

"To protect, to feed, and to give momentum to every effort": African American Clubwomen in Houston, 1880–1910

by Audrey Y. Crawford

Without an auxiliary composed of women," Mariah Sharkie claimed, "[organizations] would be as a ship without a rudder, a machine without a dynamo, or the earth without its verdured carpet to protect, to feed and to give momentum to every effort."¹ Sharkie was speaking, in particular, of the Woman's Convention, an auxiliary to the Baptist Missionary and Educational Convention of Texas. However, her words could apply to the efforts of church and clubwomen in cities all over the country at the turn of the twentieth century.

As cities grew, women's efforts provided community services and educational and cultural resources that improved people's lives and made cities viable. African American women's efforts were particularly crucial in Southern cities where Jim Crow laws forced African American men out of the political process, restricted educational and vocational opportunities for African American people, and excluded them from the social services developed by middle class white women during this era. Throughout the U.S., African American women built on a long tradition of social networking and developed a variety of formal and informal groups to address the needs of people in their communities and of African Americans as a group.²

Like many Southern cities, Houston implemented Jim Crow laws concurrent with the development of its educational, cultural, business, and financial institutions. As Houston became a major shipping port, profited from an oil boom, and began implementing modern public service technologies, state laws and city ordinances crystallized racial segregation.

African American voters were excluded from Democratic primaries, and public transportation, restaurants, and businesses were segregated. By 1906, African American and white people in Houston lived in separate worlds. African Americans were subject to discrimination in all areas of everyday life, including health care, occupational and educational opportunities, and treatment by law enforcement.³

Lack of political support and economic opportunity did not diminish the striving for education, culture, and social position that had characterized the efforts of African Americans since emancipation. African American Houstonians had been politically active into the 1890s. They aggressively sought to own property while they organized to improve their political and economic prospects. Between the end of the Civil War and World War I, Houston's total population was almost forty percent African American, and enterprising African Americans developed businesses and support institutions in their own communities that substituted for or paralleled white-only resources. Comprising

professionals, educators, businessmen, and white-collar workers, African American middle class Houstonians encompassed only about three percent of the African American population. In the face of limited or non-existent public services, this small group took on the task of providing libraries, schools, hospitals, and charitable institutions for the people of their race.⁴

This paper focuses on the efforts of women in Houston's African American middle class, based on the organizations discernible from club records and City Directories of the era. Studies of African American Houstonians typically neglect this group, and data about them is scarce and scattered. However, the existing data indicates that African American women developed a tradition of community activism centered on their work in churches, fraternal orders, and secular clubs.

Born in the 1870s and 1880s, the women of this era were among the first generation born free, and many were the children of ex-slaves. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, this group and their counterparts in cities across the country claimed autonomy in traditionally male-dominated organizations, formed local organizations, and federated on a national scale. African American newspapers acknowledged their efforts decades later, identifying them as women "of unimpeachable character who set the pace of the social life of the community."⁵ However, these women did more than affect African American social life. They created institutions to improve education and to provide social services in response to the needs of a growing community constrained by racial prejudice.

Jennie Belle Murphy Covington, who arrived in Houston in 1903, provides an example. Covington led several organizations while managing a household that was a social center for African Americans in Houston. The Covington house, built in 1911 on the corner of Dowling and Hadley in Third Ward, hosted many prominent African American visitors during a time when they were barred from Houston hotels. In spite of an effort to restore the house after Jennie Covington's death in 1966, it was razed in 1980. The empty lot is marked with a historical marker.

Covington, born in 1881 in Clinton, DeWitt County, Texas, attended Guadalupe College in Seguin, where she worked as a seamstress for the college president. There she married Dr. Benjamin Jesse Covington in 1902, and they moved to Houston a year later. Within a few years, Benjamin Covington and four other African American physicians founded Union hospital. The hospital filled a pressing need because African Americans had previously had to travel to Galveston to receive hospital services. Jennie joined the Married Ladies Social, Art, and Charity Club and the



Jennie and Dr. Benjamin Covington prepare for a dinner party on their 40th wedding anniversary. Benjamin Covington Collection. Courtesy Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library.

1906 Art and Literary Club and began a lifetime career in social service organizations. In addition to supporting her husband's hospital through ladies' auxiliaries, she was a founder of the Bethlehem Settlement in Fourth Ward in 1917, which provided day care and clubs for boys and girls. In 1920, she would also direct the Blue Triangle Branch of the YWCA, the first unit in Houston for African American girls. Additionally, she took a lead in addressing race relations in the 1920s as co-founder and first head of the Houston Commission on Interracial Cooperation and chair of the Negro Women's Division of the Texas Commission on Interracial Cooperation. In the 1950s she was still active as a member of the Board of the Negro Child Center. She was a member of Antioch Baptist Church and was associated with two fraternal organizations, the Court of Calanthe, of the Knights of Pythias; and the Household of Ruth, of the Grand United Order of Odd Fellows.⁶

This brief biography of Jennie Covington illustrates several elements that characterized African American clubwomen during this period. Typically, these women had some college education, worked as educators, married men who were also prominent in their communities, and carried out community work through churches, fraternal groups, and organizations of women in their communities. In a study of clubwomen active in national organizations, historian Linda Gordon noted that the status of their husbands reinforced the authority of African American women in their communities. This was true even though the women worked independently of their husbands and often had a history of activism that pre- and post-dated their marriages. Gordon's description fit clubwomen such as Lugenia Burns Hope in Atlanta, whose husband John Hope was president of Morehouse College; and Ida B. Wells-Barnett in Chicago, famous for her late-nineteenth century anti-lynching campaign, whose husband Ferdinand Barnett was an attorney and publisher of Chicago's leading African American newspaper, *The Defender*.⁷

The Lights and the Bell families in Houston provide similar examples. In 1910, Pearl Lights founded the Daily Bible School kindergarten at Antioch Baptist Church. She had graduated from Gregory Institute, an early school for African Americans in Houston, and taught in Houston city schools until her marriage to Rev. Frederick Lee Lights in 1895. As pastor of Antioch Baptist Church from 1894 to 1921, Frederick Lights presided over one of Houston's most prominent African American cultural centers. When Pearl Lights died in 1912, former public school teacher Venora Allen Bell took over as manager and treasurer for the kindergarten. She organized it under the Kindergarten Association, independent of the church Missionary Society.

Venora Bell's activities as manager of the kindergarten and as clubwoman would have dovetailed with her husband's involvement in numerous projects in support of Houston's African American community. John Brown Bell participated on committees that founded the first library for African Americans in Houston in 1907 and that acquired funds for the Colored Federated Charities in 1914. In 1914, he donated funds to settle a tax bill in order to save Emancipation Park. He cultivated national connections as a member of the executive committee of the National Negro Business League, of which Booker T. Washington was president.

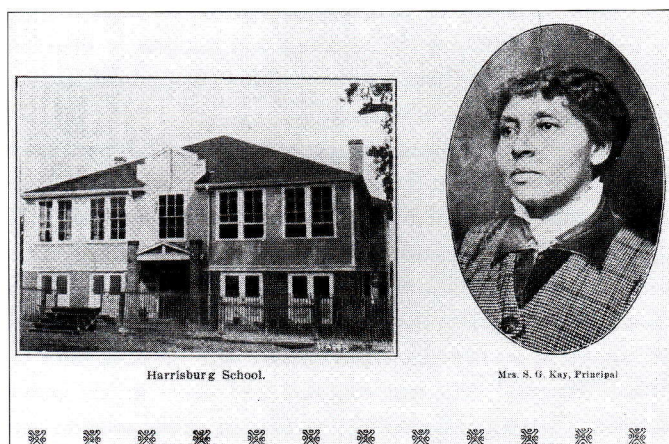
Venora Allen married John Brown Bell in 1900 when he was already a prosperous businessman. Their home, noted as a "palatial residence, richly furnished," with a library, double parlors, and "spacious entrance hall," hosted numerous receptions and dinners featuring leaders of the African American community. In addition to his business associations, John Brown Bell served for twenty-five years as Master of Solomon Lodge of the United Brothers of Friendship and was also Chancellor Commander of True Friends Lodge, Knights of Pythias; and a member of Masonic Magnolia Lodge No. 2. Although there is no data about Venora Allen Bell's fraternal associations, John Brown Bell's active memberships suggest that Venora Allen Bell also participated in one or more of these organizations. Venora Allen Bell was a charter member of the Married Ladies Social, Art, and Charity Club, and both she and Pearl Lights were members of the 1906 Art and Literary Club.⁸ The civic efforts of both men and women in families such as these established the model for African American middle class life in Houston.

Like Pearl Lights and Venora Allen Bell, many women of this group began their public activism as teachers. For this generation, teaching took on the character of missionary work. Slave laws had proscribed teaching slaves to read and write, and, by authorizing segregated schools the Texas Constitution of 1876 reinforced the notion that African Americans should be educated differently. The limited training and lack of resources that resulted from this racial bias characterized the careers of early teachers, such as Savannah G. Kay and Mabel Wesley.

Savannah G. Kay was born in 1869 in Victoria County. After completing an eighth grade education, she received a teaching certificate and began teaching. In the 1890s she took a position in a poor African American community in Montgomery County, teaching in the only church building in the community. In order to accommodate several religious denominations in the single

church building, she initiated a union Sunday school and included a teacher training class. Her efforts established regular training for the children and inspired parents to support their children's educations. Kay moved to Harrisburg in 1909 and repeated this process. The churches in the community were important in her efforts. She organized activities through church groups that attracted students and reinforced their educational experience. At times, she offered scholarships from her own money to enable students to continue their education at Colored High School in Houston or at Prairie View College. Late in her career, Kay herself completed a B.S. degree at Prairie View College.

Mabel Wesley was from the same generation. She was born in 1862 and shared Kay's early educational challenges as she achieved recognition as an educator. Wesley graduated from Gregory Institute and taught at various African American elementary schools in Houston. She became the principal of the newly established Crawford Elementary in 1917, holding this position until her death in 1941. Like Kay, Wesley continued her own education throughout her career and graduated from Prairie View A&M in 1930 at age sixty-eight.⁹



Savannah G. Kay turned the one-room Harrisburg school into a two-story, four-room school during her tenure as teacher and principal.

Courtesy Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library.

The development of autonomous organizations by African American women reflected their commitment to community activism and created institutions for carrying it out. Beginning in the 1880s, African American women formed their own groups within their churches, which were often the key social and political institutions in the African American community. Two northern white missionaries, Miss J. L. Peck and Miss F. Dysart, organized the Woman's Convention of the Baptist Church in Waco in 1886. The group contained about twenty charter members, including three Houston women, and Houstonian Mariah Sharkie as treasurer. The Woman's Convention built churches throughout the state and supported educational institutions, such as Hearne Academy, Houston College, and Bishop College. Its various committees addressed particular needs in local communities, such as youth activities and care of the sick. Initially, Pearl Lights founded the Daily Kindergarten at Antioch under the auspices of the Home Mission Society of the Woman's Convention.

Men participated in the early work of the Woman's

Convention, but all officers and committee heads were women. The women developed a strong sense of independence as they progressed. Mariah Sharkie hinted at differences in purpose among men and women that split the group in 1893. This occurred at the beginning of an era when women would increasingly form organizations under their own authority. The Woman's Convention in Texas took advantage of its affiliation with the National Baptist Convention to bring Nannie Helen Burroughs to speak at its 1906 annual conference in Ft. Worth. In 1900, after several years of effort, Burroughs had finally succeeded in establishing the Woman's Convention as an autonomous group within the National Baptist Convention. She would remain a leader of the Woman's Convention for the next sixty years, speaking across the country about women's roles in addressing the core issues of the African American community. Her issues included lynching, segregation, and discrimination in employment and education. She especially advocated higher education for women and women's political activism. Her appearance among churchwomen in Texas indicates a growing strength and self-confidence in the scope of issues that women in the Texas organization sought to address.¹⁰

A decade after the founding of the Woman's Convention in Texas, African American women began organizing independent fraternal orders in Houston. Fraternal organizations became significant as secular groups that fostered a sense of community and provided financial support in the form of health benefits or loans. Although African American fraternal lodges date from the late eighteenth century in the U.S., they became key institutions in Southern African American communities in the wake of the Civil War. A Grand Lodge of the Negro Masons, with subordinate lodges in Houston, Galveston, Austin, and San Antonio, was established in Texas in 1873. Maude Cuney Hare testifies to the importance of fraternal organizations in her 1913 biography of her father, Texas legislator Norris Wright Cuney: "In the early development of the Negro in the South, the secret societies were among the most helpful forces."¹¹

Fraternal buildings appeared as some of the earliest and most persistent African American-owned business properties in Houston. They provided office space for African American businesses ranging from grocery stores to physicians' offices, as well as meeting space for a variety of community organizations. Virtually all the African American community leaders in this period were members of fraternal organizations, often of multiple organizations simultaneously.¹²

Fraternal lodges enjoyed high esteem during this era. A *Houston Chronicle* journalist reported on the 1884 session of the Grand Lodge of the Odd Fellows and suggested that Houston should pay a bonus to the Odd Fellows to ensure that they locate their new hall in Houston, since, "The men composing the grand bodies of all benevolent or charitable institutions are, as a rule, from the best element of society, sound in principles and morals....[Their meetings have a] good effect ... both morally and in a business point of view, upon the community." The fraternal ideology of brotherhood and charity was a useful and attractive framework for African Americans struggling to establish themselves after Reconstruction, when racial segregation questioned their respectability and ensured

their exclusion from public resources. The 1882 inaugural issue of *The Pythian Banner*, a publication for the Knights of Pythias in Illinois (an African American organization), described the attraction of their Order in flowery terms encompassing principle, organization, and social life:

Our Order, purely of American origin, by its grand and noble principles and teachings, together with its chivalric and martial organism, invites the good and the true, the educated and cultured of every community, and especially to young men does it open up a field for enlistment in ennobling social life that should ever be desirous of attainment.

At the end of Reconstruction in Houston, the Grand United Order of Odd Fellows and the Ancient Order of Pilgrims established lodges in Houston in quick succession, in 1881 and 1882, respectively.¹³

Fraternal organizations were among the first autonomous groups formed by African American women in the third quarter of the nineteenth century. They reflected women's commitment to the fraternal values of morality, frugality, and industriousness, as well as their desire for autonomy. Women had been auxiliary members of men's organizations. In the 1890s, they began to demand lodges under their own authority. This involved a long process of evolution in which women assumed independent governance over their own groups. Women's chapters gradually eliminated requirements for male attendance to form a quorum, and they disconnected their membership status from the status of male relatives. Finally, they took over authority to design their own rituals and regalia, an important source of identity for a lodge. Ultimately, some orders assumed autonomy at the level of the Grand Lodge, becoming subject only to other women's lodges and to women's Grand lodges.¹⁴

A short story, "That Female Pythian," was published in the 1882 *The Pythian Banner* and expressed the negative stereotypes that women faced when establishing their own lodges. In this story, a lodge member tells his wife a story about his lodge's mistake in admitting a woman to membership:

[S]he didn't have any bangs, nor false hair, nor hoop-skirts nor bustles — and how was we to know a woman without any of these things on, you tell me....And when our Chief asked in a hollow voice by all the shades of Moses if she could keep a secret, she said yes — and then we knew it wasn't a woman.

He goes on to describe the series of ridiculous and terrifying initiation trials to which she was subjected and endured as well as any male candidate. She was found out when, in the final trial, a live rat and a mouse were let loose, and "she climbed on a chair and attempted to gather her imaginary skirts about her, all the time screeching like an Apache." The lodge members knew that "only a female woman could ever take on that way." The story ends with the husband's "unfeeling remark" to his wife, who has just stated that she does not believe she would want to join, "Well, I don't think anybody will ever ask you to." Although this story seems ludicrous and sarcastic, its publication in the inaugural issue of the organization's paper suggests that there was an ongoing

dialogue and that the feelings about admitting women were far from congenial.¹⁵

The sexism expressed in "That Female Pythian" demonstrates one of the reasons why women may have sought independent lodges. However, more to the point, gender roles of this era assigned special responsibilities to women with respect to addressing the needs of people in their communities. In his history of women in Odd Fellowship, Past Grand Master Frank Evans justified the establishment of the degree of Rebekah by arguing that women have a special talent for relieving distress:

Among the duties of Odd Fellowship are visiting the sick and relieving the distressed. Woman is especially adapted to this work; she is a natural and practical nurse....The experience in sickness in her own home qualifies her, especially, to minister to the sick of other homes. There is, ordinarily, more tenderness in the sympathy of women than in that of men... There is a lightness in her step that indicates thoughtfulness and delicate caution; a depth in her sympathy that gives a magnetism to her touch as she gently strokes the fevered brow. Men may be kind and attentive to the sick, and patiently watch by their bedside and minister to their wants, but they have not the yearning pity and delicate tact characteristic of woman.¹⁶

This argument assumed that special nurturing skills were inherent in women and that those same skills were useful in the larger community. Women activists of the late 19th century used this argument to justify women's public activism and to identify a role for women in public institutions. The concept of the "True Woman," dedicated to domesticity, household order, and morality, merged in the late nineteenth century with the concept of the "New Woman," who was educated and savvy in the public domain. The idea of domesticity wedded to public activism gave women basis for a claim to authority in male-dominated organizations. It also provided a sense of identity and purpose that motivated women to develop their own institutions and methods. For middle-class African-American women, autonomous organizations were a logical outcome of the double message in their education, "to be useful and to be womanly."¹⁷

Women's lodges multiplied quickly in Texas. In December 1896, about twenty men and women founded Hermione #4, the fourth court in Texas of the Court of Calanthe, a magic number that enabled establishing a Grand Court in the state. By 1901, ten years after its founding in Texas, there were 33 African American chapters of the Order of the Eastern Star, including one in Houston. In 1904 the Grand Lodge of the United Brothers of Friendship and the Sisters of the Mysterious Ten met in Houston. In 1906, four Houston tabernacles of the Daughters of Tabor sent in reports to the *Taborian Banner*. In 1915, *The Red Book of Houston* listed 15 chapters of the Sisters of the Mysterious Ten, as well as several courts of the Heroines of Jericho and of the Household of Ruth.¹⁸

Though fraternal orders were organized ostensibly for the purpose of mutual aid, their organizational hierarchy, statewide and regional networks, and financial resources offered opportunities

for social prestige and personal growth. Historians have argued that it was the claim of privileged membership and commitment to high principle that made fraternal groups significantly attractive to middle class African Americans. The restricted membership, the variety of offices, the rituals, and the procession through degrees of membership provided the opportunity for a sense of achievement and prestige. The Matron had supreme authority in her lodge, presiding over meetings and acting as a judge in settling disputes. The Court of Calanthe required an investigation by the standing Investigation Committee and a vote of the membership to admit a new member. A membership application required a fee, a doctor's certificate, and a recommendation from two members of the Court. New members had to be persons "of good moral character, of sound bodily health, of ability to earn a livelihood for themselves."¹⁹

In addition to offering "tenderness, ...pity and delicate tact" to the sick and needy, a fraternal organization functioned like a business. The organization paid the expenses of its officers, and some offices received honorariums. A benefits department administered death and sick benefits. The Household of Ruth included a medical department that did medical research and kept statistics of sicknesses and causes of death. Visiting Committee members could be fined for failing to visit within twenty-four hours of being notified of illness, suggesting that one of their functions was to verify benefit claims as well as to offer help. The bylaws specified monthly premiums, penalties for being in arrears, benefit amounts, and periodic reports of fees and benefits paid.²⁰



As Grand Worthy Counsellor of the Court of Calanthe from 1925 to 1934, Mrs. F. K. McPherson oversaw the investments that ensured the organization's success during the Depression years.

Photograph by Milton Bertrand. Courtesy Grand Court Order of Calanthe.

Successful organizations accumulated considerable financial resources. In the 1930s Depression, at a time when membership in many fraternal organizations was rapidly decreasing, the Court of Calanthe kept an income of over \$600,000, increased its membership, and successfully invested its funds which enabled it to provide loans to its members in distress. It also lent \$46,000 to Paul Quinn College for building construction. Some lodges became precursors of banks and insurance companies. The still flourishing Consolidated Bank and Trust Company of Richmond, Virginia, began in 1903 as a development project of the Independent Order of St. Luke, originally a woman's sickness and death mutual benefit society. The origins of the North Carolina Insurance Company,

which by 1910 was touted as a model of African American business in the South, can be traced to the Grand United Order of the True Reformers. In Houston in 1907, Venora Allen Bell's husband John Brown Bell obtained a loan from the St. James Lodge No. 6 to buy property for the Colored Library.²¹

The regional networks intrinsic to fraternal organizations implicitly supported the development of extended networks of support among African American women. The officers of Grand Lodges were required to make an annual tour of their region. Especially in the segregated South, African Americans depended on private hospitality when they traveled. This created a unique social obligation for southern African American households. Participants in a study of southern professional African American women attributed their sense of community and social responsibility to their childhood experience of traveling and of hosting travelers as household visitors.²²

The active participation of African American women in fraternal organizations demonstrates their contribution to the development of middle-class values in the African American community. Their participation depended on family relationships. Their assumption of institutional authority based on gender paradoxically reinforced the middle-class concept of the gendered division of labor. The mutual aid philosophy of these organizations reflected a long tradition of local networking and social support among African American women while providing an institutional basis for extending personal relationships into the larger community.

The development of federated women's clubs paralleled the founding of women's independent fraternal lodges in Texas. In 1896, the same year that Hermione #4 was established in Houston, a group of women in Washington, D.C. founded the National Association of Colored Women (NACW). The founding of this organization heralded a movement that had been in progress for decades and extended the scope of African American women's activism from sectarian groups and fraternal organizations with limited membership to a nationwide grassroots movement.

In the late nineteenth century, as individuals and as members of private groups and of larger institutions across the country, African American women took on a variety of projects such as homes for aging ex-slaves, orphanages, settlement houses, and kindergartens. A sense of social responsibility pervaded reading clubs, sewing clubs, and school mothers' clubs. In Washington, D.C., during the depression of 1893, Mrs. Sara Fleetwood organized her "economically privileged" friends to provide coal and staple goods for their more needy neighbors. In Austin, Texas, in 1894, the Heart's Ease Circle of King's Daughters was organized to establish a home for elderly women. In Illinois in 1902, the Cornell Charity Club organized to support an old folks home, an orphanage, a hospital, and a home for girls; meanwhile, the Colored Woman's Aid Club started a neighborhood social center for young people. The Neighborhood Union, organized in 1906 in Atlanta by Lugenia Burns Hope, became a model for a highly structured citywide social service organization. Extension programs at Hampton Institute in Virginia and at the Women's Club at Tuskegee Institute in Alabama involved community women in a variety of community improvement projects.²³

In Houston, the Married Ladies Social, Art, and Charity Club organized in 1902 to bring together neighborhood women for self-education and charitable work. Mary Crawford and Melissa Price invited fourteen women and initiated the club at Mary Crawford's house at 1014 Hill Street in Third Ward. This club is considered the oldest extant African American women's club in Houston. Its founding hints at a tradition of informal organizations of women in Houston and connects Houston women with the efforts of women nationwide during this era.²⁴ In the statement of purpose in the bylaws of the Married Ladies Social, Art, and Charity Club, benevolent work, community education, and self-improvement overlap:

The purpose for which the Corporation is organized is to engage in charitable, benevolent and social undertakings in Houston, Harris County, Texas and to promote the social welfare of its members and by systematic effort to bring about a social equality among the members, to inspire its members along intellectual and civis [sic] and artistic lines, and to exchange ideas which will generally [promote] the conditions of the members hereof socially, intellectually [sic] and industrially.²⁵

Membership was restricted to "70 persons, all respectable, married women living with their husbands in Harris County, Texas." They met at the homes of members and rotated the responsibility of hostess. New members were added by invitation and could be dropped for not attending meetings or not fulfilling their hostess duty when their turn came. In this club, the restricted membership based on relationship with a husband reflected the elitism of masonry. "Married Ladies" conveyed a sense of the importance of family and a claim of respectability, at the same time that it suggested a claim to the authority and social responsibility that prominent families assumed in their community. The amiable formation of this club as a group of women friends, coupled with its institutional format and its assumption of middle class family values, illustrates the transformation in women's organizations from informal private network to social institution that was taking place during this time.

The transition from fraternal organizations, with their membership restrictions, to the federated clubs with their open membership was a new concept to many women. In her 1924 history of the Illinois Federation of Colored Women's Clubs, Elizabeth Lindsay Davis noted how the strong tradition of fraternal organizations influenced women's responses to the concept of federated clubs:

The first organizers had many laughable experiences over letters received from members in various parts of the State who confused the club idea with that of fraternal organizations and thought they must meet in upper rooms, behind closed doors and be admitted with a password. But as the years went on, the work grew and women were guided out of their narrow [sic] spheres into a bigger and more progressive atmosphere, learning that the world was not made for 'me and my wife, my son John and his wife, us four and no more', but that they were living in an age where there were big things to be done for Humanity and the world.

Indeed, the Texas Federation of Colored Women's Clubs

(TFCWC) that formed in 1905 in Gainesville elected an Eastern Star leader as its first president. The founding of the NACW itself was a triumph over regional interests. A Boston group and a Washington, D.C. group, each of which had previously formed as a "national" group, managed a rapprochement in 1896 to form the NACW. At the 1896 conference M.F. Pitts made a specific call for ecumenicism:

In uniting the women of the various sections into one great union, we entertain every difference of opinion and belief, we are orthodox and heterodox, suffragists and anti-suffragists, temperance and anti-temperance, Christians, agnostics and theosophists. The result of all this commingling will be to rub down the rough edges of eccentricities and pet hobbies and teach a wholesome respect to others' opinions and to give a capacity to see others may be right and we ourselves wrong. Never before in the history of the world has the capacity of woman been more recognized than now.

The federated clubs sought to unite women across religion, regional identity, and political affiliation. The national organization initially relied on the already active agendas of local women's organizations. However, in encouraging all types of organizations, it provided a forum for sharing experience across a broad range of women's efforts. NACW provided a national presence and resources for issues that traditionally had been addressed locally.²⁶

The founding of the NACW spurred the founding of local groups. The 1906 Art and Literary Club, which prides itself on being the first African American federated women's club in Houston, was a product of this movement. It adopted as its motto "Climbing Though the Way Be Rugged," which is a variation of the NACW motto, "Lifting As We Climb." The statement of purpose of the 1906 Art and Literary Club closely parallels that of the Married Ladies Social, Art, and Charity Club, specifically mentioning study of "the visual arts; music, literature, drama, dancing," as well as the carrying out of "some form of charity" and "activities that affect the lives of our youth." A big difference between these two clubs was eligibility for membership. In contrast to the limited numbers, specific marital status, and required level of participation of the Married Ladies Social, Art, and Charity Club, the 1906 Art and Literary Club allowed for a wide variety of members and levels of participation. It specifically defined active, inactive, and honorary members, distinguished by their attendance at meetings and whether or not they paid dues.²⁷

Federation brought national resources to local groups. In 1908, the 1906 Art and Literary Club sponsored Margaret Murray Washington as a speaker. As the wife of Booker T. Washington, Margaret Murray Washington was a national figure, but she also had experience as an organizer in her own right. After noticing the exclusion of women at the Annual Tuskegee Negro Conference, she had founded the Tuskegee Woman's Club at Tuskegee Institute in Alabama in 1895. The Tuskegee Woman's Club staffed a settlement house, a library, and a reading room, in addition to doing home visits to teach hygiene and housekeeping to women in the neighborhood. Washington had been elected president of the National Federation of Afro-American Women at

the 1895 First National Conference of Colored Women in Boston and had presided at the 1896 conference in Washington, D.C. that founded the NACW. In her speeches and writings, Washington focused on home life, education, the care of children, and the unique responsibility of women in these areas. The mothers' groups in Tuskegee would become a model for similar groups across the country by 1912.²⁸

Washington's lecture attracted some of the most prominent African American women in Houston. Venora Allen Bell hosted a dinner that was attended by clubwomen and educators, including Jennie Covington, Melissa Price, Ada O. Levy Miller, and Pauline Lewis Lubin. At that time, Miller and Lubin were in the middle of long careers as educators. In 1908 Miller had been the Secretary of the Antioch Baptist Sunday School for eleven years and was a member of the Sisters of the Mysterious Ten. Her husband, Prof. William E. Miller, was principal of Colored High School, a deacon at Antioch Baptist Church, and was on the Board of the Houston Negro Hospital. Pauline Lewis Lubin, whose husband was Houston attorney J. Vance Lewis, had begun her career as a teacher at Gregory School at age 16 and became the second librarian of the Colored Branch of the Houston Public Library. Later, she was active in the NAACP and acted as a state organizer for the Texas Federation of Colored Women's Clubs. Her career continued into the 1930s, when she participated in an international tour under the auspices of the American Peoples College. She was a charter

member, and eventually matron and secretary, of St. Martha Chapter #76 of the Order of the Eastern Star.²⁹

These women put Washington's counsel into action and established Mothers Clubs that provided important resources for African American schools. Between 1908 and 1910, Mothers Clubs were founded at Colored High School, Douglass, Booker T. Washington, Dunbar, and C.U. Luckie. These clubs enhanced basic services, such as landscaping school properties and providing nutritious lunches. In addition, they provided equipment such as sewing machines and tables for modern school home economics programs. They also enriched the school environment by purchasing art supplies and playground equipment. Their fundraising even paid salaries for some teachers. Houston educator and historian of the African American schools in Houston, Ira Bryant, Jr., called the contribution of the Mothers' Clubs "inestimable."³⁰

Through church groups, fraternal orders, and secular clubs, this generation of African American women created institutions that strengthened the philosophy of education and self-help that motivated the African American community during this era. These female leaders struggled against white efforts to continue a legacy of racial oppression and established the basis for community involvement and civic activism that subsequent generations would build on.



The 1906 Art and Literary Club posed during the 1908 dinner with Margaret Murray Washington. Washington is seated on the front row next to the man with the white beard; Jennie Covington is on the far left; Melissa Price may be the lady in the hat on the second row. Courtesy Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library.

- 1 Mrs. M. Sharkie, "A Brief Sketch (revised) of the Woman's Convention, An Auxiliary of the Baptist Missionary and Educational Convention of Texas," (Houston, ca. 1940), copy in Antioch Collection, Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library (hereinafter cited as HMRC).
- 2 Numerous works have explored African American women's club work from a variety of perspectives, although they typically do not include Texas women. A short list includes Anne Firor Scott, "Most Invisible of All: Black Women's Voluntary Associations," *Journal of Southern History* 56, no. 1 (February 1990): 3-22; Dorothy Salem, *To Better Our World: Black Women in Organized Reform, 1890-1920* (Brooklyn: Carlson Publishing, Inc., 1990); Stephanie J. Shaw, "Black Club Women and the Creation of the National Association of Colored Women," *Journal of Women's History* 3, no. 2 (Fall 1991): 10-25; Glenda Elizabeth 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). For women in Texas, see Ruthe Winegarten, *Black Texas Women: 150 Years of Trial and Triumph* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995), chapter 9; Judith N. McArthur, *Creating the New Woman: The Rise of Southern Women's Progressive Culture in Texas, 1893-1918* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998), although mostly about white women, also includes important information about African American women.
- 3 On the political struggle of African Americans in the late nineteenth century, see Merline Pitre, *Through Many Dangers, Toils and Snares: The Black Leadership of Texas, 1868-1900* (Austin: Eakin Press, 1985); Alwin Barr, *Black Texans: A History of African Americans in Texas, 1528-1995* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1973), chapter 4. On the boycotts in the wake of the city ordinance segregating streetcars, see "Negroes Still Refuse To Ride," *The Houston Post*, November 2, 1903; and "Negroes Still Refuse To Ride," *The Houston Post*, November 3, 1903. Mary Beth Rogers, *Barbara Jordan: American Hero* (New York: Bantam Books, 1998), chapter 2, contains a poignant story about racial misjustice in the life of Barbara Jordan's grandfather John Ed Patten in Houston in 1918.
- 4 For a brief overview of African Americans in Houston during this period see Howard Beeth and Cary D. Wintz, introduction to "Part III Economic and Social Development in Black Houston during the Era of Segregation," in *Black Dixie: Afro-American History and Culture in Houston* (College Station: Texas A & M University Press, 1992); Carey Wintz, "Black Business in Houston," *Essays in Economic and Business History* 10 (1992): 29-40; David G. McComb, *Houston: A History* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 108-14; and Cary D. Wintz, "Blacks," in *The Ethnic Groups of Houston*, ed. Fred R. von der Mehden (Houston: Rice University Studies, 1984), 22-23. Frances Dressman, "'Yes, We Have No Jitneys!' Transportation Issues in Houston's Black Community, in 1914-24," in *Black Dixie*, provides an example of how some African Americans developed businesses specifically to serve the African American community. On African American politicians, see Merline Pitre, *Through Many Dangers, Toils and Snares: The Black Leadership of Texas 1868-1900* (Austin: Eakin Press, 1985).
- 5 The quote is from "Married ladies club nears century mark in charity work," *The Informer and Texas Freeman*, 1973, clipping in Married Ladies Social, Art and Charity Club Collection, RGE-46, HMRC.
- 6 On Jennie Covington, see newspaper clippings in the Dr. Benjamin Covington Collection, MSS170, HMRC; "Covington, Jennie Belle Murphy," *The Handbook of Texas Online* [database online] (1999). Also, see Dr. Howard Jones, *The Red Diary: A Chronological History of Black Americans in Houston and Some Neighboring Harris County Communities—122 Years Later* (Austin: Nortex Press, 1991), 66-67. On the Bethlehem Settlement, see Betty Chapman, *Houston Women: Invisible Threads in the Tapestry* (Virginia Beach: The Donning Company Publishers, 2000), 59; and Thomas Kelly, "Free Enterprise, Costly Relief: Charity in Houston, Texas, 1915-1937," *The Houston Review* 18, no. 1 (1996): 40-41.
- 7 Linda Gordon, "Black and White Visions of Welfare: Women's Welfare Activism, 1890-1945," *Journal of American History* 78, no. 1 (September 1991): 559-90. Gordon's sample was 67 African American women and 72 white women who were leaders in national organizations. She argues that, in contrast to African American clubwomen, a significant majority of white clubwomen were single and worked as social workers rather than as educators. Although she suggests that the profile of local women activists may be different, her discussion seems descriptive of many of the women identified in this research.
- 8 On Pearl and Frederick Lights, see *The Red Book of Houston: A Compendium of Social, Professional, Religious, Educational and Industrial Interests of Houston's Colored Population*, (Houston: Sotex Publishing Co., c. 1915), 38 and 68, respectively; Jones, *The Red Diary*; and Betty Chapman, *Houston Women*, 37, 51. On Venora and John Brown Bell, see *The Red Book of Houston*, 81-85. The quote about the house is on page 82. Both Venora Bell and Pearl Lights are named in "Mrs. Melissa Price Active 61 Years in Married Ladies Social Club," *Forward Times* (Houston), June 15, 1963, clipping in the Dr. Benjamin Covington Collection, MSS170, HMRC.
- 9 On Kay, see A. W. Jackson, *A Sure Foundation: A Sketch of Negro Life in Texas* (Houston, 1939), 153-54; and Jones, *Red Diary*, 60, 76. On Wesley, see "Mabel Wesley," in *Texas Trailblazer Series 1992-1997* (Texas Trailblazer Preservation Association, Houston, 1997).
- 10 On the Women's Convention in Texas, see Mrs. M. Sharkie, "The Woman's Convention, An Auxiliary of the Baptist Missionary and Educational Convention of Texas" (Houston, 1940), copy in Antioch Collection, Box 4, Folder 15, HMRC; Mrs. Vanita Crawford, "Dramatic History of Antioch Baptist Church" (1975), typescript in Vanita Crawford Collection, HMRC. Evelyn Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), describes the development of the independent Women's Convention. On Burroughs, also see "Burroughs, Nannie Helen," in *Black Women in America: An Historical Encyclopedia*, ed. Darlene Clark Hine et al. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993).
- 11 Maud Cuney Hare, *Norris Wright Cuney: A Tribune of the Black People* (Austin: Steck-Vaughn Company, 1968), 17. A slave in Houston prior to the Civil War, Norris Wright Cuney became a Texas legislator during Reconstruction and remained politically active until his death in 1898. On masonry, see James David Carter, *Masonry in Texas: Background, History and Influence to 1846* (Waco: Committee on Masonic Education and Service for the Grand Lodge of Texas A.F. & A.M., 1955), about white masonry; and William A. Muraskin, *Middle-class Blacks in a White Society: Prince Hall Freemasonry in America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975). Carter gives the date 1873 for the first African American lodge in Texas; Jones, *The Red Diary*, 45, gives the date 1877.
- 12 In Jones, *The Red Diary*, 97, the list of African American-owned buildings and their values in Houston in 1928 is comprised entirely of fraternal society buildings: Odd Fellows Temple, \$400,000; U.B.F. Building, \$375,000; Pilgrim Building, \$200,000; Knights and Daughters of Tabor, \$100,000; Masonic Temple, \$25,000.
- 13 The quotes are from the *Houston Chronicle*, December 14, 1884; and *The Pythian Banner* 1, no. 1 (July 1882): 7. On the relationship between African American fraternal orders and middle-class values, see Muraskin, *Middle-Class Blacks*, chapter 2; and Loretta J. Williams, *Black Freemasonry and Middle-Class Realities* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1980). See Jones, *The Red Diary*, 48-49, on the founding of the Order of Odd Fellows and the Order of Pilgrims in 1881 and 1882, respectively.
- 14 For a detailed history of the evolution of a (white) female lodge, see Abbie Lynch, "History of the Rebekah Degree," in *The Official History of Odd Fellowship: The Three-Link Fraternity*, ed. Henry Leonard Stillson (1894; reprint, Boston: The Fraternity Publishing Co., 1910). A brief account of a similar evolution is included in Elizabeth Lindsay Davis, *The Story of the Illinois Federation of Colored Women's Clubs and The History of the Order of Eastern Star Among Colored People* (1921; reprint, New York, 1997).
- 15 *The Pythian Banner*, 24-25.
- 16 Frank Evans, "The Rebekah Degree," in *The Official History of Odd Fellowship*, ed. Henry Leonard Stillson, 710.

- 17 The quote is from Winegarten, *Black Texas Women*, 107. Many studies refer to community activism as part of the social expectations of middle class African American women. See Stephanie J. Shaw, *What a Woman Ought to Be and to Do: Black Professional Women Workers During the Jim Crow Era* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996); Paula Giddings, *When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America* (New York: Bantam Books, 1984), chapters 5-6; Opal V. Easter, *Nannie Helen Burroughs* (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1995), 13-18; Gilmore, *Gender and Jim Crow*, 148.
- 18 On the Court of Calanthe, see Jones, *The Red Diary*, 56; on the Order of the Eastern Star, see Winegarten, *Black Texas Women*, 186; on the Daughters of Tabor, see *Taborian Banner*, July 20, 1906; on Sisters of the Mysterious Ten, see *Galveston City Times*, September 3, 1904; and *The Red Book of Houston*, 98.
- 19 The quote about membership requirements is from the *Constitution and Bylaws of the Grand and Subordinate Courts of Texas, Independent Order of Calanthe: N.A., S.A., E.A. A&A.* (n.p., ca. 1902). The 1924 Bylaws of the Heroines of Jericho of the State of Florida lists similar specifications for membership, including "not an outcast or convict, upright in body and not deformed or dismembered at the time of making application." See *Constitution and Bylaws of the most worshipful Union Grand and Subordinate Courts of Heroines of Jericho of the State of Florida and Jurisdiction* (n.p., 1924).
- 20 See the report of the Grand Medical Examiner of the Household of Ruth in *Proceedings of the 28th Annual Session of the District Grand Household of Ruth #13, Held in Houston, Texas, August 4-8, 1925*. The bylaws of the Heroines of Jericho of the State of Florida specified a fine of \$1 for Visiting Committee members who failed to visit a sick member within 24 hours of notice.
- 21 On the Court of Calanthe, see Mrs. Arlelia W. Thymes Armstrong, "Grand Court Order of Calanthe, Texas Jurisdiction," typescript in author's possession; and Winegarten, *Black Texas Women*, 186-87. On the Independent Order of St. Luke and the Consolidated Bank and Trust Company, see Elsa Barkley Brown, "Womanist Consciousness: Maggie Lena Walker and the Independent Order of Saint Luke," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 14, no. 3 (1989): 611-33; and "Walker, Maggie Lena," in *Black Women in America*. On the origins of the North Carolina Mutual Life Insurance Company, see Walter B. Weare, *Black Business in the New South: A Social History of the North Carolina Mutual Life Insurance Company* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1973), chapter 1. John Merrick, the company founder, had been an insurance agent for the Grand United Order of the True Reformers. On John Brown Bell, see *The Red Book of Houston*, 83.
- 22 See Shaw, *What a Woman Ought to Be*, 43.
- 23 On Washington, D.C., see Inabel Burns Lindsay, "Some Contributions of Negroes to Welfare Services, 1865-1900," *Journal of Negro Education* 25 (Winter 1956): 15-24. On the Heart's Ease Circle, see Winegarten, *Black Texas Women*, 189. On Illinois, see Elizabeth Lindsay Davis, *The Story of the Illinois Federation of Colored Women's Clubs*. On the Neighborhood Union, see Jacqueline Anne Rouse, *Lugenia Burns Hope: Black Southern Reformer* (Athens: The University of Chicago Press, 1989). On Hampton and Tuskegee Institutes, see Cynthia Neverdon-Morton, *Afro-American Women of the South and the Advancement of the Race, 1895-1925* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1989).
- 24 "Mrs. Melissa Price Active."
- 25 *Constitution (Revised) of Married Ladies Social, Art and Charity Club of America, 1950*, Married Ladies Social, Art and Charity Club Collection, RGE-46, Box 1, File 1, HMRC; Carol Rust, "Ladies of the Club," *Houston Chronicle*, December 14, 1997.
- 26 Davis, *The Story of the Illinois Federation*, 3; "How can the National Federation of Colored Women be made to serve the best interests and needs of our women?" by M. F. Pitts, *History of the National Association of Colored Women's Clubs, Inc.*, NACW Records, Pt. I, Reel 1, p. 63. On the founding of the TFCWC, see Winegarten, *Black Texas Women*, 190. Dorothy Salem tells the story of the founding of the NACW in chapter one of *To Better Our World*.
- 27 1906 *Art and Literary Club Yearbook 1970-72*, City Federation of Women's Clubs, Afro-American Collection, RGE-67, HMRC.
- 28 On the Tuskegee Woman's Club, see Cynthia Neverdon-Morton, *Afro-American Women of the South and the Advancement of the Race, 1895-1925* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1989), 132-37. See speeches by Margaret Murray Washington in NACW Records, Pt. I, Reel 6, Speeches, Statements, Convention Reports [1902-1906].
- 29 On Melissa Price, see *The Red Book of Houston*, 91; "Miller, William E.," "Lewis, Pauline Lubin," in *Black Biography 1790-1950: A Cumulative Index*. On the 1908 dinner, see "Mrs. Melissa Price Active."
- 30 Scott, *The Red Book of Houston*, 17-18; Ira B. Bryant, Jr., *The Development of the Houston Negro Schools* (Houston: The Informer Publishing Co., ca. 1935), 58-63.