Organization Elects Officers,” *Washington Tribune*, December 13, 1924, 5.

<sup>25</sup> “In D. C. Churches,” *Baltimore Afro-American*, May 24, 1930, 20.

in Northwest Washington and she served as the president of the Minister's Wives Association of the Methodist Episcopal Church of Washington and Vicinity.<sup>26</sup>

Some members of the CWRL were involved in other explicitly political organizations. Gabrielle Pelham, who was originally from Michigan and served as the absentee voters' coordinator, was engaged in many activities in Washington, including the National Race Congress.<sup>27</sup> Jeannette Baltimore, a vice president, was a member of both the Oldest Inhabitants Association and the Women's Defense Committee, an organization that raised money for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP).<sup>28</sup> Other CWRL members belonged to different social clubs and salons. Emma Muse, the CWRL organizer, was a member of a neighborhood-based art club, while Samuella D. Milton, who served as the treasurer, belonged to the Wisteria Embroidery Club.<sup>29</sup> And Georgia Douglas Johnson, who was in charge of the program committee, convened a popular literary salon in the city, the Saturday Nighters, which offered a forum for writers from Washington and New York City.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> "Minutes of the Methodist Episcopal Ministers' Wives Association of Washington and Vicinity," March 7, 1921, Reel 5, Asbury M.E. Records, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library, New York, (hereafter cited as SCRBC-NYPL).

<sup>27</sup> "District Federation of Colored Women's Clubs" *Washington Tribune*, September 20, 1924, 2; and "Locals and Society," *Washington Tribune*, December 30, 1922, 4.

<sup>28</sup> Women's Defense Fund against segregation sends a check of \$1,500.00 to the NAACP," *Washington Tribune*, January 22, 1926, 1; and "Oldest Inhabitants," *Washington Tribune*, March 26, 1929, 2.

<sup>29</sup> "The Art Club," *Baltimore Afro-American*, April 12, 1930, 2; and "Annual Reception of the Wisteria Embroidery Club," *Washington Bee*, May 1, 1915, 5.

<sup>30</sup> "Locals and Society," *Washington Tribune* December 17, 1926, 4. See also, Elizabeth McHenry, *Forgotten Readers: Recovering the Lost History of African American Literary Societies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 251-295.

Affiliation with different jobs and businesses also put CWRL members in contact with a range of people. For instance, Clara Taliaferro, the Recording Secretary, was involved in the Tuesday Evening Club of Social Workers.<sup>31</sup> Addie R. Clarke was a business owner, the proprietor of the Clarke Training School. And finally, many CWRL members belonged to different mutual benefit societies or fraternal orders across the city. Daisy Welch was an active member of the Order of Lady Elks, Ida M. Young was a member of the Queen of Sheba Chapter of the Order of the Eastern Star in Southeast, and Mary Alice Parker was an organizer in the Household of Ruth as well as a member of the Woman's Auxiliary of the Grand United Order of Odd Fellows.<sup>32</sup>

And the CRWL did work to draw in a broad base of women by pursuing recruitment in churches and fraternal orders. Addie R. Clarke, the owner of the Clarke Training School, deposited sign-up sheets for the CWRL in the back spaces of churches across the city.<sup>33</sup> When first organizing the CRWL in September 1920 Ida M. Young contacted laundress Mary Alice Parker, asking her if she would be willing to mention the CWRL to the Grand Chapter Order of the Eastern Star, of which she served as the chair on Foreign Correspondence. This fraternal association was

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<sup>31</sup> "Joy to the Unfortunates," *Washington Tribune*, January 6, 1928, 2; and "Mrs. Stewart is Received by Local Women," *Washington Tribune*, September 7, 1928, 4.

<sup>32</sup> "Queen of Sheba Observes Anniversary," *Washington Tribune*, April 29, 1927, 3; "The Convention of the National Grand Lodge of Elks and Lady Elks," *Broad Axe*, September 4, 1915, 5; "Elkdom's History Told in Pageant," *Baltimore Afro-American*, June 17, 1939, 7; and "Monument Unveiled to Mrs. Parker," *Washington Tribune*, July 18, 1928, 1.

<sup>33</sup> Sharon Harley, "Black Women in the District of Columbia, 1890-1920" (Ph.D. diss., Howard University, 1981), 300; and "The League of Republican Colored Women," *Washington Bee*, October 2, 1920, 4.

composed of women and men who lived in different neighborhoods in Northwest, Northeast, and Southwest Washington. Young stated that the organization wished to “unite women” and asked her if she would be willing to “bring our work to the attention of your organization.”<sup>34</sup> This example illustrates ways that the CWRL attempted to establish contact with a fraternal organization composed of leaders living in different neighborhoods as a way to gather diverse members. (Presumably Parker assented as she quickly became part of the CRWL’s leadership board.)

Black women in Anacostia, a neighborhood in Southeast Washington, chose to join by forming an auxiliary to the CWRL inside of the Campbell ME Church.<sup>35</sup> It is not surprising that CWRL leaders selected Campbell since women in Anacostia used this building as a space to convene many different organizational meetings. Numerous fraternal organizations met at the church, including the Golden Rod Household, the Mount Arat Household, the Traveling Pilgrim Lodge, and the David B. Bower Lodge.<sup>36</sup> As well, the National Sewing Council, which raised money to pay off the mortgage at the Non-Sectarian Home, staged their meetings at the Campbell ME Church.<sup>37</sup>

The CWRL Auxiliary attracted important women in this neighborhood to serve on the board. Fannie Shipley, a teacher, served as president of this organization. Her husband, Dr. R.H. Shipley, owned a pharmacy in Anacostia.

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<sup>34</sup> Ida M. Young, Washington, D.C., to Mary Alice Parker, Washington, D.C., 11 September 1920 in Frame 89, Reel 5, MCT-LC.

<sup>35</sup> “Women’s Republican League of the D.C.,” *Washington Bee*, September 25, 1920, 7.

<sup>36</sup> “Garfield Notes,” *Washington Bee*, May 15, 1920, 5.

<sup>37</sup> “Anacostia News,” *Washington Bee*, June 26, 1920, 5.

Shipley was active in various causes, both in Anacostia and throughout Washington. She served as the president of the National Sewing Council.<sup>38</sup> She was also in charge of community work for the local chapter of the NACW.<sup>39</sup> Julia Warner, a housewife, served as vice president of the auxiliary. Warner was active in fundraising ventures at Campbell.<sup>40</sup> Mamie Sales served as a treasurer, Marion Warner as secretary, Mamie Kent as chaplain, and N.E. Taylor as organizer. Among these women located in newspapers and the census, all lived in Anacostia and were closely connected to the Campbell ME Church. Fannie Shipley and Julia Warner both lived on Nichols Avenue in Anacostia, which was the same street of Campbell.<sup>41</sup>

The CRWL both attempted to create a broad Republican constituency among black women in D.C. and also to allow separate and independent leadership within the organization. Having an auxiliary at Campbell put the CRWL's ideas and programs in close proximity to a number of women who may not have ventured across town to the main CRWL meetings.

The different leadership positions in the CWRL indicate the ways that they imagined their organization. Two of the CWRL's committees addressed voting. One committee was in charge of all of the absentee voters, while the other committee was called the "Cast Your Vote Committee." Distinguishing between voting and absentee

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<sup>38</sup> "Anacostia, D.C.," *Washington Bee*, May 23, 1914, 3.

<sup>39</sup> "Colored Women's Clubs," *Washington Bee*, May 5, 1916, 8.

<sup>40</sup> "Anacostia," *Baltimore Afro-American*, December 22, 1917, 3.

<sup>41</sup> For Fannie Shipley in the census, see Fourteenth Census of the United States, 1920, Anacostia, D.C., Enumeration District 359, Sheet 7B. For Julia Warner, see Thirteenth Census of the United States, 1910, Washington, D.C., Enumeration District 234, Sheet 7B.

voting suggests that the CWRL not only reached out to absentee voters, but also, emphasized the importance of voting, even though no one who held legal residence in Washington, D.C., could cast a ballot.<sup>42</sup>

Members in the CWRL circulated awareness about voting on at least two occasions. In February 1921, a large group of African American women representing twenty states across the country and affiliated with the NACW traveled to Washington, D.C., to meet with members of the National Women's Party. Many of these local, Washington women were affiliated with the Colored Women's Republican League, including Julia Mason Layton and Jacqueline Cuney. The women gathered at the Nineteenth Street Baptist Church where they strategized what they would say to the chair of the National Women's Party, Alice Paul. While this church was an important site in black women's organizing and activism, it was also located only a few blocks away from the headquarters of the National Women's Party on Jackson Place, enabling this cohort of activists to walk as a group. They "passed down Eye Street, then Connecticut Avenue to Jackson place." On the second floor in the large reception hall, they greeted Miss Paul." Here they asked her to "lend her aid toward the enforcement of the Nineteenth Amendment to the Constitution, which would give the 5,000,000 colored women the right to vote." Paul was not receptive to this issue and the black women left disappointed. *The Washington Bee*, reporting on the meeting, contended, "[t]he delegation left with a greater determination to go on

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<sup>42</sup> For a list of all of the CWRL's committees, see their letterhead located in Mary Church Terrell, Washington, D.C., to Reverend Gaskins, Washington, D.C., September 24, 1924, Frame 607, Reel 5, MCT-LC.

and press the battle. They went to the Phyllis Wheatley YWCA building.” Here they enjoyed a “luncheon” and then “held another meeting.”<sup>43</sup>

In addition to working to end disfranchisement among black women across the U.S. South, women in the CWRL encouraged black women to vote via absentee ballots. In 1924, March Church Terrell wrote letters to ministers across the city, asking them to encourage black Washingtonians to fill out their absentee ballots. For instance, in a letter to Reverend Gaskins of Trinity Baptist Church, Terrell asked him to “preach a sermon to the women of your church” that would encourage “those who do not live here to go home and vote or vote by mail.” She pleaded with him to “do everything in your power to impress upon our women that it is their Christian duty to register and cast their vote.” She asked that Reverend Gaskins preach this sermon on “either the last Sunday in September or the first Sunday in October” so as to coincide with the sequencing of absentee ballot completion.<sup>44</sup>

The main CWRL held weekly meetings in the YWCA and its programmatic committee staged other activities designed to spread the word about Republican candidates. In November 1920, the CWRL staged an event at Asbury ME Church for “Woman’s Day.” The decision to meet at this particular church was no doubt facilitated by Fannie Clair, a member of the CWRL whose husband, Matthew Wesley Clare, was the pastor of the Asbury ME Church. Asbury had a popular choir, which

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<sup>43</sup> “Colored Women Present Memorial,” *Washington Bee*, February 19, 1921, 4. On the National Woman’s Party and Paul’s refusal to aid black women in their struggle against disfranchisement, see Nancy F. Cott, *The Grounding of Modern Feminism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987).

<sup>44</sup> Terrell also wrote to Reverend Medford of the John Wesley A.M.E. Zion Church in Northwest. See Letter from Mary Church Terrell, Washington, D.C., to Reverend Gaskins, Washington, D.C., 24 September 1924 in Frame 607, Reel 5, MCT-LC.

frequently entertained both Washingtonians and out-of-town guests. Asbury's congregation numbered 1,000 members in the 1920s and the church's large meeting space could accommodate up to 1,800 people with a lecture hall and places for more intimate gatherings. A newspaper article reported that more than "three hundred Republican women" gathered in Asbury for the services. Those in attendance heard addresses by Reverend Clair, Fannie Clair, white Republican leader Virginia White Speel, and lawyer Marie Madre-Marshall. In addition to these talks, the "occasion was enlivened with several patriotic selections by the well-trained choir of Asbury." Since Terrell was away on a lecture tour, Fannie Clair presided over the gathering. Those in attendance, women and men, made it "truly a Harding and Coolidge House" as they voted to endorse these candidates as president and vice-president, respectively. In addition, Julia Jeubius recited a poem for the occasion, which summarized her reasons for supporting Harding: a minimum wage for women, global peace, and woman suffrage.

Twas not in the dawn of the morning  
Nor the bright noontide of day  
Twas just in the hush of the evening  
When all cares were locked away  
The voice of the newsies sound mellow  
Out on the warm June night  
We smiled as we hailed the fellows  
When the extras brought delight  
We stood and gazed at the likeness  
Of one who boldly stood  
Strong for the Grand Old Party  
For all—and its general good  
Dear face! What noble lineaments  
An asset which gold never buys  
Remind us of true, loving service  
He gave in years that have gone by  
He fights today for peace in your home  
All over this broad land of ours  
And fights for the safety of our sons against all foreign powers  
The minimum wage law he supports for women in industries  
And woman suffrage he defends loyally—Warren Harding

Following the speeches, songs, and poetry, the “ladies of the church” invited all those in attendance to adjourn to the lecture room where they feasted on a “sumptuous repast.”<sup>45</sup> Eva Chase was one of those in attendance. In a letter to Mary Church Terrell, she concluded that the “meeting at Asbury was the most successful we have had.”<sup>46</sup> Black women’s organizing for the Republican Party—both in Washington, D.C. and across the nation—paid off and Warren G. Harding was elected the nation’s twenty-ninth president in November. In addition to this presidential victory, Republicans regained both houses of Congress. Harding and members of the Republican National Committee recognized the importance of black

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<sup>45</sup> “Women’s Republican League at Asbury,” *Washington Bee*, November 6, 1920, 2.

<sup>46</sup> Letter from Eva Chase, Washington, D.C., to Mary Church Terrell, New York, 27 October 1920, in Frame 158, Reel 5, MCT-LC.

women's activism to the campaign. The Inaugural Executive Committee placed four black women on the Information Committee in gratitude for their "splendid work in the last campaign." These women were all members of the CWRL, including Mary Church Terrell, Julia Mason Layton, and teachers Eva Chase and Rachel Bell.<sup>47</sup>

The overall excitement of Harding's election was palpable throughout the city. One month before Harding's inauguration in February 1921, a group of black women in Deanwood, a working-class neighborhood in Northeast, formed the Deanwood Women's Republican Forum. In forming their own organization, black women in Deanwood made a conscious decision to retain their autonomy within their neighborhood. As an article stated about this new group, "[t]he women of Deanwood are alive to civic development and look forward to this movement with enthusiasm."<sup>48</sup> Although the identities of these women are unknown, one likely participant was beauty culturist Christina Moody Briggs, a prominent Deanwood activist. Briggs wrote the weekly Deanwood column in the *Washington Bee*.<sup>49</sup> During World War I, she had used her home, which also housed her her "Electric" beauty parlor, as a space to provide community services to soldiers and war workers.<sup>50</sup> And she had also organized a Mother's Protective Society in Deanwood, which also met inside of her house.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> "Colored Women on Inaugural Committee," *Washington Bee*, January 29, 1921, 3.

<sup>48</sup> "Deanwood News," *Washington Bee*, February 8, 1921, 7.

<sup>49</sup> See, for instance, "Progressive Deanwood," *Washington Bee*, December 3, 1921, 4.

<sup>50</sup> "Community House Opened in Deanwood," *Washington Bee*, October 25, 1919, 1.

<sup>51</sup> "Mother's Meeting," *Washington Bee*, December 22, 1917, 5.

Between 1920 and 1921, black women in Washington, D.C., formed Republican organizations in three different neighborhoods across the city: Anacostia in Southeast, Deanwood in Northeast, and LeDroit Park in Northwest. The fact that black women formed organizations in three different regions points to the importance of local neighborhoods in nurturing and sustaining political movements. Having a neighborhood-based organization meant that black women did not have to travel a great distance to attend meetings or functions. It also narrowed the scope of recruitment, enabling women to reach into their local church, fraternal, labor, and political networks to enlist potential members. The decision to have not one, but rather, three Republican organizations in different neighborhoods illuminates the complexity of black women's politics in Washington, D.C., typified by regional, economic, and political differences.

The flourishing of black women's Republican organizations and activities across the city in 1920 and 1921 attracted the attention of the local press. "Though the women of the District of Columbia are suffering political slavery as well as the men," an article noted, "they are thoroughly organized and functioning to do their bit."<sup>52</sup> A columnist for the local black newspaper, *The Washington Bee*, writing under the ghost name *Sage of the Potomac*, commented in "Public Men and Things," that he had "never seen so many would-be politicians in all of my life. Just what impression these orators make on the voters I am at a loss to state." He concluded that, "our colored women exercise greater political sagacity than many of our men. The women will be factors in the present campaign. They are in many instances

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<sup>52</sup> "Women's Republican League of the D.C.," *Washington Bee*, September 25, 1920, 4.

better vote-getters than the men.”<sup>53</sup> And the *Sage of the Potomac*’s amazement at the scope of black women’s political activities in Washington, D.C. did not cease. Two months later, he broadened the title of his column to reflect this ostensibly new political presence, calling his column “Public Men, Women, And Things.” In this column, he noted that, “I have concluded to deal with women as well as men and things. Women have decided to place themselves on political and other equality with men hence they must receive what is to come.”<sup>54</sup> In March 1921, the month of the inauguration, the *Washington Bee* reported that, “colored men and women are more interested this time than ever.”<sup>55</sup> This recognition in the local press indicates the degree to which black women in Washington, D.C., had organized for Republican politics across the city in Northwest, Northeast, and Southeast between 1920 and 1921. While black women pursued traditional recruitment methods through churches and mutual benefit associations, they gathered a relatively elite coalition of black women in Washington, D.C.

### **Studying Politics**

In August 1923, Jeanette Carter, a lawyer, added another dimension to black women’s Republican activities in Washington, D.C. by founding the Women’s Political Study Club (WPSC). Many different events and experiences prepared Jeannette Carter to organize the Women’s Politics Study Club. Carter had been born

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<sup>53</sup> “Public Men and Things,” *Washington Bee*, October 9, 1920, 4.

<sup>54</sup> “Public Men, Women, and Things,” *Washington Bee*, December 11, 1920, 4.

<sup>55</sup> “National Capital News,” *Norfolk Journal and Guide*, March 5, 1921, 4.

in Pennsylvania, but moved to Washington, D.C. to attend Howard University Law School. In 1912 she had campaigned for Woodrow Wilson's presidency and had been active in the National Negro Business League.<sup>56</sup> Five years later in 1917, she and Julia P. Coleman, a licensed pharmacist and owner of the Hair Vim Salon, founded the Woman Wage Earners' Association. The following year in 1918, she was appointed Director of the Colored Bureau of Industrial Housing and Training in the Department of Labor.<sup>57</sup> And in 1920 the Republican National Committee hired both Carter and Mary Church Terrell to tour Northeastern states, meeting black women and encouraging them to vote for the Republican ticket. Cumulatively, all of these different experiences—law school, employment at the Labor Department, canvassing for presidential elections, and organizing for labor and business causes—helped to shape Jeannette Carter's political knowledge and informed her visions for the WPSC.

Carter designed the WPSC to focus principally on voter education. In her canvassing for presidential elections, she had “discovered how little even educated women knew about politics and party matters affecting the states in which they reside.” This realization encouraged her to “form an organization to make the women of my group better citizens and voters.”<sup>58</sup> The WPSC was different from the CWRL

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<sup>56</sup> “Personals,” *Baltimore Afro-American*, November 9, 1912, 8; and “Green Mentioned for Recorder,” *Baltimore Afro-American*, July 10, 1915, 1.

<sup>57</sup> “Miss Jeannette Carter,” 15 August 1918 in Frame 564, Reel 8, *The Tuskegee Institute News Clipping File, 1899-1966* (Sanford, South Carolina: Microfilming Corporation of America, 1976).

<sup>58</sup> “An interview with Miss Jeannette Carter, president of the National Political Study Club, by William H. Ferris,” undated, in Folder 7, Box 1, Collection 12: Jeannette Carter

and other Republican leagues precisely because it was “composed of women residing in the District who retain their citizenship in the States” and could therefore vote in state and national elections via an absentee ballot.<sup>59</sup>

Carter designed seven goals for the WPSC, blending logistical organizing techniques with a focus on political education. Her organization’s aims included:

To arrange meetings and enable audiences in which leading Statesmen may discuss public questions, candidates and officials may become acquainted with constituencies and all good citizens may present and express themselves on public problems; To establish in a systematic manner actual, practical work for the party in campaign times; To make the women of the community acquainted with one another and on pleasant social terms; To keep track of the accomplishments of our officials and to put them back in all of their undertakings; To keep them informed of our public opinion and defend them before their opponents or a misinformed citizenry; To serve as an auxiliary for the party enlisting the interest of women who may become convinced of the righteousness of our cause later join the party; To cultivate a respect for and establish the prestige of the Republican Party in communities by organizing branch clubs and acquainting citizens with its principles and membership.<sup>60</sup>

These aims illuminated many aspects of Carter’s vision for the organization. In terming the WPSC a “club” rather than a “league” or “association,” Carter might have wanted to situate her organization within the existing modes of black women’s social and political activities in Washington, D.C. African American women often met socially in different clubs across the city, where they played bridge and whist, enjoyed musical entertainment, discussed art and literature, and held fundraisers for

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Papers, Manuscript Division, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Founders Library, Howard University, Washington, D.C., (hereafter cited as JC-MSRC).

<sup>59</sup> “Women’s Political Club Entertains at Banquet,” *Philadelphia Tribune*, June 14, 1924, 14.

<sup>60</sup> “Interview with Jeannette Carter,” JC-MSRC.

political causes. Although the WPSC had a more overt political message than other clubs, both its social function and its name were perhaps meant to fit within existing structures of black women' organizing. And while the WPSC had an explicit educational message of "study" and created a space where black women could learn about political history, current policies, and interact with prospective and elected politicians, the organization encouraged members from all levels of political activism and stages of awareness to participate.

The Women's Political Study Club was not a new concept. For decades women and men had discussed political issues in their churches, mutual benefit associations, and clubs. As well, they had participated in other political study clubs. A newspaper article from January 1921 noted a "Political Study Club" in Washington, D.C., among African Americans where six men and fourteen women met in a school to discuss political parties, state legislatures, labor issues, and movements in Greece, India, Ireland, and Russia.<sup>61</sup>

Carter's decision to make the WPSC an "auxiliary" to the Republican Party was perhaps meant to ease women's entry into Republican politics. Carter convened weekly meetings every Sunday afternoon at four o'clock. Initially, the WPSC met at the YWCA, but they switched their venue to the new NACW's new headquarters following its dedication in 1928. By meeting on a weekend in the middle of the day, Carter allowed for working women to attend, perhaps after church activities. Black women were not the only ones to initiate a political study club in 1920s-Washington. White women also convened their own political study club. But this organization met

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<sup>61</sup> "News and Society," *Washington Bee*, January 21, 1921, 4.

only once a month and held meetings at the Franklin Square Hotel. The white women's political study club was more focused on political education and less on political advocacy.<sup>62</sup>

The WPSC was composed of a relatively elite group of black women in Washington, D.C. Marian Butler, the First Vice Chair, native of South Carolina, and widow, worked as dressmaker.<sup>63</sup> Emma Merrick Holcomb, the Executive Secretary, was born in Georgia, worked as a seamstress in Washington, D.C. and was active in NACW activities.<sup>64</sup> Dorisse Bundy, a member of the WPSC, was a housewife, was active in social clubs in D.C. while her husband, Edward, an undertaker, was active in fraternal organizations.<sup>65</sup> Corelia Johnson, the Second Vice Chairman who was born in Georgia, worked as a hairdresser in her home while her husband labored as a Pullman Porter.<sup>66</sup> Jacqueline Cuney, the chair of Legislation, was a housewife who was born in Alabama while her husband was a skilled laborer for the government printing office.<sup>67</sup> Mary M. Kimball, who was in charge of the organization, was originally from Texas and worked as a stenographer, both in the government and in

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<sup>62</sup> See, for instance, "Senator King to Speak," *Washington Post*, February 17, 1923, 8.

<sup>63</sup> Fourteenth Census of the United States, 1920, Washington, D.C., Enumeration District 295, Sheet 13A.

<sup>64</sup> "State Federation to Hold 500 Lawn Fete," *Washington Tribune*, July 9, 1926, 2.

<sup>65</sup> "Girls' Training School Starts Fund Campaign," *Washington Tribune*, November 12, 1926, 1.

<sup>66</sup> Fourteenth Census of the United States, 1920, Washington, D.C., Enumeration District 211, Sheet 6B.

<sup>67</sup> Fifteenth Census of the United States, 1920, Washington, D.C., Enumeration District 230, Sheet 6A.

the Hair Vim Chemical Company.<sup>68</sup> Julia West Hamilton, a speaker, was a native of South Carolina and worked as an Examiner in the Bureau of Printing and Engraving.<sup>69</sup> Mae Richardson, the Industrial Secretary, was a native of Washington, D.C., and a housewife and widow.<sup>70</sup> The membership secretary, Daisy Welch, was a native of North Carolina, while her husband worked as a messenger in the Navy Department.<sup>71</sup> Katie C. Goodloe, the Finance Secretary, a native of Tennessee, was a housewife while her husband served as a Fireman in the Treasury Department. And Nora Battle, the WPSC's historian, was born in Alabama and worked as a housewife while her husband worked as a minister.<sup>72</sup> Two of the board members, Katie Gooloe and Nora Battle, lived in the Southwest section of the city. That so many board members had connections to government employment explains why the WPSC weighed in on civil service employment and patronage throughout the 1920s.

The WPSC had ambitions to reach a wider community of black women. In October 1926, members gathered at the YWCA to plan a “detailed program for getting out for the fall elections absentee colored women who maintain a voting status in the various States.” Jeanette Carter and other members planned a “canvass of organizations, churches, and government departments” and established a headquarters

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<sup>68</sup> Fourteenth Census of the United States, 1920, Washington City, Enumeration District 59, Sheet 14B.

<sup>69</sup> Fourteenth Census of the United States, 1920, Washington City, Enumeration District 207, Sheet 5B.

<sup>70</sup> Fourteenth Census of the United States, 1920, Washington City, Enumeration District 41, Sheet 6B.

<sup>71</sup> Fourteenth Census of the United States, 1920, Washington City, Enumeration District 211, Sheet 4A.

<sup>72</sup> Fourteenth Census of the United States, 1920, Washington City, Enumeration District 98, Sheet 5A.

at 611 F Street NW, which was the location of Jeannette Carter's office where she worked as a claims agent.<sup>73</sup>

At the WPSC's weekly meetings, Jeannette Carter selected a theme and invited different speakers to address these topics. These speakers were black and white, ranging from congressmen and civil servants to local business leaders and professionals. In 1925, New York journalist and political activist William H. Ferris spoke to 100 women on the subject of "overcoming race prejudice." In that same meeting, historian, journalist and political activist Delilah Beasley addressed the crowd on the importance of political education.<sup>74</sup> In March 1926, Dr. W. H. Hart offered an interpretation of the constitution, tracing its history from ratification in the eighteenth century to the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment in 1920. An article noted that a "special exposition was made of the history of the woman suffrage movement and the status of women was compared with unenfranchised portions of the electorate."<sup>75</sup> At that same meeting, Mary Lew, a housewife and chair of Legislation, reported on her attendance as representative for the WPSC at a dinner for Civil Service Commissioner Jessie Dell, which had discussed the "pending equal rights bill for women."<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> *Boyd's Directory of Washington, D.C.*, 1921-1930.

<sup>74</sup> "Talks on Race Prejudice," *Washington Post*, May 4, 1925, 13.

<sup>75</sup> "Speaker Interprets the U.S. Constitution," *Washington Post*, March 8, 1926, 2.

<sup>76</sup> "Speaker Interprets the U.S. Constitution," *Washington Post*, March 8, 1926, 2. For information on Jessie Dell, see J. Stanley Lemons, *The Woman Citizen: Social Feminism in the 1920s* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1972), 82.

The weekly activities of the WPSC were documented in the *Washington Tribune*, thereby contributing to the public's knowledge about the organization. The vice-president of the WPSC, dressmaker Marian D. Butler, wrote the "Locals and Society" page of the *Tribune*, where she always documented the organization's activities. The article often balanced between the guest speaker's lecture and the audience's reaction. In August 1924, for instance, the WPSC convened their weekly meeting at the YWCA where they had a "very enthusiastic meeting." Teacher and NAACP activist Lafayette M. Hershaw addressed the organization on "How Presidents Are Made." The column noted that Hershaw was a "walking encyclopedia on this subject" and "the women expressed themselves as being greatly benefitted." Following the talk, domestic worker Mary Fountain addressed the group on "Why I am Supporting the Republican Party."<sup>77</sup> This newspaper article indicates the ways that WPSC meetings focused heavily on reactions among club members.

In addition to their weekly meetings, members of the WPSC also lobbied for political causes. For instance, in 1926, one of the members, Emma M. Holcomb, the Executive Secretary and a seamstress, offered a resolution "condemning removal of colored employees in disproportionate numbers from the office of the Register of the Treasury" and members voted to pass it unanimously. The WPSC's main speaker, Washington, D.C.'s NAACP branch president Neval Thomas, "urged members of the club to aggressive action in conserving racial rights." At the meeting, WPSC women appointed a committee to meet with Massachusetts Senator William M. Butler, who

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<sup>77</sup> "Locals and Society," *Washington Tribune*, August 9, 1924, 2.

also served as the chairman of the Republican National Committee.<sup>78</sup> One of the reasons why Emma Holcomb might have introduced this resolution was the fact that several government workers lived near her house on T Street in Northwest Washington.<sup>79</sup> In addition to civil service, members of the WPSC weighed in on civil service appointments. In 1928, members of the WPSC responded to North Carolina Representative William C. Hammer's threat to impeach the Recorder of Deeds, Arthur G. Froe. Legislative Chair Mary Lew offered a resolution for the retention of Froe and members voted to pass it. Additionally, Jeannette Carter offered a presentation, which demonstrated that Froe's office was "more modern than any time in its history."<sup>80</sup>

The WPSC also held receptions and parties. In June 1924, for instance, the WPSC held a reception in the private dining room Harrison's Café, a popular restaurant in Northwest Washington. Here members, dressed in elegant gowns, held a reception for George H. Woodson, chair of the Virgin Islands Commission. An article noted that the dining room was adorned with "profuse decorations" of American flags and flowers.<sup>81</sup> In this article, Carter cast the WPSC as composed of women who lived in the District of Columbia, but maintained residency in other states, thereby allowing them to vote in elections via absentee ballot.

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<sup>78</sup> "Removal of Colored Workers Condemned," *Washington Post*, June 14, 1926, 2.

<sup>79</sup> For Emma Merrick and her neighbors in the census, see Fifteenth Census of the United States, 1930, Enumeration District 208, Sheet 2B.

<sup>80</sup> "Froe Retention Urged at Study Club Session," *Washington Post*, March 5, 1928, 16.

<sup>81</sup> "Women's Political Club Entertains at Banquet," *Philadelphia Tribune*, June 14, 1924, 14.

Members of the WPSC transported their activism into various spaces across Washington, D.C. For instance, when Thomas L. Jones was appointed the Assistant District Attorney in Washington, on his first day of office, a committee composed of twelve members of the WPSC visited Jones in his office at the Police Court Building and presented him with a “basket of flowers.”<sup>82</sup> This act illuminates the ways that African American women in the WPSC blended political consciousness with a social gesture. Thomas L. Jones was the only African American man who held this position and black women wished to recognize that.<sup>83</sup> The location of WPSC meetings rotated across Northwest Washington, between the parlors of the YWCA, individual houses, and by 1928, inside of the headquarters of the NACW on O Street. For instance, in 1926 the WPSC met at the home of housewife Jacqueline Cuney in Northwest Washington where members listened to a talk by editor and author William Ferris, who encouraged members to track the racial attitudes of members of congress.<sup>84</sup> In addition to this local, Washington, D.C.-based work, members of the WPSC also left the city limits, traveling to other states to encourage women’s voting in elections. For instance, in August 1924, Jeanette Carter, Marian Butler, and Emma Holcomb “motored to Mechanicsville, Maryland to work for the Coolidge-Dawes campaign.”<sup>85</sup> The WPSC offered an important service to black women in the city by providing a basic education in political issues.

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<sup>82</sup> “Women Present Attorney Thomas L. Jones with Flowers,” *Washington Tribune*, June 1, 1925, 1.

<sup>83</sup> “Thomas L. Jones Candidate for U.S. Attorney,” *Baltimore Afro-American*, May 23, 1925, A1.

<sup>84</sup> “Congress Inquiry is Urged on Negroes,” *Washington Post*, January 25, 1926, 18.

<sup>85</sup> “Locals and Society,” *Washington Tribune*, August 16, 1924, 3.

One of the most ambitious projects that the WPSC undertook was to survey every member of Congress about their racial attitudes. Two women spearheaded this project, Corelia B. Johnson, a hairdresser who worked out of her house and Jacqueline Cuney, a housewife.<sup>86</sup> These two women were neighbors. Corelia Johnson lived at 119 Seaton Place Northwest, while Jacqueline Cuney lived at 134 Seaton Place Northwest.<sup>87</sup> Together, these two women conducted an “investigation of the attitudes and accomplishments of congressional aspirants and candidates for reelection regarding matters of concern to the colored race.”<sup>88</sup> This activity suggests the ways that Johnson and Cuney used their location in Washington, D.C. to conduct research about every member of Congress. It is unclear whether black women living in other states would have been able to engage in this research.

In addition to causes, WPSC members made political endorsements. In 1925, members of the WPSC endorsed the NACW’s programmatic agenda, which demanded the appointment of black women to administrative posts in the departments of Education, the Internal Revenue Service, Immigration, the U.S. Employment Service, and the United States Civil Service.<sup>89</sup> And in September 1924, the WPSC endorsed the candidacy of Calvin Coolidge for a full term in office. In their letter to President Coolidge, the WPSC wrote that they pledged to the Republican Party “our

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<sup>86</sup> “Colored Women Plan Congressional Survey,” *Washington Post*, February 1, 1926, 18.

<sup>87</sup> For Corelia Johnson in the census see Fourteenth Census of the United States, 1920, Washington City, Enumeration District 211, Sheet 6B and for Jacqueline Cuney see Fourteenth Census of the United States, 1920, Enumeration District 211, Sheet 7A.

<sup>88</sup> “Congress Inquiry is Urged on Negroes,” *Washington Post*, January 25, 1926, 18.

<sup>89</sup> “Republican Women Want Recognition in the Government,” *New Journal and Guide*, June 20, 1925, 8.

undivided support and promise to do all in our power to lead back to the path of Republicanism those of our group that have blindly strayed therefrom, to the end that southern Democracy may be subverted and political equality and righteousness and the brotherhood of man may prevail throughout the United States.” In their endorsement, they explicitly opposed the Democratic Party because it was “the facile tool of Southern race prejudice and lawlessness.” Similarly, they articulated reasons for not supporting Third Party Candidate Robert LaFollette because that party “has maintained no interest whatever in the conditions affecting our people in the South.”<sup>90</sup> In the 1928 election, the WPSC women gathered at the NACW headquarters to “inaugurate a local campaign in the interest of Hoover and Curtis.”<sup>91</sup>

Black women in the WPSC also weighed in on state-wide races. For instance, in October 1926, they offered a resolution supporting the reelection of Massachusetts Senator William M. Butler because he had voted in favor of James Cobb’s nomination to the District of Columbia Supreme Court and he had “prevented the wholesale dismissal of Negro employees of the Register’s Office when a particular section in the office was declared a surplus.”<sup>92</sup>

And on two different occasions, Marian Butler, as the representative of the WPSC, lobbied Congress. In 1926, she appeared before the House of Representatives in a hearing about lynching. And in 1930 she lobbied against the confirmation of Supreme Court Justice nominee John J. Parker. In March 1930 Supreme Court Justice Edward T. Sanford died in office and President Hoover nominated Fourth

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<sup>90</sup> “Study Club Praises G.O.P. Stand,” *Chicago Defender*, September 20, 1924, A7.

<sup>91</sup> “Study Club Starts Hoover Campaign,” *Washington Post*, September 10, 1928, 2.

<sup>92</sup> “Washington, D.C.,” *New York Amsterdam News*, October 13, 1926, 7.

Circuit Court judge and North Carolina native John Parker to the Supreme Court. African Americans in Washington, D.C., and across the country responded angrily to this nomination precisely because of Parker's history of intolerance toward African Americans. In a 1920 speech when he was running for governor of North Carolina, Parker had stated that "the participation of the Negro in the political life in the South is harmful to him and to the community" and that African Americans had "no desire to participate in politics."<sup>93</sup> In another address, Parker equated the relationship between African Americans and the Republican Party as "a source of evil" and a "danger to both races."<sup>94</sup> Parker was explicit in his support for disfranchisement measures in North Carolina.

Civil rights organizations pointed to this evidence of Parker's long history of racial intolerance in their campaign to thwart his confirmation. NAACP leaders testified before Congress and contacted Senators, congressmen, and President Hoover. In May 1930 the WPSC joined these protests. For black women who had spent the past seven years meeting to discuss the importance of African Americans in politics, Parker's nomination directly undermined their efforts.

Marian Butler, who had been born in South Carolina, launched a two-pronged campaign on behalf of the WPSC to defeat Parker. She contacted local chapters of the NACW in every state where Republican senators favored Parker's confirmation. She also got in touch with the local black newspapers in these states. And next, she

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<sup>93</sup> Thomas J. Parker in *The Charlotte Observer*, April 18, 1920, as quoted in Kenneth W. Goings, *"The NAACP Comes of Age": The Defeat of Judge John J. Parker* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 23.

<sup>94</sup> Judge John J. Parker as quoted in the "Report of the Acting Secretary," April 1930, as quoted in Goings, *"NAACP Comes of Age,"* 24.

wired telegrams to every Republican senator who approved of Parker and told them about her contacts with these communities of black women. Butler pointed out that African Americans' vibrant support of Republican candidates had led to their electoral victories. Now, as senators and representatives, these men should favor the interests of their constituencies by rejecting the nomination of this decidedly anti-black candidate.<sup>95</sup>

On May 1, Republican Senator from Ohio Simon D. Fess dismissed African American protests against Parker as “manufactured clamor.” He then went on to read Marian D. Butler’s telegram. “Through the colored press and the National Association of Colored Women’s Clubs,” Butler wrote to him, “I am asking the colored women of Ohio to note your stand in the Parker case.” Butler signed the telegram as the chairman of the National Political Study Club.<sup>96</sup> This telegram both signaled the strength of African American women’s political protest—based in the press and in organizations—as well as the political space that black women increasingly began to occupy in the 1920s.

The black press followed Butler’s telegram. Articles in both the *Baltimore Afro-American* and the *Chicago Defender* mentioned Butler. And the article in the *Baltimore Afro-American* entitled “Mrs. Butler’s Anti-Parker Wire Peeved Senator Fess” carried the subtitle “Washington Woman Reminded Ohio Senator that Women

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<sup>95</sup> “Mrs. Butler’s Anti-Parker Wire Peeved Senator Fess,” *Afro-American*, May 10, 1930, A1.

<sup>96</sup> Senator Fess, *Congressional Record* 1 May 1930, 71st cong., 2nd sess., (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1930): 8115.

helped elect him and can Work just as hard for his defeat.”<sup>97</sup> In a letter to the *Baltimore Afro-American*, Marian Butler responded. “Senator Fess,” she wrote, “referred to my wire as manufactured clamor.” But he “seemed to have forgotten the manufactured clamor though Miss Hallie Q. Brown that he got when he wanted colored women’s votes.” She then weighed in on some of the southern demagogues, who had spent the 1920s spreading hateful lies about black women on the Senate floor. She focused on her former governor who had orchestrated a disfranchisement campaign and took no efforts to end lynching in her state. “Senator Ben Tillman said at least one true thing,” Butler wrote. “The colored woman is the more deadly of the species.” She insisted that, “[w]e must not prove him false. We must hit back if we have to jump from party to party every four years. She then foreshadowed the black migration from the Republican party by forecasting that, “If the Democrats run Governor Roosevelt I hear thousands of colored men and women singing: ‘I’m Republican bred and Republican born. But this is where the Republican is gone.’”<sup>98</sup> Butler’s efforts were part of a larger movement by many African Americans organizations, including the WPSC and the NAACP, as well as numerous individual African American citizens to block Parker’s nomination. These efforts were successful and the Senate did not confirm the nomination of Justice John Parker.

One of the reasons that might explain why Marian Butler argued so forcefully against Parker was because of her childhood in South Carolina. She had been in

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<sup>97</sup> “Senate Rejects Parker,” *Chicago Defender*, May 10, 1930, 1.

<sup>98</sup> “Mrs. Butler’s Anti-Parker Wire Peeved Senator Fess,” *Baltimore Afro-American*, May 10, 1930, 1.

Barnwell, South Carolina in 1876.<sup>99</sup> When she was fourteen years old, Ben Tillman, an openly white supremacist candidate, became Governor of South Carolina in 1890. Tillman's administration coincided with a wave of white supremacy in the South, when southern legislatures began to enact laws codifying segregation and disfranchisement.<sup>100</sup> Five years into his term in 1895, Governor Tillman urged the South Carolina legislature to amend its Constitution and initiate a process of disfranchisement. After much debate, they decided to make voting for men contingent upon property requirements and an "understanding clause" that required applicants to read and interpret sections of the Constitution. Although six black delegates and two white delegates vetoed these measures, the new South Carolina state Constitution passed in 1895. By 1896, only 5,500 black men in South Carolina could vote.<sup>101</sup> Marian Butler's father, Alexander Ford, might have been one of the thousands of black men who lost the right to vote. In moving to Washington, D.C., and joining the WPSC, Marian Butler was able to use her networks and political lobbying power to protest the confirmation of a Supreme Court nominee who supported disfranchisement. For Marian Butler, these protests against John Parker were deeply personal.

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<sup>99</sup> Tenth Census of the United States, 1880, Barnsville County, South Carolina, Enumeration District 24, Page 3.

<sup>100</sup> For a discussion of these practices across the South, see C. Vann Woodward, *Origins of the New South, 1877-1913* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1951); C. Vann Woodward, *The Strange Career of Jim Crow* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965); and J. Morgan Kousser, *The Shaping of Southern Politics: Suffrage Restriction and the Establishment of the One-Party South, 1880-1910* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1971).

<sup>101</sup> Stephen Kantrowitz, *Ben Tillman and the Reconstruction of White Supremacy* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 198-242.

Through the WPSC, African American women encouraged voting, weighed in on political matters of local and national concern, and learned about many issues of governance. Although the WPSC was explicitly oriented toward absentee voting, some of its active members, including Marian Butler, likely did not vote via absentee ballot.

### **“In Politics to Stay”**

Along with the CWRL and the WPSCP, black women also founded the National League of Republican Colored Women (NLRCW) in 1924. Following the conclusion of the annual NACW conference in Chicago, leaders Mamie Williams and Mary C. Booze gathered a group of women together to create the NLRCW. This organization would be national in scope and elected Nannie Helen Burroughs as president. The officers included Vice-President Sue Brown of Iowa; chair Daisy Lumpkin of Pennsylvania; Treasurer Mary Church Terrell of Washington, D.C. and parliamentarian Elizabeth Ross Haynes of Washington, D.C. This organization adopted the slogan “We Are in Politics to Stay and Shall be a Stay in Politics.”

The NLRCW marked black women’s second attempt to establish a national Republican organization. In 1919, Monen L. Gray had founded the Women’s Republican League, but the organization lasted for only a few years. Five years later, black women’s political landscape had expanded. During the early 1920s, African American women had established political clubs and organizations in cities across the United States, thereby creating a network of political women.<sup>102</sup> While some of these

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<sup>102</sup> In Baltimore, black women founded the Colored Women’s Suffrage Club and the Maryland Political Study Club; in New York black women founded the Women’s Non-

organizations were non-partisan or not explicitly Republican, most were geared toward the goals of the Republican Party. African American women had recently been enfranchised with the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment. While disfranchisement prevented many black women from voting in the U.S. South, African American began to exercise political influence in states like Illinois, New York, and Pennsylvania. African Americans had made a great deal of progress in lobbying for the Dyer Anti-Lynching Bill and a national coalition of Republican women would offer a more unified force in upcoming battles. And while the NACW's Citizenship and Legislative Departments had been a presence in many political campaigns—ranging from anti-lynching activism to monitoring legislation and working for enfranchisement—it was a non-partisan organization.<sup>103</sup> For all of these reasons, the NLRCW could offer a unified force of black women in politics. When Jeannette Carter learned about the formation of the NLRCW, she argued that the WPSC was still relevant because “it was unique, it functioned between campaigns as well during campaigns, in fact up of a substantial group of business and professional women who reside in the District of Columbia, but who have voting status in other states.”<sup>104</sup>

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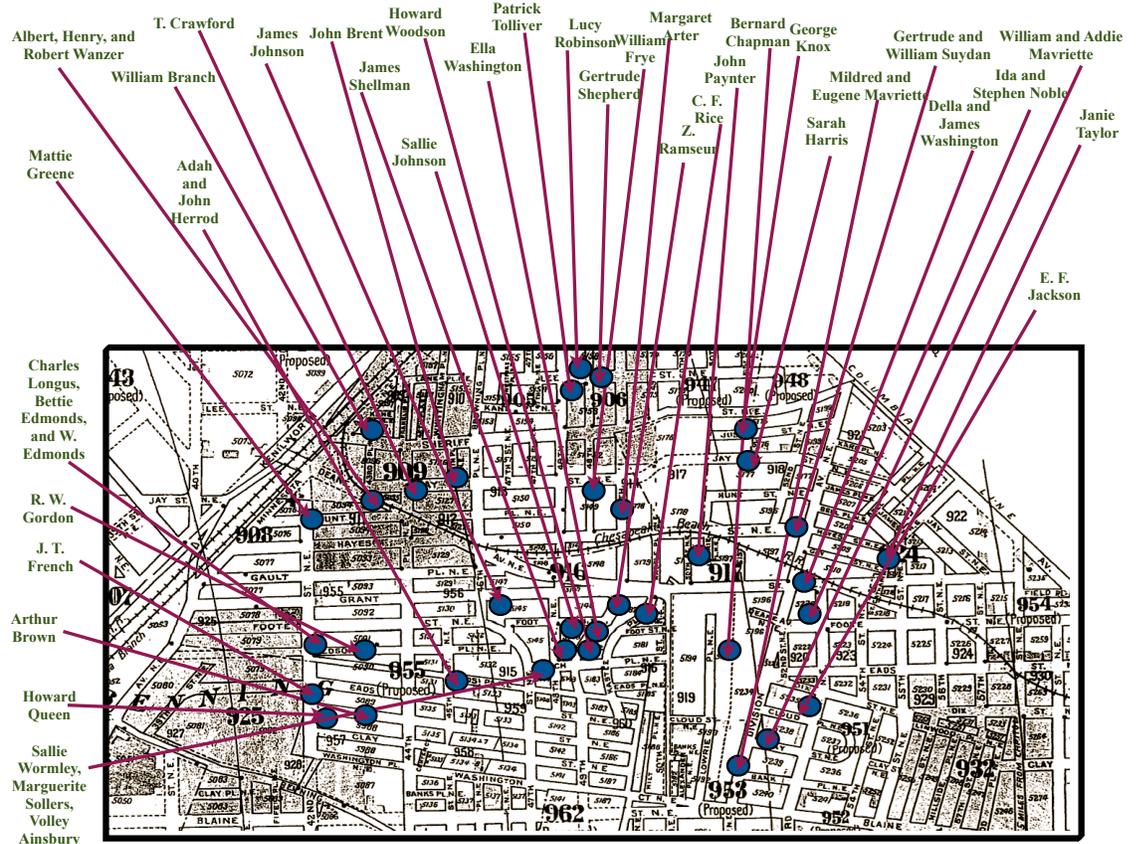
Partisan Political League; and in Detroit black women founded the Women's Political League. See Brown, *Private Politics and Public Voices*, 148; “YWCA holds formal re-opening” *Baltimore Afro-American* 16 January 1926; Weisenfeld, *African American Women and Christian Activism*, 163; and letter from Lillian Johnson from the Women's Political League in Detroit to Nannie Helen Burroughs, Washington, D.C., July 22, 1928, in Folder 4, Box 14, NHB-LC.

<sup>103</sup> Higginbotham, “In Politics to Stay,” 299.

<sup>104</sup> “Political Organization Among Colored Women,” Folder 7, Box 1, JC-MSRC.

As president of the NLRCW and a resident of Deanwood, Nannie Helen Burroughs worked to infuse the organization with many of her organizational and neighborhood-based networks. For instance, she recommended that the organization establish contact with forty-eight women and men who lived in Deanwood in Northeast Washington (see figure 25). Some of these members might have belonged to the Deanwood Women’s Republican League.<sup>105</sup>

**Figure 25: NLRCW Potential Members in Deanwood**



**Source:** *Sanborn Maps* Washington, D.C., 1927-1928, 7, no. 28, Sheet 0a.

<sup>105</sup> See “Washington, D.C.” undated, in Folder 3, Box 309, NHB-LC.

The NLRCW's constituency in Deanwood consisted mainly of middle-class and working-class women and men, such as cook Gertrude Shepherd, hospital maid Janie Taylor, laborer Patrick Tolliver, storekeeper Mattie Greene, servant Adah Herrod, barber John Herrod, laundress Margaret Arter, and expressman Henry Wanzer. While the roster of all Washington, D.C., NLRCW members are unknown, Burroughs's recruits from Deanwood points to her work to bring women and men from diverse parts of Washington, D.C. who labored at mostly working-class jobs into this new political organization. The prominence of men in this explicitly women's organization is unclear. While men did not appear to participate in organizational meetings, Burroughs did invite at least one man to attend them.<sup>106</sup>

Burroughs also drew upon her existing political connections and networks to initiate and sustain the NLRCW. In 1921 Burroughs had founded the National Association of Wage Earners (NAWE), a labor organization for black women. By 1924, the NAWE had gathered nearly 900 members in Washington, D.C. as well as several hundred members across the country. The NLRCW shared many of the NAWE's organizing techniques. For instance, both organizations circulated a questionnaire to obtain knowledge about black women's understandings of labor and politics. The NLRCW's questionnaire asked about organizing on the local level, the scope of black women's political knowledge, and if "you hear that Whites who hire servants tried to influence their votes?" This question about servants reflected Burroughs interests in labor.<sup>107</sup> In addition to the questionnaire, the NLRCW, like the

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<sup>106</sup> See, for instance, Arthur Froe, Washington, D.C., to Nannie Helen Burroughs, Washington, D.C., February 25, 1925, in Folder 1, Box 9, NHB-LC.

<sup>107</sup> "NLRCW Questionnaire," undated, in Folder 3, Box 309, NHB-LC.

NAWE, charged a \$1 membership fee. Moreover, in establishing the organization, the NLRCW relied on the existing state wide organizing of the NAWE. As Burroughs stated in the preliminary meetings, the NLRCW should be divided into districts and “use lists of Districts made up for Wage Earners’ Association.”<sup>108</sup> And finally, the NLRCW shared its headquarters with the NAWE; both organizations operated out of the building at 1115 Rhode Island Avenue. While the historian Lisa Materson has noted that the NLRCW worked through mainstream churches, but missed opportunities to work directly with poor women, it should be noted that domestic servants and cooks in Washington, D.C. used the NLRCW’s headquarters for training classes. And some live-in servants slept in the building. While the NLRCW might have neglected to organize working-class women nationally, the organization had a fair amount of contact with NAWE members in Washington, D.C.<sup>109</sup>

Nationally, the NLRCW worked to press the interests of African American women and men onto the Republican Party. For instance, they decided that African American women be appointed to various federal departments, such as Agriculture, Education, and Labor, and wrote letters to presidents, congressmen, and the heads of government agencies. They held meetings with elected officials, asking them to support the enforcement of the Fifteenth and Nineteenth Amendments to the Constitution.

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<sup>108</sup> “Plans: Executive Session, NLRCW,” in Folder 3, Box 309, NHB-LC.

<sup>109</sup> Materson, *For the Freedom of Her Race*, 141.

With the founding of the NLRCW, members of the Colored Women's Republican League, in their bi-weekly meeting on Tuesday evening at the YWCA, "unanimously voted" to have their organization be absorbed in the "federated" NLRCW. But black women in Washington, D.C. wanted to ensure that an organization would maintain the particular, local interests of black women in D.C., namely, absentee voting. On the same evening that the Colored Women's Republican voted to join the NLRCW, a group of women representing twenty-six states met at the old offices of the *Washington Bee* in 1109 I Street NW, where they formed an absentee voter's league, electing Michigan resident and community activist Gabrielle Pelham as president.<sup>110</sup>

## **Conclusion**

The founding of all of these different Republican organizations indicate the impact of woman suffrage in helping to shape black women's politics in 1920s-Washington. Through these organizations, African American women in Washington, D.C., worked to subvert the impact of their disfranchisement by pursuing a mixture of strategies, including absentee voting, voting campaigns outside of D.C., congressional lobbying, and political education. At the end of the decade, black women in Washington could point to a few political victories, including absentee voter campaigns, the retention of black civil servants, and the thwarted confirmation of Justice John Parker. But glaring issues—including widespread disfranchisement of southern voters, the failed passage of an anti-lynching bill, and the never passed

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<sup>110</sup> "Women Organize Political Clubs," *Washington Tribune*, August 30, 1924, 1.

Equal Rights Amendment—were too large for black women’s Republican organizations to effectively address.

In their Republican organizations, African American women pursued fairly conventional methods of recruitment, publicity, and fundraising. While the evidence suggests the possibility that working-class women joined Republican organizations in Deanwood and Anacostia, it is uncertain. African American women who were engaged in Republican organizations in 1920s-Washington were a relatively elite group who lived principally in Northwest Washington and belonged to the same social circles. There are two possible reasons why Republican organizations were so elite. First, many of the women who were engaged in absentee voting were connected to government workers, including Jeannette Carter and Gabrielle Pelham, who had been born in Pennsylvania and Michigan, respectively. Jeannette Carter worked for the government in the 1910s. And Gabrielle Pelham’s husband, Robert Pelham, was a clerk in the Census Bureau. It was much easier for Gabrielle Pelham and Jeannette Carter to vote via absentee ballot in Michigan or Pennsylvania than southern states. Southern migrants would have been as disfranchised in Washington, D.C. as in Mississippi, Texas, or Florida. And next, the CWRL, the WPSC, and the NLRCW never held mass meetings or events on a large scale. In other political work, including campaigns for education, labor, segregation, and anti-lynching, black women held parades, mass meetings, circulated petitions, and encouraged street-based recruitment.

## Chapter 6: “It Was A National, as Well as Local Affair”: The Politics of Anti-Lynching Activism

### Introduction

“Years afterward I marched through the streets of Washington in a silent parade staged by the colored people as a protest against the continued lynchings of members of our race. This was an effort to influence Congress to pass the Dyer anti-lynching bill. Not a band played. Not a sound of music was heard. As I walked in silence up Pennsylvania Avenue, I thought of the fine boy whom I knew as a girl, who had been brutally lynched when he became a man. And I said to myself, there is at least one person in this protest parade who understands personally exactly what it means.”<sup>1</sup>

Mary Church Terrell, *A Colored Woman in a White World*, 108.

On Tuesday June 14, 1922 at one o'clock in the afternoon, 5,000 black Washingtonians gathered on Maryland Avenue in Northeast Washington, D.C., to prepare to march in their Silent Parade protesting the inhumanity of lynching. In January 1922 the U.S. House of Representatives had passed the Dyer Anti-Lynching Bill and in only a few days, the Senate would begin debating the bill. This was an historic moment because it marked the first time either branch of Congress had ever passed a bill to make lynching a crime. Recognizing the importance of this occasion, African American women in the city planned a Silent Parade to draw attention to the issue and to illustrate the support of a broad spectrum of black Washingtonians. Black women formed a Committee of One Hundred to raise money, circulate publicity, and recruit participants among churches, fraternal orders, civic associations, schools, and social clubs. The Committee of One Hundred selected the parade to occur on June 14 because it was Flag Day, a patriotic celebration in America's civic

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<sup>1</sup> Mary Church Terrell, *A Colored Woman in a White World* (Washington, D.C.: Ransdell Publishing, Inc., 1940), 108.

calendar. As well, the Committee of One Hundred designed the parade sequence with different formations composed of fraternal orders, prominent women, children of particular ages, ministers, police officers, and finally, war veterans. In staging a silent parade that prominently displayed the organizational strength and patriotism of black America and marching past important federal government buildings and offices, including the U.S. Capitol, the Supreme Court, and the White House, African Americans pronounced themselves as citizens, claimed federal space in Washington, D.C., and thereby broadcast their support for the Dyer Anti-Lynching Bill to politicians, the nation, and the world.

The parade route began on Maryland Avenue and First Streets in Northeast. African American men, women, and children waved flags and carried banners as they circled around the United States Capitol and passed the Supreme Court and Senate and House Office Buildings. They then marched past the Treasury Building and ended their parade on West Executive Avenue at the White House (see figure 26). An article in the black-owned newspaper the *Chicago Defender* noted that the timing of the parade was “planned so as to pass these points just as the government departments were dismissing their employees.”<sup>2</sup>

The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) issued a press release drawing attention to the fact that participation in the parade involved African Americans from “every walk of life.” The press release emphasized Washington, D.C., and the African American community within Washington as particularly positioned to represent African Americans’ national interests as residents of the city had been born throughout the country. They thus contended that the

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<sup>2</sup> “Citizens Parade in Washington for Dyer Bill,” *Chico Defender*, June 24, 1922, 8.

marchers, based on the states of their birth, represented all forty-eight states in the Union, making this event a “national, as well as a local affair.”<sup>3</sup> Through this silent parade, black Washingtonians claimed federal spaces in the nation’s capital to press for the legal abolition of lynching and enact justice for African Americans across the nation. Newspaper articles about the parade appeared in both the local and national press, including the *Washington Post*, the *Washington Star*, the *New York Times*, the *Christian Science Monitor*, and the *Los Angeles Times*.<sup>4</sup> Many of these articles took note of the work that African American women, the Committee of One Hundred, had done to plan the movement.<sup>5</sup> African American women’s work to organize the Silent Parade in 1922 epitomized the ways that they conducted anti-lynching activism in the 1920s by connecting with existing sites of black political culture in Washington, D.C., to recruit constituents, circulate information, and raise money. A crucial part of black women’s everyday politics in anti-lynching activism was their deliberate work to bring their political activism into different federal spaces across the city.

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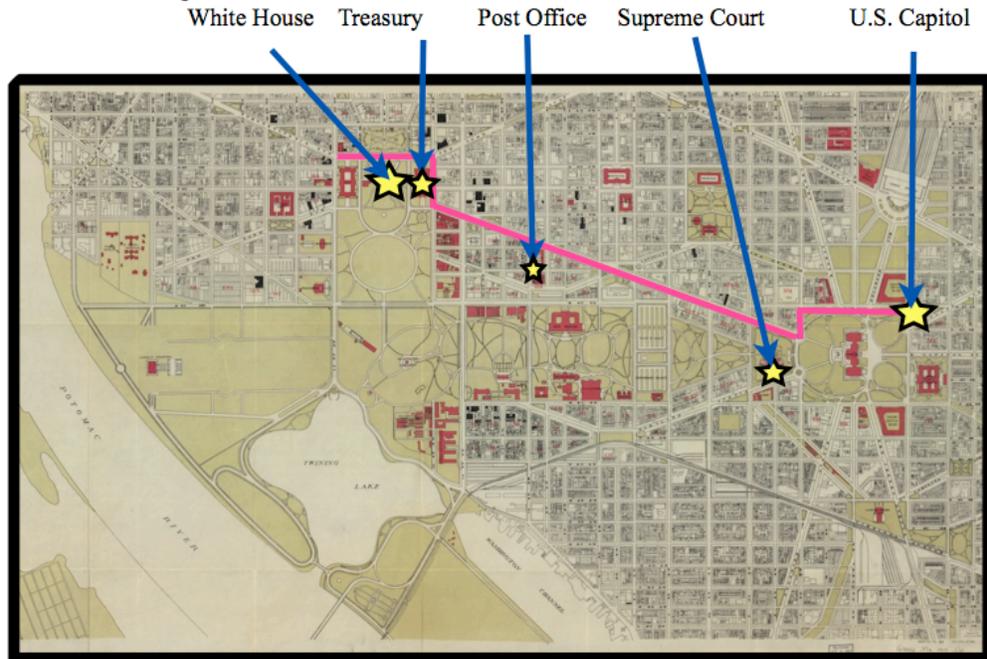
<sup>3</sup> “Silent Protest Parade Against Lynching Celebrates the Birth of Old Glory,” 1922 in Folder 16, Box 34, National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) Papers, Part I, Series G, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C., (hereafter cited as NAACP-LC).

<sup>4</sup> See, for instance, “Negroes Stage Silent Parade,” *Los Angeles Times*, June 16, 1922, 12; “Silent Negroes March in Lynching Protest,” *New York Times*, June 15, 1922, 3; “5,000 Negroes Parade As Lynching Protest,” *Washington Post*, June 15, 1922, 2; and “Foes of Lynching March in Silence,” *Christian Science Monitor*, June 15, 1922, 2.

<sup>5</sup> For a specific mention of the Committee of One Hundred, see “5,000 Negroes Parade As Lynching Protest,” *Washington Post*, June 15, 1922 and “Citizens Parade in Washington for Dyer Bill,” *Chicago Defender*, June 24, 1922, 8. For the NAACP Press Release, see “Colored Citizens Celebrate Flag Day in Silent Parade,” Folder 831, Box 43, NAACP Washington, D.C. Branch Papers, Collection 78, Manuscript Division, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Founders Library, Howard University, Washington, D.C., (hereafter cited as NAACP-MSRC).

**Figure 26: Map of the Silent Parade Route, 1922 (route is in pink)**

Pink = Parade Route  
Star = Government Building



**Source:** “Washington, the Mall and Vicinity, Public Buildings Occupied by Various Government Activities: 1917,” Prepared by the Public Buildings Commission (Washington, D.C.: Norris Peters Company, 1928). Accessed through the Geography and Map Reading Room, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

Some African Americans felt optimistic that lynching would become a federal crime during the 1920s. In 1920, the Nineteenth Amendment gave women the right to vote. And in 1921, Warren Harding, a Republican, was elected president along with a Republican Congress. Harding’s predecessor, President Woodrow Wilson, had ordered segregation in the offices of the federal government and largely ignored the violence and brutality that African Americans faced in the 1910s. These two

political changes, then, made some African Americans hopeful that America's racial climate would improve, especially with the passage of anti-lynching legislation.

African American women activists living in Washington, D.C., worked tirelessly to pass an anti-lynching bill within the context of 1920s-politics. African American women pursued many different strategies to make lynching a crime, including prayer meetings, petitions, mass meetings, and a Silent Parade. Black women's anti-lynching activism in Washington, D.C., mirrored national trends. During the 1920s, African American women throughout the United States formed a national organization, the Anti-Lynching Crusaders, to raise money and lobby for the passage of the Dyer Anti-Lynching Bill. Black women in Washington were part of these efforts, also taking advantage of their location within the nation's capital to also directly confront the U.S. Congress and the White House and press for the legal abolition of lynching.

This chapter examines the everyday politics of black women's work for the passage of an anti-lynching bill in 1920s-Washington. Exploring the process of black women's organizing and activism against lynching illuminates the importance of community-based networks in initiating and sustaining their day-to-day work of politics. Black women recruited constituents within churches, mutual benefit associations, businesses, organizations, and neighborhoods. In working within all of these different spaces across the city, African American women strove to gather a diverse cohort of activists. Black women also used the black and white press as instruments to circulate news about their activism and to persuade others to join the cause.

For many black women, including Mary Church Terrell, the anti-lynching movement was deeply personal. Many of the black women who were active in anti-lynching politics in 1920s-Washington felt an intimate connection with this cause, based upon a childhood in the South or stories from friends and family. Many African American women in Washington, D.C., carried these memories into their political activism. In marching in a parade, testifying before Congress, or meeting with politicians, black women living in Washington, D.C., served as political surrogates for their friends, family, and all of the black women activists who were based in other cities, thereby making their anti-lynching campaigns a local and national affair.

### **Anti-Lynching Activism before the 1920s**

African American women's work for the passage of an anti-lynching law in the 1920s marked only one part of a longer history of activism. Since the 1890s, the crime of lynching had disproportionately affected African Americans in the U.S. South and neither state governments nor the federal government supported any measures to end these tragedies.<sup>6</sup> Between 1899 and 1922, 3,436 African Americans were lynched and eighty-three of these victims were women.<sup>7</sup> African American activists pursued several strategies to make lynching a crime. Ida B. Wells, a journalist and political activist, gathered quantitative data, which refuted the popular

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<sup>6</sup> For a table outlining the number of lynchings by race and state between 1882 and 1968, see Robert L. Zangrando, *The NAACP Crusade Against Lynching, 1909-1950* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1980), 5-7.

<sup>7</sup> For this figure see Lisa G. Materson, *For the Freedom of Her Race: Black Women and Electoral Politics in Illinois, 1877-1932* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 121.

notion that black men were lynched because they raped white women. Ida B. Wells published several different accounts of her meticulous research, including *A Red Record* and *Southern Horrors*. She also traveled throughout the United States and to Europe on speaking tours to denounce lynching and call attention to the fact that the United States government ignored this injustice.<sup>8</sup>

In addition to gathering statistical evidence and speaking out, African Americans also made anti-lynching a priority in their political activism. In 1896, African American women united some of their local organizations to form the National Association of Colored Women (NACW). Since its inception, participants at the NACW's biennial conventions had issued resolutions that denounced lynching.<sup>9</sup> In 1909, the NACW created its own anti-lynching department to focus specifically on ending this crime. Nannie Helen Burroughs, a resident of Washington, D.C., held this position.<sup>10</sup> And at the Eleventh biennial convention of the NACW in Baltimore, Maryland in 1916, members passed a resolution to "telegraph President Woodrow Wilson, condemning lynching in this country."<sup>11</sup>

Other organizations addressed anti-lynching as well. In 1900, a group of African

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<sup>8</sup> For information on Ida B. Wells and her anti-lynching activism, see Patricia A. Schechter, *Ida B. Wells-Barnett and American Reform, 1880-1930* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001); Mia Bay, *To Tell the Truth Freely: The Life of Ida B. Wells* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2009); and Crystal Feimster, *Southern Horrors: Women and the Politics of Rape and Lynching* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009).

<sup>9</sup> See Minutes of the Biennial Convention of the National Association of Colored Women's Clubs, Reel 1, National Association of Colored Women's Club Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C., (hereafter cited as NACW-LC).

<sup>10</sup> Mary Jane Brown, *Eradicating This Evil: Women in the American Anti-Lynching Movement, 1892-1940* (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 2000), 95.

<sup>11</sup> "Minutes of the Eleventh Biennial Convention of the National Association of Colored Women," August 7-10, Baltimore, Maryland, 27, Frame 459, NACW-LC.

American Baptist women formed the Woman's Convention of the Baptist Church (WC). In annual conventions, the WC issued resolutions denouncing the inhumanity of lynching. For instance, in their convention in 1913, WC women made a list of demands entitled "What We Want and What We Must Have" and one was "lynching stopped."<sup>12</sup> And when activists formed the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in 1909, anti-lynching legislation was a central priority.<sup>13</sup>

Locally in Washington, D.C., African American residents worked to abolish lynching. In 1903, members of the African Methodist Episcopal Church in Washington, D.C., gathered in a two-day conference at the Ebenezer AME Church where a speaker delivered a paper entitled "The Lynching Practice or Mob Violence and What of Its Tendency."<sup>14</sup> Three years later, black men affiliated with the National Negro Baptist Preacher's Union of Washington, D.C., met at the Cosmopolitan Baptist Church to issue a resolution "condemning mob violence."<sup>15</sup> And in 1910, 600 black Washingtonians gathered in the Metropolitan Baptist Church to denounce the recent race riot in Texas and adopt a resolution that "lynching and

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<sup>12</sup> "What We Want and What Me Must Have," *Annual Report of the Executive Board and Corresponding Secretary of the Women's Convention, Auxiliary of the National Baptist Church*, Volume 13, 13 September 1913, Nashville, Tennessee, in MRL Reports, Rare Book Room, Burke Library, Union Theological Seminary, Columbia University, New York City (hereafter cited as WC-Burke).

<sup>13</sup> Zangrando, *The NAACP Crusade Against Lynching* and Patricia Sullivan, *Lift Every Voice: The NAACP and the Making of the Civil Rights Movement* (New York: The New Press, 2009).

<sup>14</sup> "The District Conference of the African Methodist Episcopal Church," *Washington Bee*, September 12, 1903, 1.

<sup>15</sup> "Denounce Lynching," *Washington Bee*, September 29, 1906, 1.

mob rule and race riot may be driven from the American commonwealth.”<sup>16</sup> In addition to these meetings, the black press in Washington, D.C., covered lynchings and issued an annual report discussing the totality of crimes that year.<sup>17</sup> These examples illustrate the ways that African Americans in Washington, D.C., were attuned to the inhumanity of lynching. When the United States entered World War I, African Americans in Washington, D.C., especially women, expanded their activism against lynching.

### **“Women on the Right Track”**

When the United States entered World War I in April 1917, many black women used this global conflict as an opportunity to press the federal government to promote democracy at home. Three months into the war, the Washington, D.C., chapter of the NACW initiated a “vigorous campaign against lynching.” An article in the black newspaper the *Washington Bee* entitled “Women on the Right Track” reported how NACW women were wielding a “weapon of prayer” by holding early-morning church services each Wednesday, under the leadership of political activist Nannie Helen Burroughs. “This city,” the article noted, “is under the spell and thousands flock to the 6 o’clock prayer meeting every Wednesday morning.” NACW women waged this campaign to protest the fact that the U.S. Congress had not outlawed lynching by law. But they also directed their attention toward the recent

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<sup>16</sup> “Meeting Asks Men to End Mob Violence,” *Washington Bee*, July 13, 1910, 5.

<sup>17</sup> See, for instance, “Lynching; Dispatches; Suspicion; Riddled,” *Washington Bee*, December 25, 1886, 2.

riots in East Saint Louis, where more than 100 African American men and women had died. The article concluded by noting that, “There must be no letup until the Federal Government sets in motion the machinery to prosecute outlaws, overthrow mobocracy, and establish a Democracy in our own land.”<sup>18</sup> Another article in the *Norfolk Journal and Guide* reported that “5,000 Negro women” had “gathered in Metropolitan Baptist Church on R Street between 12<sup>th</sup> and 13th Streets in Northwest Washington on Wednesday morning at six o’clock to pray for God for the abolishing of lynching.”<sup>19</sup> In her meeting minutes of the WC, Nannie Helen Burroughs described her advocacy as the director of the Publicity Campaign against Lynching and Mob Violence for the NACW. She announced that, “[t]he City of Washington” demonstrated “unabated interest in the campaign.” Burroughs noted that these prayer meetings attracted a diverse community of women and men, from “all walks of life” such as the “doctor and the ditch digger, the great and the small” who “meet at the mercy seat.” She argued that, “the nearest way to the conscience of the American people” was “by way of the throne of God.”<sup>20</sup> Prayer meetings in Washington, D.C., as elsewhere, drew on the spiritual and institutional culture of many African Americans, thereby offering a broad base of people with the ability to support the cause. Prayer meetings also called attention to the fundamental morality of the issue. Metropolitan Baptist, since its founding in 1878, had been used as a space to hold

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<sup>18</sup>“Women on the Right Track,” *Washington Bee*, July 21, 1917, 3. See also “Stop Lynchings Through Prayer,” *Baltimore Afro-American*, July 28, 1917, 4.

<sup>19</sup> “Washington, D.C.,” *Norfolk Journal and Guide*, July 21, 1917, 5.

<sup>20</sup> “Working for a Real Democracy,” *Annual Report of the Executive Board and Corresponding Secretary of the Women’s Convention, Auxiliary of the National Baptist Church*, Volume 17, 5 September 1917, Muskogee, Oklahoma, WC-Burke.

political meetings on issues ranging from suffrage rights in the District to the inhumanity of lynching.<sup>21</sup> By 1917, the congregation numbered 3,000 members.<sup>22</sup> The church was a large, brick building featuring a central tower, which prominently occupied R Street between 12th and 13th Streets in Northwest Washington. And Nannie Helen Burroughs maintained connections with this church, holding meetings for the WC as well as social receptions.<sup>23</sup> By occupying churches such as Metropolitan Baptist across the city, African American women in the local NACW chapter used their everyday sites of worship to send a political message to black and white citizens about the need for anti-lynching legislation.

This NACW-based activism offers an important lens into ways that black women in Washington, D.C., both organized their movements and practiced politics. Secretary of the local NACW chapter, Julia Mason Layton, worked as the community center secretary in the Phelps School in Northwest. And president Marie L. D. Madre, who had earned a law degree from Howard University, taught in the public schools. And Layton and Madre had different religious affiliations; Layton was a Baptist and active in the WC, while Madre belonged to the AME Church, working with the AME Woman's Mite Missionary Society.<sup>24</sup> Layton and Madre, then, might

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<sup>21</sup> "Suffrage in the District," *Washington Bee*, May 23, 1896, 8; and "Race War Denounced," *Washington Post*, August 9, 1910, 2.

<sup>22</sup> "Their Silver Anniversary: A Great Social Event," *Washington Bee*, January 13, 1917, 1.

<sup>23</sup> "Jubilee Arch," *Washington Bee*, September 5, 1914, 1. See also, Nina Honemond Clarke, *History of the Nineteenth-Century Black Churches in Maryland and Washington, D.C.* (New York: Vantage Press, 1983), 125-127.

<sup>24</sup> Bettye Collier-Thomas, *Jesus, Jobs, and Justice: African American Women and Religion* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf Press, 2010), 291-292.

have been able to infuse this organization with their different religious networks. While early morning prayer meetings were a common religious practice, the NACW's early morning prayer meetings also enabled the participation of those women and men who worked for long hours in wage labor positions outside of their homes who were unable to attend many other political events. A prayer service at six in the morning would allow many servants, laundresses, cooks, teachers, and government employees to participate before work. A prayer meeting for anti-lynching also fit within broader patterns of African American politics in Washington, D.C. During the 1920s, nearly 60 percent percent of African Americans belonged to a church.<sup>25</sup> Additionally, churches were common meeting spaces. In situating their activism in the form of a prayer meeting, then, African American women in Washington, as throughout the country, fused religion and politics and invited Washingtonians into familiar spaces and rituals while encouraging a focus on the political issue.

One month after these prayer meetings began, black women's activism against lynching traveled from neighborhood churches into the U.S. Congress. On August 3 1917, Nannie Helen Burroughs testified at the House of Representatives Rules Committee's Hearing on the riots in East St. Louis. Burroughs, one of only two black women who spoke, identified herself as the superintendent of the NACW's Department for the Suppression of Lynching and Mob Violence which, she informed

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<sup>25</sup> These statistics were calculated using the numbers from "Table 38," *Religious Bodies: 1926*. (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1926), 730. I correlated these numbers with the black population of Washington in 1925. See *Report of the Commissioners of the District of Columbia for the Year Ended June 30, 1917* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1917), located in RG 351, Entry 9, National Archives, Washington, D.C. (hereafter cited as RG351-NARA).

the committee, had “distributed over 200,000 pages of literature in the form of petitions and protests, appeals, tracts and circulars.”<sup>26</sup> Burroughs was there to present to the committee members petitions “signed by American citizens of color and by white citizens . . . extremely anxious that the Federal government do something in this matter.” The petitions were “fixed in packages of fifty” and were arranged geographically according to state. It would have been impossible for Burroughs to carry all of the petitions with her, but she informed the audience that there were “at least 100,000 of these petitions.” By physically depositing these petitions from black and white citizens across the country, Nannie Helen Burroughs served as their political surrogate in Washington, D.C.

In her testimony, Burroughs stressed that she wanted to make America a safe country for all citizens to live and labor and that federal enforcement to stop mob violence was essential to that quest. “The people who are seeking work,” Burroughs argued, “the people who want to earn their bread, want to know whether the Federal Government is going to make America a safe place in which to live and not only to live but to labor, and we want to do both; but we are at the mercy of the Federal Government: and I come this morning to ask you, in behalf of my people, what are you going to do about this matter?”<sup>27</sup> Burroughs’s employed a language of rights, casting the need for an anti-lynching bill within the discourse of American citizenship and tying it to labor and economic rights as well.

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<sup>26</sup> “Working for a Real Democracy,” WC-Burke.

<sup>27</sup> “Statement of Nannie H. Burroughs, National Training School, Lincoln Heights,” *Riot at East St. Louis, Illinois: Hearings before the Committee on Rules House of Representatives, 65th Cong., 1st sess., H. J. Resolution 118, August 3, 1917* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1917), 17-19.

Following this testimony, Burroughs wrote a letter to the *Washington Bee* where she recounted these recent activities. “Praise the Lord,” she wrote, “I got a hearing for the National Association of Colored Women before House Rules Committee Friday.” She also described her meeting with Congressman Leonidas Dyer, a white Republican Representative from Missouri who “urged her to stay with him in the fight,” informing her that his anti-lynching bill had received a favorable report from the Committee. Burroughs announced that the “fight” was “on” and asked all readers to “flood Congressmen with petitions.”<sup>28</sup> By physically traveling to Congress and depositing some of these petitions, Burroughs occupied a government space to articulate the collective sentiments of NACW women in their appeal for an anti-lynching bill.

Black women in Washington, D.C., participated in the anti-lynching movement as part of national organizations, sometimes becoming the representative of these organizations to federal officials. Black women in Washington, D.C., also organized their own local, sometimes neighborhood level, anti-lynching activities and organizations. At some point in 1917 or 1918, African American women formed a club at the Asbury M.E. Church called “Red Anti-Lynching,” which continued the tradition of holding prayer services.<sup>29</sup> Two months after Burroughs’s testimony before the House of Representatives, political activist Ida B. Wells addressed a “large audience” at the Asbury ME Church in Washington, D.C. Wells was a guest of the Washington, D.C., chapter of the NACW. A newspaper article in the *Washington*

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<sup>28</sup> “10,000 Petitions from 36 States,” *Washington Bee*, August 18, 1917, 1.

<sup>29</sup> Minutes of the NACW’s Biennial Convention, Denver, Colorado, July 1918, 61, Frame 542, Reel 1, NACW-LC.

*Bee* noted that this meeting was “one of the largest ever held in in this section of the country.” In the meeting, Wells noted that she would be organizing “anti-lynching clubs” that would serve as auxiliaries to the NACW.<sup>30</sup> It is likely that Asbury’s club was formed in response to Wells’s address since it was affiliated with the NACW and its founding reported in the NACW’s annual report of anti-lynching activities.

In 1918, anti-lynching activism finally materialized into a congressional legislation. In April 1918, Congressman Dyer introduced Bill 11279 to “protect citizens of the United States against lynching” in the House of Representatives. While some people pointed to the recent lynching Robert Paul Prager, a white German-American man in Illinois, as the impetus for the bill, there is little doubt that Dyer’s conversations with civil rights activists, including the one he had with Nannie Helen Burroughs, helped to shape his awareness about lynching as a racial crime, especially in the U.S. South. Dyer’s bill stated that, “each person in the mob shall be guilty of murder.” If authorities failed to stop a lynching, they could be subject to a fine of five thousand dollars or five years in prison.<sup>31</sup> An article in the *Chicago Defender* expressed disappointment that the first anti-lynching bill was proposed because of the murder of a white, and not a black, person, despite the grim reality that African Americans disproportionately composed the majority of lynching victims. “This is the first attempt to make lynching a national offense,” the article concluded, “in spite of the three thousand members of our race who have been willfully

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<sup>30</sup> “Self-Help, the Negro’s First Duty,” *Washington Bee*, October 13, 1917, 7.

<sup>31</sup> See “H.R. 11279: A Bill to Protect Citizens of the United States against lynching in default protection of the United States,” 65th Cong., 2nd sess., April 8, 1918 in Folder 1, Box C-242, Part I, Series, C, NAACP-LC.

murdered in the South.”<sup>32</sup> Nannie Helen Burroughs articulated these precise concerns in a letter to Congressman Dyer. He responded by urging her to “correct the impression that seems to have gotten into some places, to the effect that I introduced this bill on account of the lynching of the name of Prager.” He wrote that, “[o]f course you know that I have been working on this matter for a long time and had agreed to introduce such a Bill a good while before the lynching of Prager. He concluded by urging her and other political activists to “unite upon my Bill” and to keep him “fully posted as to your work in this matter.”<sup>33</sup>

African Americans in Washington, D.C., as around the country, rallied in support of the Dyer Anti-Lynching Bill. The “Red Anti-Lynching” Club at Asbury ME Church continued to hold prayer meetings.<sup>34</sup> The Washington, D.C., chapter of the NACW maintained a “District Union for the Suppression of Lynching and Mob Violence.”<sup>35</sup> And the local chapter of the NAACP also had an anti-lynching committee.<sup>36</sup> In April 1919, students at Howard University decided to cancel their Vesper Service, instead choosing to attend the local NAACP’s mass meeting at the Howard Theater to discuss the campaign against lynching. This meeting generated

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<sup>32</sup> “Anti-Lynching Bill is Now Before Congress,” *Chicago Defender*, April 13, 1918, 4.

<sup>33</sup> I have been unable to locate the letter that Nannie Helen Burroughs wrote to Leonidas Dyer on April 17, but it is referred to in Leonidas Dyer, Washington, D.C., to Nannie Helen Burroughs, Washington, D.C., May 3, 1918 in Folder 1, Box C-242, Part I, Series C, NAACP-LC.

<sup>34</sup> Minutes of the NACW’s Biennial Convention, Denver, Colorado, July 1918, 61, Frame 542, Reel 1, NACW-LC.

<sup>35</sup> Letter from Mary Church Terrell, Washington, D.C., to anyone, June 1920, Reel 5, MCT-LC.

<sup>36</sup> “Statement of Purpose,” January 17, 1919, NAACP Papers, Part 1, Series G, Box 34, Folder 6, NAACP-LC.

\$300 in donations and \$2,000 in subscriptions. An editorial in the *Howard University Record* stated “We hope that many other meetings will take place not only in Washington, but also in the Southern cities where these foul crimes are perpetrated.”<sup>37</sup> By 1919, then, various segments of the African American community in Washington, D.C., were engaged actively in anti-lynching work.

### **“The Eyes of the World are Upon Us”: The Dyer Anti-Lynching Bill**

With the election of Warren Harding in 1920 and installation of a Republican Congress, many African Americans expressed cautious optimism that these new administrations would enact policies of racial justice. Black women and men across the country, and especially in Washington, D.C., monitored the progress of the Dyer Anti-Lynching Bill in Congress. In May 1920, the bill finally moved out of Committee onto the House floor. But it was not until the following year in April 1921 that Congress actually debated it. Black Washingtonians affiliated with the NAACP’s local branch held a mass meeting with Congressman Dyer at the Howard Theater where he “outlined the provisions of the pending legislation.”<sup>38</sup>

Black women in Washington, D.C., worked to cultivate their own personal relationship with Congressman Dyer. In November 1921 African American women affiliated with the Phyllis Wheatley Young Women’s Christian Association (YWCA) initiated a huge organizing drive to raise money to support building maintenance and annual activities. They set their goal at \$20,000 and planned a mass meeting to

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<sup>37</sup> Rayford Logan, *Howard University: The First Hundred Years, 1867-1967* (New York: New York University Press, 1969), 219.

<sup>38</sup> “Anti-Lynching Bill Topic,” *Washington Post*, April 18, 1921, 5.

initiate the drive in the large auditorium of the newly built Dunbar High School. They invited Congressman Dyer to deliver the keynote address. To “an appreciative audience,” Dyer expressed his support for the YWCA, remarking that “every man, woman, and child should contribute to its support. He offered his services to the organization to help them to raise the budget, saying he would do every single thing he could do to help them.”<sup>39</sup> In inviting Congressman Dyer to attend their fundraising drive, women in the YWCA forged an important connection with a congressman who supported anti-lynching legislation and used their drive to raise funds for their own work to keep the anti-lynching bill in people’s consciousness.

The following year in January 1922, the House of Representatives finally began the process of debating the Dyer Anti-Lynching Bill. African American Washingtonians carefully followed these Congressional conversations. Situated in the nation’s capital, they had a unique vantage point. An article in the *Baltimore Afro-American* noted the “big colored audience, numbering over seven-hundred” who climbed into the Congressional galleries and “filled every available niche” to observe the hearings, expressing vocal protests when they disagreed with the statements of congressional opponents. Their voices were so loud that congressmen and the Speaker of the House ordered them to be quiet on several occasions.<sup>40</sup> The bill

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<sup>39</sup> “YWCA Notes,” *Washington Bee*, November 19, 1921, 1.

<sup>40</sup> See *Congressional Record*, 67th Cong., 2nd sess., (January 25, 1922), 1721; “Anti-Lynching Bill Precipitates Clash,” *Washington Post*, January 26, 1922, 3; “Anti-Lynching Debate Heard by Big Crowds on Yesterday,” *Baltimore Afro-American*, January 27, 1922, 1; telegram from James Weldon Johnson, Washington, D.C. to Walter F. White, New York City, January 25, 1922 in Folder 5, Box C-243, Part 1, Series C, NAACP-LC; and Sullivan, *Lift Every Voice*, 106.

alluded to the recent race riot in Washington, D.C., in 1919, thereby using race relations in the local city as a touchstone for national federal policy.<sup>41</sup>

Although the identities of the 700 black observers are unknown, it is likely that a large number were residents of Washington, D.C. By visiting the Congressional Galleries to observe the hearings, black Washingtonians continued their longer tradition of occupying federal space to both display and vocalize their support for Congressional legislation, in this case, the Dyer Anti-Lynching Bill.<sup>42</sup> For black residents of Washington, they might have had unique access to these spaces if they had a spouse, friend, or relative who worked as a charwoman, elevator operator, or messenger in this building. Attending the hearings about the Dyer Anti-Lynching Bill enabled African Americans to act as political surrogates for their friends and family outside of Washington, D.C.

The House of Representatives passed the Dyer Anti-Lynching Bill on January 26 1922 by a vote of 231 to 119 and sent it off to the Senate, which scheduled its hearings for June.<sup>43</sup> African Americans in Washington, D.C. carefully followed this fight. In 1922, black women held a meeting with James Weldon Johnson, the Executive Secretary of the NAACP. Johnson suggested that black citizens in Washington, D.C., stage a “silent parade” to show politicians that black citizens supported the passage of the bill. Johnson had orchestrated a similar parade

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<sup>41</sup> *Anti-Lynching Bill* 66th Cong., 2nd sess., 22 May 1920, 13.

<sup>42</sup> For information on black Washingtonians’ presence in Congressional hearings in the Reconstruction period, see Kate Masur, *An Example for All the Land: Emancipation and the Struggle Over Equality in Washington, D.C.* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 139.

<sup>43</sup> Zangrando, *The NAACP Crusade Against Lynching*, 64.

in New York City in 1917 in protest of the East St. Louis race riot. In March 1922, Theresa Lee Connelly, a teacher and member of the newly formed Colored Women's Republican League (CWRL), organized the Citizen's Protest Parade Committee to coordinate the movement. She gathered a pantheon of elite black women called the Committee of One Hundred to help plan the parade. Some of these activists were also members of the CWRL, including Mary Church Terrell and Julia West Hamilton. But other women joined as well, including housewife Leonora Scott who was married to Howard University professor Emmett J. Scott, Phyllis Wheatley YWCA Executive Secretary Martha A. McAdoo, teachers Marie Madre, Emma F. G. Merritt, and Ella Lynch, and poet Carrie Williams Clifford. Many of these women were affiliated with the NACW's District Union for the Suppression of Lynching.

Many events in Theresa Connelly's life prepared her to organize this parade. Theresa Lee had been in Boston, Massachusetts in 1881, the third child of Joseph and Christina. Her father, Joseph Lee, was a native of Charleston, South Carolina and he claimed ancestral ties with Robert E. Lee. In the 1870s, Joseph Lee migrated to Boston, married Christina, and established a successful restaurant and catering business in the city. He was also a noted inventor, creating a machine to mechanically knead bread.<sup>44</sup> Joseph Lee was active in Boston politics. In 1890 he had served as a delegate in the State Colored Citizen's Equal Rights Association.<sup>45</sup> He also expressed interest in working to spread industrial training for African

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<sup>44</sup> For information on the Lee Family, see William B. Gatewood, *Aristocrats of Color: The Black Elite, 1880-1920* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 112; and Marc R. Schneider, *Boston Confronts Jim Crow, 1880-1920* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1997), 75.

<sup>45</sup> "For Equal Rights," *Boston Globe*, May 5, 1890, 4.

Americans and Native Americans in the South.<sup>46</sup> And in 1904, he had hosted a meeting of the Boston Suffrage League inside his house on Columbus Avenue, where members voted to issue a memorial to Congress protesting the disfranchisement of African Americans in the South.<sup>47</sup> Being the daughter of Joseph Lee would have exposed Theresa to African Americans' political interests in both Massachusetts and throughout the South, as well as educated her in protest strategies.

The visitors in the Lee household also helped to inform the development of Theresa Lee's political knowledge. Archibald Grimké, the noted lawyer and civil rights activist, was a childhood friend of Joseph Lee; the two had met as boys in Charleston, South Carolina. When Grimké returned to Boston in 1898 following his diplomatic work in Santo Domingo, he and his daughter, Angelina Weld Grimké, boarded with the Lee family for several years. This household arrangement helped to nurture an important friendship between Theresa Lee and Angelina Grimké. Only two years apart in age, they both attended the Boston Normal School to become teachers.<sup>48</sup> In 1900 they attended a "Canata" fundraiser in Boston to raise money for the construction of a hospital and training school for African Americans in

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<sup>46</sup> "For Negro and Indian," *Boston Globe*, February 20, 1899, 3.

<sup>47</sup> "To Congress: Petition from Boston Suffrage League," *Boston Globe*, March 31, 1904, 6. For a discussion about African American politics in Boston, see Millington W. Bergeson-Lockwood, "Not As Supplicants, but as Citizens: Race, Party, and African American Politics in Boston, Massachusetts, 1864-1903" (Ph.D. diss., University of Michigan, 2011).

<sup>48</sup> Twelfth Census of the United States, Boston, Ward 12, Enumeration District 1322, Sheet 2; Dickson D. Bruce, *Archibald Grimké: Portrait of a Black Independent* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1993), 79; and Stephanie J. Shaw, *What A Woman Ought to Be and Do: Black Professional Women Workers in the Jim Crow Era* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 39.

Charleston, South Carolina.<sup>49</sup> They exchanged letters of friendship, anticipating summer visits and sharing frustrations about the drudgery of domestic chores.<sup>50</sup> In 1902, Angelina Weld Grimké graduated from the Boston Normal School of Gymnastics and moved to Washington, D.C., where she became a teacher at the Armstrong Manual Training School.<sup>51</sup> Theresa Lee moved to Washington, D.C., between 1903 and 1904, where she also became a teacher in the city's public schools.<sup>52</sup> By 1910, both Angelina Grimké and Theresa Lee were teaching at the prestigious Dunbar High School in Northwest Washington.<sup>53</sup>

Theresa Lee and Angelina Grimké cultivated not only a friendship, but also, a shared passion for abolishing lynching. In 1915, Angelina Grimké wrote a play, *Rachel*, which explored the psychological impact of lynching on a family. In the play, the protagonist, Rachel, learns that a lynch mob killed both her father and her brother. This information causes Rachel to reject prescriptive notions of womanhood through motherhood. Grimké's *Rachel* was the first known play written to protest lynching, and it helped to inspire a literary tradition in playwriting. The Drama Department of the Washington, D.C., branch of the NAACP performed *Rachel* in

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<sup>49</sup> "In Aid of a Colored Hospital," *Boston Globe*, February 27, 1900, 10.

<sup>50</sup> See, for instance, Theresa Lee, Boston, to Angelina Grimké, Boston, June 30, 1895, in Folder 11, Box 1, Collection 38: Angelina W. Grimké Papers and letter from Theresa Lee, Boston, to Archibald Grimké, Philadelphia, undated, in Folder 6, Box 4: Collection 39: Archibald Grimké Papers, both located in Manuscript Division, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Founders Library, Howard University, Washington, D.C.

<sup>51</sup> Gloria T. Hull, *Color, Sex, and Poetry: Three Women Writers of the Harlem Renaissance* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 117.

<sup>52</sup> *Boyd's Directory of Washington, D.C.*, 1904.

<sup>53</sup> "Most Popular Teacher," *Washington Bee*, June 18, 1910, 5.

1916 at the Miner Normal School.<sup>54</sup> Grimké argued that she wrote *Rachel* to arouse the conscience of white women. In an article in the *Competitor*, she argued that, “[w]hite women of this country are about the worst enemies with which the colored race has to contend. My belief was, then, that if a vulnerable point in their armor could be found they might become, at least, less inimical and possibly friendly.”<sup>55</sup> Throughout the 1920s, African Americans staged productions of *Rachel* across the country. And Angelina Grimké continued to be active in the anti-lynching movement by organizing with the Anti-Lynching Crusaders, a group formed in 1922 specifically to coordinate support for the Dyer Bill as it moved from the passage in the House of Representatives to debate and vote in the Senate.

Angelina Grimké and Theresa Lee Connelly shared the joint political purpose of raising consciousness about the inhumanity of lynching. Tracing the process of Theresa Lee Connelly’s activist experiences illuminates the importance of households in helping to shape her political knowledge. Her close friendships with both Archibald Grimké and his daughter, Angelina Grimké, would have helped to expose her to political causes, while a childhood in the Lee household would have introduced her to different forms of activism. All of these different experiences flowed into

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<sup>54</sup> For information on Grimké and her play, see Hull, *Color, Sex, and Poetry*, 118-128; Patricia Alzatia Young, “Female Pioneers in Afro-American Drama: Angelina Weld Grimké, Georgia Douglas Johnson, Alice Dunbar-Nelson, and Mary Powell Burrill” (Ph.D. diss., Bowling Green State University, 1986); and Kathy A. Perkins and Judith Louise Stephens, eds., *Strange Fruit: Plays on Lynching by American Women* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998).

<sup>55</sup> Angelina W. Grimké, “‘Rachel’: The Play of the Month: The Reason and Synopsis by the Author,” *Competitor* 1 (1916): 51-53.

Theresa Lee Connelly's motivations for staging this protest parade in support of the Dyer Anti-Lynching Bill.

Theresa Connelly and members of the Committee of One Hundred spent May and June preparing for the parade. They held their meetings at the newly dedicated Phyllis Wheatley YWCA building. The building's architecture, which featured multiple meeting rooms, a gymnasium, and a cafeteria, offered members of the Committee of One Hundred ample space to plan the details of the parade. Here women designed hundreds of banners for black Washingtonians to carry. They also mapped the parade route, determined the marching sequence for black organizations and institutions, and selected the dress code for all parade participants. They also raised money. Carrie Williams Clifford, for example, raised \$230.32 in support of the passage of the bill.<sup>56</sup> Members of the Committee of One Hundred, working with lawyer Shelby J. Davidson and minister Walter H. Brooks of the Nineteenth Street Baptist Church, sent a letter to the director of parks and buildings, obtaining permission to hold the parade.<sup>57</sup> They selected the parade to occur on June 14, which was Flag Day, thereby locating their struggle for justice within the larger, American narrative of freedom.

Theresa Connelly sent the heads of institutions in black Washington, including churches, mutual benefit societies, fraternal groups, and social and political organizations, letters inviting them to participate in the parade. She asked the heads of all of these organizations to serve as the "vice-presidents" of the Citizen's

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<sup>56</sup> "Silent Parade Report Made," *Washington Tribune*, July 22, 1922, 5.

<sup>57</sup> Letter from Col. C. O. Sherrill, Washington, D.C., to Shelby J. Davidson, et al., Washington, D.C., June 13, 1922 in Folder 826, Box 43, Washington, D.C. NAACP Branch Papers, NAACP-MSRC.

Lynching Protest Committee. “We are seeking ten or twenty thousand of our people in line of march,” she wrote, “to muffled drums, to show Congress and the world that we demand the protection of ours and the passage of this law.” She noted that this parade would coincide with the Dyer Anti-Lynching Bill having reached the Senate, and will be “under consideration and discussion.” She asked these organizational and institutional heads to circulate this letter to their church groups, mutual benefit associations, and organizations. By opening participation to all black citizens of Washington, D.C., Connelly demonstrated black women’s political inclusion. She concluded by noting that, “The eyes of the world are upon us. Let us make an outcry to the conscience of the world.”<sup>58</sup> Here Connelly referenced black Washingtonians’ visible location in the nation’s capital, indicating that their activism against lynching in a land that purported to be a beacon of democracy would attract a global audience.

Through a deliberate choice of clothing, march design, sound, and signage, African American Washingtonians claimed a space in their city’s monumental built environment to lobby for the passage of the Dyer Anti-Lynching bill. The parade and the ways that women, men, and children took up space in the city illuminated ways that black Washingtonians wished to define their community to their city, the nation, and the world.

A group of motorcycle police and “colored police officers” led the parade, along with the Grand Marshall. Following the members of the Committee of One Hundred and the Ministers of the City were seven divisions of marchers. The first

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<sup>58</sup> Letter from Theresa Lee Connelly, Washington, D.C., to “Dear Friend,” Washington, D.C., May 29, 1922, Folder 827, Box 43, NAACP Washington, D.C. Branch Papers, NAACP-MSRC.

division consisted of “tots in automobiles, Masonic bodies, girls aged 10-15, and Boy Scouts.” The second division featured “the Odd Fellows, Boys aged 10-15, Girls aged 15-20, and aged persons in automobiles.” The third division was composed of “Knights of Pythians, Girl Reserve, and the Women in White.” The fourth division consisted of the Knights of Jerusalem, Cliff Rock Men, Cliff Rock Women, and Business and Professional Men. Mutual benefit associations composed the Fifth Division, featuring the Elks, the Macabees, the Order of Moses, and the Independent Order of Saint Luke. The sixth division featured women and men affiliated with organizations not previously mentioned as well as “other individuals.” And the final division was military, including veterans from the Civil War, the Spanish American War, World War I, members of the Army and Navy, the American Legion, and other veteran organizations.

The parade sequence offers a lens into ways that black Washingtonians wished to present themselves. By beginning the parade with black police officers, they illuminated how African Americans played an important role in law enforcement. The prominence of mutual benefit associations in the protest parade points to their overall importance in black Washington. These institutions contained large memberships and often had chapters across the city. By choosing to represent black Washington through mutual benefit associations, members of the Committee of 100 illustrated the political and economic strength that existed in these organizations but also by having each of these organizations call their own members to action assured a larger mass base for the parade. The presence of children of all ages showed that opposition to lynching was widespread, but also that children, like adults,

were at risk of lynching. The parade formation conveyed how African Americans imagined women, children, and men as all part of their community. The decision to end the parade with African American veterans offered an explicit reminder of the contributions of black military service members to the United States.

African American women played a visible and important role in this protest parade. Beginning the parade with ministers and the “Committee of One Hundred” showcased their principal leadership and presented a dual—men and women—and equal leadership structure in the black community. African American women in Washington had spearheaded the parade, but their act of marching together with the ministers of the city suggests that they viewed these men as allies and partners in their political campaign to legally outlaw lynching. They also maintained a focus on themselves as the leaders without offending any who might have thought public political activities should have a male leadership. African American women were prominent in the membership ranks of mutual benefit associations, while the Girl Reserve and the Women in White were entirely female groups. Women and children’s white dress evoked the larger narrative of black women’s protests. Only a week earlier, hundreds of African American women and men in New York City had “braved a storm” to stage their own silent protest against lynching and support of the Dyer Bill.<sup>59</sup> And a few years earlier in June 1919, African American women and men in New York City had staged another anti-lynching parade where they women wore white dresses, hats, and Red Cross sashes.<sup>60</sup> The prominence of white might have

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<sup>59</sup> “600 Brave Storm in Anti-Lynch Parade,” *Afro-American*, June 9, 1922, 6.

<sup>60</sup> Brown, *Private Politics and Public Voices*, 2.

suggested the innocence of lynching victims, emphasized the peacefulness of the protest, and, for black women, also connected to the suffrage movement. Drawing on Ann Douglas's analysis of the NAACP's 1917 New York silent protest parade as "organized and conspicuous theater" occupying a "precarious psychological location between justified rage and creative restraint," Clare Corbould emphasizes that the powerful silence required bystanders to, in fact, fully engage the marchers; without any sounds to signify the meaning of the event, bystanders were required to "locate the aural, as it were, . . . in the bodies of the marchers, holding placards aloft." Given this attention to the bodies of the marchers, Corbould argues it was even more important that those black bodies be seen as orderly and peaceful—the silence and the white dress both contributing to this effect.<sup>61</sup>

The banners that protesters carried and the messages they chanted echoed the overall parade formation in juxtaposing African American patriotism against the barbarity of lynching. These messages were tailored to correspond to parade participants. For instance, one of the children's banners read, "We Are Fifteen Year Olds: One of Our Age was Roasted Alive." Women's messages focused on their loss as mothers and on the lynching of women. Signs read "What Would You Do if your Sick Mother were Hanged and her Bones Burned?" "We Mourn as Mothers Whose Sons might be Lynched," and "We protest the Burning of Babies and Women...American Canibalism." These banners situated African Americans as quintessential, patriotic Americans. Their banners demanded such things as "Equal Protection Under the Law" and "Make America Safe for American Citizens";

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<sup>61</sup> Clare Corbould, "Streets, Sounds, and Identity in Interwar Harlem," *Journal of Social History* 40, no. 4 (2007): 865.

criticized “mob trials instead of court trials”; and argued that “we fought for democracy: give it to us” and concluded with the global message that “The World Looks On in Wonder at America, the Champion of Democracy.” While African Americans in the city of Washington were not the only ones to hold an anti-lynching parade, theirs took on special significance in that its location in the nation’s capital, parading through the federal district allowed them to speak more fully as American citizens representing the interests of African Americans across the country.

Following the protest parade in the city, black Washingtonians vigilantly monitored the progress of the bill. In late June, the Senate Judiciary Committee narrowly passed the Dyer Bill by a vote of eight to six, sending it off to the Senate floor to be debated. The Citizen’s Protest Parade Committee viewed this victory as a sign that the protest parade had registered a “wholesome effect...of the pending legislation and the Press at large.” The Reverend Walter Brooks, an active member of the Citizens Protest Parade Committee, noted that, “[w]e think that we do not claim too much when we state the vote of the Sub-Committee of Judiciary in the Senate of 8 to 6 in favor of the bill on June 30<sup>th</sup>, was one of the far-reaching effects.”<sup>62</sup>

The following month in July, students from black colleges, including Howard University, traveled to Washington, D.C., to present President Harding a booklet on mob violence.<sup>63</sup> And also that summer, African American women living across the country formed a political organization called the Anti-Lynching Crusaders, which

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<sup>62</sup> Letter from Reverend Walter Brooks, the Citizen’s Anti-Lynching Protest Parade Committee, Washington, D.C., to Mary Church Terrell, Washington, D.C., 16 July 1922, Frame 371, Reel 5, MCT-LC.

<sup>63</sup> “Harding Gets Facts on Mobs Thru Booklet,” *Chicago Defender*, July 1, 1922, 3.

was designed to raise \$1,000,000 to fund anti-lynching publicity and lobbying by asking every black woman across the country to donate one dollar. The organization's slogan was "One Million Women United for the Suppression of Lynching." In total, at least 700 African American women volunteered as state workers for the Anti-Lynching Crusaders. In addition to fundraising, women affiliated with the Anti-Lynching Crusaders staged prayer meetings across the country.<sup>64</sup> Before the Senate was about to begin debating the Dyer Anti-Lynching Bill, Nannie Helen Burroughs initiated another "day of prayer" in support of the Bill.<sup>65</sup> The activities among the Anti-Lynching Crusaders and the Committee of One Hundred in Washington, D.C. indicate the ways that anti-lynching legislation was a central priority for many black women political activists.

In September 1922, the passage of the Dyer Anti-Lynching Bill began to appear less certain. President Harding, who had previously voiced support for the passage of the Dyer Anti-Lynching Bill, changed his mind, arguing that anti-lynching bill violated the Constitution. An article in the *Chicago Tribune* noted that, "[p]resident Warren Harding at the last minute knocked all the wind out of the bag of hope that the entire country has held for the passage of the Dyer Anti-Lynching Bill." The article continued, stating that, "[i]t is the opinion of the president of the United

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<sup>64</sup> For an excellent analysis of the Anti-Lynching Crusaders, see Brown, *Eradicating This Evil*, 144-150 and Angelica Mungarro, "How did Black Women in the NAACP Promote the Dyer Anti-Lynching Bill, 1918-1923?" *Women and Social Movements in the United States* 2002.

<sup>65</sup> Brown, *Eradicating This Evil*, 144.

States that the Dyer Bill is unconstitutional and that the Kellog Bill, designed to protect aliens, foreigners in the same manner, should be considered.”<sup>66</sup>

African Americans expressed keen disappointment that they had lost President Harding’s support for the passage of the bill. Thus black Washingtonians reached out to sympathetic congressmen and leaders to sustain the momentum of the bill. In November, Massachusetts Senator Henry Cabot Lodge arranged for members of the Equal Rights League to have a private meeting with Harding, where they pleaded with him to pass the bill.<sup>67</sup> Later that month a group of Southern Democrats banded together in the Senate and threatened to filibuster the Dyer Bill. Faced with the reality of defeat, liberal Republican Senators abandoned the bill in December 1922.<sup>68</sup>

Although the Senate rejected the bill, African Americans did not lose hope that it might ultimately pass. Their activism certainly did not diminish. The following year in March 1923, African American women in the NACW opened a legislative headquarters on the second floor of the recently opened Whitelaw Hotel in Northwest Washington.<sup>69</sup> The decision for black women to literally take up space in the city with a legislative headquarters signaled their increased visibility in partisan politics. But the fact that this “headquarters” was located in a hotel room that cost \$1 per week also indicates the very small budget for the NACW’s legislative work.

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<sup>66</sup> “Harding Tables Anti-Lynch Bill,” *Chicago Defender*, September 2, 1922, 1.

<sup>67</sup> “President Hears Dyer Bill Plea,” *Chicago Defender*, November 11, 1922, 1.

<sup>68</sup> “South Flames into Filibuster on Lynching Bill,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, November 29, 1922, 3.

<sup>69</sup> “Women’s Organization Opens Legislative Headquarters Here,” *Washington Tribune*, March 24, 1923, 1.

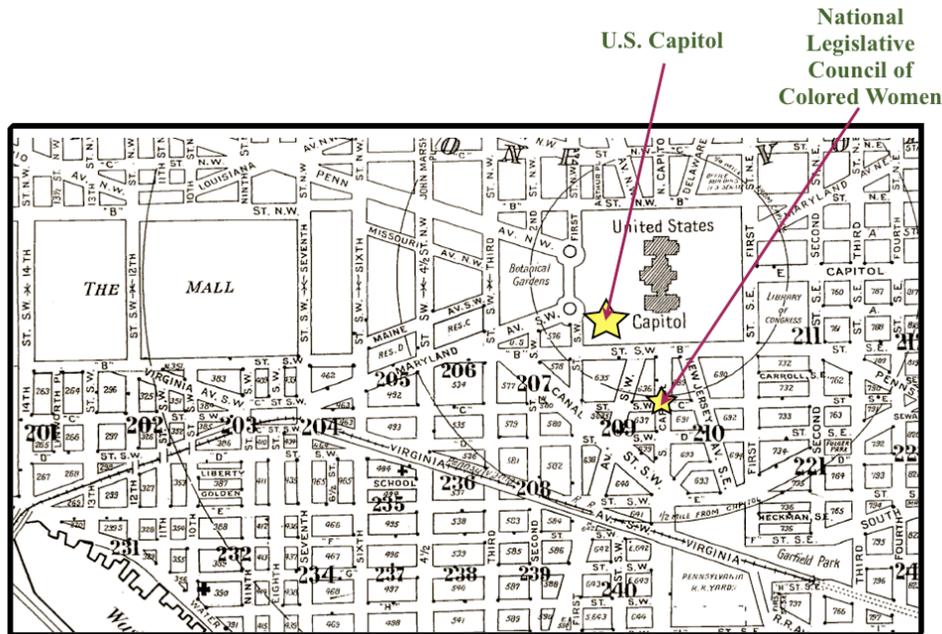
Mary “Mazie” Mossell Griffin became the director of the Legislative Headquarters. Griffin had been born in Pennsylvania to Dr. Nathan Mossell, a doctor, and Gertrude Bustle Mossell, a noted feminist writer and journalist. Griffin married her husband, Dr. J. H. Griffin and they raised their family in Pennsylvania. During the 1910s, she had been active in woman suffrage campaigns and also wrote articles about women’s political activities for the *Philadelphia Tribune*. In her opening letter to NACW members, Griffin announced the formation of the Legislative Headquarters and outlined its agenda. She noted that some of the most pressing legal questions concerned regulation of hours and wages, marriage and divorce laws, equal education in the South, the proposed Mammy Monument, and the Dyer Anti-Lynching Bill. The marriage and divorce proposals sought to universalize standards through federal law, including those which banned interracial marriage. Griffin wrote that, “we are maintaining our headquarters so that we may be able to put a stop to this rotten legislation.” She announced the formation of a “Legislative Chatauqua” which would occur on the campus of Howard University for three days in July.<sup>70</sup> Two years later in 1925 Mary Griffin expanded black women’s political outreach by forming the National Legislative Council of Colored Women, which continued to press for anti-lynching legislation. In a letter to Nannie Helen Burroughs, she wrote that she had “bought a house in D.C.—its not so large, but in a good location,” which would also serve as the headquarters for this new

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<sup>70</sup> Letter from M. Mossell Griffin, Washington, D.C., to “Co-Worker,” Undated, in Frame 547, Reel 5, MCT-LC.

organization.<sup>71</sup> Griffin's house was located at 13 C Street in Southeast right next to the Capitol (see figure 27).

**Figure 27: Location of the National Legislative Council of Colored Women**



**Source:** *Sanborn Maps* Washington, D.C., 1927-1928, Vol. 2, no. 28, Sheet 0a.

As this map illustrates, the National Legislative Council of Colored Women was located only one block away from the U.S. Capitol building. This close, geographic proximity to the central site of American lawmaking enabled black women in the National Legislative Council of Colored Women to carefully monitor the progress of various bills. And the symbolic significance of black women having a

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<sup>71</sup> Letter from M. Mossell Griffin, Washington, D.C., to Nannie Helen Burroughs, Washington, D.C., undated, in Folder 4, Box 10, Nannie Helen Burroughs Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C., (hereafter cited as NHB-LC).

legislative headquarters so very close to the Capitol building signaled the ways that they were beginning to take up more visible space in American politics.

On August 3, 1923 President Harding unexpectedly died in office and his vice-president, Calvin Coolidge, assumed the position. This sudden shift in presidential administrations offered African Americans a sliver of hope that the Dyer Anti-Lynching might pass with the stronger backing of President Coolidge.

### **“The People of this Country...Are Looking to the Men on the Hill”**

With the election of Calvin Coolidge as president in 1924 and installation of a new Congress and Senate, politically active black women and men in Washington, D.C., began to strategize ways to continue to press for anti-lynching legislation. In October 1924, in anticipation of his upcoming election, President Coolidge pledged his support for the passage of the Dyer Anti-Lynching Bill.<sup>72</sup> In December, following his election as president, Coolidge issued a national address where he declared that the “negro” was making progress and urged support for the passage of the bill.<sup>73</sup> Despite Coolidge’s support for the passage of anti-lynching legislation, Congress stalled.

But in December 1925, Congressman Leonidas Dyer reintroduced an anti-lynching bill in the House of Representatives and Illinois Senator William B. McKinley introduced the bill in the Senate. This bill in 1925 differed slightly from earlier bills because it would punish mobs regardless of whether the victim survived.

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<sup>72</sup> “Dyer Declares Coolidge is for Federal Anti-Lynch Legislation,” *Chicago Defender*, October 18, 1924, A9.

<sup>73</sup> “Coolidge Asks Fair Play,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, December 6, 1924, 1.

Congressman Dyer knew that it was going to be a tough fight. In a letter to Executive Secretary of the NAACP James Weldon Johnson, Dyer noted that the bill would “be passed again easily by the House of Representatives” but “the only thing that stands in the way of it becoming law is the Senate of the United States” and he feared the looming threat of a filibuster. Dyer asked Johnson to assist in helping to convince the Senate to pass the bill.<sup>74</sup>

Two months later in February 1926, a group of seven African Americans appeared before the Senate to testify at a hearing in the Judiciary Subcommittee on Senate Bill 121 “To Prevent and Punish the Crime of Lynching.” These people included NAACP Executive Secretary James Weldon Johnson, Reverend J. H. Branham, the Assistant Pastor of the Mount Olivet Baptist Church in Chicago; James L. Neil, the secretary of the National Equal Rights League, Thomas H. R. Clarke, a member of the National Equal Rights League, Edgar Brown of New York City, Mary Church Terrell of the National League of Republican Colored Women in Washington, and Marian D. Butler, the vice-president of the Women’s Political Study Club in Washington. The inclusion of two black women, representing separate groups, reflected the growth of African American women’s political organizing in the 1920s.

Each witness described the urgency of the anti-lynching bill from a different dimension. In his testimony, James Weldon Johnson pointed to the statistical work that the NAACP had conducted, which proved that African American men and women composed the disproportionate victims of this crime. Reverend Branham, on the other hand, situated his message within the post World War I context, arguing that

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<sup>74</sup> Letter from Leonidas C. Dyer, Washington, D.C., to James Weldon Johnson, New York City, December 10, 1925, in Folder 5, Box 247, Part I, Series C, NAACP-LC.

“America is looked upon and regarded as the most outstanding nation in the world” and that the crime of lynching contradicted that.<sup>75</sup>

In her testimony, Mary Church Terrell identified herself as “the first President of the National Association of Colored Women.” Although Terrell maintained dozens of organizational connections, she came to this hearing as representative of the NACW, identifying herself as having been its first national president. Then Terrell boldly announced that while she was, of course, coming “in the interest of colored women,” her primary concern on that day was “to speak in the interest of the white women of the South.” She told the committee that, “[w]hen white women apply the torch to the Negroes burned at the stake they are brutalizing themselves and their children to come.” She remarked that, “[w]hite women who apply the torch to burn colored men, as they have done more than once, when they become mothers of children, those children will undoubtedly be brutalized, and I think it is going to be more and more difficult to stop lynching, as had been suggested here, because the white mothers of the South are becoming more and more brutalized by these lynchings in which they themselves participate.”<sup>76</sup> Terrell’s strong statement contradicted entrenched notions about Southern white women, who were often constructed as innocent, pure, and the victims of rape at the hands of black men. By

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<sup>75</sup> Reverend Branham, as quoted in *To Prevent and Punish the Crime of Lynching, Hearing before a Subcommittee of the Committee of the Judiciary of the United States Senate, 69th Cong., 1st sess., Senate Bill 121, 16 February 1926* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1926), 38.

<sup>76</sup> “Anti-Mob Bill Nears Senate Debate,” *Chicago Defender*, February 20, 1926, 1; Testimony of Mary Church Terrell, *To Prevent and Punish the Crime of Lynching, Hearing before a Subcommittee of the Committee of the Judiciary of the United States Senate, 69th Cong., 1st sess., Senate Bill 121, 16 February 1926* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1926), 42-43.

inverting this idea, she cast white women as perpetrators of lynching while also warning of the dangers to white children of being brought up in a society, which allowed and even glorified such brutalization. Terrell's testimony worked to appeal to members of Congress who consistently argued for the rights and protections of white women.

Marian Ford Butler testified after Terrell and her statements differed substantially from Terrell's. Marian Ford had been born in Barnwell, South Carolina in 1876. Her father worked as a butler in a hotel, while her mother kept house. Butler had one younger sister, Rosa.<sup>77</sup> Marian Ford graduated from Benedict College in South Carolina and had pursued a variety of jobs, including a schoolteacher, the principal of Jenkins Orphanage in Charleston, South Carolina, and for six years, she worked as the Assistant Postmaster in Blackville, South Carolina.<sup>78</sup> Around 1910 she married William J. Butler, a clerk who worked in the Auditor's Office in the Post Office in Washington, D.C.<sup>79</sup> William Butler was a civic leader in Washington, D.C. When he had first moved to Washington, D.C., in the late 1890s, he lived as a boarder with the Houston Family on Tenth Street in LeDroit Park, consisting of William, his wife Mary, and their young son Charles, who would go on to become the famous civil rights lawyer. William Houston had recently graduated from Howard University Law

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<sup>77</sup> Tenth Census of the United States, 1880, Barnsville County, South Carolina, Enumeration District 24, Page 3; and *Boyd's Directory of Washington, D.C.*, 1900-1920.

<sup>78</sup> Information on Butler's different jobs comes from "Mrs. Marian Butler to Edit Society Page," *Washington Tribune*, April 18, 1925, 2.

<sup>79</sup> *Official Register of the United States Containing a List of Officers and Employees in the Civic, Military, and Naval Service on the First of July, 1895* Vol. II: The Post Office Department and The Postal Service (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1896), 14.

School, but worked with William Butler as a clerk in the Treasury Department.<sup>80</sup>

This household arrangement between Butler and Houston nurtured an important friendship between the two men. In 1915, William Houston, William Butler and five other men founded a mutual benefit organization in Washington, D.C. called the Supreme Order of Helpers.<sup>81</sup>

William and Marian Butler settled in a house they purchased on Montello Avenue in Northeast Washington. They later moved across town to Florida Avenue in Northwest Washington.<sup>82</sup> During World War I, Marian Butler volunteered with the YWCA in Newport News, Virginia. At some point between 1919 and 1920, William J. Butler died.<sup>83</sup>

As a widow, Marian Butler, like many women who lost their husbands, struggled financially. During the 1920s, she rented rooms in her house on Montello Avenue in Northeast to boarders. She also worked as a dressmaker and in 1925 she became the editor of the Society Page of the *Washington Tribune*.<sup>84</sup> But she struggled to pay her bills. In a letter to Nannie Helen Burroughs in 1927, Butler

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<sup>80</sup> Twelfth Census of the United States, 1900, Washington, D.C., Enumeration District 57, Sheet 5.

<sup>81</sup> See the letterhead of the Supreme Order of Helpers in Folder 6, Box 10, William Lepre Houston Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C., hereafter cited as WLH-LC; "Supreme Order of Helpers," *Washington Bee*, September 25, 1920, 1; and Genna Rae McNeil, *Groundwork: Charles Hamilton Houston and the Struggle for Civil Rights* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1983), 59.

<sup>82</sup> Thirteenth Census of the United States, 1910, Washington, D.C., Enumeration District 196, Sheet 4A.

<sup>83</sup> Fourteenth Census of the United States, 1920, Washington, D.C., Enumeration District 295, Sheet 13A; and letter from William L. Houston, Washington, D.C., to Charles H. Houston, Amherst, March 3, 1920, Folder 5, Box 8, WLH-LC.

<sup>84</sup> *Boyd's Directory of Washington, D.C.*, 1920-1930.

asked about the possibility of obtaining a job in the government. “Since so many Apartments have been opened for colored people in this section it is hard to keep rooms rented, and I have found myself getting behind for a year,” Butler wrote. “I sew day and night when I can get work, but,” Butler lamented, “sewing is not regular work.” Butler feared that if she did not find more work, she would “have to sell” her “house to keep from losing it.”<sup>85</sup> It was not surprising that the city directory in 1929 listed Marian Butler as a domestic worker.<sup>86</sup>

Marian Butler was also one of the most important political activists in 1920s-Washington, D.C. She was a member of the NAWE, a secretary of the local chapter of the NAACP, and secretary of the District Federation of Colored Women’s Clubs of Washington and Vicinity.<sup>87</sup> Leadership positions and membership in all of these different organizations helped to shape Marian Butler’s political knowledge about the process of policymaking.

Marian Butler’s childhood in South Carolina also helped to shape the development of her political worldviews and flowed into her activism. In her congressional testimony in 1926, Butler drew upon the memories of her childhood in Barnwell, South Carolina and the violence and terror she had witnessed to press for an anti-lynching bill. When she was thirteen years old, racial tensions in her town surged.<sup>88</sup> In October 1889, two black men, Mitchell Adams and Ripley Johnson,

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<sup>85</sup> Letter from Marian D. Butler, Washington, D.C., to Nannie Helen Burroughs, Washington, D.C., 5 June 1927 in Folder 4, Box 3, NHB-LC.

<sup>86</sup> *Boyd’s Directory of Washington, D.C.*, 1929, 345.

<sup>87</sup> “Mrs. Marian Butler to Edit Society Page,” *Washington Tribune*, April 18, 1925, 2.

were in a saloon that Adams managed. When the white landlord died, Johnson was accused of shooting him and Adams was accused of helping him escape the alleged crime. The police arrested both men and put them in jail where they awaited trial. And shortly thereafter, six more black men were arrested and accused of killing their white employers. Just before sunrise on December 28, 1889, a mob of 100 white men wearing masks broke into the jail and seized all eight black prisoners and took them to the woods where they hung them from trees and shot them dead. One witness noted that as many as “one hundred and fifty shots were fired.”<sup>89</sup> When citizens in Barnwell woke up the next morning, they saw the horrific site of “eight bodies riddled with bullets by the roadside, just outside the town limits.”<sup>90</sup> This horrific crime deeply affected the African American community in Barnwell, who raised the money to bury Adams and Johnson. The funeral for Mitchell Adams and Ripley Johnson attracted a crowd of 550 African Americans. Newspapers especially noted

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<sup>88</sup> Marian Butler did not explicitly refer to this lynching in Barnwell, South Carolina in 1889. I believe that she is referring to this lynching for the following reasons. Marian Butler was born in Barnwell, South Carolina where eight men were lynched at the same time; her narrative in the Congressional testimony matches the story of the Barnwell lynching; her sister, Rosa, married Robert Adams who was the son of a man who was lynched; and Rosa Adams visited Marian Butler on two separate occasions in Washington, D.C. in the 1910s. All of these pieces of evidence lead me to argue that Marian Butler’s testimony in Washington, D.C. centered on this episode in Barnwell, South Carolina in December, 1889.

<sup>89</sup> “Shot Down in Cold Blood,” *Charleston News and Courier*, December 29, 1889, 1.

<sup>90</sup> “Shot to Death, Terrible Tragedy in Barnwell, South Carolina,” *Atlanta Journal and Constitution*, December 29, 1889, 11. For more information on the lynching, see Terence Finnegan, “Lynching and Political Power in Mississippi and South Carolina,” in *Under Sentence of Death: Lynching in the South*, ed. W. Fitzhugh Brundage (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 189-218; Stephen Kantrowitz, *Ben Tillman and the Reconstruction of White Supremacy* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 171-172; and George Brown Tindall, *South Carolina Negroes, 1877-1900* (Columbus: University of South Carolina Press, 1952), 239-240. For other newspaper accounts, see “Eight Negroes Lynched,” *New York Times*, December 29, 1889.

the grief among black women. One black woman shouted that, “God should burn Barnwell to the ground.”<sup>91</sup> African Americans in Barnwell insisted that the white community pay for the burials of the six other men, which they did reluctantly. Only a few days after the Barnwell massacre, African American men across the state, mostly ministers, gathered at the Wesley ME Church in Columbia, South Carolina to demand the “vindication of law and order.”<sup>92</sup> Within a month of the lynching, black citizens in Barnwell staged mass meetings, where they discussed plans for emigration out of the state.<sup>93</sup>

Thirty-seven years later, Marian Butler recounted the Barnwell Massacre in Congress. “I want to say something,” Marian Butler announced, “because as a child I lived through the terrors of lynching.” She continued, noting that there were “eight men lynched in my town.” Besides the fact that she was an African American girl living in the town when these murders occurred, Butler had even more personal connections to the crimes. Butler’s younger sister, Rosa Ford, married Robert Adams, the son of Mitchell Adams, who died. Robert “Bob” Adams, like Marian Butler, was also thirteen years old when the lynch mob killed his father.<sup>94</sup> “My sister married the son of one of the men who was lynched—she married him afterwards,

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<sup>91</sup> “The Butchery in Barnwell,” *Charleston News and Courier*, December 30, 1889, 1 and Finnegan, “Lynching and Political Power in Mississippi and South Carolina,” 197.

<sup>92</sup> “The Colored Conference,” *Charleston News and Courier*, January 3, 1890, 1.

<sup>93</sup> “The Negroes are Going, Barnwell Will Soon be without its Colored Inhabitants,” *Atlanta Journal and Constitution*, January 23, 1890, 1.

<sup>94</sup> For information on Robert Adams, see Tenth Census of the United States, 1880, Barnwell, South Carolina, Enumeration District 24, Page 17 and Fourteenth Census of the United States, 1920, Barnwell, South Carolina, Enumeration District 49, Sheet 1A.

and so I know something about what a lynching means,” Butler told the committee. After Marian Butler married her husband and moved to Washington, D.C., Rosa Adams visited at least two times, no doubt, discussing the pain and trauma that her family continued to experience.<sup>95</sup>

Marian Butler explained that lynching harmed not only the persons who were killed, but inflicted trauma on the entire community. She argued that with the crime of lynching, “a whole town” could be “terrorized” with “women and children shrieking up and down the streets.” She somberly remarked that “[n]ever will I be able to get over it, never will I forget it. And so those kind of things are happening all over our country, every week the sad experience is being lived over by others.”<sup>96</sup>

Butler concluded her testimony by eloquently arguing that the federal government had to enact an anti-lynching bill. “There is no hope of it being stopped by the states, she argued. “The people of the country,” she announced, “are looking across to the men on this hill

and if we lose the hope here, wither will our hope turn. We are looking to God and we are looking to the men who sit on Capitol Hill to pass some law, to do something that is going to make the lives of the negroes the United States safe, and that is going to make the lives of the negroes of this country sweeter and better, and thereby we make better citizens, and the white and the colored people will be happier and better. Thank you.<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> Rosa V. Adams visited Marian Butler in August 1915 and September 1916. See “The Week in Society,” *Washington Bee*, August 28, 1915, 5 and “The Week in Society,” *Washington Bee*, September 30, 1916, 5.

<sup>96</sup> Testimony of Marian D. Butler, *To Prevent and Punish the Crime of Lynching*, “Hearing before a Subcommittee of the Committee of the Judiciary of the United States Senate, 69th Cong., 1st sess., Senate Bill 121, 16 February 1926 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1926), 44-45.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

Marian Butler's argument about the importance of federal action can be contextualized by considering her childhood and parts of her adulthood in South Carolina. In 1890, Ben Tillman became Governor of South Carolina. Two years into his term, Governor Tillman announced his "lynching pledge" that when a black man was accused of raping a white woman, he would personally lead the mob. While Tillman's public rhetoric contradicted his private actions, this statement nonetheless symbolized African Americans' weakening political status in South Carolina.<sup>98</sup> Living in different cities and towns across the state, including Charleston, Barnwell, and Blackville, Marian Butler would have witnessed firsthand the hardening of segregation practices. In moving to Washington, D.C., joining Republican organizations like the NLRCW and the WPSC, and recounting the racial terror of her childhood before a Congressional audience, Marian Butler was able to articulate the political interests of her sister and brother-in-law and her black community in South Carolina. The historian Lisa G. Materson has written about how black migrant women in Illinois served as "proxy voters" to politically represent the interests of their southern communities.<sup>99</sup> Black migrant women in Washington, D.C. like Marian Butler could not cast ballots for their friends and relatives in the South. But they could seize on their geographic location in Washington, D.C. to press for racial justice, thereby serving as political surrogates.

Despite these impassioned pleas, anti-lynching legislation in 1926 never materialized into a bill. The following year in December 1927, President Calvin Coolidge presented a pointed address to Congress, where he urged them to pass an

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<sup>98</sup> Kantrowitz, *Ben Tillman and the Reconstruction of White Supremacy*, 156.

<sup>99</sup> Materson, *For the Freedom of Her Race*, 77-80.

anti-lynching bill. One of the distinguishing features of this address was the fact that he justified African Americans' citizenship and fitness based upon their federal service. "No other race," Coolidge told Congress, "has accomplished as much in the same length of time." He believed that African Americans had "come up from slavery "to be prominent in education, the professions, art, science, agriculture, banking and commerce." Furthermore, African Americans were "the recipients of federal appointments and their professional ability has risen to a sufficiently high plane so that they have been entrusted with the entire management and control of the great veteran's hospital." He declared that "fifty thousand negroes are on the payroll of the federal government" and that "Their pay amounts to \$50,000,000 a year." Coolidge ended his address by urging Congress to "enact any legislation under the Constitution to provide for its elimination."<sup>100</sup>

Coolidge's assessment of federal employment contained no critique of segregation. Ever since Calvin Coolidge took office, African American civil rights organizations had visited him, urging him to banish civil service segregation. Even that year, only a few months earlier, national delegates in the National Equal Rights League—bearing a petition with 25,000 signatures from forty states—had held a private meeting with President Coolidge, pressing him to abolish civil service segregation in government offices.<sup>101</sup> Coolidge's plea for an anti-lynching bill, but not an end to civil service segregation, reveals the limits of his racial liberalism. The fact that African American federal employees figured so prominently in his address

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<sup>100</sup> "Wipe Out Lynching," *Pittsburgh Courier*, December 10, 1927, 1.

<sup>101</sup> "Asks Coolidge to Blot Out Segregation," *Chicago Defender*, July 10, 1926, 4.

reveals that the local black population in Washington, D.C. offered a point of reference for federal administrators as they proposed, crafted, and debated legislation. In May 1929, Leonidas Dyer tried, one more time, to pass the Anti-Lynching Bill in the House of Representatives.<sup>102</sup> African Americans responded by convening a huge anti-lynching conference. In December 1930, a total of 135 delegates streamed into Washington, D.C.<sup>103</sup> But these efforts were futile. Congress never passed an anti-lynching bill.

## **Conclusion**

Black women in Washington, D.C. worked as important activists to pass an anti-lynching bill in the 1920s. Black women transported their organizing and activism into various spaces across Washington, D.C., including churches, the YWCA, civic spaces, and the halls of Congress. In staging an anti-lynching parade, observing congressional debates, opening a legislative headquarters close to the Capitol, and testifying before Congress, African American women seized on their location in Washington, D.C., to enact justice for African Americans across the country. For many black women living in Washington, D.C., this political activism was deeply personal. For Theresa Lee Connelly in organizing the Silent Parade, she was able to follow in her father's footsteps by lobbying Congress for racial justice and also complement the work of her good friend, Angelina Grimké and her father, Archibald Grimké. And Marian Butler reached into the memories of her painful childhood in Barnwell, South Carolina and the trauma that continued to haunt her

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<sup>102</sup> "Dyer Again Introduces Anti-Lynching Bill," *Pittsburgh Courier*, May 11, 1929, 3.

<sup>103</sup> "Anti-Lynching Congress," *Pittsburgh Courier*, December 6, 1930, 10.

sister and brother-in-law to advocate that this violence should meet justice. Tracing the process of these experiences illuminates the ways that households, friendships, churches, and organizations helped to shape the development of African American women's political knowledge and influenced their activism in 1920s-politics.

## Chapter 7: “Fired the Women with a Determination: The Politics of Space

### Introduction

In September 1920, an article in the *Washington Bee* predicted that in the coming decade, black women would play a decisive role in initiating freedom movements across the city. In this period immediately before the presidential election, African Americans, both in Washington, D.C., and across the country, felt optimistic that if Republican candidate Warren G. Harding were elected, he would reverse some of the disappointing setbacks that black Washingtonians had experienced under Woodrow Wilson’s administration. When Wilson became president in 1913, he and his cabinet members had instituted racial segregation in the offices, restrooms, and cafeterias of federal buildings in Washington, D.C. and thwarted career advancement for many black government employees. The anticipated victory of Harding, then, coupled with the recent passage of the Nineteenth Amendment granting woman suffrage, convinced black Washingtonians that women’s activism would be a major factor in helping to end civil service segregation, specifically, and other forms of discrimination more broadly. “The present discrimination in various departments in Washington,” the article noted, “has to drive from the Capitol every semblance of oppression, discrimination, and segregation which the women have suffered under Democratic rule.”<sup>1</sup> Indeed, this article correctly anticipated African American women’s vibrant participation in their numerous fights against segregation in the 1920s.

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<sup>1</sup> “The Coming Election,” *Washington Bee*, September 18, 1920, 1.

During this decade, African American women and men in Washington, D.C. initiated a series of movements to make the physical landscapes of their city—the buildings, the neighborhoods, and the memorials—more racially democratic and inclusive. Specifically, African American women protested the segregation practices in the offices of the federal government, contested the restrictive covenants that excluded African American citizens from white neighborhoods, and opposed the construction of a memorial to the “faithful slave, Mammy” on the National Mall as well as the Ku Klux Klan’s (KKK) parades down Pennsylvania Avenue. Black women also worked to insert African American experiences into the national commemorative landscape by dedicating the Frederick Douglass House in Anacostia and lobbying Congress to pass a bill that would construct a National Negro Memorial.

Black women in Washington, D.C. challenged the local, spatial politics of their city that were controlled by the federal government, including Congress, presidential cabinet members, the Supreme Court, and even the President. For instance, the president and his cabinet members determined whether or not their departments would observe segregation practices. Because of this unique level of contact between black Washingtonians and the federal government, women and men in D.C. viewed their local city policies and ordinances as a touchstone to measure national racial practices, issues, and the overall place of African Americans in the United States.

African American women performed many different roles in their movements to make the spaces of their city more democratic. Two African American women organized and led crusades against segregation. When government stenographer

Gretchen McRae was transferred from the Pension Office to the all-black Land Office, she challenged this reassignment and pressed Republican administrations to end civil service segregation. McRae's activism sparked debates between politicians that traveled to Congress. And when Helen Gordon Curtis and her husband, Arthur Curtis, attempted to purchase a house in a neighborhood governed by a restrictive covenant, she became a plaintiff in a test case that traveled to the Supreme Court, which attempted to overturn residential segregation. Other black women in Washington worked to make the spaces of their city more inclusive by raising money, attending mass meetings, signing petitions, delivering speeches, testifying before Congress, and even writing poems.

As with other of their political activism, black women used the spaces of their households, churches, fraternal orders, neighborhoods, schools, and social and political organizations to initiate and sustain their movements against segregation and for democratic inclusion. During the 1920s, African American women reached into their dense network of social organizations in the city to create a Women's Defense Committee, which raised money for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP)'s legal defense fund. They also used the Phyllis Wheatley Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA) as a space to wage political movements. Members of the local chapter of the National Association of Colored Women (NACW) worked to dedicate the Frederick Douglass Memorial, protest the Mammy Memorial, and raise money and argue for the construction of the National Negro Memorial. And women in all of these different organizations worked with men in the NAACP, the Civic Center of Allied Organizations, and in their churches

and mutual benefit associations. Collectively, African American women connected their campaigns with important sites of black organizing and mobilization to make Washington a more democratic city.

Previous histories of black activism in the spatial politics of 1920s-Washington have often focused on a single episode, such as protests against the Mammy Memorial, campaigns against segregation in government offices, or the Supreme Court's decision to uphold restrictive covenants in *Corrigan v. Buckley*.<sup>2</sup> These studies have done remarkable work of fleshing out the intricate details of these movements, but have largely ignored the connections between all of these different laws and proposals, both in the minds of African Americans in Washington, D.C., as well as white lawmakers, judges, and politicians. Detaching these different episodes from each other obscures the importance of sequencing, often neglects to consider the ways that each outcome affected subsequent movements, and diminishes the cumulative impact of public policymaking in the overall narrative of civil rights for black Washingtonians in the 1920s.

For instance, the sequence by which these different episodes occurred was an important factor to consider in the debates about Washington, D.C.'s memorial landscape. When African Americans lobbied Congress for the passage of the

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<sup>2</sup> For work that examines the Mammy Monument, see Micki McEyla, *Clinging to Mammy: The Faithful Slave in Twentieth-Century America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 116-159; Francesca Morgan, *Women and Patriotism in Jim Crow America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 103; Joan Marie Johnson, "Ye Gave Them A Stone: African American Women's Clubs, the Frederick Douglass Home, and the Black Mammy Monument," *Journal of Women's History* 17, no. 1 (2005): 67-68; and Fitzhugh Brundage, *The Southern Past: A Clash of Race and Memory* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005), 10-11. For literature on segregated swimming pools, see Jeff Wiltse, *Contested Waters: A Social History of Swimming Pools in America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 142-146.

National Negro Memorial between 1924 and 1929, they were partially animated by the memory of the proposed “Mammy Memorial.” Outrage over this statue—that would have enshrined African American women’s anti-citizenship—only spurred black women and men to argue more passionately for the National Negro Memorial. In May 1926 President Calvin Coolidge signed a bill allocating money for segregated swimming pools in Washington, D.C. while the Supreme Court weighed in on a local Washington cause by upholding restrictive covenants. These back-to-back decisions that affirmed the doctrine of segregation caused black Washingtonians to view these different episodes as parts of a continuum about federal, especially Republican, approaches to race.

White lawmakers, like black Washingtonians, also understood the connections between these different policies. For instance, white Mississippi Representative James F. Byrnes passionately advocated for both the construction of the Mammy Memorial and the exclusion of black Washingtonians from the bathing beach at the Tidal Basin. And black Washingtonians offered an important frame of reference for white lawmakers in their decisions about federal racial policy. For instance, in 1927, President Calvin Coolidge delivered a pointed address to Congress, demanding that they pass an anti-lynching bill partially because of the service of black workers in the federal government. But while Coolidge imagined anti-lynching legislation as part of racial democracy, he could not imagine integration. In the 1920s, Coolidge signed a bill that ordered the construction of segregated swimming pools in Washington, D.C. and permitted the continuation of segregation in the federal government. And Congress rarely distinguished between legislation affecting African Americans living

across the country and African Americans living in Washington, D.C. The visibility of African Americans in spaces across Washington, D.C.,—and the roles that they would play in those spaces—remained a critical point of debate. Even when Congress addressed matters that would affect black citizens across the nation, the experiences, activities, and activism of black Washingtonians offered a salient point of reference.

Black Washingtonians participated in complex debates about spatial politics. Some of the battles black Washingtonians waged in the 1920s involved restricted access to certain spaces, such as neighborhoods governed by restrictive covenants. But other conflicts about space also centered on status. White clerks in the federal government expressed opposition to the prospect of black clerks working beside them in the same office, but offered no critique of black service workers collecting their trash, delivering their messages, or operating their elevators. Similarly, some white women and men advocated for the construction of a memorial that depicted an African American woman as a faithful slave, rather than a citizen. And some disputes addressed the quality of space. Activists were conscious about ways that racial discrimination intersected with the environment; African Americans often worked, lived, and played in the more undesirable places across the city, spaces that were unhealthy, difficult to access, or even hidden from public view. In the 1920s, black workers in the Pension Office of the Treasury Department were all reassigned to a tiny room. Black children were forced to swim in “germ-ridden” Buzzard’s Point while white children splashed around at the sparkling new bathing beach beside the

Tidal Basin. African American activism, then, critiqued all of the different ways that racial hierarchy was manifest in spatial terms.

During the 1920s, black women in Washington worked to make the spaces of their city reflect African Americans' citizenship rights, and in doing so, worked to uphold the citizenship rights of African Americans across the country.

### **“Our Party Has Come To Power”**

For many black residents of Washington, the segregated offices of the federal government constituted one of the most infuriating spaces of discrimination. For one thing, this segregation was relatively new. In 1912, Woodrow Wilson was elected the first Southern president since Reconstruction. When his administration assumed power in 1913, Wilson's cabinet members formally instituted segregation in the workspaces of the federal government. Civil service segregation meant the creation of separate bathrooms, cafeterias, and workspaces for government workers. But this separation also meant exclusion and inequality. Some federal office buildings could not readily accommodate separate facilities, forcing African Americans to use inferior restrooms, eat their lunch in small spaces, and work in unpleasant conditions. As the historian Eric Yellin has argued, the segregation of government spaces also meant that black civil servants' prospects for promotion and career advancement diminished.<sup>3</sup> Through letters, mass meetings, and a full-scale confrontation between President Wilson and Boston-based civil rights activist William Monroe Trotter,

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<sup>3</sup> Eric S. Yellin, “In The Nation's Service: Racism and Federal Employees in Woodrow Wilson's Washington” (Ph.D. diss., Princeton University, 2007), 140-193.

African Americans tried to end these segregation practices, but they were largely unsuccessful.

During the 1920s, African Americans continued to wage battles against segregation in government offices. But the circumstances of the decade encouraged black Washingtonians to adjust their protest tactics. African Americans pointed to their loyalty to the Republican Party as a reason why segregation in the federal government should cease. They also referenced their military service and patriotism from World War I in their campaigns. And with the marked increase of black women's employment in federal departments, as clerical workers, stenographers, and typists, they also assumed a more visible role in protests, often drawing on gendered arguments about ways that segregation affected black women. An examination of three protests—the first in 1921 in the Treasury Department, the second in 1927 in the Interior Department, and the third in 1928 in the Commerce Department—reveals how African American workers in the federal government used the postwar climate, restoration of Republican administrations, and the rise of black women in the clerical workforce to protest segregation in the 1920s.

Black Washingtonians resumed their fight against civil service segregation with the inauguration of Warren G. Harding in 1921. When Harding was sworn into office in March, many African Americans felt optimistic that his Republican administration would reverse Wilson's segregation policies.<sup>4</sup> Although Harding had refused to place the issue on his campaign platform, he had promised NAACP

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<sup>4</sup> For additional information on African American loyalty to the Republican Party, see Richard B. Sherman, *The Republican Party and Black America: From McKinley to Hoover, 1896-1933* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1973).

members that, as president, he would abolish the practice.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, according to a National Equal Rights League Memo, during his campaign Harding had argued that, “[i]f the United States cannot prevent segregation in its own service we are not in any sense a democracy.”<sup>6</sup> In anticipation of this integration order, black workers in the Treasury Department began to push for civil service desegregation soon after Harding became president.

Within days of Harding’s inauguration on March 4, 1921, black male workers in three Treasury Department bureaus began to use their white counterpart’s restrooms, encountering hostility and outrage from some white employees.<sup>7</sup> Clarence M. Hyslop, a white worker in the Sixth Auditor’s Division, a department with historically high rate of African American employees, was horrified by this activism and wrote a letter to Treasury Secretary Andrew W. Mellon, outlining these practices. “Since the fifth of March,” Hyslop wrote, African American workers in his division had “flocked to the white men’s toilet like flies around a molasses barrel.”<sup>8</sup> Hyslop

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<sup>5</sup> Harding promised NAACP members he would issue an executive order to end civil service segregation when he assumed office. See Minutes of the Board of Directors, September 13, 1920, Folder 14, Box A-2, NAACP-LC; and Richard D. Kane, “The Federal Segregation of the Blacks During the Presidential Administrations of Warren G. Harding and Calvin Coolidge,” *The Pan African Journal* 7, no. 2 (1974): 155.

<sup>6</sup> Warren G. Harding, as quoted in Stephen R. Fox, *The Guardian of Boston: William Monroe Trotter* (New York: Atheneum, 1970), 237.

<sup>7</sup> The historian Sharon Harley notes that African American clerks were most prominent in bureaus where African American men were administrators, such as the Sixth Auditor’s Division of the Treasury Department and the Office of Recorder of Deeds. See “Black Women in a Southern City: Washington, D.C., 1880-1920” in *Sex, Race, and the Role of Women in the South*, ed. Joanne V. Hawks and Sheila L. Skemp (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1983), 63.

<sup>8</sup> See Clarence M. Hyslop, Washington, D.C., to Andrew W. Mellon, Washington, D.C., 16 March 1921, Folder 6, Box 9, Entry 415, General Records of the Treasury Department, Office of the Chief Clerk, 1913-1949, Treasury Department Papers, Record

ended his letter by alluding to patriotism, claiming that “the white men” were “suffering indignities that no free American can long endure.”<sup>9</sup> Clarence Hyslop was not the only civil service worker to notice and respond to African American violation of segregated restrooms policy. Treasury Department administrators received similar complaints from white male workers in the Supervising Architect’s Office and the Post Office, indicating heightened levels of black non-compliance in the weeks after Harding’s inauguration.<sup>10</sup> These black workers, cognizant of a new political party taking power, strategically claimed racially inclusive space within the federal buildings where they worked.

One month later in April, three African American clerks in the Treasury Department sent a petition to Treasury Secretary Mellon expressing their opposition to segregation and asking that he eliminate the practice. These men included internal revenue clerk Jessie J. Porter, custodian clerk of vaults and files Robert P. Rhea, and clerk in the U.S. Treasurer’s Office, John T. Howe.<sup>11</sup>

These men had all been born in southern states, but migrated to Washington, D.C. Jessie Porter, a native of Arkansas, was part of a club of Arkansans in

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Group 56, National Archives II, College Park, Maryland, (hereafter cited as Treasury-NARA).

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 1.

<sup>10</sup> See William H. Walsh, Washington, D.C., to W. G. Platt, Washington, D.C. 18 March 1921 and Assistant Secretary of the Treasury to Mr. Gilbert, 25 March 1921, Folder 6, Box 9, Entry 415, Treasury-NARA.

<sup>11</sup> See Neval Thomas, et al., Washington, D.C., to Ogden Mills, Washington, D.C., 4 April 1928, Folder “Personnel: Segregation of Employees in the Treasury Department, 1924-1932,” Box 107, Entry 191, Treasury-NARA.

Washington and a fundraiser for the YMCA.<sup>12</sup> Robert P. Rhea had been born in Tennessee in 1877, while John T. Howe was a native of Wilmington, North Carolina.<sup>13</sup> In 1897, Howe was elected to the state's House of Representatives. One year into his term, white men initiated a white supremacy campaign to enact segregation and disfranchisement across the state. Racial tensions escalated as newspaper editor Alexander Manly wrote controversial articles and white men and women in North Carolina held a white supremacy parade that prominently featured Senator Ben Tillman, the "liberator" of South Carolina. In November 1898, John Howe was part of a cohort of thirty-two black citizens who submitted a letter that denounced Manly's editorials and pressed for the "interest of peace." But this activism could not compete with the waves of violence that appeared across the state. Hundreds of white men banded together as Red Shirts and Rough Riders to murder black North Carolinians and drive them out of their state. This event became known as the Wilmington race riot. John Howe and his wife, Aurelia, left Wilmington and moved to Washington, D.C.<sup>14</sup>

Besides their employment in the Treasury Department, Howe, Porter, and Rhea were all members of fraternal orders. Robert Rhea was the treasurer of a local chapter of the Elks in Washington, Jessie Porter appears to have been a member of

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<sup>12</sup> See Fourteenth Census of the United States, Washington City, Enumeration District 40, Sheet 1B; "The YMCA Recruiting," *Washington Bee* 14 April 1917, 4; and "The Nation's Capital," *Freeman*, December 14, 1912, 1.

<sup>13</sup> Fourteenth Census of the United States, Washington City, Enumeration District 191, Sheet 7B.

<sup>14</sup> For information on the Wilmington race riot, see H. Leon Prather, Sr., "We Have Taken A City: A Centennial Essay," in *Democracy Betrayed: The Wilmington Race Riot of 1898 and Its Legacy*, ed. David S. Cecelski and Timothy B. Tyson (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 15-42.

the Elks because in 1934 he was elected treasurer, and John Howe was a member of the Grand Lodge of the Masons of North Carolina.<sup>15</sup>

In their petition, these men alluded to the contradictions of segregation in Washington, D.C., a city that often was heralded as the capital of democracy. By introducing themselves to Mellon as “fellow citizens,” they cast civil service segregation as a perverse form of injustice that contradicted the tenets of the American creed. Workers were “humiliated” with separate restrooms, and requested that Mellon abolish the practice so that “justice” could prevail and “the fundamentals of the Declaration of Independence” could be “upheld.”<sup>16</sup>

Examining the totality of activism against civil service segregation in 1921 illuminates the complexity of black resistance. By signing a petition African American workers registered their discontent with segregation through a formal letter. But they also disregarded segregation orders by claiming the white bathroom as an integrated space. During the transitional months when Harding entered the White House and new cabinet secretaries and staff oriented themselves to their positions, black workers tested that unstable climate by claiming spaces, in this case, using white restrooms. This activism contradicts scholarly claims of black acceptance toward civil service segregation during the 1920s.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> For Rhea see “‘Hello Bills’ to Own Washington Next Week,” *Baltimore Afro-American*, July 23, 1910, 1; For Porter see, “Elks in Tilt Over Convention,” *Chicago Defender*, November 24, 1934, 1; and for Howe see, “Big Meeting of Masonic Order,” *Baltimore Afro-American*, December 31, 1910, 3.

<sup>16</sup> Robert P. Rhea, J. J. Porter, and John T. Howe, Washington, D.C., to Andrew W. Mellon, Washington, D.C., 8 April 1921, Folder 6, Box 9, Entry 415, Treasury-NARA.

<sup>17</sup> The scholarship that addresses African American efforts to end civil service segregation during the 1920s includes: August Meier and Elliott Rudwick, “The Rise of

Administrators in the Treasury Department were uncertain how to resolve the issue of civil service segregation. The Assistant Secretary of the Treasury acknowledged on March 25 that “the question” was “a most delicate one” that could “easily become very troublesome.”<sup>18</sup> On that same day, Neval H. Thomas, a history teacher at the prestigious black M Street High School and chair of the Education Committee for the Washington, D.C. branch of the NAACP, joined the fight by writing to Secretary of the Treasury Andrew W. Mellon, asking him to abolish the “humiliating” segregation policies. Here Thomas seized on African Americans’

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Segregation in the Federal Bureaucracy,” *Phylon* 28, no. 2 (1967): 178-184; Constance McLaughlin Green, *The Secret City: A History of Race Relations in the Nation’s Capital* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968), 199-203; Richard D. Kane, “The Federal Segregation of the Blacks During the Presidential Administrations of Warren G. Harding and Calvin Coolidge,” 166-168; Lewis Newton Walker, Jr., “The Struggles and Attempts to Establish Branch Autonomy and Hegemony: A History of the District of Columbia Branch National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, 1912-1942” (Ph.D. diss., University of Delaware, 1979), 119-122; Desmond S. King, *Separate and Unequal: Black Americans and the U.S. Federal Government* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 12-15; and finally, Schneider, “*We Return Fighting*,” 290-293. Meier and Rudwick argued that segregation flourished under both Republican and Democratic administrations, and in fact worsened in the 1920s with Harding, Coolidge, and Hoover. Green posited that during the 1920s, black civil service workers’ fear of unemployment eclipsed outrage over civil service segregation. Precisely because workers did not articulate their grievances, NAACP leaders lacked a sufficient constituency to launch a successful campaign against civil service segregation. She devoted significantly more attention to the 1910s-era protests. Walker argued that protests were unsuccessful in the 1920s because of the lack of cooperation between the NAACP’s Washington, D.C. branch and the national office, as well as the national office’s refusal to provide adequate funding for the fight. While Schneider recognized some of the victories that the branch won, he argued that Neval Thomas’s difficult personality thwarted collaboration between the local and national branches. Richard D. Kane, the only scholar to focus on the 1920s-era struggles, has argued that a number of factors impaired the effectiveness of the NAACP’s protests. First, internecine disagreements between the NAACP’s local Washington, D.C. branch and national office diverted attention away from protests. Second, local and national NAACP leaders did not alert prominent whites to the cause. And finally, efforts failed because African American civil service employees expressed reluctance to jeopardize their jobs, and, with the exception of a few daring workers, silently endured segregated conditions. However Kane’s work has not addressed how African Americans situated civil service segregation within the political and cultural context of the 1920s.

<sup>18</sup> Letter from Assistant Secretary of the Treasury, Washington, D.C., to Mr. Gilbert, Washington, D.C., 25 March 1921, Folder 6, Box 9, Entry 415, Treasury-NARA.

electoral loyalty to the Republican Party by reminding him that “our party has come to power” and African Americans expected the Harding administration to abolish civil service segregation.<sup>19</sup> Although the outcome of these protests remains unclear, the NAACP’s 1928 survey of civil service segregation did not include Treasury Department restrooms, suggesting that these protests were successful.<sup>20</sup> Neval Thomas served as the president of the local branch of the NAACP in Washington, D.C. throughout the 1920s. He devoted nearly all of the energies of this branch to ending segregation in the federal government.

### **“How Our Girls Are Humiliated”**

This particular fight in the Treasury Department centered on spaces inhabited by black and white men. But as the 1920s progressed, civil service segregation fights increasingly surfaced in relation to those federal workspaces in which black and white women clerks and stenographers were employed. By 1928 black workers composed 9.6 percent of the civil service workforce in Washington, but most labored in menial jobs, such as messengers, elevator operators, janitors, and charwomen, positions that contained almost no white workers.<sup>21</sup> Civil service segregation fights erupted among

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<sup>19</sup> Letter from Neval H. Thomas, Washington, D.C., to Andrew W. Mellon III, Washington, D.C. 25 March 1921, Folder 6, Box 9, Entry 415, Treasury-NARA.

<sup>20</sup> See Walter White, et al., “Report on Segregation in Government Departments,” 10-17 August, Folder 10, Box C-403, NAACP-LC.

<sup>21</sup> In 1928, African Americans composed 9.6 percent of the workforce. For this figure, see Margaret C. Rung, *Servants of the State: Managing Diversity and Democracy in the Federal Workforce, 1933-1953* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2002), 46. A figure for the precise number of civil service workers in 1928 was unavailable, but in 1931, it was estimated that 71,159 workers were employed for the government in Washington, D.C. For a breakdown of black workers in civil service positions in 1928 see “Negroes in the United States Service at the close of Fiscal Year Ended June 30, 1928” in Folder 10, Box C-

specific segments of the work force where black and white workers labored in comparable positions. Between 1920 and 1930, the number of black women stenographers almost doubled, and the number of black women clerks rose as well. No other population in civil service positions experienced as marked career advancements in clerical work or stenography during the 1920s.<sup>22</sup> A significant number of black women clerical workers and stenographers entered segregated workspaces in government bureaus during the 1920s, making civil service segregation increasingly a black women's labor issue. These changing labor demographics caused the NAACP and black newspapers to especially focus on black women as the victims of civil service segregation.

As the 1920s progressed, the NAACP's gendered strategy was manifest in black newspaper articles. *The Cleveland Gazette*, an African American newspaper in

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403, NAACP-LC. For a discussion of the total number of workers see Lorenzo J. Greene and Myra Colson Callis, *The Employment of Negroes in the District of Columbia* (Washington, D.C.: Association for the Study of Negro Life and History, 1931), 58.

<sup>22</sup> The 1920 Occupational Census recorded 87 black women stenographers and typists, whereas the 1930 Occupational Census recorded 163 black women stenographers and typists. In 1920, 548 black women worked as clerks, whereas by 1930 that number had risen to 650. White women, on the other hand, did not experience such marked increases. For example, the 1920 Occupational Census recorded 8,154 white women stenographers, and by 1930 that figure had declined to 8,117. For black men in 1920, 1,184 worked as clerks and by 1930 that figure had dropped to 1,149. White male clerks declined as well. In 1920 the census listed 15,135, and by 1930 that figure had declined to 13,807. Thus black women were the only population to experience career expansion in clerical work and stenography between 1920 and 1930. For figures from 1920, see William C. Hunt, U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Fourteenth Census of the United States: Population: Occupations. Males and Females in Selected Occupations* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1923), 897-900 and for 1930 see Alba M. Edwards, U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Fifteenth Census of the United States: 1930, Occupation Statistics. United States Summary* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1932), 11-14. These figures were not limited to government positions, but Sharon Harley notes that the vast majority of clerical workers and stenographers, especially among African Americans, worked in government positions. See Harley, "Black Women in a Southern City," 63.

Ohio, provided the best coverage of the civil service fights during the 1920s. The editor was a close friend of the NAACP leader Neval Thomas, and printed the same article on civil service segregation every week during the 1920s. Beginning in 1924, the headline for this article read “Segregation an Outrage!: How Our Girls Are Humiliated.”<sup>23</sup> Another article from the *Cleveland Gazette* approached the issue of civil service segregation from the vantage points of gender and class, and argued that African American women government workers were cultivated and refined, unlike their white women counterparts. “They are girls from our best homes, most of them with high and normal school training, and fine culture,” the article emphasized. “The white girls are of no such grade” and earn “high wage[s] for mediocre talent.”<sup>24</sup> In 1927, Neval Thomas, now president of the Washington, D.C. branch of the NAACP, criticized the Bureau of Printing and Engraving’s treatment toward black women. An article in the *Chicago Defender* discussed Thomas’s critique that “our ladies” worked in segregated conditions in the Bureau of Printing and Engraving. Furthermore, white officials referred to “white ladies as ‘Miss’ and our ladies by their first names.”<sup>25</sup> These examples illustrate how the NAACP helped to position black women as the female victims of civil service segregation during the mid-1920s.

Segregation expanded and evolved during Calvin Coolidge’s presidency, which began in August 1923. Cabinet members extended segregation in their departments by promoting black workers to administrative positions, assigning them

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<sup>23</sup> See, for example, “Segregation an Outrage!” *Cleveland Gazette*, August 23, 1924, 3.

<sup>24</sup> “Segregation an Outrage!,” 3.

<sup>25</sup> “Protest Jim Crow in the Printing Bureau,” *Chicago Defender*, April 23, 1927, 4.

tedious jobs such as files or stating accounts, and then placing them in rooms with all-black subordinate staffs.<sup>26</sup>

The next large-scale protest against civil service segregation occurred in 1927 in the Interior Department's Pension Office. On August 1, 1927, Secretary of the Interior Hubert D. Work ordered a "reorganization" of the Pension Office, appointed an African American man to an administrative post as chief of the Files Division, and transferred twenty two black employees from different Treasury Department posts to this consolidated black bureau. Work viewed this "reorganization" as a positive event, and noted that "many of the colored employees in the Pension Office" felt "complimented by the formation of the new Files Division, which has been made entirely the responsibility of colored employees."<sup>27</sup> However, most black workers in the Pension Office did not view the "reorganization" with such sanguinary terms.

In early August, thirty-six African American clerks in the all-black Files division protested their reassignment in a petition to Work. The signers objected to the "reorganization" on two counts. First, African American workers considered it insulting that they had to work with an exclusively black staff in a different room. Spatial separatism, they argued, was stigmatizing. And next, they objected to their transfer to the "Files Division," which was a demotion for many employees, some of whom had previously engaged in more stimulating work.<sup>28</sup> As they noted, the "Files

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<sup>26</sup> For additional information on Coolidge and civil service segregation, see John L. Blair, "A Time for Parting: The Negro during the Coolidge Years," *Journal of American Studies* 3, no. 2 (1969): 182-185.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>28</sup> See petition from Gretchen McRae, et al., Washington, D.C., to the Honorable Hubert D. Work, Washington, D.C., 6 August 1927, Folder 9, Box C-403, NAACP-LC.

Division and the allocations in it” were “among the lowest in the office.”<sup>29</sup> Since the stereotype of black intellectual inferiority persisted into the 1920s, placing African Americans in charge of file work represented collective downgrading.

Gretchen D. McRae, a stenographer, led these protests (see figure 28). McRae had been born in North Carolina in 1901, but migrated as a young child with her father and sisters to Colorado Springs, Colorado, where she graduated from high school. In 1919, Gretchen and her older sister, Almena, took the civil service exams and moved to Washington, D.C. to work in the government.<sup>30</sup> Gretchen McRae first worked as a typist in the War Department, but in 1921 moved to the Interior Department as a stenographer. In addition to her government work, McRae was involved in many different aspects of black Washington’s political culture. She was a member of the Women’s Business League; in 1924, she and Ella Lynch, a teacher, sold periodicals and books at the organization’s carnival at the Metropolitan AME Church.<sup>31</sup> In addition, she worked as a subscription representative, traveling across the city to sell and deliver newspapers and periodicals, such as the *Crisis*, *Opportunity*, the *Pittsburgh Courier*, and the *Chicago Defender*.<sup>32</sup> Finally, she was

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<sup>29</sup> See petition from Gretchen McRae, et al., Washington, D.C., to the Honorable Hubert D. Work, Washington, D.C., 6 August 1927, Folder 9, Box C-403, NAACP-LC.

<sup>30</sup> Fourteenth Census of the United States, Washington City, Enumeration District 207, Sheet 12A.

<sup>31</sup> “Women’s Business League,” *Washington Tribune*, March 8, 1924, 2.

<sup>32</sup> John Stokes Holley, *The Invisible People of the Pikes Peak Region: An Afro-American Chronicle* (Colorado Springs: Friends of the Pikes Peak Library, 1990), 145.

an active member in the 1920s of the local chapter of the NAACP, serving on the Entertainment Committee.<sup>33</sup>

**Figure 28: Gretchen McRae**



**Source:** *Lever*, 1917, Local History Collection, Pikes Peak Library District

Protests and petitions were not new to Gretchen McRae; in 1924 she had submitted a formal petition requesting that her grade be elevated, and although this request was denied, she earned a raise in pay. For someone as experienced as McRae, whose previous work was in the Interior Department’s Medical Division, being demoted to the “Files Division” was insulting. The petition that McRae and other workers signed highlighted African Americans’ service in World War I as the reason why civil service segregation should be abolished: “Segregation on account of race is

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<sup>33</sup> See letter from Gretchen McRae, Washington, D.C., to Richetta Randolph, New York, 11 September 1928, in Folder 11, Box G-36, NAACP-LC.

un-American, and undermines the morals of the employees affected, some of whom in this instance are ex-servicemen.”<sup>34</sup> Here, as in the Treasury protest, black workers in the Interior Department cast civil service segregation as an institution that threatened democracy and American patriotism. By discussing ex-servicemen, black activists took a page from Warren Harding’s 1920 campaign textbook where he praised black soldiers whose “sacrifices in blood on the battlefields . . . entitled them to all of freedom and opportunity, all of sympathy and aid that the American spirit of fairness and justice demands.”<sup>35</sup> Referring to themselves as “American Citizens,” the signers employed a liberal integrationist language, arguing for their first-class citizenship rights.

In mid-August, local NAACP president Neval Thomas joined the workers’ protest by writing a letter to President Coolidge, requesting that he end segregation in the Pension Office, terming the practice “undemocratic.” But Thomas went past relying on arguments of patriotism and Americaness to focus on the effect of segregation on black workers. To do so he, used McRae’s story to illustrate how segregation humiliated black workers. “One cultivated colored lady,” Thomas wrote, “was brought from seven years efficient service in the Medical Division where she was respected by all of her co-workers and her chief, and sent to this inferior status.”<sup>36</sup> By emphasizing McRae’s refinement and calling her a “lady,” Thomas

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 1.

<sup>35</sup> Warren G. Harding in *Republican Campaign Textbook, 1920* as quoted in Sherman, *The Republican Party and Black America*, 137.

<sup>36</sup> Neval H. Thomas, Washington, D.C., to Calvin Coolidge, Washington, D.C., 8 August 1927, Reel 64, Calvin Coolidge Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

argued for her respectability. Just as white supremacists had discussed how integration had humiliated white women during the 1910s-era protests, Thomas developed a parallel argument that segregation humiliated Gretchen McRae, a “cultivated lady,” thereby employing respectability as a political strategy to end segregation.<sup>37</sup> The petition and letters were successful, and, by October 1927, Work restored black employees to their original positions.

However, Work refused to admit that his earlier reorganization had possessed racist undertones. He vehemently denied “that there was any so-called segregation,” but argued that African Americans’ infuriated reaction “. . . militate[d] against efficiency.”<sup>38</sup> Although discussions of the Pension Office protest ceased, McRae continued to figure prominently in civil service segregation fights. Activists monitored McRae’s relocation to the Interior Department’s General Land Office, where she again experienced segregated conditions. Thus, in late October, McRae, the black radical activist William Monroe Trotter, and the black Reverend H. W. Jernagin all visited Work and protested that McRae was only permitted to take stenographic dictation from black employees. McRae’s visibility in the fight soon reached local newspapers. An article in the *Washington Post* noted McRae’s participation as the “McRay case,” where she accused the Interior Department of instituting “horizontal segregation” because she was only permitted to work with

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<sup>37</sup> Glenda Gilmore, *Gender and Jim Crow: Women and the Politics of White Supremacy in North Carolina 1896-1920* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 36.

<sup>38</sup> “Colored Workers’ Charges Denied,” *Washington Star*, October 8, 1927, 2.

black clerks, and denied opportunities for promotion.<sup>39</sup> Despite their meetings and publicity campaigns, McRae and her delegates were unable to immediately resolve Land Office segregation in 1927, although McRae would remain engaged in the fight.

Then in March 1928, black activists took up segregation in the Commerce Department when Neval Thomas of the NAACP and Robert J. Nelson of the Civil Liberties Bureau of the Elks visited Commerce Secretary Herbert Hoover and demanded that he integrate his department. Hoover readily complied with their request, and integrated the sixteen segregated black clerks in his department. This integration request coincided with Hoover's upcoming campaign as the Republican nominee in the 1928 presidential election.<sup>40</sup> Although the historian Donald J. Lisio has suggested that Hoover integrated his department because of his racial convictions, it is possible that Hoover's political aspirations also influenced his integration decision.<sup>41</sup> A year earlier African Americans had requested that Hoover end segregation, and he had taken no action.<sup>42</sup> Hoover's integration decision, then, likely stemmed from his Quaker beliefs in egalitarianism, the growing clout of Democratic contender Al Smith, and African Americans' disillusionment with the Republican Party for its sluggish pace on civil rights legislation. Hoover's integration order

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<sup>39</sup> "Segregation Fight Started as Negro Societies Merge," *Washington Post*, October 30, 1927, 8.

<sup>40</sup> The Republican National Convention occurred in Kansas City, Missouri in June 1928, although Hoover had been planning his campaign for several months.

<sup>41</sup> Donald J. Lisio, *Hoover, Blacks, and Lily-Whites: A Study of Southern Strategies* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1986), 31.

<sup>42</sup> See Kane, "The Federal Segregation of Blacks," 161-162.

quickly produced feelings of outrage and indignation among some white women clerks and white supremacist senators.

On April 10, 1928, two white supremacist senators began to attack Hoover's integration orders on the Senate floor. South Carolina Senator and vociferous segregationist Coleman Livingston Blease read letters from anonymous white women in government bureaus bitterly denouncing the recent integration practices which forced them to share offices and facilities with African Americans, mostly black women.<sup>43</sup> One letter writer accused Hoover of integrating the Commerce Department "without considering the feelings of the [white] girls in the Department" who were unable to "defend themselves" against black women clerks, which is why she appealed to Senator Blease.<sup>44</sup> Like the indignant white workers in the Treasury Department, the writer lamented that she had to share bathroom facilities with African Americans. She explained that prior to the integration orders, black women workers "had a toilet set aside for them" but "now we have to use the same ones they use, which is not very pleasant."<sup>45</sup>

The writer also argued that white women were cognizant of their new political power, and refused to be duped by Hoover's integration scheme to earn black votes.

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<sup>43</sup> For information on Coleman Livingston Blease, see Bryant Simon, "The Appeal of Cole Blease: Race, Class, and Sex in the New South," *Journal of Southern History* 62, no. 1 (February 1996): 57-86; and Stephen Kantrowitz, *Ben Tillman and the Reconstruction of White Supremacy* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000).

<sup>44</sup> "Letter to Coleman Livingston Blease," *Congressional Record* 10 April 1928, 70th Cong., 1st sess., 6145.

<sup>45</sup> "Letter to Coleman Livingston Blease," *Congressional Record*, 6145.

“We are all in politics now,” she announced. “Hoover’s chocolates are for him strong, but the white women are not going to vote for him.”<sup>46</sup>

In his next Senate attack, Blease announced that Hoover’s sole intention in integrating his bureau was to earn black votes and “humiliate white girls.”<sup>47</sup> The concept of women’s humiliation paralleled the argument that African American civil rights leaders employed, except they substituted black women for white women, and segregation for integration. Only a few years earlier, the *Cleveland Gazette*, a black newspaper that offered extensive coverage of the civil service segregation fights, had featured an article discussing how segregation humiliated “our [African American] girls.”<sup>48</sup> Both white supremacist senators and black civil rights leaders rooted their arguments about the racial composition of workspaces in a language of women’s humiliation. On April 16, Senator Blease read another letter from an anonymous white woman, this time in the Interior Department. The writer recounted the recent integration efforts in the Interior Department, when a “negro girl typist” was “sent down to the stenographic division” but “the [white] girls in this division put up such a ‘kick’ that the negro girl” was transferred to another division.<sup>49</sup> Implicit in this letter was the idea that white women could be powerful agents to preserve segregation by staging a “kick.”

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<sup>46</sup> “Letter to Coleman Livingston Blease,” *Congressional Record*, 6145.

<sup>47</sup> Coleman Livingston Blease, *Congressional Record*, 16 April 1928, 70th Cong., 1st sess., 6487.

<sup>48</sup> “Segregation an Outrage!” *Cleveland Gazette*, August 23, 1924, 3. For other evidence of how black newspapers helped to position black women as the female victims of civil service segregation during the 1920s, see, for example, “Protest Jim Crow in the Printing Bureau,” *Chicago Defender*, April 23, 1927, 4.

<sup>49</sup> Coleman Livingston Blease, *Congressional Record* 16 April 1928, 6486.

According to Alabama Senator J. Thomas “Cotton Tom” Heflin, Hoover had violated established southern practices by forcing white American women to experience the “destructive” effects of integration. “Such a thing is a shocking outrage,” he fumed, “upon these fine American girls.”<sup>50</sup> Like African Americans, Heflin employed rhetoric of Americanism to enhance his argument. But African Americans and white segregationists possessed distinctly different notions of what an “American girl” looked like.

Senators Blease and Heflin were not only angry with Secretary Hoover. They also learned of McRae’s efforts to end segregation in the Interior Department’s Land Office, and criticized Interior Department Secretary Work. On April 16, Senator Blease read aloud the *Washington Post* article, which discussed McRae’s involvement with the case. He also read another letter from an anonymous white woman, this time in the Interior Department. This woman recounted the recent integration efforts in the Interior Department, when a “negro girl typist” was “sent down to the stenographic division” but “the [white] girls in this division put up such a ‘kick’ that the negro girl” was transferred to another division.<sup>51</sup> Implicit in this letter was the idea that white women could be powerful agents to preserve segregation by staging a “kick.” The letter writer summarized the situation by informing Senator Blease that the Land Office was “at its best a regular hell hole” and that it was “bad enough to work for starvation wages without working with a lot of negroes.”<sup>52</sup> As the

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 6175.

<sup>51</sup> Coleman Livingston Blease, *Congresional Record* 16 April 1928, 6486.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 6486.

author lamented her meager government salary, she looked to members of Congress to ameliorate her plight by re-segregating government offices.

These acrimonious Senate attacks received extensive coverage in the black press. They also prompted James Weldon Johnson, Executive Secretary of the NAACP, to issue a press release and praise Hoover's integration of the Commerce Department in the language of Americanism and patriotism. "Secretary Hoover in abolishing segregation in the Commerce Department," Johnson stated on April 18, "has proved to colored Americans that the spirit of Democracy is not entirely dead in the Government Bureaus." Johnson's language deliberately cast integration as a watershed in the struggle for justice, and argued that "Senator Blease" had presented the "un-American" perspective.<sup>53</sup> Johnson's optimistic message appeared to discount the possibility that Hoover had integrated the Commerce Department to tailor his upcoming presidential campaign to appeal to black voters. Moreover, Hoover's desegregation order involved only sixteen employees out of a sizable pool of African Americans in the federal government who remained segregated, especially in the Printing Office.

Nevertheless, white supremacist senators continued to criticize Hoover's integration orders into early May. Senator Blease delivered the final attack against integration by arguing that black women were "viragos" and, when "aroused," posed

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<sup>53</sup> James Weldon Johnson Press Release, 18 April 1928, Folder 9, Box C-403, NAACP-LC. Although Hoover's orders only integrated sixteen black employees, a year earlier, James Weldon Johnson had expressed interest in making the issue of civil service segregation "a national political issue." See James Weldon Johnson, New York City, to L. M. Hershaw, Washington, D.C., 9 September 1927, Folder 9, Box C-403, NAACP-LC.

more danger to white women and white men than their black male counterparts.<sup>54</sup>

These constructions stemmed from the evolving racial and sexual composition of workspaces, and signaled white supremacists' hostility toward black and white women laboring alongside one another in comparable positions.

NAACP leaders at the local D.C. branch and the national office were angered with Blease's and Heflin's attacks on civil service integration and black women civil service employees. They responded to these gendered charges in two ways. First, they tried to find prominent white women who could denounce Blease and Heflin. In early May, the day after the final Senate attack, Herbert J. Seligman, the publicity director for the NAACP's national office, wrote to Will W. Alexander, a white Southerner who served as the director of the Commission on Interracial Cooperation. Seligman asked Alexander to locate progressive white women to refute Blease's and Heflin's charges that all white women opposed racial integration.<sup>55</sup> "The line he is taking," Seligman wrote Alexander about Senator Heflin's Senate attacks, "is that this act of simple justice to colored employees of the government constitutes a dastardly outrage upon Southern White Womanhood."<sup>56</sup> Seligman's wording emphasized that African Americans were making a minor and legitimate claim for justice. He wondered if "two or three or half a dozen prominent white southern women" could "come out publicly and say they do not need Heflin to defend them in these

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<sup>54</sup> Coleman Livingston Blease," *Congressional Record* 3 May 1928, 70th Cong., 1st sess., 7701.

<sup>55</sup> Herbert J. Seligman, New York City, to Will W. Alexander, Atlanta, 4 May 1928, Folder 9, Box G-36, NAACP-LC.

<sup>56</sup> Herbert J. Seligman, New York City, to Will W. Alexander, Atlanta, 4 May 1928, Folder 9, Box G-36, NAACP-LC.

premises.” It remains unclear if any white women ever accepted this invitation, but NAACP leaders also embarked upon their other strategy to offset white supremacists’ verbal attacks on black women.

### **“Joan of Arc of the Federal Service”**

In the wake of these attacks, NAACP leaders launched a shrewd counterattack in which Gretchen McRae became the chief symbol of civil service segregation. Because NAACP leaders lacked a conspicuous space like the Senate floor to articulate their message, they tapped into another space by using the black press wire to counter the myths of civil service integration. As white supremacists intensified their language about how segregation was hurting white women and threatening their virtue, NAACP leaders responded by emphasizing how segregation harmed Gretchen McRae and, by implication, other African Americans, especially women. They used her story as a foil to Senate attacks.

In 1928, in a letter to Herbert Seligman at the national NAACP headquarters, Neval Thomas unveiled this public relations campaign. Terming McRae the “brave little girl stenographer” who “led the men of the department into protest,” Thomas described her latest insult as administrators transferred McRae from the Pension Office to the Land Office where she was placed “in a room to herself.”<sup>57</sup> In 1928 Gretchen McRae was thirty-one years old, and hardly fit the description of a “little girl.” But Thomas’s strategic language cast her as a vulnerable and defenseless person, the antithesis of Blease’s descriptions about black women as viragos, and in

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<sup>57</sup> Neval H. Thomas, Washington, D.C., to Herbert Seligman, New York City, 29 May 1928, Folder 9, Box G-36, NAACP-LC.

concert with Senators' constructions of the white "girls" they claimed to be protecting. Moreover, by stressing her physical confinement, Thomas tried to underscore her isolation and vulnerability.

In June, the Washington, D.C. branch of the NAACP nominated Gretchen McRae as their delegate to attend a national NAACP conference in Los Angeles, California to share her story about the segregation fights. In her speech at this conference, McRae argued that segregation in government departments was important not only in its own right, but also because federal policies influenced policies within private businesses across the nation. "I believe that residential segregation, segregation in public carriers, in theaters, and all private enterprises," McRae told the audience, "are caused by government segregation. It is an easy matter for the private business man to justify segregating you by the example your government sets for him."<sup>58</sup> Gretchen McRae thus cast her and others' fights to end segregation in the government departments of Washington, D.C., as part of a larger campaign to end segregation across the country. That same month, Thomas, in another letter to Seligman describing McRae's activism, focused on her bravery by calling her the "Joan of Arc of The Federal Service."<sup>59</sup> By using this title, Thomas situated McRae within the pantheon of women crusaders for justice and cast her as a brave soldier. According to the historian Patricia A. Schechter, people often referred to the African American woman journalist Ida B. Wells-Barnett as a "Joan of Arc" figure. This title

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<sup>58</sup> Gretchen McRae, as quoted in Holley, *The Invisible People of the Pikes Peak Region*, 142.

<sup>59</sup> Neval H. Thomas, Washington, D.C. to Herbert Seligman, New York City, 5 June 1928, Folder 9, Box G-36, NAACP-LC.

imbued women with the ability to lead troops when men were unavailable. Schechter notes that the image of Joan of Arc enabled an actor or actress to transcend acceptable male and female roles, and thus convey a spiritual or political message.<sup>60</sup> Gretchen McRae's visibility and iconic status in civil service segregation fights increased because her story offered NAACP leaders an opportunity to respond to the virulent Senate attacks.

Thomas continued upon his Joan of Arc metaphor to illustrate McRae's ability to break free from traditional women's roles. "She framed an able . . . protest against segregation," Thomas explained of McRae's activism in the Pension Office, and "carried around so that no man henceforth could run in two worlds, and secured the signatures of more than two-thirds of the Negro force, thus arming us with the sinews of war."<sup>61</sup> Thomas's discussion of McRae reveals the complexity of his gender strategies in the 1920s, which pivoted around both McRae's vulnerability toward segregation, but also her strength to resist it. Moreover, the timing in this letter is critical because McRae's recent title as a "Joan of Arc" related to a fight she had conducted nearly a year before.

In August, the national branch of the NAACP conducted a formal investigation of civil service segregation in government departments. "Negro women," the report read, "seem to suffer more from race discrimination than do the men." This pattern was most evident in places where African Americans worked as "clerks." Here the NAACP did not base their data on a gendered strategy per se, but

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<sup>60</sup> Patricia A. Schechter, *Ida B. Wells-Barnett and American Reform, 1880-1930* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 33.

<sup>61</sup> Neval H. Thomas, Washington, D.C., to Herbert Seligman, New York City, 5 June 1928, Folder 9, Box G-36, NAACP-LC.

rather from the conditions they observed. Black women experienced more discrimination precisely because some worked in occupations with white women, whereas black men primarily worked as “laborers and messengers,” jobs that contained almost no white men.<sup>62</sup> In their detailed report, NAACP Assistant Secretary Walter White and his fellow investigators pinpointed segregation’s visibility in the Interior and Treasury Departments. But White also discussed the plight of Gretchen McRae, one of approximately 13,000 African American civil service workers in Washington, D.C. White noted that she was excluded from the stenographic “pool” and worked “in a room on the first floor of the third wing which she occupies alone.”<sup>63</sup> The NAACP sent their findings to black newspapers across the country to inform African Americans how black women particularly suffered more from civil service segregation.<sup>64</sup> Gretchen McRae also spoke to the women at the Phyllis Wheatley YWCA on segregation in the federal government.<sup>65</sup>

Gretchen McRae conducted the final attacks on civil service segregation in the Interior Department’s land office herself. Between 1927 and 1928, she wrote four letters protesting segregation and when no action was taken to resolve her claim, she resigned in protest. In her fourth letter, McRae emphasized the physical consequences of segregation, as African Americans were forced to work “in storage rooms and

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<sup>62</sup> Walter White, et al., “Report on Segregation in Government Departments,” 10-17 August, Folder 10, Box C-403, NAACP-LC.

<sup>63</sup> White, “Report on Segregation in Government Departments,” 3.

<sup>64</sup> “Pres. Hoover is Given 919 Word Memorandum,” *Baltimore Afro-American*, March 16, 1929, 4.

<sup>65</sup> “NAACP Report,” *Washington Tribune*, October 5, 1928, 6.

behind file cases” as well as “in one corner of the rooms they occupy.”<sup>66</sup> McRae also discussed the underrepresentation of black women working in clerical positions in comparison to their white women counterparts. McRae argued that “one of the most flagrant abuses” of government’s segregation was “the fact that there are only two colored women clerks in the General Land Office,” McRae wrote, “and two in the Pension Office, making only four in this vast building where thousands of white women clerks are employed.”<sup>67</sup> To compound this bleak statistic, she argued that black women were not “treated properly” and “several colored women” had applied “for clerkships in the building during the past few years” and were informed that no jobs were available.<sup>68</sup> Throughout her letter, McRae outlined the effects of civil service segregation through the lens of black women. But when cabinet members failed to desegregate the government offices, Gretchen McRae resigned. In her resignation letter, McRae situated her personal decision to quit within a collective struggle by discussing segregation’s impact on black workers. McRae resigned “as a protest against the crushing conditions to which the colored employees are subjected” in the Interior Department “and in the Government.” She concluded her resignation letter by outlining her future aspirations to “enter upon higher and fuller service to my country and to my race.”<sup>69</sup> McRae later argued that quitting offered “the most

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<sup>66</sup> Gretchen McRae, Washington, D.C., to Roy O. West, Washington, D.C., 22 October 1928, Folder 11, Box C-403, NAACP-LC.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>69</sup> Gretchen D. McRae, Washington, D.C., to Roy O. West, Washington, D.C., 23 October 1928, Folder 19, Box G-36, NAACP-LC.

stinging and last way that she “possessed” to express her outrage over segregation and offer a “greater service to the remaining colored clerks.”<sup>70</sup>

After she quit, McRae moved to New York City to take art classes at Cooper Union Institute and campaign for Democratic presidential nominee Al Smith. McRae later discussed her decision to resign from her position, and argued that quitting offered “the most stinging and lasting way that I possessed” to express her outrage over segregation and provided a “greater service to the remaining colored clerks.”<sup>71</sup> McRae may or may not have been cognizant that quitting was a strategy that one of the most distinguished African American women in Washington, D.C., had employed to protest civil service segregation. During World War I, Mary Church Terrell, black clubwoman and Oberlin College graduate, had worked in the War Risk Insurance Bureau, and was then transferred to the Census Bureau. In the Census Bureau, Church Terrell was infuriated with the prospect of separate bathrooms for black and white women, and resigned from her position in protest. “I was unwilling to remain in a government department,” Terrell recalled in her memoir, “in which colored women were subjected to such an indignity as we had been.”<sup>72</sup> Thus McRae was not the first, and certainly not the last black woman to quit as a form of protest against civil service segregation.

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<sup>70</sup> See Gretchen McRae, Washington, D.C., to Herbert Seligman, New York City, 15 February 1929, Folder 12, Box C-403, NAACP-LC.

<sup>71</sup> Gretchen McRae, Washington, D.C., to Herbert Seligman, New York City, 15 February 1929, Folder 12, Box C-403, NAACP-LC.

<sup>72</sup> Mary Church Terrell, *A Colored Woman in a White World* (Washington, D.C.: National Association of Colored Women’s Clubs, 1968), 258.

The NAACP seized on McRae's resignation to illustrate how civil service segregation humiliated black workers to the point of quitting. Thomas immediately sent a copy of her resignation letter to Seligman, who issued a press release, circulating the story on the black press wire. An article in the African American newspaper the *Chicago Defender* entitled "Discrimination Drives Woman from U.S. Job" offered a brief synopsis of McRae's resignation letter, connecting Chicago residents to the local struggle in Washington, D.C.<sup>73</sup> Similarly an article in another black newspaper, *The Pittsburgh Courier*, announced "Gretta McRae" the "... Joan of Arc of the Government Service" had accepted a position on the NAACP's Executive Committee following her resignation from the Land Office.<sup>74</sup> Neval Thomas used McRae's resignation to emphasize how civil service segregation threatened American democracy, and cast her as the quintessential, patriotic American citizen. "She was not asked to resign," Thomas mused about McRae's bravery, "but the long struggle for justice" had "simply worn upon her physical condition."<sup>75</sup> Thus the NAACP's strategy to end civil service segregation used McRae as both an icon and a touchstone to illustrate segregation's impact on black workers.

The Washington, D.C. branch of the NAACP used their campaigns against segregation in the federal government to press for integration in other spaces across

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<sup>73</sup> "Discrimination Drives Woman From U. S. Job," *Chicago Defender*, November 3, 1928 in Folder 16, Box G-36, NAACP-LC.

<sup>74</sup> "Re-elect Thomas NAACP Head," *Pittsburgh Courier*, February 4, 1928, Folder 16, Box G-36, NAACP-LC.

<sup>75</sup> Neval H. Thomas, Washington, D.C., to Herbert Seligman, New York City, 18 November 1928, in Folder 11, Box C-403, NAACP-LC.

the city. The NAACP branch referenced the fight against civil service segregation in their subsequent civil rights campaigns. In August 1929, Sears, Roebuck, and Company, the department chain, opened a store in Washington, D.C. In the midst of its grand opening, the new leadership at the Washington, D.C., branch of the NAACP criticized Sears's policy of racial segregation. The secretary of the branch conducted a formal investigation, and noticed, "signs marked 'Women's Restroom' and 'Colored Women's Toilet.'" In their protest letter to Sears, NAACP leaders alluded to their "ten-year fight waged against a like insult" in government bureaus" and refused to accept Sears's policy.<sup>76</sup> The NAACP hoped that its campaign for integration in government bureaus would force the opening wedge into broader desegregation campaigns.

After Gretchen McRae moved to New York and was no longer employed as a civil servant, she continued to advocate for equality in government policies. Her activism continued during the 1930s and centered on New Deal programs. In 1934, as Interior Secretary Harold Ickes was unveiling an ambitious housing and labor program, most of which accepted segregation, Gretchen McRae identified contradictions that Ickes had integrated government workers, but still supported segregation policies among Public Works Administration recipients. The *Baltimore*

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<sup>76</sup> Press Release, "Sears, Roebuck, and Co. Open Retail Store in D.C." 23 August 1929, Folder 4, Box G-37, NAACP-LC. See also telegram from Charles M. Thomas, Washington, D.C. to Claude Barnett, Chicago, 22 August 1929 in Folder 7, Box 147, Claude M. Barnett Papers, Chicago History Museum Archives, Chicago, Illinois.

*Afro American* published three Letters to the Editor written by McRae challenging Ickes's policies.<sup>77</sup>

African American protests against civil service segregation illuminate the ways that activists drew upon the aftermath of World War I and the return of Republicans to the White House to argue for democracy in government offices. African American women, especially Gretchen McRae, were central to these campaigns. Gretchen McRae's experiences—including working for the NAACP, serving as subscription representative for newspapers and magazines, living in North Carolina and Colorado, and working in a segregated office space—all helped to shape the development of her political knowledge and influenced the ways that she waged campaigns against segregation. As a subscription representative for newspapers and magazines, McRae could understand firsthand the power of the press. By highlighting her discontent with segregation through newspaper articles and letters to the editor—in both local and national publications—McRae circulated her opinions to residents of Washington, African Americans living across the country, and members of Congress.

### **African American Women and the Politics of Residential Segregation**

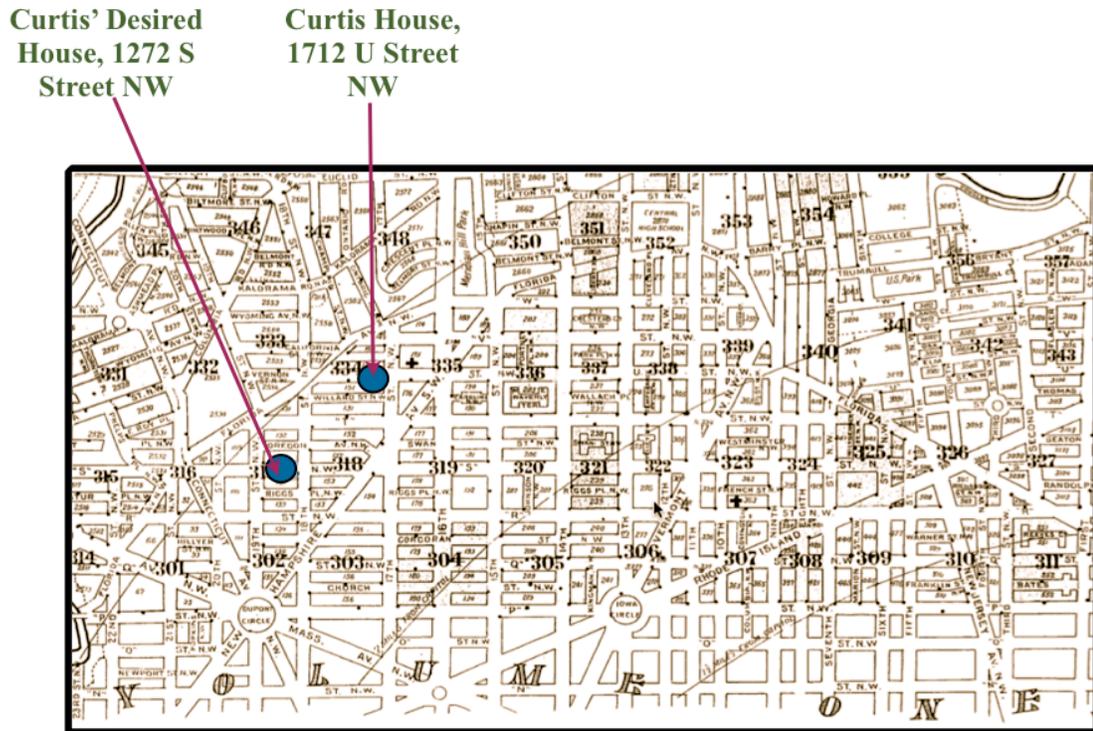
In addition to fighting segregation in the federal government, African American women in Washington, D.C., also challenged the city's restrictive

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<sup>77</sup> See, Gretchen McRae, ““Did Mr. Ickes Head an N.A.A.C.P. Unit Without Learning that Segregation is Objectionable?”” *Baltimore Afro-American*, October 6, 1934; Gretchen McRae, “Interior Department: Segregation and its Reactions,” *Baltimore Afro-American*, October 24, 1934; and finally, Gretchen McRae, “Rejoices at Removal of Clark Foreman, But –” *Baltimore Afro-American*, November 10, 1934.

covenants. In September 1922, Dr. Arthur L. Curtis and his wife, Helen Gordon Curtis, entered into an agreement to purchase a large, three-story house at 1272 S Street, which was located between Eighteenth Street and New Hampshire Avenue in Northwest Washington. The street already had two black residents, Dr. Norman Harris and Mr. and Mrs. Johnson. And this house was less than one mile away from the Curtis's current residence on U Street (see figure 29). Helen Curtis handled the transactions, visiting the house with a white real estate agent and negotiating the price with the current owner, Irene Hand Corrigan, who was white. But Arthur and Helen Curtis never moved into the property at 1727 S Street because a restrictive covenant barred African American residents. As this map illustrates, the properties were located very close to each other.

**Figure 29: Arthur and Helen Curtis’s Current and Desired Homes in Northwest**



**Source:** *Sanborn Maps* Washington, D.C., 1927-1928, Vol. 3, 1928, Sheet 0b.

In 1921, twenty-eight white residents of this neighborhood had signed an agreement to exclude African Americans from their property. This covenant stated that, “no part of the land now owned by the parties hereto...shall ever be used or occupied by, or sold, leased, rented or given to Negroes, or any persons or persons of the Negro race or blood.” The covenant would “run with the land and bind the respective heirs...for the period of twenty-one years.”<sup>78</sup> It was not at all coincidental that white Washingtonians signed this covenant in 1921 because it was the latest legal device to exclude people from owning property.

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<sup>78</sup> “Mrs. A. L. Curtis v. John J. Buckley,” Case 4059, Court of Appeals of the District of Columbia, in Folder 6, Box G-98, NAACP Papers, Part 1, Series G, National Association for the Advancement of Colored People Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C., (hereafter cited as NAACP-LC).

Since the nineteenth century, as rural African American southerners began to migrate to Southern, Northern, and Midwestern cities, many white residents had expressed concerns about the prospect of black neighbors. Municipal governments responded by passing ordinances that legally banned African Americans from moving into particular neighborhoods.<sup>79</sup> But in a landmark case before the Supreme Court in November 1917, *Buchanan v. Warley*, the court struck down these municipal ordinances, arguing that they violated the Fourteenth Amendment to the Constitution. This decision, then, spurred white citizens to devise other methods of exclusion to ban African American residents from purchasing property and moving into their neighborhoods. The white residents of S Street in Northwest Washington were only one example of thousands of white citizens who signed covenants to ban African Americans, Jewish Americans, and other members of American minority communities from moving into their neighborhoods.

Upon learning about the Curtis's intentions to purchase the house, Irene Corrigan's neighbor, John J. Buckley, sued her for violating the covenant she had signed in June 1921. Rather than abandoning the sale of the house, Irene Corrigan and Helen Curtis contacted the local NAACP and consulted with the Legal Defense team about the course of action. The NAACP viewed this case as the opportunity to "test" the legality of restrictive covenants, making Irene Corrigan and Helen Curtis the plaintiffs in their suit.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> Roger L. Rice, "Residential Segregation by Law, 1910-1917," *Journal of Southern History* 34, no. 2 (May 1968): 179-99.

<sup>80</sup> Kevin Boyle, *Arc of Justice: A Saga of Race, Civil Rights, and Murder in the Jazz Age* (New York: Henry Holt, 2004), 202-203; and Patricia Sullivan, *Lift Every Voice: The NAACP and the Making of the Civil Rights Movement* (New York: Free Press, 2008), 116.

News of this legal trouble circulated to black newspapers across the country. The *Chicago Defender* wrote that, “The crack of the old southern slave driver’s whip again re-echoed through the air of the nation’s capital last week.” The article noted that, the Curtises had “just returned from a European tour” and were “well known throughout the East and Middle West. They intend to push the case to its legal limit, if such becomes necessary.”<sup>81</sup> This article, like much of the press coverage about the case, emphasized the dignity and refinement of Arthur and Helen Curtis by discussing their extensive travel and notoriety in black communities. And these articles often featured a photograph of Helen Curtis dressed in elegant clothes, decorated with jewelry and a fancy hairstyle (see figure 30). Helen Curtis’s physical appearance, like descriptions about Gretchen McRae’s bravery, became one of the central features of this court case in the black press.

**Figure 30: Images of Helen Curtis in the Black Press**

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<sup>81</sup> “Bar Mrs. Helen Curtis from Home,” *Chicago Defender*, November 25, 1922, 1.



Mrs. Curtis

*Chicago Defender*, 1922



MRS. HELEN CURTIS,  
Washington, D. C., social leader,  
who is the storm center of the fa-  
mous property segregation case,  
which was argued last week before  
the United States Supreme Court.  
Mrs. Curtis is the wife of Dr. Ar-  
thur Curtis.

*Pittsburgh Courier*, 1926

Tracing Helen Curtis’s life experiences helps to explain why she became the plaintiff in this case. Helen Gordon was born in Washington, D.C. in 1891. Her family lived on Elm Street in LeDroit Park and her father worked as a blacksmith.<sup>82</sup> Helen Gordon attended public schools in Washington, D.C. In 1916, she married Dr. Arthur Curtis, a surgeon and professor at Howard University’s Medical School.<sup>83</sup> Soon after they were married, Arthur Curtis left for Iowa to attend officers’ training school. During World War I, he served as a first lieutenant in the medical corps, working with the 92nd Division and working in a field hospital with the 38th infantry.<sup>84</sup> Helen Curtis was active in organizational circles in Washington, D.C.,

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<sup>82</sup> Twelfth Census of the United States, 1900, Washington City, Enumeration District 181, Sheet 2A.

<sup>83</sup> “The Town in Review,” *Freeman*, July 22, 1916, 3.

volunteering with both the Phyllis Wheatley YWCA and the Pollyannas, a group of black women who met socially, but also raised money for various organizations, including the NAACP.<sup>85</sup> Helen Curtis's childhood in Washington, D.C. would have familiarized her with the rigid, residential segregation of the city. Her organizational connections with the YWCA and the Pollyannas would have taught her about the workings of politics. And her marriage to Arthur Curtis, who had just returned from a war about making the world safe for democracy, might have inspired her to become a plaintiff in the case. All of these life circumstances help to explain why Curtis became involved in this case against residential segregation.

In February 1923 the local NAACP branch argued the case against Buckley in the Supreme Court of the District of Columbia. James A. Cobb, a distinguished black lawyer in Washington, D.C., served as the chief legal counsel. Cobb had been born in Louisiana, graduated from Fisk University and received a law degree from Howard University, where he also served on the faculty. Cobb argued that the covenant was unconstitutional, depriving Curtis of her property without the due process of law. He also contended that the case prevented Curtis from receiving her "privileges and immunities" and did not experience equal protection under the law of the Fifth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments. Finally, he insisted that restrictive covenants contradicted the "local public policy" of Washington, D.C.<sup>86</sup> In April the District of

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<sup>84</sup> "Dr. A. L. Curtis is Buried with Military Honor," *Chicago Defender*, July 4, 1936, 9.

<sup>85</sup> "Women's Christian Association," *Washington Bee*, January 22, 1916; "Pollyannas Fashion Show," *Washington Bee*, May 3, 1921, 1; and "On Y. W. Board," *Baltimore Afro-American*, May 10, 1930, A3.

<sup>86</sup> Walker, "The Struggles and Attempts to Establish Branch Hegemony," 125.

Columbia Supreme Court issued their opinion, ruling in favor of John Buckley. In his opinion, Chief Justice McCoy situated these restrictive covenants within the context of other examples of public policy in Washington, D.C., where African Americans and whites were segregated in education and recreation. “After viewing the authorities at length,” Justice McCoy wrote, “the weight of authority favored the upholding of the restrictive agreement. A mere restriction is not a violation of the rights of colored people.”<sup>87</sup> News of this defeat spread to black newspapers across the country, positioning Curtis as the central figure in the fight. An article in the *Chicago Defender* noted that, “Mrs. Helen Curtis, through her attorney James A. Cobb, intends to file an appeal.”<sup>88</sup>

One year later in 1924, Cobb contested the decision before the D.C. Court of Appeals. Local black Washingtonians circulated awareness about the case. In April, black Washingtonians staged a mass meeting at the John Wesley AMEZ Church to discuss the case. Here prominent women and men, such as lawyer Ashbie Hawkins, teacher Shelby Davidson, pastor of the Nineteenth Street Baptist Church Walter Brooks, community secretary Gabrielle Pelham, activist Mary Church Terrell, and NAWE president Nannie Helen Burroughs spoke.<sup>89</sup> This meeting suggests widespread interest in the case, as black residents could be barred from neighborhoods across the city.

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<sup>87</sup> Justice McCoy, as quoted in “Right to Restrict Property Ownership in D.C.,” *New York Amsterdam News*, April 25, 1923, 11.

<sup>88</sup> “Court Upholds Residential Segregation,” *Chicago Defender*, April 21, 1923, 2.

<sup>89</sup> “Mass Meeting on Segregation Sunday,” *Washington Tribune*, April 12, 1924, 1.

In May 1924, Cobb argued the case in the Court of Appeals in the District of Columbia before a “courtroom crowded with prominent people.” In this argument, he situated his case against restrictive covenants by using *Buchanan v. Warley* as a precedent, arguing that state or municipal governments could not enact statutes requiring residential segregation.<sup>90</sup> He also had a five-point list for why covenants should not be enforced, and they centered on the harm they posed to American democracy. Cobb argued that enforcement of the covenants would promote: “a degradation to American citizenship; the ridicule of American democracy; contempt for the law; a retardation of the progress of a large group of American citizens; and stimulate racial antipathy.”<sup>91</sup> Following Cobb’s argument, Moorfield Storey wrote to James Weldon Johnson, president of the NAACP, that “I think we are going to have a series of agreements like this one in the Curtis case, which in the long run will come very near producing civil war, for the same rules will be tried not only against colored people but against everybody who by social position, nationality, religion, or perhaps politics is objected to by their neighbors.”<sup>92</sup> In June 1924, the Court of Appeals handed down their verdict, again ruling against Helen Curtis and Irene Corrigan. The court contended that “segregation” did not “imply inferiority.” Rather “segregation was the result of agitation, by both white and colored people” and “therefore, one race

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<sup>90</sup> “Residential Segregation Fought in District Court,” *Chicago Defender*, May 3, 1924, 3.

<sup>91</sup> “Wage Contest on Washington Segregation,” *New Journal and Guide* 23 February 1924, 7; and “NAACP Fighting Washington, D.C. Segregation Before Highest Courts,” 15 February 1924 in Folder 6, Box G-98, NAACP-LC.

<sup>92</sup> Letter from Moorfield Storey, Boston, to James Weldon Johnson, New York, 26 May 1926, in Folder 8, Box 98, Part 1, Series G, NAACP-LC.

has the right to exclude another.”<sup>93</sup> The ruling stated that black Washingtonians barred white people from their churches, theaters, and restaurants and white people in Washington could do the same to African Americans.

After this second setback, NAACP leaders remained confident that they could win the case by submitting it to the Supreme Court. They believed that the Supreme Court would not rule in favor of local Washington judges. In a letter to NAACP publicity director Herbert Seligman, Cobb wrote that, “the case, in my mind, is the most important since the case of *Buchanan vs. Warley*, which was decided in the Supreme Court in 1917. In fact, these cases are more far reaching.”<sup>94</sup>

In January 1926 the legal branch of the NAACP tried the case before the Supreme Court. The legal team broadened to include Cobb and white lawyers Moorfield Storey, James P. Schick, and Louis Marshall. All eyes were focused on the legal outcome in Washington, D.C., because the NAACP had suits pending on restrictive covenant cases in Michigan, California, St. Louis, Baltimore, and Louisiana.<sup>95</sup> The lawyers relied on the legal precedent of *Buchanan v. Warley*, crafting an argument that cities and states could not enforce policies of residential segregation. But when the Supreme Court ruled on the case in May 1926, they stated that the case lacked jurisdiction.<sup>96</sup> This case, then, upheld the legitimacy of restrictive

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<sup>93</sup> “Segregation in Nation’s Capital Upheld by Courts,” *Philadelphia Tribune*, June 7, 1924, 1.

<sup>94</sup> Letter from James A. Cobb, Washington, D.C., to Herbert I Seligman, New York, 24 April 1924, in Folder 6, Box G-98, NAACP-LC.

<sup>95</sup> “The Outcome of Residence Bar Cases Watched,” *New Journal and Guide*, September 20, 1924, 7.

<sup>96</sup> *Corrigan v. Buckley*, 271 U.S. Supreme Court Reports (1926).

covenants and they were not overturned until 1947 in the landmark ruling, *Shelley v. Kraemer*.

Waves of disappointment appeared both in the NAACP and in black newspapers across the country. A huge, banner headline appeared in the *New York Amsterdam News* with the title, “Segregation Gets O.K.”<sup>97</sup> The *Norfolk Journal and Guide* soberly noted that the “opinion, which was rendered by Justice Sanford, leaves the way open for any group of people to enter among themselves into an agreement not to sell their land to any person whom they may desire to keep out of their neighborhoods and constitutes a serious set-back to the aspirations of Negroes to acquire decent living conditions.”<sup>98</sup> And even national publications took note of the case. *Time Magazine* remarked that this case involved property “a few blocks...from where Woodrow Wilson made his residence.” The article concluded that, “[u]nless new legal grounds can be found against property owners, making private agreements to exclude Negroes, there is nothing to prevent such action.”<sup>99</sup>

Black women in Washington organized not on behalf of the Curtis case, but rather, for the defense of Ossian Sweet. In September 1925, Dr. Ossian Sweet and his wife, Gladys, moved into a house on the east side of Detroit. Although the property was not governed by a restrictive covenant, their white neighbors expressed outrage at the prospect of black neighbors. Shortly after the Sweets moved in, white neighbors began to threaten their lives by pelting stones, bricks, and coal at their

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<sup>97</sup> “Segregation Gets O.K.,” *New York Amsterdam News*, May 26, 1926, 1.

<sup>98</sup> “Supreme Court Holds Property Covenant Valid,” *New Journal and Guide*, May 29, 1926, 1.

<sup>99</sup> “Negroes: No Color Whatever,” *Time Magazine* 7 June 1926.

house. Because the Detroit police refused to stop the mob, Ossian Sweet gathered a group of black men to guard his house, armed with guns. Shots were fired from the Sweet residence, killing one white man and wounding another. Police officers arrested Ossian and Gladys Sweet along with nine other black men, charging them all with murder.<sup>100</sup> This case gained national attention because it hinged around questions of residential segregation and self-defense. Ossian Sweet secured the services of the famous trial lawyer, Clarence Darrow.

African Americans across the county raised money to help defray the legal costs of the Sweet case. In New York City, for instance, African Americans held a mass-meeting fundraiser.<sup>101</sup> And in Washington, D.C., Jennie Richardson McGuire organized the Women's Defense League, composed of hundreds of black women and seventeen different social clubs and associations. In the initial meeting at the Phyllis Wheatley YWCA, McGuire "planned a large drive on segregation."<sup>102</sup>

Virginia "Jennie" Richardson's family and organizational connections prepared her to lead this campaign. Richardson had been born in Washington, D.C., in 1890, the third child of George and Ida Richardson. Her father was a government clerk as well and a graduate of both the medical and law schools at Howard University. As well, he served as the president of the federated civic associations

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<sup>100</sup> For details of the case, see Victoria Wolcott, *Remaking Respectability: African American Women in Interwar Detroit* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 131-138 and Boyle, *Arc of Justice*.

<sup>101</sup> Wolcott, *Remaking Respectability*, 145.

<sup>102</sup> "Plan Large Drive on Segregation," *Washington Tribune*, December 17, 1925, 1.

across the city, thereby connecting Jennie Richardson to a range of people.<sup>103</sup> Her mother, Ida Richardson, was the first African American attendance officer in the city's public schools and the founder and president of the Sterling Relief Association, an organization that raised money for poor students during the 1910s and 1920s.<sup>104</sup> And Richardson affiliated the Sterling Relief Association with the local chapter of the NACW, reaping the constituencies and connections of this organization.<sup>105</sup> Being the daughter of Ida Richardson would have taught Jennie Richardson McGuire skills of fundraising as well as the importance of forging connections between organizations. In 1909, Jennie married Robert McGuire, a designer for a company in New York and they had one son, Robert.<sup>106</sup>

Jennie Richardson McGuire assembled a pantheon of civic activists to serve as leaders in the Women's Defense Committee, including housewives, teachers, and government clerks. Treasury Department clerk Julia West Hamilton served as the director of publicity, housewife Lottie M. Calloway served as the financial director, Bella Nelson of the Grand Order of the Odd Fellows served as the outreach coordinator for secret and benevolent societies, housewife Ruth Savoy was in charge

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<sup>103</sup> "Dr. Richardson, Civic Leader, Dies at 88," *Washington Post*, December 3, 1942, 3.

<sup>104</sup> "Minutes of the Board of Education of the District of Columbia," Vol. 11 March 19, 1919, Charles Sumner Educational Archive, Washington, D.C. (hereafter cited as Sumner); "Sterling Relief Association," *Washington Tribune*, February 18, 1922; "Locals and Society," *Washington Tribune*, February 17, 1923, 2; and "Pupils of Colored Schools Aid Own Relief by Benefit," *Washington Post*, June 14, 1925, 16.

<sup>105</sup> Elizabeth Lindsay Davis, *Lifting As They Climb* (Washington, D.C.: National Association of Colored Women, 1933), 409-411.

<sup>106</sup> "Dr. James E. Shepherd," *Washington Bee*, January 1, 1910, 4 and Thirteenth Census of the United States, 1910, Washington City, Enumeration District 181, Sheet 1B.

of social activities, and Louise Adams Hayes was in charge of printing.<sup>107</sup> These women spearheaded three different fundraisers in December 1925, including a rummage sale, a whist tournament, and a luncheon at the Lincoln Colonnade, which raised \$5,000 to defray legal costs of the Sweet case.<sup>108</sup>

One reason why African Americans in Washington, D.C., were so involved with this particular case was because of Ossian Sweet's connections to Howard University Medical School. Following his undergraduate education at Wilberforce University in Ohio, Sweet traveled to Washington, D.C., in 1917 to attend medical school. Sweet pledged to the Chi Delta Mu Fraternity and lived at its headquarters at 301 T Street in Northwest Washington.<sup>109</sup> He graduated from Howard in 1921 and left Washington, D.C., to move to Detroit.

Some of the members of the Women's Defense League held personal connections with Ossian Sweet. Both Emma Williston and Rebekah West were married to men who worked as professors at Howard University Medical School when Ossian Sweet was a student.<sup>110</sup> And other members were married to men who graduated from medical school slightly before Ossian Sweet, but might have pledged in the same fraternity, taken classes together, or studied and socialized in the same educational and professional circles. For instance, Henrietta Burwell's husband

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<sup>107</sup> "Delegates to the B.M.C.," *Washington Bee*, September 11, 1920, 1.

<sup>108</sup> "Women Arouse City on Behalf of Sweet Case," *Washington Tribune*, December 26, 1925, 1.

<sup>109</sup> *Boyd's Directory*, 1920, 1408; "Third Anniversary: Frat House Entertains," *Washington Bee*, March 25, 1916, 5; and Boyle, *Arc of Justice*, 97.

<sup>110</sup> See *Fourteenth Census of the United States*, 1920, Washington City, Enumeration District 184, Sheet 9A; *Fifteenth Census of the United States*, 1930, Washington City, Enumeration District 25, Sheet 7A; and *The Echo of '20: History of Howard University of the Year 1919-1920* (Washington, D.C: Murray Brothers Printing, 1920).

graduated in 1912, Ruth Savoy's husband graduated in 1918, and Marie Wilson's husband graduated in 1919.<sup>111</sup> And other members were married to husbands who were also in the medical profession. Carol Carson's husband was a surgeon while Emily Francis's husband was a physician.<sup>112</sup> The fact that at least seven members of the Women's Defense League were affiliated with the medical profession through their husbands suggests a connection among these women. Ossian Sweet was a man who had known many of their husbands and his wife was arrested along with him. These women perhaps joined the Women's Defense League because Ossian and Gladys Sweet's situation could have easily been theirs.

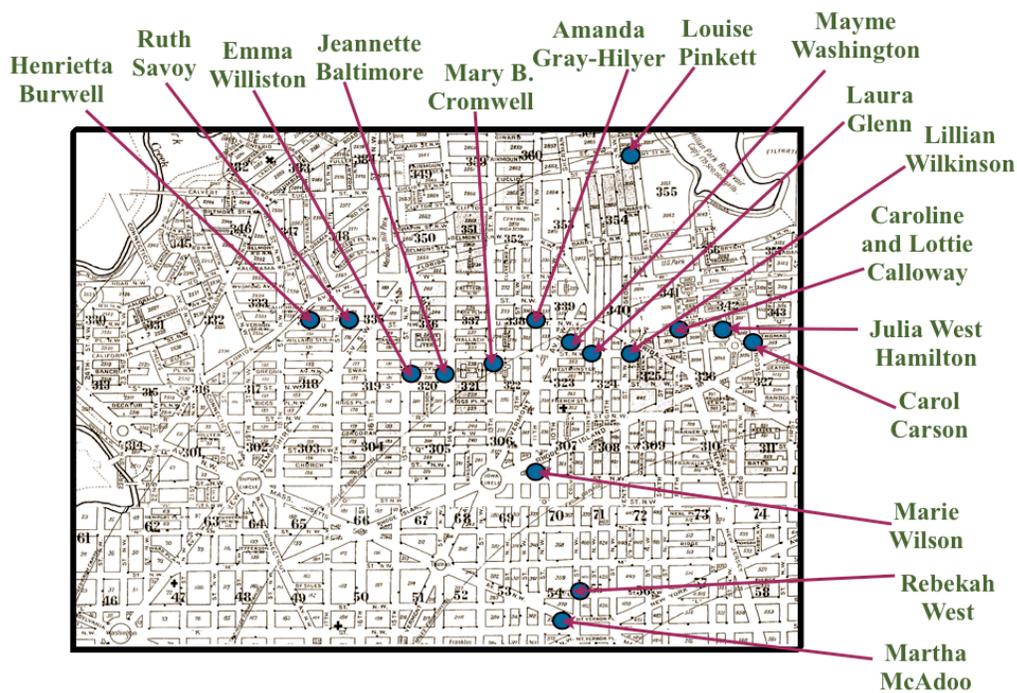
Other members of the Women's Defense Committee might have joined based upon shared neighborhood connections (see figure 31). As this map illustrates, members of the Women's Defense Committee lived within close proximity to one another in Northwest Washington.

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<sup>111</sup> Fourteenth Census of the United States, 1920, Washington City, Enumeration District 274, Sheet 1B; Fourteenth Census of the United States, 1920, Washington City, Enumeration District 181, Sheet 2A; and Fourteenth Census of the United States, 1920, Washington City, Enumeration District 20, Sheet 8A; and *Howard University Alumni Directory, 1867-2005* (Chesapeake, VA: Harris Connect, 2005), 550, 551, and 553.

<sup>112</sup> Fourteenth Census of the United States, 1920, Washington City, Enumeration District 207, Sheet 1B and Fourteenth Census of the United States, Washington City, Enumeration District 40, Sheet 9A.

**Figure 31: Members of the Women’s Defense Committee in Northwest Washington**



Source: *Sanborn Maps Washington, D.C., 1927-1928, Vol. 3, 1928, Sheet 0b.*

Throughout the month of January, members of the Women’s Defense League held fundraising parties in individual houses in Northwest Washington. Each “party”

centered around a different activity. These included apron making, candy sales, rummage sales, a card party, a dinner, and a dance. Nearly every Thursday, Friday, and Saturday evening, black women in neighborhoods in Northwest Washington gathered at each other's houses for meetings of their social clubs, which contained whimsical names such as the "Merry Makers," the "Blue Birds," and the "Just Us."<sup>113</sup> The Women's Defense Committee attracted the attention of at least seventeen social clubs, using their constituencies—as well as the individual houses where these clubs met—as spaces to raise money for Ossian Sweet's defense.

The following month in January women gathered at the John Wesley AMEZ Church where they held a mass meeting to raise awareness about their fundraising. Nannie Helen Burroughs chaired this event.<sup>114</sup> By the end of the month, McGuire presented the NAACP another check for \$1,500. The activities of the Women's Defense League illustrate the ways that Richardson and other leaders shrewdly tapped into important spaces of black women's organizing and mobilization across the city, including social clubs, organizations, work connections, and neighborhood streets.

During the 1920s, African American women waged numerous fights against residential segregation. While the most conspicuous example was the Curtis case, hundreds of black women in Northwest Washington raised money for the Sweet case. The issue of residential segregation hinged on the presence of African Americans in particular spaces across the city.

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<sup>113</sup> "Women's Defense Fund Against Segregation Sends a Check of 1,500," *Washington Tribune*, January 22, 1926, 1.

<sup>114</sup> "John Wesley A.M.E.Z. Church Notes," *Washington Tribune*, January 1, 1926, 3.

## **“The Story Every American Should Know”: The Politics of Commemoration**

During the 1920s, African American women and men in Washington, D.C. worked to make the memorial landscape of Washington, D.C. commemorate black citizenship and history. As residents of Washington, D.C., African American women and men understood the power that monuments and memorials commanded in commemorating history and conveying notions of citizenship. Throughout the 1920s, group of mostly elite African American women in Washington, D.C., labored to design a civic landscape that celebrated the contributions of black Americans to the United States. Working with the local and national chapters of the NACW and the Phyllis Wheatley YWCA, African American women dedicated the Frederick Douglass House in Southeast Washington, protested the proposed Mammy Memorial, and passionately advocated for the construction of the National Negro Memorial.

Even before NACW women had dedicated the Frederick Douglass house, local black women and men in Washington, D.C. incorporated it into their political projects as ways to expose citizens, especially children, to African American history. For instance, beginning in 1919, members of the Sterling Relief Association, an association composed of teachers and attendance officers, collaborated with the local chapter of the NACW to take African American schoolchildren in Washington, D.C. on a pilgrimage to the Douglass House each June for a “Memorial Day Pilgrimage.”<sup>115</sup> In addition, the Junior Division of the Washington Branch of the NAACP made a pilgrimage to the Frederick Douglass House in May 1927. They held a meeting inside the house where they staged recitations and orations and sang

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<sup>115</sup> “Minutes of the Board of Education of the District of Columbia,” June 18, 1919, Sumner.

the National Negro Anthem. Thelma Lane and Lily Louise Pinkett headed the Junior Division.<sup>116</sup> These activities illustrate ways that black Washingtonians used the space of the Douglass House—even before it was formally dedicated—to teach black children about African American history.

In August 1922, African American women in the NACW—living in Washington, D.C. and traveling from across the country—gathered in Southeast Washington to dedicate the Frederick Douglass House at Cedar Hill (see figure 32).<sup>117</sup> In 1916 Helen Pitts Douglass, Frederick Douglass’s second wife who was white, had willed the house and its mortgage to the male-run Frederick Douglass Memorial and Historical Association. This organization was unable to raise sufficient funds to preserve the estate and pay off the mortgage. Thus in 1918 African American women in the NACW assumed the mortgage and established a Douglass Home Committee. For five years, the NACW raised money to pay off the mortgage and dedicate the Douglass House as a museum. Clubwomen secured donations from diverse sources, including black units from World War I, individual black women’s clubs in many states, and black businesswomen, such as Madam C. J. Walker. In their organ, *National Notes*, clubwomen of the NACW tracked the financial progress of their fundraising efforts. Finally in 1922 African American women had raised \$15,000, enough money to pay off the mortgage and restore the home. In August of

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<sup>116</sup> “NAACP News,” *Washington Tribune*, May 7, 1927, 2.

<sup>117</sup> For additional information on African American memorialization practices before the Douglass House, see Jeffrey C. Stewart and Fath Davis Ruffins, “A Faithful Witness: Afro-American Public History in Historical Perspective, 1828-1984,” in *Presenting the Past: Essays on History and the Public*, ed. Susan Porter Benson, Stephen Brier, and Roy Rosenweig (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986), 307-336; and Julie Des Jardins, *Women and the Historical Enterprise in America: Gender, Race, and the Politics of Memory, 1880-1945* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 118-142.

that year, clubwomen gathered to dedicate the Douglass House before a crowd of 250 people.<sup>118</sup>

**Figure 32: Frederick Douglass House in Anacostia**



**Source:** “Frederick Douglass House,” Scurlock Photograph Collection, Smithsonian Museum of American History Archive, Washington, D.C.

Black women in the NACW seized on the opportunity to preserve the Douglass house for three primary reasons. First, it offered African American women the opportunity to labor as cultural workers. Preserving the Douglass home

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<sup>118</sup> Brundage, *The Southern Past*, 148.

represented the persistence of black women's enduring efforts to preserve history, memory, and culture in their communities. And commemorating the Douglass house coincided with the NACW's agenda. The physical building, featuring a wide porch, well-manicured lawns, and Victorian furniture, offered an architectural illustration of African American respectability. Just as the NACW had been laboring for years to underscore black respectability and decorum, through literary clubs, mothers' societies, nurseries, and an emphasis on high culture, preserving the Douglass house fit within this broader campaign.<sup>119</sup> By showcasing the house of one of the most distinguished African Americans, clubwomen alerted both black and white Americans that African Americans were a dignified and respectable race. And most importantly, NACW women were political activists. In addition to lobbying for anti-lynching, woman suffrage, kindergartens, improved public health, and an end to segregation, black women in the NACW used the Douglass House as an instrument to convey African American citizenship through memorialization. African American women celebrated women's history in the house as well. They placed a sheaf of papers commemorating "our noted women" in the house to educate schoolchildren about the contributions of black women.<sup>120</sup> Additionally, black women praised Douglass's identity as a feminist by discussing his work with woman suffrage.

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<sup>119</sup> Deborah Gray White, "The Cost of Club Work, the Price of Black Feminism," in *Visible Women: New Essays in American Activism*, ed. Nancy A. Hewitt and Suzanne Lebsock (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 247-269.

<sup>120</sup> Morgan, *Women and Patriotism in Jim Crow America*.

Black clubwomen were cognizant of their role as cultural workers in their commemorative labor at Cedar Hill. In particular, they emphasized how women were taking up the challenge of history and preservation when men had failed. As Nannie Helen Burroughs argued in *National Notes*, the “women of this race have taken up the vigil and will guard, guide and direct, from the inspiring heights to which they are climbing the mental, moral, and spiritual destiny of their race. Cedar Hill is now their watch tower. They will keep eternal vigilance over the things of the spirit and preserve in physical beauty for all generations Cedar Hill – Frederick Douglass’s Ebenezer.”<sup>121</sup> Here Burroughs linked the preservation of the Douglass house with the NACW’s overall mission of uplift, most conspicuously through her use of the term “climbing.” Moreover, her use of the words “eternal vigilance,” and “preservation” suggests that Burroughs perceived black women to be performing an important role as cultural laborers in their work to claim a space as their project.

Black women in Washington also recognized the power of the physical site of Cedar Hill to fashion a counter-narrative to white racist histories. As Nannie Helen Burroughs wrote in a letter to Mary Church Terrell, “the redeeming of the Home by our women, and now, the work of remodeling, is one of the biggest achievements to the credit of any race group. The women are planning to make Cedar Hill as beautiful as Mount Vernon.”<sup>122</sup> As this letter illustrates, black women situated their commemorative practices within a code of American civic culture and memory. Just

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<sup>121</sup> Nannie H. Burroughs, “Cedar Hill – Beautiful for Situation: The Negroes Most Valuable Heritage, Women Have Taken up the Vigil,” *National Notes* 31, no. 5 (February 1929): 12.

<sup>122</sup> Letter from Nannie Helen Burroughs, Washington, D.C., to Mary Church Terrell, Washington, D.C., February 8, 1922, in Reel 5, Mary Church Terrell Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C., (hereafter cited as MCT-LC).

as white women had preserved the house of the first president, black women were engaged in the preservation of the home of Frederick Douglass, arguably black America's most esteemed political figure. And just as white America embraced the narrative of the Founding Fathers, clubwomen helped to craft a counter-narrative for black Americans by honoring a Black Founding Father. By working to preserve the Douglass house, then, black women used the space of the Douglass House to uphold African American history and celebrate black citizenship.<sup>123</sup> Furthermore, by dedicating the first black museum in Washington, D.C., African American clubwomen offered a visual counterpoint to white memorialization practices by situating a memorial to an African American within the physical space of American democracy.<sup>124</sup>

But the victory of black citizenship through memorialization was fleeting. Only four months later in December 1922, Senator John Sharpe Williams of Mississippi threatened to undermine black memorial campaigns for citizenship by proposing a memorial that showcased black women as anti-citizens. Williams,

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<sup>123</sup> Johnson, "“Ye Gave Them A Stone,”” 67-68; and Brundage, *The Southern Past*, 10-11.

<sup>124</sup> Details about the dedication of the Lincoln Memorial are beyond the scope of this chapter. But on May 30 1922, Americans gathered to dedicate the Lincoln Memorial in a ceremony that privileged national reconciliation over emancipation. Only one African American, the current head of Tuskegee, Robert R. Moton, spoke. And distinguished black men and women guests encountered segregated seating at the dedication. Although both plans for the Douglass House and the Lincoln Memorial had been brewing for some time, it is perhaps no coincidence that clubwomen dedicated the Douglass House after the Lincoln Memorial, deliberately honoring a figure who had fought against segregation. For evidence of segregation at the Lincoln Memorial dedication ceremony, see letter from Shelby J. Davidson, Washington, D.C., to James Weldon Johnson, New York, May 31, 1922, Folder 15, Box G-34, NAACP-LC. For scholarly accounts, see Terree N. Randall, "Democracy's Passion Play: The Lincoln Memorial, Politics and History as Myth" (Ph.D. diss., City University of New York, 2002).

honoring the wishes of the Jefferson Davis Chapter 1650 of the United Daughters of the Confederacy (UDC), proposed a bill in Congress to erect a memorial in the nation's capital to honor the "faithful slave woman," Mammy.' James F. Byrnes, who later protested the construction of a black bathing beach at the Tidal Basin, joined Williams in his call for this memorial (see figure 33).<sup>125</sup>

Since the nineteenth century, representations of Mammy had been emblazoned on numerous material objects, ranging from syrup bottles to lunch boxes. But the construction of a bronze and stone statue signaled a permanence that transcended commercial culture.<sup>126</sup> Erecting this memorial to a black woman celebrated as docile, unthreatening, and, maternal—qualities that were the antithesis of an American citizen—was an artistic way to counter black women's equality and citizenship. The local chapter of the UDC, then, envisioned their memorial as a way not only to commemorate the passing of a generation of perceived docile black southerners, but also as an instrument to shape current power relationships by freezing black women in a permanent servile mode as anti-citizens.<sup>127</sup> This distinction illustrates why white women of the UDC chose to erect a memorial rather than a monument because its ongoing purpose to shape race relations.<sup>128</sup>

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<sup>125</sup> James F. Byrnes, *Congressional Record* 28 February 1923, 67th Cong., 4th sess., (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1923), 1509.

<sup>126</sup> McElya, *Clinging to Mammy*, 117.

<sup>127</sup> McElya, *Clinging to Mammy*, 123.

<sup>128</sup> Sturken, *Tangled Memories*, 47-48.

**Figure 33: Proposed Mammy Memorial**



**Source:** "A Disgraceful Statue," *Chicago Defender*, July 14, 1923, 1.

The prospect of a Mammy Memorial ignited a firestorm of controversy in African American communities across the nation, and particularly in Washington, D.C. With the possibility of a denigrating statue in the nation's capital, African American women organized to halt this memorial campaign. The Mammy Memorial clearly illustrated the dangers of stereotyping against black women. For many black women, the image of slave women evoked hidden histories of women's sexual violence, abuse, and sorrow. Just as black women had labored as cultural workers to dedicate the Douglass House and celebrate black citizenship, in the following months they continued their cultural labor by protesting the Mammy Memorial and its images of anti-citizenship.

The NACW was poised at the vanguard of protest against the Mammy Memorial. In the NACW's organ *National Notes* the editor published a petition slip that was to be cut out and disseminated to others, thereby encouraging the thousands of members to express their disdain with the Mammy Memorial by contacting their local congressmen and initiating dialogues in their communities. Mary Church Terrell wrote a scathing letter that appeared in local Washington, D.C., newspapers, and even reached national newspapers, such as the *St. Louis Argus*, as well as the nationally circulated *Literary Digest*.<sup>129</sup> In her letter, Terrell countered the notion that slave women were happy, cared for, and well loved. "The black mammy," Terrell wrote, "Had no home life. In the very nature of the case she could have none. Legal marriage was impossible for her. If she went through a farce ceremony with a slave man, she could be sold from her at any time, or she might be sold from him, or she might be taken as a concubine by her master, his son, the overseer, or any other white man on the place who might desire her."<sup>130</sup>

In this passage, Terrell echoed the NACW's mission to promote home life and domesticity among African Americans. By pointing out that the slave mammy lacked a proper home life, Terrell shattered the notion that black women received protection and care under slavery. Furthermore, she outlined the physical and sexual abuse that slave women endured, a reality that few black or white southerners acknowledged in public contexts. In her final statement, Terrell posited a color-blind womanhood that

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<sup>129</sup> In 1920 the *Literary Digest* had a circulation of close to 900,000. For this figure, see Nancy Burkhalter, "Women's Magazines and the Suffrage Movement: Did They Help or Hinder the Cause?" *Journal of American Popular Culture* 19, no. 2 (Summer 1996): 15.

<sup>130</sup> "For and Against the 'Black Mammy's Monument,'" *Literary Digest* 77 (April 28, 1923): 50.

would be outraged with the prospect of the Mammy Memorial and all of its implications. “One cannot help but to marvel at the desire to perpetuate in bronze or marble,” Terrell wrote, “a figure which represents so much that really is and should be abhorrent to the womanhood of the whole civilized world.”<sup>131</sup>

In addition to grassroots activism through petitions and letters, black women also used cultural production to express their outrage. In February 1923, Carrie Williams Clifford, a black poet in Washington, D.C., who had served on the Committee of One Hundred, penned a poem that denounced the proposed Mammy Memorial. Although the poem first appeared in the local black Washington newspaper, it was reprinted in black newspapers across the nation.<sup>132</sup> As Williams wrote,

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<sup>131</sup>“For and Against the Black Mammy Monument,” 50.

<sup>132</sup> Carrie Williams Clifford was a distinguished African American poet who lived in Washington, D.C. She was active in establishing the NAACP branch in the city. In 1922 her book of poetry, *The Widening Light*, was published. She died in 1934. For the poem see, “Black Mammy,” *Washington Tribune*, February 10, 1923, 8.

Oh, built it out of iron, or build it out of glass,  
 Build it out of marble or build it out of brass,  
 Build it as high as the Tower of Babel  
 Or build it e'een higher if you are able!  
 But nothing you do and nothing you say  
 Can add to her glory or take it away:  
 From palace to hovel all men know her worth,  
 Her praises resound to the ends of the earth;  
 She reared her own monument in her own humble way;  
 The *inscription's* the record she made day by day;  
 For one will remain while the other endures  
 You flogged her, debauched her – you bought her and sold  
 Esteeming her value for less than the gold  
 You greedily gasped! You tore out her heart,  
 By selling her sons in the cruel slave-mart –  
 Her children and yours! And now you profess  
 A love for Black Mammy, above all we can guess!  
 Her meek homely virtues you laud to the skies,  
 Which one must confess, takes one by surprise  
 When it is known how her grandchildren fare,  
 It left unprotected – exposed to your 'care'  
*Your* babies she nurtured and loved as her own;  
 By every action and thought it was shown.  
 But your love for her, you now demonstrate  
 By horrible, vile exhibitions of hate  
 Toward Mammy's descendants, who still wish to be  
 Helpful and true, *but aspiring and free!*  
 And if you shall build a memorial of glass  
 'Twill but mirror the crystalline heart of the lass:  
 If of iron or brass, if the story will tell  
 Of a faith that withstood the assaults of your hell  
 If you choose marble, jet black, or pure white  
 No difference 'twill make, either choice will be right  
 If *black*, your misdeeds to the world you'll unroll'  
 If *white*, 'twill reflect the pure light of her soul  
*And never forget while our country endures*  
*That she is 'my Mammy,' before she is yours!*

Williams's poem illustrates how black women used cultural production as an instrument to counter the Mammy Memorial. Here Williams offers a counter-narrative to the Mammy story, outlining the physical, sexual, and psychological

impacts of slavery on women. Furthermore, she pinpointed the reasons why white southerners embraced mammy – for her perceived “meek and homely virtues.” Finally, Clifford illuminated the central contradiction of the Mammy memorial—that many black women raised white southern children, and yet black women’s own descendants were treated as second-class citizens. The kindness and nurturing that Mammy expressed was never reciprocated in the present day. By terming the proposed monument a “vile exhibition of hate” Clifford seems to be cognizant of the power of monuments and memorials to shape attitudes and race relations.

Black women leaders in the Phyllis Wheatley YWCA responded in several ways. First, they issued a collective statement denouncing the proposed monument. In their message, the members of the Phyllis Wheatley board represented themselves as speaking for “the colored women of the city of Washington.” Black women perhaps used the YWCA—and not one of their Republican organizations—to make their critique seem less partisan. “The colored women of the city of Washington,” they wrote,

do not like to be vividly reminded of the unfortunate condition of some of our ancestors, as were the helots of Greece or the serfs of Russia. The old mammy as a slave, however well she may have performed her part as foster mother to many of the progeny of the South, represents the shadows of the past. Such irritants are not conducive to the harmony of citizenship.

This statement was re-printed in national publications, such as the *Literary Digest* and the very first issue of *Time Magazine*.<sup>133</sup> In addition to this critique, black YWCA women “carried the Resolution to Vice-President Coolidge and Speaker Gillette.”

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<sup>133</sup> “The Black Mammy of the South,” *Literary Digest* 76, no. 13 (1923): 56 and “Black Mammy,” *Time Magazine* 1, no. 1 (3 March 1923): 6.

*Time Magazine*, in fact, credited women at the Phyllis Wheatley YWCA with striking down the proposal.<sup>134</sup>

Because of African American opposition, plans for the Mammy Memorial dissolved in 1924. But within a few months, African Americans in Washington, D.C., staged the final monument campaign of the 1920s. African Americans of the National Memorial Association (NMA), an organization founded in 1916, lobbied to pass a bill in Congress authorizing the creation of a National Negro Memorial (see figure 34).

**Figure 34: Proposed National Negro Memorial**



**Source:** *Washington Star*, March 10, 1929, 1.

This classical building featuring columns and porticoes would serve three functions. It would commemorate the black soldiers and sailors who had fought for the United States, their distinguished service stretching from the Revolutionary War to the Great War. The National Negro Memorial would also serve as a museum, documenting the contributions of Africans in America since the seventeenth century. The description noted that it would be a “great educational temple, where statues of

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<sup>134</sup> “Black Mammy,” 6.

Great Men and Women of our Race may be placed to give inspiration, hope, and pride to the youth in our land.”<sup>135</sup> African Americans intended the National Negro Memorial to showcase blacks’ citizenship in the United States. Just as the city of Washington contained myriad monuments honoring the histories of Europeans in America, African Americans intended their memorial to fashion a counter-narrative and highlight the accomplishments of black America. The National Memorial Association described the building as able to convey “the story every American should know.”<sup>136</sup> In this statement, the NMA positioned the National Negro Memorial as part of American, rather than African American history. The classical design of the building reflected that liberal integrationist message. By emulating an architectural style already in existence, African Americans situated their own history with the larger American narrative, albeit with a counter-narrative message and language of equal citizenship. And finally, the building would be a meeting place that could accommodate five thousand people. This act of claiming a place in Washington, D.C.—for a memorial, a museum, and a meeting space—signaled ways that African American women and men proposed to use space in the city to champion their vision of racial democracy.

Black women thus continued their cultural labor as advocates for the National Negro Memorial. The NACW, which had sponsored the Frederick Douglass House and protested the Mammy memorial, initiated a wave of support for the National Negro Memorial. In 1928 NACW leaders wrote an editorial in their national organ,

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<sup>135</sup> “Design of the Proposed National Negro Memorial,” in Frame 63, Reel 18, MCT-LC.

<sup>136</sup> “Lest We Forget” Frame 18, Reel 84, MCT-LC.

*National Notes*, endorsing the plan.<sup>137</sup> And in 1924 and 1928 the House of Representatives convened two different hearings on the National Negro Memorial. Black Washingtonians and African American residents from other states testified at these hearings. Reverend Walter Brooks of the Nineteenth Street Baptist Church in Washington, D.C. explicitly connected the protests against the Mammy Memorial with the construction of the National Negro Memorial. Brooks recounted how white women in the United Daughters of the Confederacy “proposed a statue here in the District of Columbia of black Mammy, but that was not what these colored people wanted.” Brooks contended that the National Negro Memorial, and not the Mammy Memorial, was what African Americans—in D.C. and across the nation—desired.<sup>138</sup>

Black women in Washington, D.C. testified alongside black men at these hearings, again using the space of the Senate floor to enact their visions of racial democracy. Some of the most prominent advocates included government clerk Julia West Hamilton and teacher Mary Church Terrell. Both of these Washington women had worked to dedicate the Douglass House, protest the Mammy Memorial, and held institutional ties with the NACW and the Phyllis Wheatley YWCA.

In February 1928, Hamilton testified before Congress where she argued that, “We appeal to your high sense of justice and fair play; we appeal to you who have placed here in Washington, our Nation’s Capital, numerous monuments to naval and military heroes of every nation, tribe, and section, to give or appropriate in some

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<sup>137</sup> “A National Memorial Building,” *National Notes* 30, no. 10 (June 1928): 10.

<sup>138</sup> Statement of Dr. Walter H. Brooks, *Monument or Memorial Building to the Memory of Negro Soldiers and Sailors* Hearings before the Committee on the Library Congress of the United States 68th Cong., 1st sess., 28 May 1924 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1924), 9.

tangible way a monument to the valor of negro sailors and soldiers who love America so well, whose loyalty and patriotism are so unquestioned that they can be called on, as they were in the recent World War, first to defend the Nation's Capital and all the bridges and approaches leading thereto. There are no hyphenated Americans among our racial group. We teach our children to love America, and we want them to be constantly reminded that America loves them and appreciates them."<sup>139</sup>

In her testimony, Hamilton conveyed two central ideas. First, she defended African American citizenship by highlighting blacks' patriotism and military contributions. Next, she depicted African Americans as quintessential Americans by insisting on the lack of hyphenated Americans. This was a shrewd move when considered within the nativist climate of the 1920s, a decade when all European immigrants who maintained Old World ties and habits were considered traitors who posed a threat to American safety.<sup>140</sup> Hamilton was one of many African American women who fought for the National Negro Memorial by linking commemoration with citizenship.

Mary Church Terrell also testified before Congress to advocate for the National Negro Memorial. In her testimony, Terrell positioned the memorial as an instrument of social change. She argued that not only would the memorial educate black and white children about the contributions of African Americans to American

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<sup>139</sup> "Statement of Mrs. Julia West Hamilton, President Women's Relief Corps Auxiliary to Grand Army of the Republic and President of Washington and Vicinity of Federation of Women," *Public Buildings and Grounds No. 3 Hearings Before the Committee on Public Buildings and Grounds House of Representatives 70th Cong., 1st sess., 1 February 1928* in Reel 18, Frames 64-82, MCT-LC.

<sup>140</sup> John Higham, *Strangers in the Land: Patterns of American Nativism* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1955).

history, but that it would also serve as a mechanism to promote social change and racial uplift. “Recognition of efforts by colored people to play their part effectively and nobly in the development of the United States,” Terrell argued, “will spur the race as a whole to greater endeavor and will be an inspiration to our youth.”<sup>141</sup> In this statement, Terrell linked the construction of the National Negro Memorial with racial uplift, albeit with class implications. In fact, parallels can be discerned between the NACW’s Frederick Douglass House and the NMA’s National Negro Memorial. Black clubwomen believed that both buildings could perform a dual function of conveying black respectability through architecture and content, but also function as mechanisms of racial uplift. Terrell’s language of “spur the race as a whole to greater endeavor” indicated that she was, at present, unsatisfied with the aspirations of some African Americans and envisioned both the Frederick Douglass House and the proposed National Negro Memorial as buildings that would help to uplift African Americans and encourage them to pursue greater ambitions.

Following these two hearings, in March 1929 the House of Representatives debated the bill. Although the bill passed by a vote of 253 to 83, many white southern congressmen aired their views about the prospect of a national memorial to commemorate the achievements of African Americans. For instance, white Mississippi Representative John E. Rankin informed his fellow representatives that “I am not willing to expend the Government’s money to build a memorial here to commemorate the achievements of the Negro race; nor am I in favor of spending

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<sup>141</sup> “Statement of Mrs. Mary Church Terrell, First President of National Association of Colored Women,” *Public Buildings and Grounds No. 3 Hearings Before the Committee on Public Buildings and Grounds House of Representatives 70th Cong., 1st sess., 1 February 1928* in Reel 18, Frames 64-82, MCT-LC.

money in this way on any race; not so long as the American congress refuses to erect a monument in the National Capital to the memory of Thomas Jefferson.”<sup>142</sup>

Although the bill passed and President Herbert Hoover signed it into law, the Great Depression drained the coffers for the memorial.

## **Conclusion**

A crucial component of black women’s activism and organizing in Washington, D.C. centered around their movements to make the spaces of their city more racially democratic and uphold African American citizenship rights. As this chapter has illustrated, segregation practices hardened in the 1920s, whether it was in the offices of the federal government or individual neighborhoods. And segregation, especially in Washington, D.C., was deeply connected to the status of African Americans in the nation.

African American women’s activism involved a process of working within churches, fraternal orders, neighborhoods, and social associations to organize and sustain their movements. The Women’s Defense Committee successfully raised money within a short period of time precisely because it tapped into black women’s existing connections. And black women used the Phyllis Wheatley YWCA throughout the decade to protest segregation in the swimming pools as well as strike down the proposed “Mammy” Memorial.

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<sup>142</sup> John E. Rankin, *Congressional Record* March 2, 1929, 70th Cong., 2nd sess., (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1929), 5081.

### **Conclusion: “In Union There Is Strength”**

For African American women, engagement with politics was an ongoing process. Various life experiences—including family life, friendships, labor experiences, travel, education, and connections with churches, fraternal orders, and social organizations—shaped the ways that black women both approached politics and understood issues. Recognizing the various life experiences that animated African American women’s political activism helps to illuminate the importance of both personal and institutional connections.

Personal experiences mattered tremendously in women’s political activism. Family life and friendships certainly influenced African American women’s participation in politics, whether it was instilling political skills, introducing them to causes, or recruiting them to join an organization. But it was also the personal stories and memories passed along from family and friends that inspired African American women to wage their campaigns for justice, whether it was the fight for the passage of an anti-lynching bill, the campaign to thwart the confirmation of Supreme Court justice John J. Parker, or efforts to improve labor conditions for domestic servants. Tracing the web of connections across families, friendships, and households illuminates the ways that these relationships flowed into African American women’s political activism.

Affiliation with a range of institutions also figured prominently in black women’s politics. In her survey of African American fraternal activities, political activist Fannie Barrier Williams noted that, “no race of men or women feel more

strongly than we do the force of that maxim, ‘in union there is strength.’”<sup>1</sup> African American women in Washington, D.C., embraced this idea and very often applied it to their political campaigns. As African American women gazed out at the sea of people in black Washington—those who attended church each Sunday, belonged to outreach organizations, pledged money to their fraternal orders, spent Friday evenings at neighborhood bridge games, or read the newspaper—they sought to recruit these women and men to serve as constituents in their political campaigns.

Activism in formal politics rarely marked African American women’s first organizational experience. As churchgoers, dues-paying members of fraternal orders, fundraisers for the Young Women’s Christian Association (YWCA), or participants in social clubs, African American women developed important political skills, including fundraising, publicity, and public speaking. But organizing and activism were crafts, and women possessed different levels of talent and ability. Some were better organizers, others were more adept at publicity, and some were truly exceptional public speakers. African American women readily acknowledged that particular churches, fraternal orders, and clubs excelled at meeting their goals, whether it was increasing membership, raising money, or expanding their outreach. In their campaigns in the 1920s, then, black women activists often adopted strategies they identified as successful and worked hard to recruit celebrated activists. Black institutional culture functioned as an important bridge to formal political activism, which helps to explain how African American women were sometimes able to

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<sup>1</sup> Fannie Barrier Williams, “Social Bonds in the ‘Black Belt’ of Chicago: Negro Organizations and the New Spirit Pervading Them,” *Charities and the Commons* 15 (October 7): 40-44 as quoted in Theda Skocpol, Ariane Liazos, and Marshall Ganz, *What A Mighty Power We Can Be: African American Fraternal Groups and the Struggle for Racial Equality* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 80.

mobilize hundreds of foot soldiers in a short period of time and also indicates that activists and their visions of democracy persisted, even when their formal organizations did not.

Collective participation was not reflexive and always required people to continually come together and forge relationships of trust. African American women pursued many strategies to build community in their political activism, whether it was a testimony, a newspaper column, or an organizational dinner. It was also incredibly hard work to recruit and maintain cross-class, citywide constituencies. A broad geographical and occupational segment of women black Washington participated in political activism, including teachers, housewives, domestic workers, laundresses, seamstresses, hairdressers, and workers in the federal government. These women lived in neighborhoods across the city. But, despite a few exceptional cases, women mainly organized and pursued activism within their neighborhoods and social and occupational circles.

Sometimes black women organized across class lines. For instance, the leaders of the Parents' League were a principally elite cohort of women, who were married to ministers or leaders in the black community. But many of the grassroots participants of the movement were working-class women and men who rented their houses, labored in service and manual labor positions, and lived on streets with other workers. And the District Union attracted black women from every walk of life. But in order to achieve this cross-class constituency, black women had to explore different modes of organizing. It was only when black women employed member-to-

member recruitment and adopted specific labor initiatives that they were able to achieve a cross-class section of the black community.

Other political movements, however, were more monolithic in their constituencies. Working-class parents in Southwest, Deanwood, and Anacostia fought for educational resources for their children, including playgrounds, high schools and middle schools, and reduced street car fares. And elite black women who joined Republican organizations and raised money for the Ossian Sweet case.

But class could be a fluid and shifting category for African American women. Life circumstances, including the death of a spouse, loss of a job, or chronic family illness, could profoundly alter a woman's economic standing. For instance, Marian Butler, who testified before Congress about the need for an anti-lynching bill and waged a campaign to prevent Judge Parker's confirmation to the Supreme Court, socialized, worshipped, organized and lived in principally middle-class circles. But the death of her husband, William Butler, in 1920 and her status as a widow meant that she struggled to pay her bills and survive. Her occupation changed nearly every year in the city directories as she went from being a newspaper page editor to a dressmaker to a domestic worker. And Theresa Lee Connelly, a teacher who organized the city's anti-lynching parade in 1922 and came from a distinguished family in Boston, worked as a teacher in the city's public schools throughout the 1920s. But her husband, Robert Connelly, had a checkered employment history. According to the city directory, in 1922 he worked as a chauffeur, the following year he was a copyist in the Recorder of Deeds, and in 1923 he worked as a laborer in the city's public schools. Robert Connelly might have been afflicted with a chronic

illness because his employment ends in the city directories in 1923 and he died in 1929.<sup>2</sup> In 1930, Theresa Lee Connelly filed for bankruptcy.<sup>3</sup> These examples illustrate the fragility of life circumstances for the African American middle class in Washington, D.C. At the same time that some black women were pressing for justice, they were simultaneously experiencing economic hardships, which could force them to labor in service positions, take in boarders, or seek financial assistance. Sometimes these economic struggles could cause black women's activism to diminish, but other times, it could broaden their political networks by introducing them to other people or give them first hand experience about the realities of economic distress.

African American women conducted political organizing within their neighborhoods and across the city at large. The evidence indicates that black women participated in citywide organizing in the Parents' League and the District Union. And they founded Republican organizations in their respective neighborhoods, including LeDroit Park in Northwest, Anacostia in Southeast, and Deanwood in Northeast. But other movements were more limited in their geographic scope. Examining neighborhood based activism illuminates the ways that black women did not always compose a unified political community. African American women and men living in different neighborhoods disagreed about whether married women and mothers should be employed as teachers in the public schools.

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<sup>2</sup> See *Boyd's Directory*, 1920-1930.

<sup>3</sup> "Think Bankruptcy Will Be Dodge for Teachers," *Baltimore Afro-American*, November 8, 1930, 3; and "Second Teacher in Week Goes Bankrupt," *Norfolk Journal and Guide*, November 18, 1933, 4.

And residency and travel in different neighborhoods across the city was a factor in shaping black women's political organizing. Some women had a broad view of the city and maintained connections in a range of neighborhoods. But others were firmly rooted within a few blocks of their neighborhood. And some women traveled across the city for work. These different degrees of travel within the city often influenced their recruitment patterns and also shaped their organizational and neighborhood networks.

The circumstances of the 1920s and their location in Washington, D.C. shaped black women's politics, organizing, and activism. The 1920s is a vibrant decade to examine African American women's politics, organizing, and activism because of the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment granting woman suffrage, the return of Republicans to Congress and the White House, and the aftermath of World War I and its language of democracy. And Washington, D.C. is a rich location to examine black women's activism because of its large African American population and the unique local and federal interactions. The advent of woman suffrage encouraged black women in Washington, D.C. to organize Republican clubs and organizations and to study politics. Black women were engaged in this work in the 1910s, but their organizing increased. Black women also seized on the return of Republicans to the White House and Congress to press an agenda of racial justice.

It is possible to point to local concrete reforms that resulted, in part, from black women's activism. These include expanded educational resources and facilities for African American students, the construction and maintenance of a modern Phyllis Wheatley YWCA building and camp facilities, and pay raises for a few domestic

servants based upon their membership in the District Union. It is unclear whether the District of Columbia's local government—the Board of Commissioners, School Board, and various other governing boards, but the lack of a mayor, city council or a vote—helped or hindered black women's work for justice. But it is clear that black women's close proximity to the federal government prompted them to either weigh in on local issues that were under the jurisdiction of Congress or press for justice on matters of national concern. Through congressional testimony, petitions, visits with politicians, and parades, African American women worked to end segregation in the federal government and improve conditions for civil servants, protested the confirmation of Supreme Court nominee John J. Parker, challenged the Mammy Memorial, and witnessed President Herbert Hoover sign the bill authorizing the construction of a National Negro Memorial. The sluggish pace of racial justice in this decade should not be attributed to the relative strengths or weaknesses of the black freedom movement, but rather, the political climate of the 1920s, which was very often hostile, if not completely rigid, toward black women's campaigns for justice. It would be a grave error to measure African American women's vibrant organizing and activism against external forces of time and space without considering the internal factors of black community life that created, nurtured, and sustained black political culture. As African American women and men waged a new set of movements in the 1930s and beyond, it was this internal culture of women's politics and organizing—typified by networks in churches, fraternal orders, neighborhoods, schools, social and political organizations, and the Phyllis Wheatley YWCA—that bolstered black women's activism. Black women and men adapted these networks

and institutions to be their vehicles of organizing and activism as they confronted new challenges, both in their city and across the country.

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