

JUST INDIGNATION: THE NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF
COLORED WOMEN, FROM MORAL REFORMERS

TO RADICAL RACIAL ACTIVISTS,

1895-1920s

by

Joie-Lynn Campbell, B.A.

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Committee Members:

Dwight Watson, Chair

Jessica Pliley

Mary Brennan

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DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to my family whose unwavering support made this achievement possible. My brother always believed in me and never questioned the paths I chose in life. Throughout the years, my father's emotional support never faltered and his financial support made this endeavor feasible. My mother kept my feet on the ground and my head in the stars through all the storms life threw at me.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

Abbreviation	Description
NFAW	National Federation of Afro-American Women
NACW	National Association of Colored Women
NLCW	National League of Colored Women
WCTU	Women's Christian Temperance Union
ICWDR	International Council of Women of the Darker Races
NFL	Negro Fellowship League

CHAPTER I

Introduction

African American women have organized and led active movements to provoke social and political change since the turn of the nineteenth century, therefore, when the black clubwomen's movement emerged during the 1890s, a deluge of clubs and societies were readily established based on the organizing traditions of the black community.¹ Many black clubwomen focused their efforts on the local community and organized what would later be called grassroots movements to fight the visceral nature of newly enacted Jim Crow laws.² Others created national organizations in order to network with the individual local clubs across the country. The original call to organize on a national level was sounded by Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin in 1895 and the following year the country's first national black clubwoman's organization, the National Association of Colored Women (NACW), was officially founded.³ Some black clubwomen even took their cause internationally, either independently like Ida B. Wells, the leading independent voice for

¹ For a discussion on the emergence of American women's clubs and their social and political activities, see Paula Baker, "The Domestication of Politics: Women and American Political Society, 1780-1920," *The American Historical Review* 89, no. 3 (June 1984): 620-647.

² Anne Firor Scott, "Most Invisible of All: Black Women's Voluntary Associations," *The Journal of Southern History* 56, no. 1 (February 1990): 6-9; Gerda Lerner, "Early Community Work of Black Clubwomen," *The Journal of Negro History* 59, no. 2 (April 1974): 158-161.

³ "The Call of Meeting of '95" National Association of Colored Women's Clubs, July 29, 1895 - July 31, 1895, National Association of Colored Women's Clubs, Convention Minutes and Reports, 1895, Records of the National Association of Colored Women's Clubs, LexisNexis Primary Sources in African American History via Texas State University Alkek Library [hereafter cited as NACW, 1895]; "Let Us Confer Together" *A History of the Club Movement Among the Colored Women of the United States of America, as Contained in the Minutes of the Conventions, held in Boston, July 29, 30, 31, 1895, and of the National Federation of Afro-American Women, held in Washington, D.C., July 20, 21, 22, 1896*, (1902) [hereafter cited as *History*], p.4, Series XV, box 9, folder 6, Ida B. Wells Papers, Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library [hereafter cited as Ida B. Wells Papers]; Elizabeth Lindsay Davis, *Lifting as They Climb* (1933; repr., Washington, D.C.: National Association of Colored Women; New York: G. K. Hall & CO., 1996).

African Americans, or as part of an organization such as the International Council of Women of the Darker Races, which branched out from the NACW in 1922.⁴ While various organizations had different opinions as to what area of society and politics they should focus on, whether it be maintaining middle-class values and Victorian ideals, or lobbying government officials for suffrage and anti-lynching legislation, the end goal was the same—uplifting their communities and the black race as a whole.

Black women and their club and organizational activities served as the cultural backbone of black communities and were a driving force for many of the political and social changes that occurred for blacks in the late nineteenth and twentieth century. The black clubwomen's movement was essentially orchestrated and led by middle-class black women who strategically juggled home life with full-time commitments to their causes. These women established the foundation for a long-term struggle for black women's social and political equality in United States society. While Jacquelyn Dowd Hall refers to this struggle as the "long civil rights movement," these early clubwomen do not fit within Hall's periodization. Hall argues that the movement essentially began in the 1930s with the New Deal Order, quickened during World War II, and became a "movement of movements" during the 1960s and 1970s.⁵ Yet, while arguing that historians must look beyond Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Civil Rights Movement in the South, Hall relegates the importance of women's involvement in the long movement to the labor

⁴ Paula J. Giddings, *Ida: A Sword Among Lions; Ida B. Wells and the Campaign Against Lynching* (New York: Amistad, 2008); Cynthia Neverdon-Morton, "The Advancement of the Race Through African American Women's Organizations in the South, 1895-1925," in *African American Women and the Vote 1837-1965*, eds. Ann D. Gordon, Bettye Collier-Thomas, John H. Bracey, Arlene Voski Avakian, and Joyce Avrech Berkman (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1997), 130; Michelle Rief, "Thinking Locally, Acting Globally: The International Agenda of African American Clubwomen, 1880-1940," *The Journal of African American History* 89, no. 3 (Summer 2004): 214-219.

⁵ Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, "The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past," *The Journal of American History* 91, no. 4 (March 2005): 1233-1263, 1235.

feminists of the 1940s and women's contributions to the 1963 March on Washington.⁶

My work clearly shows that black clubwomen and their struggles predate this period and the significance of their efforts should not be neglected.

The emergence of women's history in the twentieth century was written predominantly about and for white women, whether overtly stated or simply presumed. Black women were an invisible entity in the writing of American history, much like blacks in the United States in general. Their social and political activities, from charitable work to their fight for suffrage, are noticeably absent from all of the major American women's historiographical works that appear prior to the 1970s. Part of this absence lies in the fact that, unlike the activities of black clubwomen, material on white women's organizations was more easily accessible through most of the twentieth century.⁷ Additionally, many white women's organizations, such as the General Federation of Women's Clubs, founded in 1889, regularly excluded black women from joining their ranks.⁸ This extensive exclusion made the history of black women's activism seemingly non-existent.

Another reason behind African American women's historical invisibility was the racist tenor at the turn of the twentieth century. In fact, black women's activism at the turn of the century was motivated by the overwhelming proliferation of racist slander and

⁶ Ibid., 1234-1235, 1247, 1252. A subset of scholars critique Hall's "Long Movement" thesis. See Sundiata Keita Cha-Jua and Clarence Lang, "The 'Long Movement' as Vampire: Temporal and Spatial Fallacies in Recent Black Freedom Studies," *The Journal of African American History* 92, no. 2 (Spring 2007): 265-288.

⁷ 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, 1996), xxii.

⁸ Anastatia Sims, *The Power of Femininity in the New South: Women's Organizations and Politics in North Carolina, 1180-1930* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1997), 41, 46; Scott, "Most Invisible of All," 20-21; For a more in-depth study on the exclusion black clubwomen faced as well as the struggle for interracial cooperation, see Joan Marie Johnson, *Southern Ladies, New Women: Race, Region, and Clubwomen in South Carolina, 1890-1930* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2004).

demagoguery hurled at the black community by the white press and the majority of white contemporary scholars.⁹ In the nineteenth century, when contemporary scholars, such as Nathaniel Shaler, J. L. Tucker, and Philip A. Bruce, were writing about black women, more often than not it was in a degrading manner.¹⁰ J. L. Tucker pontificated on blacks' "descent into evil" and, in 1884, the Ninth Edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica* pointed toward Tucker as an expert on the black race.¹¹ Five years later, Philip A. Bruce described black women as uncivilized and promiscuous in his 1889 work, *The Plantation Negro*.¹² As Herbert Gutman explains, this openly published defamation "coincided in time with the early professionalization of historical writing," further cementing the denigration.¹³ Black women were sexualized, removing the possibility of attaining the status of a moral, Victorian-minded, "respectable lady." Thus, the efforts of black clubwomen were ignored by the white majority at the turn of the twentieth century.

My work will join the ongoing conversation about the importance of black women's activism, with a concentration on the efforts of the National Association of Colored Women as well as an emphasis on the activities of black clubwomen organizing against convict labor. While the NACW emerged in 1896 as an important entity for African American women, there have been few in-depth studies of the NACW.¹⁴

⁹ For more information on the demagoguery, see I. A. Newby, *Jim Crow's Defense: Anti-Negro Thought in America, 1900-1930* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1965).

¹⁰ Herbert G. Gutman, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom, 1750-1925* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1976), 531-544.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 534.

¹² Philip A. Bruce, *The Plantation Negro as a Freeman: Observations on his Character, Condition, and Prospects in Virginia* (1889; repr., Williamstown, Massachusetts: Corner House Publishers, 1970).

¹³ Gutman, 541-542.

¹⁴ See Davis, *Lifting as They Climb*; Charles Harris Wesley, *The History of the National Association of Colored Women's Clubs: A Legacy of Service* (Washington, D.C.: The Association, 1984); Stephanie J. Shaw, "Black Clubwomen and the Creation of the National Association of Colored Women," *Journal of Women's History* 3, no. 2 (Fall 1991): 11-25; and Daphne Spain, *How Women Saved the City* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001).

Consequently, the purpose of this work is to examine the NACW and its leading women and place it and them in the broader context of African American women's activism during the Jim Crow Era in American society.

As I began my undertaking, I was grateful to find various sources by these early leaders archived through databases and different institutions such as the Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library at Emory University, the Robert W. Woodruff Library of the Atlanta University Center, the Special Collections Research Center at the University of Chicago, the Alabama Textual Materials Collection through the Alabama Department of Archives and History, the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Yale University, The Woman's Collection at Texas Woman's University, and LexisNexis' Primary Sources in African American History via Texas State University.

The women of the NACW kept thorough records of their meetings and minutes, and correspondence between the local branches and the national office, as well as various international correspondences, were recorded. The organization also maintained their publication, *The Woman's Era*, and circulated it across the country to its members. Furthermore, many of the founding women, such as Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin, Mary Church Terrell, Ida B. Wells, Margaret Murray Washington, Victoria Earle Matthews, and Selina Butler, were prolific in their own right, leaving behind papers, speeches, articles, journals, and books. Except when intentionally using the voices of specific white Americans to depict the white supremacist majority the NACW clubwomen faced, I have aimed to allow the women of the NACW to narrate their own story through the use of their records and personal writings.

To illustrate the necessity of this work, I have dedicated the second chapter to a

bibliographic essay exemplifying that, until the last several decades, erasure of black women's activism throughout the historical narrative of American women left much of the history incomplete. Scholars have been working to restore the historical record, yet there are still numerous areas to be brought to light. Chapter III begins in 1895, detailing the state of race relations throughout the country at the time and the final impetus that prompted African American women to organize on a national level. It specifically illuminates the official formation of the National Association of Colored Women as well as the specific areas the women of the organization focused on and goals they set out to work toward. Many of their efforts were similar to those performed by white clubwomen and remained within the realm of the separate spheres ideology in which proper women's work was confined to feminine and maternal duties that revolved around moral reform, homemaking, children, and benevolence. However, due to the injustices being perpetrated specifically against members of the black race, black clubwomen saw it as their additional duty to challenge the racialized narrative and violence of their time. By taking part in radical racial activism in addition to feminine work, these women established their own unique sphere. The fourth chapter encapsulates the brutality of the convict lease system and the efforts taken by specific leading women of the NACW to abolish convict leasing, establish prison reforms and reformatories, and lobby government officials from 1895 through the 1920s.

CHAPTER II

Overcoming the Erasure of Black Women's Activism in American Women's History: A Bibliographic Essay on the Scholarship of African American Women's Organizations and Activities

“We know little about the educated, prosperous members of the race. As fast as they enter this class they withdraw into a world of their own—a world which lies all about us white folks, yet of whose existence we are scarcely aware.”¹⁵

—Lily Hardy Hammond, 1914

African American women's organizations kept thorough records of their clubs' activities, had their own newsletters, and most were supported by the black press prior to the turn of the twentieth century. Yet, black clubwomen retained a ghost-like status in the writing of United States history. Most of the early scholarship on black clubwomen was contributed by women who were active participants in their organizations. It was not until the 1970s and 1980s that historians began producing works about black women. Those works were primarily overviews of African American women's history, as scholars labored to place black women in the historical narrative. By the 1990s, new historians' scholarship on black women slowly began to trickle into the field of American women's history. These historians focused on specific groups of organized black women and narrowed their studies to focus on individualized goals. While they all agreed that black women lived under the double burden of coping with both racism and sexism, they argued over how black women prioritized their goals. This decade marked the beginning of in-depth discussions of black women's activism in striving for suffrage and fighting

¹⁵ L. H. Hammond, *In Black and White: An Interpretation of Southern Life*, ed. Elna C. Green (1914; repr., Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 2008), 34.

against Jim Crow. More current scholarship has added a discourse on economic citizenship and the use of the female body as a political weapon. These historians are taking the sexualization of black women and bringing it into conversation with political movements against rape and lynching. Still, even with the works that have been presented as of today, vast areas of African American women's history are waiting to be thoroughly examined and added to the historical narrative.

Early Scholarship

Following World War I, the New Negro Movement, Pan Africanism, the woman's suffrage movement, and black women's exclusion of the 19th Amendment, the African American clubwomen's movement and organizational activities were in full swing and a few noteworthy black clubwomen began documenting their club's efforts. One such clubwoman was Elizabeth Lindsay Davis. In an effort to support the Dyer Anti-Lynching Bill, which had been introduced to the House of Representatives in 1921, Davis wrote the first in-depth work on the history of a black clubwomen's organization entitled *The Story of the Illinois Federation of Colored Women's Clubs* in 1922.¹⁶ In this book, she includes historically renowned, nationally active black women, as well as the Illinois clubwomen's strides toward social and political change within the black communities. She stated her "greatest desire in presenting this volume, is that those younger women among our ranks will find in it, information that will give them a greater appreciation of the work and usefulness of the 'Pioneers' and that through this greater appreciation, they

¹⁶ Elizabeth Lindsay Davis, *The Story of the Illinois Federation of Colored Women's Clubs* (1922; repr., New York: G. K. Hall & CO., 1996), xvi.

will be inspired to ‘Carry On’.”¹⁷

In 1926, Hallie Q. Brown, one of the NACW’s original members and president of the organization from 1920 through 1924, compiled fifty-four biographical sketches of historically important African American women. All of the women portrayed worked to gain recognition, better conditions, and opportunities for blacks. Early figures in this compilation included Phillis Wheatley, Sojourner Truth, and Harriet Tubman. Also included were original members of the NACW, Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin, Lucy Thurman, Josephine Yates, Vitoria Matthews, Mary Talbert, and Margaret Murray Washington. Madam C. J. Walker was recognized for her industrious accomplishments as well.¹⁸

Following Brown, Elizabeth Lindsay Davis returned in 1933 with her monumental work, *Lifting as They Climb*, on the black clubwomen’s movement from 1895 through the 1930s. In this book, Davis explains that the goals of the National Association of Colored Women were to “elevate and dignify colored American womanhood” and to bring about “moral, mental, and material progress.”¹⁹ The leading members of the NACW were of the black middle-class and, because of this, Davis’ book has an elitist tone and does not focus on everyday black women. Even so, *Lifting as They Climb* served as a means to preserve the NACW’s organizational activities and efforts throughout black communities, and to set forth the argument that acting locally is the best way to affect change.

Both of Davis’ works are historically significant, as she was a contemporary

¹⁷ Ibid., Foreword.

¹⁸ Hallie Q. Brown, *Homespun Heroines and Other Women of Importance* (1926; repr., New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).

¹⁹ Davis, *Lifting as They Climb*, xv.

active participant. Davis was a charter member of the NACW, served as the club's National Organizer from 1901 through 1906 and then again from 1912 to 1916, and was the organization's historian.²⁰ It appears that Davis took her role very seriously and sought to shape the image of the organization as benevolent, neglecting to mention disagreements and infighting among some of the organization's leaders.²¹ Furthermore, Davis was serving as the president of the Illinois Federation of Colored Women's Clubs when she wrote *The Story of the Illinois Federation of Colored Women's Clubs* and was chairman of the History Committee of the NACW when she wrote *Lifting as They Climb*.²² Both leadership roles gained her open access to the organizations' inner workings.

While these early works are very important, they stood nearly alone in the history of black women's organization activities that were published by the presses until the 1970s. Even Ida B. Wells, quite possibly the most outspoken, lone voice who talked holistically about the African American struggle in relation to anti-lynching, race riots, and, later, prison reforms, did not spend her time discussing women's organized efforts. Furthermore, black male scholars, such as W. E. B. Du Bois, the leading black intellectualist of the early twentieth century, failed to discuss black women outside of maternal roles.

Other scholarly works focusing on women's clubs produced during Davis' time barely mentioned black women's activities, if at all. Most writers tended to look solely at white women's club work, rendering black women and their efforts virtually invisible. One such example is the 1937 piece by Catherine S. Vance. *The Girl Reserve Movement*

²⁰ Davis, *The Story of the Illinois Federation of Colored Women's Clubs*, Preface.

²¹ For a look at some of the factions among the clubwomen, see Giddings, *Ida*.

²² Davis, *Lifting as They Climb*, xv.

of the Young Women's Christian Association is a study on the Christian "character education" of teenage girls who were members of the association from 1918 through 1934. Black women had succeeded in their fight to integrate the YWCA in the 1920s, but are thoroughly left out of the pages of this book. Black females are mentioned only twice—once when Vance states that "clubs of Negro girls were taking their place among the school clubs," and the second can be looked upon ironically as Vance states that "race relations in this country remained a major interest of the National Y.W.C.A."²³ However, Vance failed to offer any discussion on the tensions created by the integration.

Recognition during the 1970s and 1980s

It was not until after the height of the Civil Rights Movement, the birth of the Black Power Movement, and the genesis of the new age of feminism that black women and their contributions were recognized throughout American history. With the exception of Mary Church Terrell's 1940 autobiography, *A Colored Woman in a White World*, and Rackham Holt's 1964 biography on Mary McLeod Bethune, works from the 1940s through the 1960s on black women's movements are rare.²⁴ By the 1970s, as Cornelia Hughes Dayton and Lisa Levenstein explain, many were affected by the turbulence of the period and early generation women's historians were often politically active participants in "the civil rights, student, antiwar, and feminist movements."²⁵ In 1972, Gerda Lerner produced a compilation of primary documents of African American women's history,

²³ Catherine S. Vance, *The Girl Reserve Movement of the Young Women's Christian Association: An Analysis of the Educational Principles and Procedures Used Throughout Its History* (New York: Bureau of Publications Teachers College, Columbia University, 1937), 73, 113-114.

²⁴ Mary Church Terrell, *A Colored Woman in a White World* (1940; repr., Washington, D.C.: Ransdell; New York: G. K. Hall & CO., 1996); Rackham Holt, *Mary McLeod Bethune: A Biography* (New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1964).

²⁵ Cornelia H. Dayton and Lisa Levenstein, "The Big Tent of U.S. Women's and Gender History: A State of the Field," *Journal of American History* 99, no. 3 (December 2012): 795.

from slavery to the 1970s. Lerner's publication of *Black Women in White America: A Documentary History* had a revolutionary effect. Writing on the history of black women, Lerner states that black women have been "victimized by scholarly neglect and racist assumptions."²⁶ This victimization is largely due to historians' neglect of the black clubwomen's movement.

Lerner followed up this work with her 1974 article, "Early Community Work of Black Club Women." In it, she explores the grassroots work of black clubwomen geared toward solving the social ills within their respective communities, including, but not limited to, educational institution building and charitable welfare. Lerner sets forth the argument that the "work of black clubwomen contributed to the survival of the black community."²⁷ In relation to the invisibility of black women's activities in scholarly works, Lerner observes that in the nineteenth century black historians documented the histories of black clubwomen's efforts. However, their histories and significance had been ignored by modern scholars and there was "as yet no adequate history of the black women's club movement and no interpretive literature."²⁸

Following Gerda Lerner's scholarly pieces, there were a few prominent works published that stand out on the study of black women's history and their organizational efforts. Sharon Harley's and Rosalyn Terborg-Penn's 1978 edited series, *The Afro-American Woman: Struggles and Images*, was the first volume of historical essays produced on black women. Their work provided a key contribution to the scholarly research being done on African American women at the time. The essays deal with the

²⁶ Gerda Lerner, *Black Women in White America: A Documentary History* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972), xvii.

²⁷ Lerner, "Early Community Work," 167.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 158.

racism and sexism that black women had dealt with throughout history and their movements to overcome these issues. More specifically, Terborg-Penn's essay, "Discrimination Against Afro-American Women in the Woman's Movement, 1830-1920," illustrates the necessity black women felt to form their own, racially segregated organizations due to the discrimination they faced by white clubwomen.²⁹

Also included in the edited series is Cynthia Neverdon-Morton's essay, "The Black Woman's Struggle for Equality in the South, 1895-1925," which probes the racist ideology of the day and mob violence and lynchings against blacks. Neverdon-Morton illustrates the activities of black clubwomen within their respective communities and their efforts "to contribute to the improvement of the conditions of many within the black community."³⁰ Like Elizabeth Lindsay Davis, Neverdon-Morton underscores that it was at the grassroots, local level, rather than at the national level, where the greatest change could be affected.³¹

However, as important as Harley's and Terborg-Penn's compilation was to the history of African American women, the pervasive whiteness in American women's historical scholarship continued. For example, in 1979, Sara Evans' *Personal Politics* introduced an important narrative at the time about the roots of the women's liberation movement and its outgrowth from the Civil Rights Movement.³² Evans spends most of her discussion on the significance the civil rights student organizations, specifically the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee, had on the birth of the women's liberation

²⁹ Rosalyn Terborg-Penn, "Discrimination Against Afro-American Women in the Woman's Movement, 1830-1920," in *The Afro-American Woman: Struggles and Images*, ed. Sharon Harley and Rosalyn Terborg-Penn (New York: Kennikat Press, 1978), 17.

³⁰ Cynthia Neverdon-Morton, "The Black Woman's Struggle for Equality in the South, 1895-1925," in *The Afro-American Woman: Struggles and Images*, ed. Sharon Harley and Rosalyn Terborg-Penn (New York: Kennikat Press, 1978), 43.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 57.

³² Sara Evans, *Personal Politics* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979).

movement.³³ Yet, the majority of her work is spent elaborating on white women and, at times, their interactions with black males. Although she makes references to the importance of local black women's support of the students, they are simply that—references.³⁴ Jacquelyn Dowd Hall articulates, in her 1979 seminal work, *Revolt Against Chivalry: Jessie Daniel Ames and the Women's Campaign Against Lynching*, that historians have barely scratched the surface of understanding black women's reform efforts. While Hall discusses the Commission on Interracial Cooperation as well as the Association of Southern Women for the Prevention of Lynching, her work is a study on Jessie Daniel Ames and, as a result is, self-admittedly, dominated by white middle-class women.³⁵ Additionally, this book fails to grasp how important this issue was for the NACW and other black clubwomen at the time.

Although Paula Giddings' 1984 book, *When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America*, is not the first scholarly work done on African American women's history, it is the first to provide a comprehensive general history of black women throughout United States history. It is also the first to thoroughly flesh out and illustrate the strength of the female bonds within the black communities and the courage and determination they gleaned from one another as well as their commitment to uplifting their race. Giddings argues that, historically, black women took the lead in social reform when the government failed them, were staunch feminists, and

³³ For information on SNCC, see Carson Clayborne, *In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981); and Charles Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995).

³⁴ Evans, *Personal Politics*, 51-53, 75-76.

³⁵ Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, *Revolt Against Chivalry: Jessie Daniel Ames and the Women's Campaign Against Lynching* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979), xii.

“helped launch and sustain the modern civil rights movement.”³⁶

Similar to Lerner’s *Black Women in White America*, Giddings discusses black women during slavery, with the exception that Giddings’ study is much more detailed.³⁷ This is understandable though, as Lerner’s work was chiefly primary documents. Furthermore, like Harley’s and Terborg-Penn’s 1978 edited series, *The Afro-American Woman: Struggles and Images*, Giddings illustrates the racism and sexism that black women faced throughout history. For example, Giddings highlights the sexism that black female activists faced during the Civil Rights Movement from their male counterparts and the racism they faced within the women’s liberation movement. Additionally, while discussing sexism within the Civil Rights Movement, Giddings references Evans’ *Personal Politics*, which, while centered on white women, relates the sexism that women encountered during the movement.³⁸ One new piece of historical information Giddings elaborates on is the strain between men and women within the black communities caused by the institutionalized racism they were forced to live with.

The Intellectual Flourishing of the 1990s

The groundwork laid by historians’ scholarship during the 1970s and 1980s allowed African American women’s scholars to narrow the discourse from broad overviews of black women’s history toward studying specific groups and goals of communally active black women. Historians, such as Lynda F. Dickson, Anne Firor

³⁶ Paula Giddings, *When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America* (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1984), 349.

³⁷ For further discussion on the slave community and women during slavery, see John W. Blassingame, *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972); Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the Old South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988); and Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1974).

³⁸ Giddings, *When and Where I Enter*, 301.

Scott, and Stephanie Shaw, began looking at Gerda Lerner's assertions for the reasons behind black women's club development and expounded on it. The goals and activities of clubwomen through the black Baptist church were dissected masterfully by Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, as was black women's organized political tactics in North Carolina by Glenda Gilmore. Additionally, the fight for suffrage was analyzed by scholars such as Ann D. Gordon, Rosalyn Terborg-Penn, Elsa Barkley Brown, and Cynthia Neverdon-Morton.

In 1987, Lynda F. Dickson published her article, "Toward a Broader Angle of Vision in Uncovering Women's History: Black Women's Clubs Revisited," where she argues that the racist ideology of the Jim Crow Era directly influenced the early black clubwomen movement.³⁹ Dickson also emphasizes the importance of the fact that the early black clubwomen who led the organizations were middle-class, educated black women who worked "toward the elevation of all black women."⁴⁰ She also shows that the clubwomen were working to encourage economic advancement within the black communities.⁴¹ Dickson next explores Gerda Lerner's "preconditions for club development among black women: sizeable black population, educated women with leisure time, and unmet needs of the black poor."⁴² However, Dickson states that Lerner's preconditions are only relative to local aspects for club development and, in order to

³⁹ Lynda F. Dickson, "Toward a Broader Angle of Vision in Uncovering Women's History: Black Women's Clubs Revisited," *Frontiers: A Journal of Women's Studies* 9, no. 2 (1987): 66. For an in-depth look at Jim Crow, see Newby, *Jim Crow's Defense*; C. Vann Woodward, *The Strange Career of Jim Crow*, 2nd rev. ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966); Leon F. Litwack, *Trouble in Mind: Black Southerners in the Age of Jim Crow*, 2nd ed. (New York: Vintage Books, 1999); Kathleen M. Blee, *Women of the Klan: Racism and Gender in the 1920s* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991); and Nancy MacLean, *Behind the Mask of Chivalry: The Making of the Second Ku Klux Klan* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).

⁴⁰ Dickson, 66.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 67.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 66.

understand why clubwomen chose to focus on specific activities, it is important to pay attention to the racial tensions of the day and the black community's reaction to the dominant racial ideology.⁴³

Anne Firor Scott's 1990 article, "Most Invisible of All: Black Women's Voluntary Associations," echoes Gerda Lerner, in that black women's activities helped shape black community life during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.⁴⁴ Scott states that as early as 1818, one black women's organization in particular emphasized charity and proper morals, thus showing "the concern about public perception of themselves that would become a major theme of black women's associations."⁴⁵ Similar to Dickson, Scott analyzes the importance of the racist ideology of the day in correlation to black clubwomen's activities and goals. She also uncovers the divisions among the black women's clubs over what to fight for. On the one hand, many were working to challenge the racist ideologies of the day and gain respect and acceptance from white society. Many others were fighting to change the racist structure of society as a whole as well as to put an end to lynching and job discrimination.⁴⁶ As with Paula Giddings, Scott demonstrates that "in one way or another organized black women touched every area of life, from home to politics," and many were responsible for laying the groundwork of the Civil Rights Movement.⁴⁷

Moreover, Scott points toward historian Kathleen C. Berkeley's 1985 essay, "'Colored Ladies Also Contributed': Black Women's Activities From Benevolence to Social Welfare, 1866-1896," in which Berkeley argues that black churchwomen took on

⁴³ Ibid., 66.

⁴⁴ Scott, "Most Invisible of All," 3-22.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 6.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 10-12.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 17-19.

the responsibility of welfare organization for their congregations and played a large role in “gathering the resources to build the network of churches that in time would become the backbone” of what Berkeley labeled the “distinct black infrastructure” that supported black society following the Civil War.⁴⁸ Scott also discusses Evelyn Brooks’ (Higginbotham) 1984 dissertation on black Baptist church women and asserts that Brooks’ work forces historians to “modify and expand our understanding of the history of the black church.”⁴⁹

In her 1991 article, “Black Club Women and the Creation of the National Association of Colored Women,” Stephanie J. Shaw reconceptualizes the creation of the NACW and black clubwomen’s activities. Shaw contends that most scholars often link said activities to the rise of Jim Crow, lynchings, mob violence, attacks on the character of black women, and the racist ideology of the day. However, Shaw suggests that in linking those things with the cause of the formation of the NACW, scholars ignore the “considerable evidence that reveals the obvious flaw in the interpretation.”⁵⁰ She elaborates that a new view needs to be taken that focuses on the traditions of the black community rather than the activities among the white communities. As with Evans who looked at sexism and Giddings who focused on sexism as well as racism, Shaw too includes both sexism and racism. She states that the creation of the NACW was a continuation of black women’s fight against racist ideology and sexism and served as a new “step in an internal historical process of encouraging and supporting self-

⁴⁸ Ibid., 8; Kathleen C. Berkeley, “‘Colored Ladies Also Contributed’: Black Women’s Activities From Benevolence to Social Welfare, 1866-1896,” in *The Web of Southern Social Relations: Women, Family, & Education*, eds. Walter J. Fraser, Jr., R. Frank Saunders, Jr., and Jon L. Wakelyn (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1985), 184-185.

⁴⁹ Scott, “Most Invisible of All,” 8-9; Evelyn Brooks, “The Women’s Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920” (PhD diss., University of Rochester, 1984).

⁵⁰ Shaw, “Black Club Women,” 10.

determination, self-improvement, and community development.”⁵¹

Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham expands on her 1984 dissertation in looking at black women’s movements and activities geared toward bringing about change in her 1993 work, *Righteous Discontent: The Women’s Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920*. Higginbotham examines black women’s activities within their respective churches, and how they turned those efforts toward fighting segregation and sexual assaults as well as working toward integration into society. However, in articulating the efforts of the black Baptist churchwomen, Higginbotham shows how these women were using many of the same techniques to gain the same results as the lay women described by the previous scholars mentioned, such as education and institution building and charitable contributions to the poor. They also preached self-help and racial uplift out of illiteracy, poverty, oppression, and taught proper morals and manners. Yet, Higginbotham adds a new dimension to the history of black women’s movements. She states that these women relied upon biblical scripture to emphasize that human equality embraced gender as well.⁵² They also emphasized women’s relationship with Jesus and, in turn, “shifted women’s duties outside the home, since woman’s primary obligation was interpreted to be to God rather than husband.”⁵³

Glenda Gilmore’s 1996 work, *Gender and Jim Crow: Women and the Politics of White Supremacy in North Carolina, 1896-1920*, has been widely celebrated. Gilmore’s study revolves around the black middle-class, chiefly women, prior to disfranchisement and continues through woman’s suffrage. Gilmore explores the rise of white supremacy

⁵¹ Ibid., 11.

⁵² Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women’s Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 72.

⁵³ Ibid., 131.

and violent racial repression blacks faced at the turn of the century and asserts that, as black men were pushed out of the political realm, space was created in which black women were able to step into.⁵⁴

Ann D. Gordon's 1997 edited series *African American Women and the Vote, 1837-1965*, looks at yet another angle of black women's activism in history by presenting a collection of scholarly essays on black women and suffrage. In dealing with black women's fight for suffrage, Gordon states that many women's historians contest that black women had to "choose between race and sex in the struggles in which they were engaged."⁵⁵ Rosalyn Terborg-Penn's 1998 book *African American Women in the Struggle for the Vote, 1850-1920*, challenges Gordon's assertion. Terborg-Penn states that by the 1850s, black women took radical steps toward opposing racism and sexism, simultaneously.⁵⁶ Additionally, in her essay "African American Women and the Vote: An Overview," Terborg-Penn argues against the 1970s declaration that "black women were uninterested in feminist politics and black men opposed feminist issues."⁵⁷

In continuation, Elsa Barkley Brown examines the sense of communal voting rights within black communities prior to black women's suffrage. In "To Catch the Vision of Freedom: Reconstructing Southern Black Women's Political History," Brown explains that black women saw black males' votes as equally theirs. Since women were not permitted to vote, they depended on the men to vote based on the consensus of the

⁵⁴ Gilmore, *Gender and Jim Crow*.

⁵⁵ Ann D. Gordon, Bettye Collier-Thomas, John H. Bracey, Arlene Voski Avakian, and Joyce Avrech Berkman, eds., *African American Women and the Vote, 1837-1965* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1997), 204.

⁵⁶ Rosalyn Terborg-Penn, *African American Women in the Struggle for the Vote, 1850-1920* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), 20.

⁵⁷ Rosalyn Terborg-Penn, "African American Women and the Vote: An Overview," in *African American Women and the Vote, 1837-1965*, eds. Ann D. Gordon, Bettye Collier-Thomas, John H. Bracey, Arlene Voski Avakian, and Joyce Avrech Berkman (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1997), 11.

community.⁵⁸ Additionally, Brown emphasizes that little scholarship has been done on black women's involvement in politics during Reconstruction and that there is a need to "develop an interpretive framework consistent with the alternative economic, institutional, and cultural world view of freedpeople."⁵⁹

Historians have also studied black women's fight for suffrage in relation to their efforts toward improving education as well as gaining anti-lynching legislation. Cynthia Neverdon-Morton illuminates in "Advancement of the Race through African-American Women's Organizations in the South, 1895-1925," that black female activists focused on education since they saw it as the means to working toward uplifting their race and overthrowing Jim Crow. They also saw education as the first step toward racial equality which would lead to developing the full potential of blacks.⁶⁰ While earlier scholarship explains that black women's organizational activities began with the desire to throw off racist ideologies, Neverdon-Morton takes this explanation one step further. She asserts that black women began community self-help and welfare programs because they knew they could not count on the electoral process to change the oppression they faced.⁶¹

Furthermore, Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham's "Clubwomen and Electoral Politics in the 1920's" discusses black women's "invisible politics" during the 1920s and their work to gain suffrage and obtain anti-lynching laws. Higginbotham argues that the migration of southern blacks to the North during World War I opened the door to political opportunity and power that helped organized black women accomplish those

⁵⁸ Elsa Barkley Brown, "To Catch the Vision of Freedom: Reconstructing Southern Black Women's Political History," in *African American Women and the Vote, 1837-1965*, eds. Ann D. Gordon, Bettye Collier-Thomas, John H. Bracey, Arlene Voski Avakian, and Joyce Avrech Berkman (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1997), 82.

⁵⁹ Brown, "To Catch the Vision of Freedom," 72-73.

⁶⁰ Neverdon-Morton, "Advancement of the Race," 120-121.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 123.

goals. Yet, she contemplates, the historical scholarship between the 1930s and the 1970s neglected to “investigate, to any meaningful extent, either the black female vote or the role of black women leaders in getting out the vote,” thus neglecting their “active and valuable role in the electoral politics of the 1920’s.”⁶² Additionally, Higginbotham observes that although recent works have included black female suffragists, their continued political activism after 1920 has been largely ignored.⁶³

A New Millennium

Historians writing at the turn of the twenty-first century continued the progress made in the 1990s by persisting in the study of individual groups of black female activists. Throughout the first decade of the new millennium, strides were made in the historical narrative of black women’s reform efforts, often shedding light on the use of the female body as a political weapon. Emerging historian, Tiffany Gill, focused on organized black women’s efforts through economics in the black community.⁶⁴

Specifically, Gill studied the black beauty industry and pulled her research through World War II, into the international realm. Paula Giddings produced a critically

⁶² Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, “Clubwomen and Electoral Politics in the 1920’s,” in *African American Women and the Vote, 1837-1965*, eds. Ann D. Gordon, Bettye Collier-Thomas, John H. Bracey, Arlene Voski Avakian, and Joyce Avrech Berkman (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1997), 135.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 135.

⁶⁴ Tiffany M. Gill, “Civic Beauty: Beauty Culturists and the Politics of African American Female Entrepreneurship, 1900-1965” (PhD diss., Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey, 2003); Tiffany M. Gill, *Beauty Shop Politics: African American Women’s Activism in the Beauty Industry* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2010); For a further look at black economics in the United States, see Juliet E. K. Walker, *The History of Black Business in America: Capitalism, Race, Entrepreneurship* (New York: Macmillan, 1998); For an in-depth look at black working women and resistance during Jim Crow, see Jacqueline Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work, and the Family from Slavery to the Present* (New York: Basic Books, 1985); Tera Hunter, *To ‘Joy My Freedom: Southern Black Women’s Lives and Labors After the Civil War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997); 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); and Rebecca Sharpless, *Cooking in Other Women’s Kitchens: Domestic Workers in the South, 1865-1960* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010).

acclaimed biography on Ida B. Wells and her anti-lynching crusade. Crystal Feimster and Danielle McGuire turned their angle of vision toward the sexualization of black women, rape, and the myth of the black rapist in the justification of lynching, referred to as “folk pornography” by Jacquelyn Dowd Hall.⁶⁵ Although more than a century in the making, these historians built on Ida B. Wells’ argument, initially set forth in 1892, that the black rapist in Jim Crow South was a myth and that there was a desire among white women for black men.⁶⁶

In 2003, Tiffany Gill published her dissertation, “Civic Beauty: Beauty Culturists and the Politics of African American Female Entrepreneurship, 1900-1965,” on black businesswomen, specifically black beauticians, and their place in black communities as female activists.⁶⁷ Gill states that the black beauty industry became an avenue for black women to “escape the economic limitations imposed by Jim Crow racism, and in turn built enduring institutions that challenged not only the social discourse of their respective communities, but the larger political arena, as well.”⁶⁸ She also explains that while historians have studied black women’s organizational activities, there is still a gap in the study of black women and philanthropy as well as “the economic strategies of groups and individuals...even though the accumulation of wealth was a key element of the uplift ethos.”⁶⁹ Gill comments on historian Alice Kessler-Harris’ explanation that “economic citizenship” was based on how economically autonomous one was and Gill suggests that

⁶⁵ Hall, *Revolt Against Chivalry*.

⁶⁶ Ida B. Wells-Barnett, “Southern Horrors,” in *On Lynchings* (1892; repr., New York: Humanity Books, 2002), 29.

⁶⁷ Gill, “Civic Beauty.” Also see A’Lelia Bundles, *On Her Own Ground: The Life and Times of Madam C. J. Walker* (New York: Washington Square Press, 2001).

⁶⁸ Gill, “Civic Beauty,” 44.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 101.

black beauty culturists embodied this citizenship.⁷⁰ Gill elaborates on this by stating that historians Lizbeth Cohen and Charles McGovern assert that citizenship was also defined by consumption, something else black beauticians played a large role in.⁷¹

In her 2008 biography, *Ida: A Sword Among Lions; Ida B. Wells and the Campaign Against Lynching*, Paula Giddings traces the life of Ida B. Wells, her crusade against lynching, involvement in different organizations, and international travels to spread the word of her cause.⁷² Wells was integral in the formation of the NACW, was one of the NAACP's Founding Forty, promoted suffrage, worked with Marcus Garvey and Madam C. J. Walker in spite of threats from military intelligence agencies, supported the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters and Maids, and even ran as an independent for a seat in the Illinois state senate.⁷³ Giddings explains that in writing Wells' biography, much of the history during her lifetime had to be rewritten because "it took on a new meaning and significance when viewed through the eyes of a progressive reformer with Wells' passions and concerns."⁷⁴ Giddings elaborates that in Wells' own time, she, as with so many active black women, had been virtually excluded from the annals of history. This is true throughout contemporary discussions on the anti-lynching campaign, the movement she was instrumental in bringing about.

Following Giddings' study on Ida B. Wells, Crystal Feimster's 2009 *Southern Horrors: Women and the Politics of Rape and Lynching* also traces Wells' activism and juxtaposes her against Rebecca Latimer Felton, a southern white woman born into a

⁷⁰ Ibid., 188-189.

⁷¹ Ibid., 189.

⁷² Giddings, *Ida*.

⁷³ For a look at the Women of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, see Melinda Chateauvert, *Marching Together: Women of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997).

⁷⁴ Giddings, *Ida*, 5.

wealthy slaveholding family.⁷⁵ Feimster’s work centers mainly around the late nineteenth century, during the height of lynching and the myth of the black rapist in the South, and follows both Wells’ and Felton’s crusades to protect women against sexual violence. Although Wells fought to secure protection for black women and Felton was extremely vocal about white women’s security, they both “were women’s rights pioneers who negotiated and challenged the racial and sexual politics of the New South.”⁷⁶ Feimster agrees with Ida B. Wells’ original argument that using the unfounded excuse of rape in the lynchings of black men placed boundaries on women’s political rights and sexual freedom, and maintained white male supremacy in the most violent of ways.⁷⁷ Feimster asserts that historians have yet to answer “how lynching informed women’s politics and anti-rape campaigns,” and elaborates that through the false cries of rape and subsequent lynchings, black and white women entered the realm of racial and sexual politics in the New South.⁷⁸

Danielle McGuire’s 2010 *At the Dark End of the Street: Black Women, Rape, and Resistance—A New History of the Civil Rights Movement from Rosa Parks to the Rise of Black Power* continues the discussion on sexual and racial violence against African Americans, specifically women.⁷⁹ From the kidnapping and rape of Recy Taylor in 1944 through Joan Little’s trial in 1975, McGuire illustrates that as black women began speaking out and testifying about their sexual assaults, they reclaimed their bodies and became weapons against white supremacy. McGuire states that historians have yet to

⁷⁵ Crystal N. Feimster, *Southern Horrors: Women and the Politics of Rape and Lynching* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009).

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 1.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

⁷⁹ Danielle L. McGuire, *At the Dark End of the Street: Black Women, Rape, and Resistance—A New History of the Civil Rights Movement from Rosa Parks to the Rise of Black Power* (New York: Vintage Books, 2010).

analyze the role sexual violence and rape held in the Civil Rights Movement.

Furthermore, she continues, if we comprehend “the role rape and sexual violence played in African Americans’ daily lives and within the larger freedom struggle, we have to reinterpret, if not rewrite, the history of the civil rights movement.”⁸⁰

Even with all the recent scholarly contributions, there are still a myriad of avenues waiting to be investigated and recorded with regard to African American women’s history. Scholars have posited on the reasons behind the missing information and ways to restore and add to the historical record. Gerda Lerner argued as early as the 1960s that women’s history needed to be rewritten and interdisciplinary focal points needed to be utilized.⁸¹ Anne Firor Scott elucidates that these gaps in history are due to past scholars who had either focused on white women when studying women’s history, or strictly on black men when studying African American history. Scott argues that black women were overlooked because, simply, they were black *and* female.⁸² Ann D. Gordon states that in order to properly study women’s history, women must be placed at the center of the research and analysis, but it must go a step further, as women are multifaceted and “cannot be universalized.” Therefore, Gordon continues, the subject’s culture and historical background must be taken into account.⁸³

Gerda Lerner explains, in her work *The Majority Finds Its Past: Placing Women in History*, that modern scholars of women’s history are swayed by several aspects—there are few primary resources by women, which means searching for new sources or looking at the subject matter from a different angle, engaging in “compensatory” research

⁸⁰ Ibid., xix, xx.

⁸¹ Gerda Lerner, *The Majority Finds Its Past: Placing Women in History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979).

⁸² Scott, “Most Invisible of All,” 4.

⁸³ Gordon, et al., *African American Women and the Vote*, 201-203.

with a focus on the “significant” and neglecting the “mundane,” and viewing the history as one of an oppressed group fighting against its oppressors.⁸⁴ Lynda F. Dickson continues Lerner’s argument by explaining that historians must maintain objectivity and avoid making assumptions. Dickson also relies on Gerda Lerner’s assertion that in researching women, scholars must put aside the grander, more significant seeming actions and pay attention to the ordinary activities.⁸⁵ Dickson states that it is also important in studying the development of organizations to “step away from the local setting and examine macro level factors.”⁸⁶

Glenda Gilmore takes the same stance as Gerda Lerner did in the 1960s by asserting that historical revision of African American and women’s history, as well as social, political, and southern history, is long past due. Gilmore shows that “[r]evisioning southern politics must take into account the plethora of new sources on African American and women’s history, grapple with the theoretical insight that gender and race are socially constructed, and test new ideas about the junctures of public and private space in political culture.”⁸⁷ Gilmore further explains that in researching and writing African American women’s history, it is necessary to look past the southern white archival sources, which renders black women invisible. Gilmore expounds on this by stating that through her research, she discovered two distinct points of view in the history of white supremacy and, while archival material on white women was easily found, sources on black women remained undiscovered. Furthermore, “white women often hid their thoughts on race and erased interracial encounters reported by black women, leaving a scattering of partial

⁸⁴ Lerner, *The Majority Finds Its Past*.

⁸⁵ Dickson, 62, 65, 66.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 66.

⁸⁷ Gilmore, *Gender and Jim Crow*, xvi.

truths behind.”⁸⁸ On the other hand, as Anne Firor Scott explained in her work, some black clubwomen withdrew into a world of their own, keeping their activities hidden from the white majority.⁸⁹ Scott concludes, “when the long history of black women’s associations is understood, the history of women’s activity in the civil rights movement and many other things will appear in a new light.”⁹⁰

⁸⁸ Ibid., xxii.

⁸⁹ Scott, “Most Invisible of All,” 19.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 22.

CHAPTER III

Stepping onto the National Stage:
The Formation of the National Association of Colored Women and Its Leading Ladies,
1895-1896

“I will not shrink from undertaking what seems wise and good, because I labor under the double handicap of race and sex; but, striving to preserve a calm mind with a courageous, cheerful spirit, barring bitterness from my heart, I will struggle all the more earnestly to reach the goal.”⁹¹

—Mary Church Terrell, 1940

The club and organizational activities of African American women served as an important social conduit for black women during the age of Jim Crow. It allowed them their own space and means to come together to work toward bettering conditions that were unique not only to the black community as a whole, but to black women living under the double burden of race and sex. Black clubwomen were instrumental in laying the groundwork for the movement for civil rights throughout the twentieth century. Moreover, the clubwomen’s efforts were a driving force for the political and social changes that occurred during the twentieth century, leading to the death of Jim Crow. Although many of these early clubwomen would not witness Jim Crow’s demise during their lifetimes, their articulation of grievances and activism were fundamental to the black community’s triumph over white supremacy. In their efforts to defend black womanhood against the derogatory stereotypes they were confronted with from the white majority, black clubwomen motivated their sisters to improve morals, home life, and hygiene in their respective communities. They supported temperance and worked to

⁹¹ Terrell, *A Colored Woman in a White World*, 426.

improve education as well. Black clubwomen also relied on Christian charitable activities and benevolence and promoted philanthropy. They tended to the ill, collected donations for the poor, and established homes for orphans as well as the elderly. These women found common ground in the race work that was specific to the African American community. They fought to end segregation and levied a serious challenge to the abuses of the convict lease system. Additionally, they attempted both individual and collaborative work against lynchings, and attained prison reforms.

In order to achieve their goals in these areas, they needed the support of individual local clubs. Such clubs included the Woman's Era Club of Boston, Massachusetts, the Tuskegee Woman's Club of Tuskegee, Alabama, the Atlanta Woman's Club of Atlanta, Georgia, the Ida B. Wells Club of Chicago, Illinois, the Women's Loyal Union of Brooklyn and New York, the Woman's Club of Jefferson City, Missouri, and the Woman's Club of Omaha, Nebraska, to name a few. As long as information and localized progress was not being easily shared with other groups, the full potential of the clubwomen's varied skills and interests would remain limited. Organizing on a national level created a professional front and, as Gerda Lerner explained, "the reporting of club activities in the various women's journals lent dignity and a sense of direction to the small groups of local women, taught them more sophisticated methods of organization and provided channels for the training of leadership."⁹² This multitude of clubs is collectively called the African American clubwomen's movement, which experienced a surge of activity between the 1880s and 1920s. For my study, it is important to illustrate the specific events and monumental strides that took place in 1895 and 1896. These two years marked the organizational turning point in the movement's

⁹² Lerner, "Early Community Work," 162.

history.

Prior to the establishment of a national organization, the black clubwomen's movement was largely a localized movement aimed at generating change in their respective communities. By the 1890s, however, the rising tide of racial violence compelled local clubwomen to discuss the necessity of having a national presence in order to gain social and political equality. In the face of white supremacy, racial hostility, political repression, and violence, the National Federation of Afro-American Women (NFAW) was formed in 1895 by middle-class black women who carried the banner of racial uplift. These women understood that collaborative efforts on a national level were fundamental to bringing about beneficial change and acquiring social and political equality. The NFAW lasted one year and gave way to the oldest surviving African American women's organization, the National Association of Colored Women, in 1896.⁹³ The NACW came together to defend black womanhood from the slander and violence they faced from white supremacists and to provide a national forum to highlight the racial uplift activities already occurring locally. The NACW enabled black women to unite their individual efforts into a cohesive coalition. Organizing on a national level brought the local chapters a sense of common destiny.

Various historians have debated how and why the African American women's club efforts became a national movement. Brutal race relations, the success of the white clubwomen's work, the organizational traditions within the black community, black Baptist churchwomen's activities, and distrust of the political machine as a solution to

⁹³ The National Association of Colored Women's Clubs, Inc. and Youth Affiliates, <http://www.nacwc.org/intro.htm>.

their plight, all had motivational impacts.⁹⁴ There was also a concomitant mixture of freedom and urbanization of blacks, as well as a rising number of educated blacks, which logically led to an effort to find either group cohesion or an affinity for one another. This combination culminated in a growing acknowledgement that they needed to fight together by means of a national, unified front. Thus, organizing nationally was an outgrowth of the networking experiences African American clubwomen had gained in their individual communities. When all the elements are combined, it creates a clearer synthesis of the backdrop of the black clubwomen's movement. Yet, in 1895 there was a definitive event that worked as a catalyst to bring all the elements to a climax. Although there had been prior discussion of forming a national organization, by 1895 this had not yet come to fruition. The determination of what finally pushed local black clubwomen into nationalizing is best revealed within the minutes, letters, and recorded speeches of the national conferences they organized.

By the mid-1890s, segregationist laws were swiftly mounting and black men were disfranchised, thus ensuring blacks' second class citizenship and robbing African Americans of any political power they had. Without the vote, blacks could not change political policy to fight the advances of white male supremacy. This was evidenced by the rising number of lynchings and the destruction of budding black townships, most often due to the economic competition whites faced from black entrepreneurs.⁹⁵ There was also a drastic increase in the number of sexual assaults. Black women's bodies were not their own but rather objects of amusement and pleasure, regardless of the woman's

⁹⁴ Lerner, "Early Community Work," 160-161; Shaw, "Black Club Women," 10-11; Dickson, 66; Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent*, 72; Neverdon-Morton, "Advancement of the Race," 120-121, 122-123.

⁹⁵ Feimster, 90.

desire. These assaults were used as weapons “to dominate the bodies and minds” of blacks.⁹⁶

However, the last straw was a personal affront to all black women in the form of a simple letter. On March 6, 1895, John W. Jacks, the white president of the Missouri Press Association, sent a letter to Florence Balgarnie, the Honorable Secretary of the Anti-Lynching League of London, England. In his letter, Jacks expounded on boundless depravities of black women, epitomizing the patriarchal, white supremacist ideology of the day. In his letter, Jacks stated that he “lived for years where negroes are plentiful” and that the race is “wholly devoid of morality.” He continued to state that black women were “prostitutes and all are natural liars and thieves...out of 200 in this vicinity it is doubtful if there are a dozen virtuous women of that number who are not daily thieving from the white people.”⁹⁷ Balgarnie, a virulent anti-lynching crusader, was appalled at what she called the “utter and dastardly falsehood” of Jacks’ letter. Balgarnie then forwarded a copy to her friend in the struggle, Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin, president of the Woman’s Era Club of Boston. This was one of the country’s most successful black women’s organizations and Ruffin was also the publisher of the *Woman’s Era*, the first black women’s newspaper, initially issued in March, 1894.⁹⁸

⁹⁶ McGuire, xviii; For further discussion on the destruction, violence, and sexual assaults, see David S. Cecelski and Timothy Tyson, eds., *Democracy Betrayed: The Wilmington Race Riot of 1898 and Its Legacy* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998); Michael J. Pfeifer, *Rough Justice: Lynching and American Society, 1874-1947* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004); Stewart Emory Tolnay and E. M. Beck, *A Festival of Violence: An Analysis of Southern Lynchings, 1882-1930* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995); Michael J. Pfeifer, ed., *Lynching Beyond Dixie: American Mob Violence Outside the South* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2013); Darlene Clark Hine, “Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women in the Middle West,” *Signs* 14, no. 4 (Summer 1989): 912-920; and Feimster.

⁹⁷ Letter from John W. Jacks to Florence Balgarnie, pieced together from Giddings, *Ida*, 348 and Feimster, 110.

⁹⁸ Florence Balgarnie to Mrs. Ruffin Ridley, July 19, 1895, “Extracts from Letter from Mrs. Balgarnie” NACWC, 1895; Deborah Gray White, *Too Heavy a Load: Black Women in Defense of Themselves, 1894-1994* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1999), 37; Penelope L. Bullock, *The Afro-American Periodical Press, 1838-1909* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1981), 191, 189-

What followed was an urgent, collective demand among black clubwomen across the United States to take swift, demonstrative action by forming a national organization. By doing so, they would have the presence necessary to protest such defamations of black womanhood and appeal to national authorities. They would also be able to create a network of communication between the local clubs. In turn, these local clubs would have the ability to exchange information about what they were working on, their actions and goals, and their successes and failures.

Jacks' letter struck such a nerve with Balgarnie and Ruffin due to the steadily worsening race relations of the post-Reconstruction Era. During the 1880s and 1890s, many whites believed that Africans had arrived in North America devoid of morality, behaved solely on instinct, and needed to be restrained by the institution of slavery to control their behavior. This paternalistic view that was developed during slavery reemerged following Reconstruction, creating a racialized intolerance and fear of blacks among the white majority. Emancipation fostered a belief among whites that without white guidance and physical coercion, freed men and women would revert to savagery. Therefore, there was considerable belief that ex-slaves morally and socially "retrogressed."⁹⁹ This anxiety about black savagery formed a pillar of southern apologist thinking, typified by the New South school of thought, led by William A. Dunning and Ulrich Bonnell Phillips, that would profoundly influence the white mind for generations

194. For further information on the history of the black press, see Bullock; Martin E. Dann, ed., *The Black Press, 1827-1890: The Quest For National Identity* (New York: Capricorn Books, 1971); Roland E. Wolseley, *The Black Press, U.S.A.: A Detailed and Understanding Report on What the Black Press Is and How It Came to Be* (Ames: The Iowa State University Press, 1971); and Pamela Newkirk, *Within the Veil: Black Journalists, White Media* (New York: New York University Press, 200).

⁹⁹ Gutman, 8-9, 458, 531-544. Gutman coined the phrase "retrogressed" in order to embody the concept of returning to primitive, tribal mores.

to come.¹⁰⁰

One of the best known examples of the southern apologist argument came in 1889 from white southerner Philip Alexander Bruce. Raised in Virginia on his father's five thousand acre tobacco plantation maintained by more than five hundred slaves, the University of Virginia and Harvard Law School graduate came to be known as a historian of the Old and New South.¹⁰¹ In 1889, Bruce asserted in his work, *The Plantation Negro*, that black women were naturally sexually promiscuous and black men accepted this promiscuity. In addition, he inferred that black parents' apathy toward their children made them incapable of raising them in a civilized manner or guiding their daughters toward chastity.¹⁰² Bruce stated that due to Emancipation, the "parental authority is now much laxer than it used to be, inasmuch as it is no longer supported by all the power of the slaveholder."¹⁰³ Bruce continued to state that "lasciviousness has done more than all the other vices of the plantation negroes united, to degrade the character of their social life since they were invested with citizenship" and specifically blamed said degradation on the "lasciviousness" of black women.¹⁰⁴

Bruce wanted blacks to be "eliminated as a political factor" and called for immediate disfranchisement of African Americans and their deportation from the United States.¹⁰⁵ Although Bruce's work was based on examples from Virginia, he makes it clear

¹⁰⁰ See William A. Dunning, *Essays on the Civil War and Reconstruction and Related Topics* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1898); Ulrich Bonnell Phillips, *American Negro Slavery: A Survey of the Supply, Employment and Control of Negro Labor as Determined by the Plantation Regime* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1918).

¹⁰¹ Gutman, 534; Giddings, *Ida*, 174; George M. Fredrickson, *The Black Image in the White Mind: The Debate on Afro-American Character and Destiny, 1817-1914* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1972), 244.

¹⁰² Bruce, 1-7, 12; Fredrickson, 259-260; Dickson, 66-67.

¹⁰³ Bruce, 3.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 17, 15-28.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 260; Gutman, 537-538; Fredrickson, 263, 268.

he is describing the social conditions of *all* black people. *The Plantation Negro* illustrates the white supremacist convictions that prevailed at the time and “put the case for a ‘black peril’ in the South on a firmer foundation.”¹⁰⁶ Bruce’s work was part of a larger, racialized narrative that dominated the historical and popular writing of the era.¹⁰⁷ W. E. B. Du Bois later refuted the narrative in his work, *The Suppression of the African Slave-Trade to the United States of America, 1638-1870*, published in 1896.¹⁰⁸

At the time of Bruce’s work, a woman’s ideal role was to maintain the Victorian home where she would instill values of thrift, piety, and honor into her children, preparing them for citizenship.¹⁰⁹ Under middle-class Victorian thought, children were to be raised with moral discipline through proper upbringing and education and were to be taught to keep their baser instincts under control. Furthermore, the separate spheres ideology was an outgrowth of Victorianism in which it was declared that men and women were to preserve separate realms in their everyday life.¹¹⁰ The concept was basic: men were to be the leaders of the family, protectors of women, work and produce an income, and take political stances while women were to remain obedient to their husbands’ wishes, maintain their place in the home caring for the family, and remain reticent in public forums. White women, especially in the South, were economically dependent upon

¹⁰⁶ Fredrickson, 245.

¹⁰⁷ Dickson, 66; Scott, “Most Invisible of All,” 10-12.

¹⁰⁸ W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Suppression of the African Slave-Trade to the United States of America, 1638-1870*, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (1896; repr., New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

¹⁰⁹ Dickson, 66-67.

¹¹⁰ For more information on separate spheres, see Baker, 620-647; and Nancy F. Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood: “Woman’s Sphere” in New England, 1780-1835* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1975). For information on separate spheres, motherhood, and domesticity in combination with political activism, see Linda K. Kerber, *Women of the Republic: Intellect and Ideology in Revolutionary America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980); and Mary Beth Norton, *Liberty’s Daughters: The Revolutionary Experience of American Women, 1750-1800* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1980).

their fathers or husbands and lacked their own autonomy.¹¹¹ There was a focus on moral purity and innocence, as well as culture, arts, refined manners, and a sense of honor, essentially elevating the “civilized” above the common masses. The Victorian white middle-class labeled those they feared as “savages,” usually any non-white, non-European descendant and the barrier between civilized and savage was deemed unbreakable.¹¹² Thus, black women, seen as sexually amoral and lacking the ability to maintain a secure family home life, warranted no respect whatsoever.¹¹³ The South was heavily entrenched in the separate spheres ideology. Following the Civil War, southerners tried to hold onto the myth of the genteel South and the Southern Cavalier, and the “Victorian dichotomy had supplied a principal bulwark for southern white supremacy.”¹¹⁴

Not only did the white majority exclude black women from the ideals of separate spheres, the history of African American women automatically excluded them from that concept as well. Due to the way of slavery life, black women were forced into rigorous work. Husbands and fathers were regularly sold off to neighboring plantations, resulting in the women taking on the role of household leader. Although some slave men and women were eventually reunited, a number of slave women chose to remarry and begin new families. Both situations had the potential of creating a male-headed household, although slave marriages were much more multifaceted than that, often taking on egalitarian qualities.¹¹⁵ Yet, other women relied on the female kinship network created in

¹¹¹ Feimster, 9.

¹¹² Daniel Joseph Singal, *The War Within: From Victorian to Modernist Thought in the South, 1919-1945* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1982), 5, 7.

¹¹³ Dickson, 66-67.

¹¹⁴ Singal, 9, 11-33.

¹¹⁵ Peter J. Parish, *Slavery: History and Historians* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1989), 86-87; Willie Lee Rose, *Slavery and Freedom*, ed. William Freehling (New York: Oxford University Press,

the slave communities to continue leading their own households. Black women's "cooperation and interdependence was a fact of female slave life."¹¹⁶ Slave women were largely autonomous and independent, and tended to stand at the center of the family.¹¹⁷

Following Emancipation, it was essential for black women to gain employment. Freed black males had difficulty finding work and rarely earned a fair wage, if they were not cheated out of their earnings entirely. Black women often became their families' breadwinners, usually as domestics, laundresses, or cooks. Work was directly related to racial pride and a woman's status. "One measure of the status of an African American woman's job," notes Kate Dossett, "was its distance from direct supervision by whites, and the extent to which she was working for herself and for black Americans."¹¹⁸

Moreover, black women's activism and political movements further removed them from the conventional ideals of separate spheres. Their actions were ingrained in the traditions of the black community at the grassroots level and as time progressed, and the black clubwomen's movement advanced, their voices were often the loudest and sharpest in public forums and through the black presses. Black middle-class women accepted the double duty of maintaining their home and family while also agitating for social change in the public sphere as both were seen as "bright markers of racial progress."¹¹⁹

The retrogressionist ideology spread by Bruce and others had begun to influence the black clubwomen movement at the local level prior to 1895. The derisive slurs against all African American women proved especially insulting to early, local

1982), 29; Deborah Gray White, *Ar'n't I a Woman?: Female Slaves in the Plantation South*, rev. ed. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1999), 142, 158.

¹¹⁶ White, *Ar'n't I a Woman?*, 119.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 153, 154, 160.

¹¹⁸ Kate Dossett, *Bridging Race Divides: Black Nationalism, Feminism, and Integration in the United States, 1896-1935* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2008), 204.

¹¹⁹ Giddings, *Ida*, 357.

clubwomen leaders, most of whom belonged to the educated black middle-class. Regardless of the beliefs of the white majority, these early leaders accepted the Victorian mindset of a woman's proper role in society.¹²⁰ They also accepted the tenet of the separate spheres ideology that stressed female empowerment and thus sought to embody it in practice, despite being told they were incapable of fulfilling the traditional, feminine role. Furthermore, black women during the nineteenth century operated from a very conservative point of view, which made the Victorian sensibilities at the time particularly appealing to them. Consequently, these local clubwomen turned their attentions to offering personal assistance and guidance to the downtrodden sisters of their race. Their intention was to improve the image of all black women as well as the actual living conditions of less fortunate individuals. Some local clubs were specifically formed to work toward abolishing the negative stereotypes. These clubs were often benevolent societies, raising money for the poor and establishing girls' homes where they focused on proper housekeeping and hygiene.¹²¹ Although the white majority excluded black women from the separate spheres ideology, this work, and the necessity of this work, was experienced by the white community and performed by white clubwomen as well and, therefore, remained within the realm of separate spheres.

While the efforts of these early black clubwomen have been perceived as an attempt to conform to white society's gendered social constructs in an effort to be included within the white community's realm of separate spheres, Higginbotham has

¹²⁰ For information on African American women's connection to Victorianism, see Shirley J. Carlson, "Black Ideals of Womanhood in the Late Victorian Era," *The Journal of Negro History* 77, no. 2 (Spring 1992): 61-73.

¹²¹ Dickson, 64, 66-67; Scott, "Most Invisible of All," 6; Berkeley, "'Colored Ladies Also Contributed'," 181-203.

described it as “politics of respectability.”¹²² These women formed a set of moral codes which guided blacks’ public behavior with the strategic end goal of improving race relations and the image of black womanhood by countering negative stereotypes like those put forth by Bruce and other white supremacists.¹²³ Early black clubwomen essentially created their own, distinctive separate sphere. This allowed them to focus on both feminine, maternal work, which often mirrored white clubwomen’s efforts, and explicit race work that stepped well beyond the established boundaries of the white community’s separate spheres. For these black clubwomen, focusing on race work and the overthrow of Jim Crow strictly benefitted the black community and was therefore a unique and necessary endeavor for black clubwomen. Yet, it should be noted that some of these clubwomen actually maintained strong class prejudices and were thought to be patronizing and condescending to their own kinsmen. These leaders behaved in such a way as part of their efforts to prove that they, as black women, were not without morals, principles, or the ability to comprehend right from wrong.¹²⁴ According to Lynda Dickson, they declared that in order to prepare for full citizenship, blacks must develop “the virtues of cleanliness, thrift, and high moral character.”¹²⁵

Nothing represents the influence the retrogressionist ideology had on the early black clubwomen any more than the letter from John W. Jacks to British civil rights activist, Florence Balgarnie. Though he was hardly the first to suggest that all black women were sexually promiscuous, by sending his letter overseas, it was akin to taking the attack outside of the home. In his letter, he stated that all blacks lacked morals, black

¹²² Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent*, 187.

¹²³ *Ibid.*; Dossett, 35-36.

¹²⁴ Dickson, 67; Lerner, “Early Community Work,” 160.

¹²⁵ Dickson, 67; For further discussion on local clubwomen’s goals, see Dickson.

women were prostitutes, and that lying and thieving were instinctual acts among the black race.¹²⁶ Deborah Gray White explains that by “tying the progress of the race to the morality of its women, Jacks’ insulting letter ignited a new fire under them...and from their point of view, the uplift of women was the means of uplifting the race.”¹²⁷

1895—Answering the Call to Nationalize

The records of the NACW contain the revealing correspondence that followed Balgarnie’s forwarding of Jacks’ letter to Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin. On June 1, 1895, Ruffin distributed a copy of the vile letter along with a cover letter to all the African American women’s clubs and organizations in the country known to her.¹²⁸ Although submitting the letter to African American newspapers would have promoted the cause to a larger audience, Ruffin decided not to give Jacks’ comments public acknowledgement. In her private letter to the clubwomen she advised that “[w]e do not think it wise to give this letter general publishing and ask you to use it carefully.”¹²⁹ Not only did Ruffin want to avoid giving Jacks the slightest validation, it also seems that she attempted to embody Victorian morality at the same time in her controlled public response to Jacks’ letter. Ruffin’s letter invited and strongly encouraged attendance, at least in the form of delegates, of black women, members of clubs and societies or not, to the First National Conference of the Colored Women of America to be held in Boston, Massachusetts at the end of July, 1895.¹³⁰

In regard to her letter, Ruffin explained that Boston, Massachusetts, had been

¹²⁶ “Letters and Resolutions” NACWC, 1895.

¹²⁷ White, *Too Heavy a Load*, 24.

¹²⁸ “The Call of Meeting of ‘95” NACWC, 1895.

¹²⁹ “Let Us Confer Together” *History*, p.4, Ida B. Wells Papers.

¹³⁰ “The Call of Meeting of ‘95” NACWC, 1895.

chosen as the site to hold this first meeting because of its historically supportive atmosphere of past freedmen's causes. She had a strategic reason for her selection as well. The Christian Endeavor Society, an international organization of goodwill and charity to all races, had already scheduled their conference in Boston and would bring in more than fifty thousand male and female delegates, "including many black women interested in the club movement."¹³¹ Perhaps, Ruffin believed that the Society would be fertile ground to recruit people of "open-mindedness" in such a supportive atmosphere.¹³² On a practical level, she knew the cost of train tickets had been reduced throughout the country due to The Christian Endeavor Society's massive gathering, thus creating an additional advantage for the clubwomen traveling to Boston. She went on to clarify that, although a national conference that would include clubwomen from all areas of the United States had been discussed for several years, it was Jacks' letter that served as the spur in her side to finally arrange the gathering. Due to the imperative nature of the matter, the conference was set for July 29-31, 1895, a mere eight weeks away.¹³³

Taking into account the difficulty of making arrangements to leave one's home and family, plus secure funds for such travel and accommodations in Boston, attendance at the conference would have amounted to an enormous effort for most of the recipients of Ruffin's letter. Many individuals and organizations, such as the Women's Mite Missionary Society of the African Methodist Episcopal Church in Toledo, Ohio, the Church of St. Philip the Deacon in Omaha, Nebraska, and the Cleave Circle of King's

¹³¹ Francis E. Clarke, "The Christian Endeavor Movement," *The North American Review* 161, no. 466 (September 1895): 290, 291; Henry B. F. MacFarland, "The Christian Endeavor Movement," *The North American Review* 182, no. 591 (February 1906): 198; Giddings, *Ida*, 360; Francis E. Clarke, "The Peace Spirit in Japan," *The Advocate of Peace* 72, no. 3 (March 1910): 58-59. At the time of this meeting and subsequent decade, The Christian Endeavor Society had missionaries and gatherings in locations such as England, Scotland, China, Australia, India, Japan, Cairo, Manila, and Honolulu.

¹³² MacFarland, 202.

¹³³ "The Call of Meeting of '95" NACWC, 1895.

Daughters of the Antioch Baptist Church in New York City, though unable to attend, sent letters to be presented at the conference. They described their excitement over the national gathering and the promise it gave to the future. More specifically, their letters reflected their belief that they saw the gathering as a stepping stone toward acquiring legislation to protect black females against racial hostilities and legal equality for blacks.¹³⁴

A number of women managed to overcome their various personal obstacles to be present at the end of July in 1895. Thus, Jacks' letter did more to galvanize support than many could have imagined. For example, as expressed by the delegate from the Woman's Club of Jefferson City, Missouri, regarding Jacks' letter: "Nothing has ever called forth such just indignation from the citizens of Jefferson as did this base letter, coming as it did from our own state." She then went on to say that the club members had decided "to send a delegate, at any cost, to utter their protest." Their goal in sending a delegate to the conference was to "show to the world that we, as colored women, are struggling for a higher, nobler, and purer life."¹³⁵ When the conference commenced, there were fifty-three delegates in attendance, representing Washington, D. C. and fourteen states.¹³⁶

After being advised of the upcoming conference she was so instrumental in bringing about, Florence Balgarnie replied that it was "just what I expected brave, true-hearted women would do, that is, put on a bold front to the traducers of your race and sex...[y]ou have a hard fight before you in America, but never fear, right must triumph,

¹³⁴ "Letters and Resolutions" NACWC, 1895.

¹³⁵ "Report of the Woman's Club of Jefferson City, Mo." NACWC, 1895.

¹³⁶ "Minutes of the First National Conference of Colored Women" NACWC, 1895. Only nine of the fourteen states are explicitly stated in the organization's minutes—Alabama, Georgia, Massachusetts, Missouri, Nebraska, New York, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, and South Carolina.

and with God on your side you are in a majority.”¹³⁷

1895—The First National Conference

Day one of the first national conference was dedicated to the rules of conducting the meeting. The second and third days were reserved especially for addressing their “moral, mental, physical and financial growth and well-being.”¹³⁸ Among the letters read from the many well-wishers was one from General Oliver O. Howard, head of the Freedmen’s Bureau during Reconstruction. A notable guest speaker mentioned in the minutes of the conference was Dr. Alexander Crummell. The prominent African American Episcopalian priest, abolitionist, and founder of St. Luke’s Episcopal Church in Washington, D.C. in 1873, was well received by the attendees.¹³⁹ Quite possibly, Dr. Crummell expounded on his 1883 work *The Black Woman of the South: Her Neglects and Her Needs* in which he called for the protection of black women as well as the uplift of black womanhood. He also mentioned the need for mothers’ meetings, discussed “cleanliness, thrift, and self-respect,” and called for industrial and domestic training for black women in the South.¹⁴⁰

Participants provided examples of the work being done by local clubwomen’s organizations. The Women’s Loyal Union of New York and Brooklyn, the country’s other leading black women’s organization next to Ruffin’s Woman’s Era Club of Boston, reported they regularly discussed morality, physical abuses, and political oppression, and

¹³⁷ Florence Balgarnie to Mrs. Ruffin Ridley, July 19, 1895, NACWC, 1895.

¹³⁸ “The Call of Meeting of ‘95” NACWC, 1895.

¹³⁹ “Minutes of the First National Conference of Colored Women” NACWC, 1895; Feimster, 105.

¹⁴⁰ Rev. Alexander Crummell, *The Black Woman of the South: Her Neglects and Her Needs*, (1883), p. 10, 11, 13-14, Sallie Bingham Center for Women’s History and Culture, David M. Rubenstein Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Duke University, Durham, North Carolina.

had formed local chapters in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, Charleston, South Carolina, and Memphis, Tennessee.¹⁴¹ Victoria Matthews, prolific journalist and head of the Woman's Loyal Union of New York, introduced a paper on "Race Literature," emphasizing the need for more positive literature written about blacks.¹⁴² In her paper she scorned the racialized narrative offered by white authors of the day, extolled African American literature that negated said narrative, and in discussing the conditions African Americans were forced to endure she stated that "oppressive legislation, aided by grossly inhuman customs, successfully retarded all general efforts toward improvement [and] the race suffered physically and mentally under a great wrong, an appalling evil."¹⁴³

Other examples of work being done by local clubwomen largely encompassed moral reform. Margaret Murray Washington, wife of Booker T. Washington and founder of the Tuskegee Woman's Club, presented a paper she had written entitled "Individual Work for Moral Elevation."¹⁴⁴ The Woman's Club of Jefferson City, Missouri stated they trained children in skills and morals, including temperance.¹⁴⁵ The Woman's Club of Omaha advised they had been focused on intellectual development, philanthropic and reformative goals, and were working toward getting a black teacher hired in Omaha's public schools.¹⁴⁶ Also noted in the minutes was that group discussions were held regarding temperance and social purity, another term for maintaining sexual innocence

¹⁴¹ "Report of the Women's Loyal Union of New York and Brooklyn" NACWC, 1895; "Report of the Women's Loyal Union of New York and Brooklyn" *History*, p.13, Ida B. Wells Papers.

¹⁴² "Report of the Women's Loyal Union of New York and Brooklyn" NACWC, 1895.

¹⁴³ "The Value of Race Literature: An Address Delivered At the First Congress of Colored Women of the United States, at Boston, Mass., July 30, 1895" Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut [hereafter cited as Yale Collection of American Literature].

¹⁴⁴ "Minutes of the First National Conference of Colored Women" NACWC, 1895.

¹⁴⁵ "Report of the Woman's Club of Jefferson City, Mo." NACWC, 1895.

¹⁴⁶ "Minutes of the First National Conference of Colored Women," "The Woman's Club of Omaha" NACWC, 1895.

and abstaining from immoral vices, all of which were part of the Victorian set of values so important to the clubwomen.

The First National Conference of the Colored Women of America was held over for a fourth day in order to finalize the discussion regarding the creation of a national organization.¹⁴⁷ On August 1, 1895, at Charles St. Church, the National Federation of Afro-American Women (NFAW) was formed with Margaret Murray Washington as its president.¹⁴⁸

1896—The Formation of the National Association of Colored Women

In their inaugural year, the NFAW combined eighty-two clubs from fifty-six cities in twenty-five different states, reaching from New England, to the Deep South, to the Midwest.¹⁴⁹ Continuing along the lines of local club work, the new organization listed their objectives as “establishing needed reforms...[for the] advancement of the race” and “to awaken the women of the race to the great need of systematic effort in home-making and the divinely imposed duties of motherhood.”¹⁵⁰ These objectives unmistakably illustrate the clubwomen’s belief that racial uplift, domestic reform, and a focus on maternalism went hand-in-hand in their defense of black womanhood.

The first NFAW convention was held July 20-22, 1896, at the 19th Street Baptist Church in Washington, D. C. The importance of this gathering, as well as the support it garnered from within the black community, was apparent with the attendance of several

¹⁴⁷ “Minutes of the First National Conference of Colored Women” NACWC, 1895.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid.; “Constitution” National Association of Colored Women’s Clubs, July 20, 1896 – July 22, 1896, National Federation of Afro-American Women, Convention Minutes and Reports, 1896, Records of the National Association of Colored Women’s Clubs, LexisNexis Primary Sources in African American History via Texas State University Alkek Library [hereafter cited as NACWC, 1896].

¹⁴⁹ “Directory” NACWC, 1896.

¹⁵⁰ “Constitution: Article II, Object” NACWC, 1896.

guests of honor. Epitomizing the women's connection with black female heroes, Harriet Tubman graced the conference as their guest speaker. Mother Tubman, as she was affectionately referred to, received a standing ovation as she took the podium and shared stories of her Civil War experience at the behest of some of the club's leaders. Following Mother Tubman was Dr. Alexander Crummell, "who gave one of his characteristic speeches" and blessings.¹⁵¹ Additionally, during the opening session of the convention, Rosetta Douglass Sprague, Frederick Douglass' daughter, gave a rousing speech on "behalf of the Afro-American women of the United States."¹⁵² In her speech, Sprague called for "homes in which purity can be taught, not hovels that are police-court feeders," stated the need for reform schools for girls and "industrial schools where labor of all kinds is taught," and demanded "the pool rooms and gambling dens of every variety swept out of existence."¹⁵³

The additional presence of the Women's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) also held a great deal of significance for this meeting. Mrs. La Fetra, the World's Superintendent of the WCTU's Department of Citizenship, was recognized as a distinguished guest.¹⁵⁴ This recognition emphasized an alliance with the WCTU, an organization that not only had an international presence, but was the largest, most sophisticated and influential women's organization in the United States.¹⁵⁵ Although originally a white women's organization, members of the WCTU organized white and

¹⁵¹ "First Day. Evening Session" NACWC, 1896.

¹⁵² "First Day. July 20, 1896. Morning Session" NACWC, 1896; May Unite Their Forces: Officers of Two Colored Women's Associations to Confer. Second Annual Convention To-day of the National Federation, Following Closely Upon the Convention of the National League, *The Washington Post*, July 20, 1896.

¹⁵³ "First Day. July 20, 1896. Morning Session" NACWC, 1896.

¹⁵⁴ "First Day. Evening Session" NACWC, 1896.

¹⁵⁵ For an overview of the WCTU and interracial alliances, see Gilmore, *Gender and Jim Crow*, 45-59. For a brief background on the WCTU, also see Anne Firor Scott, *Natural Allies: Women's Associations in American History* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991), 93-103; and Baker, 637-638.

black chapters by the 1880s. Prior to black clubwomen's organization on a national level, the WCTU served as the primary interdenominational association for black women.¹⁵⁶ Mrs. La Fetra's participation underlined the women's continued common interest and unification in fighting alcoholism and its damaging effects. Furthermore, the WCTU upheld "a working model of finer womanhood that meshed" with the black clubwomen's beliefs and these clubwomen viewed their alliance with the interracial organization as a path toward other interracial cooperation.¹⁵⁷

One of the issues raised on the first day of the convention was the matter of merging with the National League of Colored Women (NLCW). At the previous year's meeting, a debate took place regarding the possibility of merging with the NLCW, but no decision was reached. Although the NLCW existed prior to the first conference in 1895, their use of the word "national" and the extent of the association's membership roster was questioned.¹⁵⁸ A letter from the NLCW made it clear they considered merging the two organizations an issue of "grave importance."¹⁵⁹ Margaret Murray Washington, as president of the NFAW, appointed the committee to meet with the NLCW. The committee included Victoria Matthews, Mary Church Terrell, Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin, Ella Shepherd Moore, Libby C. Anthony, Rosa D. Bowser, and Selina Butler.¹⁶⁰ By the evening of the second day of the convention, both committees from the NFAW and the NLCW voted to unite the two organizations. By joining together, the women were able to show a solid, unifying front and, thereby, a single national organization for all black

¹⁵⁶ Gilmore, *Gender and Jim Crow*, 53.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 46-47, 49.

¹⁵⁸ "Minutes of the First National Conference of Colored Women" NACWC, 1895. At the 1895 meeting, the women referred to the NLCW as the Colored Women's National League.

¹⁵⁹ Coralie L. Franklin to Mrs. Florida R. Ridley, July 18, 1896, NACWC, 1896.

¹⁶⁰ "First Day. Evening Session" NACWC, 1896.

clubwomen to join. As Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin stated, they became an “army of organized women.”¹⁶¹

Considerable debate was required before a name was chosen for the new group. The primary difference of opinion involved whether the word “colored” or “Afro-American” would be used. On one side was the conviction that “colored” would be shorter and that it was the term used on the census. On the other side, Victoria Matthews made it clear why she did not care for that term. She clearly explained “she had African blood in her veins and was of African descent, which entitled her to the name Afro.” She further emphasized that “having been born in America, she was an American citizen and entitled to all the privileges as such...[even though] many of these rights are constantly denied.” Her conclusion was that “the Negro in America was entitled to the name Afro-American as much as the French, Franco-American, or the English, Anglo-American.” Matthews declared that “as for the name ‘colored,’ it meant nothing to the Negro race. She was not a colored American, but an Afro-American.”¹⁶² Although she did not win the debate, Matthews was clearly far ahead of her time, and perhaps quite shrewd, by encouraging the use of the term. Those of the clubwomen who preferred the term “colored” were usually of mixed descent and, therefore, could allow for recognition of their white or Native American ancestry. Matthews, on the other hand, fell in step with the general African American population in wanting to show pride in their African heritage.¹⁶³

In the end, the unification of these two organizations combined to create the

¹⁶¹ Davis, *Lifting as They Climb*, 18.

¹⁶² “Second Day. Articles of Agreement,” “Second Day. Evening Session” NACWC, 1896.

¹⁶³ White, *Too Heavy a Load*, 79-80. Matthews was not the only one taking this stance. See Gilmore, *Gender and Jim Crow*, 15.

National Association of Colored Women, with Mary Church Terrell as its first president.¹⁶⁴ By 1898, the NACW was distributing a monthly newsletter to its members at a subscription cost of twenty-five cents a year.¹⁶⁵ Though the letter John W. Jacks had sent to Florence Baggins the previous year was never meant to be inspirational, the storm he brewed had resulted in the formation of a national platform for change and justice.

Continuing with their work to dispel the negative stereotypes such as those in Jacks' letter, the women of the NACW incorporated the fundamental maternalism associated with the separate spheres ideology. It was agreed upon at the 1896 convention that the clubwomen would hold mothers' meetings nationwide and instruct black mothers on "the necessity of pure homes, and lives."¹⁶⁶ The clubwomen also asked missionary societies to send literature to the women in rural areas on proper housekeeping as a part of improving their lives.¹⁶⁷ A report was made regarding the activities of the Lucy Thurman Union. Although an organization focused on temperance, it also instructed girls on social and moral purity, proper hygiene, and good housekeeping. They even had a female doctor as their Superintendent of the Study of Heredity and Hygiene, and women were taught the importance of physical exercise for their health, hygiene, and temperance.¹⁶⁸

Along the vein of improving moral purity, at the 1896 convention the clubwomen also put the full weight of their support behind the WCTU since they viewed temperance

¹⁶⁴ "Third Day. Morning Session. July 22, 1896. Resolutions." NACWC, 1896.

¹⁶⁵ "Official Organ of the National Association of Colored Women" September, 1898, National Association Notes [hereafter cited as Notes]: Vol. 2, No. 4, National Association of Colored Women's Clubs, Mary Church Terrell Collection, Primary Sources in African American History via Texas State University Alkek Library [hereafter cited as Mary Church Terrell Collection].

¹⁶⁶ "Families Living in One Room" NACWC, 1896.

¹⁶⁷ "Plantation Women" NACWC, 1896.

¹⁶⁸ "Report of the Lucy Thurman Union" NACWC, 1896.

as the path to spiritual and moral uplift.¹⁶⁹ For example, the Woman's Club of Jefferson City, Missouri reported it had an entire department dedicated to temperance. Within this department they organized anti-cigarette leagues and had children pledge to stay away from cigarettes.¹⁷⁰ The WCTU promoted the image of the drunken, abusive husband and neglectful father as a way to bolster their cause. They relied on the ideology of separate spheres and held women up as the moral authority within the home, making temperance work necessary woman's work.¹⁷¹ This was an important cause to the black clubwomen, yet their concern over the issue of temperance was multifaceted. Although domestic issues clearly were a priority to these clubwomen, they also moved beyond the moral aspect of it. They used the temperance movement and participated in the WCTU as part of their efforts of fighting the derogatory image of blacks.¹⁷² As Glenda Gilmore aptly described, a white male had the ability to drunkenly stagger down the street, possibly receiving a few sideward glances, whereas a drunken black man "might inspire an 'I-told-you-so' editorial in the local white newspaper replete with Darwinistic predictions of the extinction of the black race in a single generation."¹⁷³

The clubwomen of the NACW encouraged participation in philanthropic, charitable, and benevolent activities. Numerous members already spent time performing outreach work to the less fortunate members of the black community. The clubwomen

¹⁶⁹ "Temperance" NACWC, 1896; For further information on temperance, see Jed Dannenbaum, "The Origins of Temperance Activism and Militancy among American Women," *Journal of Social History* 15, no. 2 (Winter 1981): 235-252; and Barbara Leslie Epstein, *The Politics of Domesticity: Women, Evangelism, and Temperance in Nineteenth Century America* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1986).

¹⁷⁰ Woman's Club of Jefferson City, Missouri to National Federation of Colored Women, June, 1896, NACWC, 1896.

¹⁷¹ Gilmore, *Gender and Jim Crow*, 48; Also, see Mary Earhart, *Frances Willard: From Prayers to Politics* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1944).

¹⁷² Gilmore, *Gender and Jim Crow*, 48-49.

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*, 49; C. Vann Woodward, *Origins of the New South, 1877-1913* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1951), 352.

were fully aware of the poverty many blacks lived in and asked missionary societies to assist them in getting their messages to the destitute and offered financial assistance whenever possible.¹⁷⁴ Several benevolent societies reported on their work at the 1896 convention. Clubs such as the Sympathetic Union of New York City spent their time aiding “fallen” women.¹⁷⁵ Hook’s School Association of Memphis, Tennessee, not only worked toward uplifting fallen men and women, the association vowed to begin erecting missionary homes for the homeless.¹⁷⁶ The Phyllis Wheatley Circle of Greenville, Mississippi, helped the sick and poor and visited homes of those in need. These women of Mississippi also organized a club for girls in which they taught them how to cook, sew, and paint. At the end of the school term, the women sold the items the girls made and used the money to buy books for poor children.¹⁷⁷ The St. Louis Colored Orphans Home opened their doors to homeless, orphaned, and neglected children. They also aided in the adoption process and ensured the children were being placed into good homes. At the time of their report, they were caring for forty-two needy children.¹⁷⁸

The necessity for homes for the aged was addressed during the convention by Harriet Tubman. The former abolitionist had established a home for elderly ex-slaves who could no longer care for themselves following the Civil War. Her speech was followed by monetary donations.¹⁷⁹ Caring for the elders of their race was a serious consideration and a worthwhile endeavor. One example of women who created a caregiving environment for the elderly was The Independent Circle of King’s Daughters of

¹⁷⁴ “Plantation Women” NACWC, 1896.

¹⁷⁵ Sympathetic Union of New York City to Women’s National Conference, Washington, D. C., July 18, 1896, NACWC, 1896.

¹⁷⁶ “In Union There is Strength” NACWC, 1896.

¹⁷⁷ “Phyllis Wheatley Circle, Greenville, Miss.” NACWC, 1896.

¹⁷⁸ “St. Louis Colored Orphan’s Home” NACWC, 1895.

¹⁷⁹ “Afternoon Session. 2.30 P. M.” NACWC, 1896; Giddings, *Ida*, 373.

New York with their Home for Aged Women.¹⁸⁰

Charity, however, was not given to just anyone. Attention was given to the question of who truly needed the most help. Homes were built for “deserving girls,” where they too were instructed on moral issues such as hygiene and how to properly keep a home.¹⁸¹ The African American clubwomen never forgot the slander that provoked their formation on a national level and continuously worked to uplift the image that still existed among some of the poorer, less fortunate members of their race.

Besides their philanthropic activities, black clubwomen were also instrumental in contributing to self-help, institutional development, industrial training, and education for both men and women. Their organizational efforts took place wherever there was a need within the community that was not being met.¹⁸² Black female activists in rural areas focused on industrial training and agriculture, whereas in urban areas, the focus was more on social services and institution building.¹⁸³ At the 1896 conference, it was resolved that they would support those who were working to establish and maintain industrial schools for their youth. The women believed it was of the utmost necessity for boys and girls to learn a viable trade.¹⁸⁴ Education was seen as a way to overthrow Jim Crow and was considered the first step toward racial equality which would lead toward developing the full potential of blacks.¹⁸⁵

Some, like Ida B. Wells, openly disagreed with Booker T. Washington’s belief that industrial education would gain African Americans their rights and safety, yet, the

¹⁸⁰ “Colored Women in the Reform Movement” January, 1899, Notes: Vol. 2, No. 8, Mary Church Terrell Collection.

¹⁸¹ Dickson, 64.

¹⁸² Lerner, “Early Community Work,” 158-159.

¹⁸³ Neverdon-Morton, “Advancement of the Race,” 123-124.

¹⁸⁴ “Third Day, Morning Session, Resolutions, Education,” “John Brown’s Memorial Association” NACWC, 1896.

¹⁸⁵ Neverdon-Morton, “Advancement of the Race,” 120-121.

NACW endorsed Washington's Tuskegee model of industrial education. Not only was this the less radical stance at the time, Margaret Murray Washington was a founding member of the organization, as well as the organization's fifth president, from 1912 through 1924.¹⁸⁶ According to scholar Michael O. West, in addition to industrial education, Washington's model also referred to "black capitalism, self-help schemes, race pride, and character building."¹⁸⁷ Furthermore, Washington would not face a major oppositional movement until W. E. B. Du Bois published *The Souls of Black Folk* in 1903.¹⁸⁸

While many of the clubwomen's efforts toward uplifting their race revolved around maternal and feminine guidance, moral reform, and benevolent activities, black clubwomen also focused on controversial areas that took them far outside the home. The only way to attain progress in their goal of racial uplift was to focus on social and political aspects of Jim Crow that only affected the black community. Although actions aimed at morality and benevolence were also performed by white clubwomen and considered acceptable endeavors under the white community's definition of separate spheres, efforts focused specifically on the black community were far removed from either realm. Not only did the white majority already exclude black women from the ideology of separate spheres, by focusing on explicit race work, black clubwomen proactively removed themselves from that ideology as well. In doing so, these clubwomen established a unique sphere in which they formed their own parameters of what was acceptable and created their own set of rules. This produced a standardized

¹⁸⁶ Ibid., 123-124; Davis, *Lifting as They Climb*, xxv.

¹⁸⁷ Michael O. West, "The Tuskegee Model of Development in Africa: Another Dimension of the African/African-American Connection," *Diplomatic History* 16, no. 3 (July 1992): 371.

¹⁸⁸ Booker T. Washington, *Up From Slavery* (New York: A. L. Burt, 1901); W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903; repr., New York: Oxford University Press, 2007); Giddings, *Ida*, 438.

acceptance of engaging in radical racial uplift, and even went so far as to stigmatize those within the black community who avoided race work.

Exemplifying the expansion of the NACW's concentration beyond the home, a committee, including Florida Ridley of Boston, Anna J. Cooper of Washington, D.C., and Mrs. Maxwell of New York, was selected at the 1895 convention to address a Florida law barring integrated education, Georgia's convict lease system, and lynching, to which they drew up a resolution on each issue.¹⁸⁹ At the 1896 convention, the Resolutions Committee reaffirmed their commitment to their objectives. They also rotated committee members to include leading women of the NACW from the North as well as the South. The new committee included Victoria Matthews of New York, Lucy Thurman of Michigan, Mary Church Terrell of Washington, D.C., Ida B. Wells of Chicago, Illinois, Selina Butler of Atlanta, Georgia, and Ella Shepherd Moore of Nashville, Tennessee.¹⁹⁰ Neither Ida B. Wells nor Mary Church Terrell were able to be present at the 1895 meeting, thus explaining their absence on committees formed during the 1895 conference.¹⁹¹ The matters discussed at these gatherings gave a clear picture of how aware these women were with regard to which areas needed the most attention in their efforts toward uplifting their race as well as their interest in politics.

The clubwomen had made it clear at the 1895 convention they could not ignore the racialized segregation throughout the South and the issue of segregation was addressed again at the 1896 convention. Although segregation throughout the South was primarily *de facto*, *de jure* segregation began as early as 1866 when Tennessee passed

¹⁸⁹ "Minutes of the First National Conference of Colored Women" NACWC, 1895; Giddings, *Ida*, 374-375; "Minutes of the First National Conference of Colored Women" *History*, p.9, Ida B. Wells Papers.

¹⁹⁰ "Afternoon Session. July 20, 1896. 2 P.M." *History*, p.39, Ida B. Wells Papers.

¹⁹¹ Giddings, *Ida*, 360, 363.

legislation requiring separate schools for black and white children, initiating the state's first Jim Crow law.¹⁹²

In addressing segregation, the Resolutions Committee examined the matter of segregated schools being required by Florida law. That situation began as a dispute when the American Missionary Association of New York, a benevolent society, built a school open to both black and white children in Alachua County, Florida, in 1891. However, William N. Sheats, Alachua County's superintendent of education, steadfastly opposed integrated education. In May, 1895, after Sheats' heated pursuance of what he considered an abomination, the Florida legislature decided to make it illegal to integrate schools.¹⁹³ At the 1895 meeting, and again at the 1896 convention, the women voted to give their full support to the American Missionary Association in their efforts against the ruling and Sheats personally.¹⁹⁴ They further added that if other southern states were to follow the Florida legislature's lead, around two hundred more schools would be closed.¹⁹⁵

In a landmark case involving segregation, *Plessy v. Ferguson* legalized all of Louisiana's segregated railcars and, more importantly, established the precedent for "separate but equal" in the United States. The case was ruled seven to one, with Justice John Marshall Harlan holding the only dissenting opinion. At the 1896 convention the women praised Justice Harlan for going against the majority of the Court. They also condemned blacks who patronized the railroads where segregation was enforced on "needless excursions" and swore to do everything possible "through the press and pulpit

¹⁹² Feimster, 58.

¹⁹³ Joe M. Richardson, "'The Nest of Vile Fanatics': William N. Sheats and the Orange Park School," *Florida Historical Quarterly* 64, no. 4 (April 1986): 393, 396, 399.

¹⁹⁴ "Minutes of the First National Conference of Colored Women" NACWC, 1895.

¹⁹⁵ "Third Day. Morning Session. July 22, 1896. Resolutions. Sheats Law." *History*, p.47, Ida B. Wells Papers.

to educate” the public on this matter of racial oppression.¹⁹⁶

The concept of respectability was something African American women fought for since Reconstruction and with the Supreme Court decision, black women were officially banned from the first-class car, also known as the ladies’ car, and relegated to the filthy, rowdy “smoking car.” Crystal Feimster asserts that for black women, “the battle over the ladies’ car had as much to do with challenging segregation as it had to do with defending their reputations as respectable women worthy of protection and insisting on their rights as female citizens to be treated with respect and dignity.”¹⁹⁷ The women argued that as long as blacks continued to travel by these railroads, the companies would continue to profit at the expense of African Americans. Because the women of their race were forced to use such transport and endure the humiliation that went along with it, the women sent out a plea to boycott the “Jim Crow Cars.” By doing so, they argued, “the railroads will fight the separate car law through self interest.”¹⁹⁸ The fight over the ladies’ car became one of the largest forms of resistance to the rise of Jim Crow.¹⁹⁹

Another part of the Resolutions Committee continued to focus on the anti-lynching crusade.²⁰⁰ The portrayal of black men as unable to control their baser instincts and the myth of the black rapist served to justify lynching, disfranchisement, and

¹⁹⁶ “Third Day, Morning Session, Justice Harlan,” “Third Day, Morning Session, Separate Car Law” NACWC, 1896; “Third Day, Morning Session, July 22, 1896. Resolutions. Sheats Law.” *History*, p.49, Ida B. Wells Papers.

¹⁹⁷ Feimster, 59.

¹⁹⁸ “Third Day, Morning Session, Justice Harlan,” “Third Day, Morning Session, Separate Car Law” NACWC, 1896.

¹⁹⁹ Feimster, 59; Also see Mia Bay, “From the “Ladies’ Car” to the “Colored Car”: Black Female Travelers in the Segregated South,” in *The Folly of Jim Crow: Rethinking the Segregated South*, eds. Stephanie Cole and Natalie J. Ring (College Station: Texas A & M University Press, 2012), 150-175.

²⁰⁰ “Minutes of the First National Conference of Colored Women” NACWC, 1895; Scott, “Most Invisible of All,” 10-12. For information on women’s activism in the anti-lynching crusade, see Giddings, *Ida*; Hall, *Revolt Against Chivalry*; and Feimster.

segregation.²⁰¹ Mostly, the initial drive for a lynching surrounded a disagreement over unpaid earnings between an African American and their landlord or boss, or over a commercial transaction.²⁰² Through lynching, white men were able to challenge “black men’s rights as citizens while simultaneously expanding their own sexual power over both black and white women.”²⁰³ Yet, black men were not the only victims of lynching. During the 1890s, forty-two black women were lynched with accusations ranging from murder or attempted murder of a white person to arson to theft of a Bible. Some were even lynched for “violating racial codes,” generally referencing miscegenation.²⁰⁴ In 1896, the clubwomen denounced the Lynch Law and mob violence, applauded the Republican Party for criticizing lynching as part of their platform, and celebrated Ida B. Wells and her work toward raising awareness nationwide to the horrors of lynching. They also lauded governors and state legislators who were actively supporting laws against lynching.²⁰⁵

Marching Forward

As the century neared its end, the clubwomen’s efforts were given a boost by women’s journals that featured articles about the different activities of the national organization. This proved to be of great assistance to the legitimacy of local clubwomen while providing guidance and advice.²⁰⁶ Also, many of the clubwomen at the turn of the century were migrating to new geographic locations and joining clubs there, while still

²⁰¹ Feimster, 5.

²⁰² Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore, *Defying Dixie: The Radical Roots of Civil Rights, 1919-1950* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2008), 98-99.

²⁰³ Feimster, 5.

²⁰⁴ Feimster, 165.

²⁰⁵ “Third Day, Morning Session, Lynch Law” NACWC, 1896; For a full discussion on Ida B. Wells, see Giddings, *Ida*.

²⁰⁶ Shaw, “Black Club Women,” 10-11; Lerner, “Early Community Work,” 161-162.

maintaining their previous affiliations. Because of this, many of the local clubs developed the ability to network on a national level.²⁰⁷

In studying the history of the black clubwomen movement, it is clear that “the work of black clubwomen contributed to the survival of the black community.”²⁰⁸ However, their influence far surpassed simple survival. While the clubwomen’s movement hastened between the 1880s and 1920s, the years 1895 and 1896 were pivotal to the success of the clubwomen’s goals. Without the ability to communicate on a coordinated, national level, merely limited, localized change was possible. In 1895, after the retrogressionist ideology finally pushed them beyond the edge of their tolerance, African American clubwomen consolidated their energies and organized their individual parts into a whole. As the NACW clubwomen moved forward, they continued to work toward uplifting the perceived image of African Americans, encouraged temperance, education, and philanthropy, and fought against segregation, the convict lease system, and lynchings. In doing so, these women laid the veritable foundation for their race to overcome social stigmas, gain equal rights in the political, economic, and employment arenas, and raise their overall living conditions. Regardless of the repercussions they faced during the Jim Crow Era, these clubwomen helped carry the burden of their race by taking their rightful places on the national stage.

²⁰⁷ Shaw, “Black Club Women,” 16-17.

²⁰⁸ Lerner, “Early Community Work,” 167.

CHAPTER IV

Villains or Victims: The NACW Takes On the Convict Lease System and Prison Reforms, 1896-1920s

“The Southern darky works only when he is driven. He is the most accomplished and the most conscienceless dawdler in the history of all peoples. It is his idleness that gets him in chains. He must have been the inspiration of the saying—‘The devil finds work for idle hands to do’—and in the case of the Georgia negro it is generally the very arduous work given him by the lessees of State convicts. Curiously enough, the fear of the convict camp has been a premium on the good behavior of Georgia negroes. They are gregarious animals, and love to move in droves, and convict life would have had too little terror for them if they had not known what life in the convict camp was.”²⁰⁹

—*New York Times*, 1908

The goals of the early leaders of the NACW were to uplift the image of black womanhood, improve home and family life, instill moral values, and focus on the welfare of black children. This suggests these early leading clubwomen accepted Victorian ideals that dictated a woman’s proper role in society as well as the ideology of maintaining separate spheres.²¹⁰ Yet, their actions often defied such a restrictive role of Victorianism by stepping beyond the established boundaries of so-called respectable white women at the time. Many of the early members of the NACW understood that, in order to uplift *all* aspects of the lives of African Americans, it was imperative they acquire political rights. Only political influence would give them the power to lobby for anti-lynching legislation, demand an end to segregated trains, challenge sexual violence against African American women, and demand both the vote and reform of the juvenile justice system. While at

²⁰⁹ Georgia Women Fighting the Convict Lease, *New York Times*, September 6, 1908.

²¹⁰ Dickson, 67.

first the women attempted to maneuver within the boundaries of the separate spheres ideology, it became necessary for them to move beyond the established limits in order to achieve success in their race work. At the 1896 convention, a letter from St. Louis, Missouri clubwoman, M. F. Pitts succinctly stated that the “‘woman’s sphere’ in life will be defined and determined by herself alone; her place in nature shall be as broad and multifarious in scope as God shall decree her capacity and ability to accomplish.”²¹¹ Pitts clearly understood that social and political equality for African Americans would not be gained by tiptoeing along the white community’s spherical boundaries, but through black women’s understanding that necessary work on the path toward racial uplift was what was deemed appropriate.

One of the critical areas of concern of the NACW clubwomen was the imprisonment of African Americans. The women responded to the worsening race relations and racism within the criminal justice system with their sustained protests. A portion of their efforts employed the traditions of their work toward moral reform and benevolence within the black community. These clubwomen adapted their benevolent activities to their work within the penal system. This encompassed creating sanitary conditions, tending to the ill, and establishing prison libraries. As the system’s conditions deteriorated, the clubwomen became more engaged and argued for the protection of women and children, expanding this protection to the establishment of reformatories. Although black women were excluded from the separate spheres ideology, much of this work was similar to the activities white clubwomen performed. Furthermore, these were charitable Christian activities that were maternal and feminine in nature and were

²¹¹ “How Can the National Federation of Colored Women be Made to Serve the Best Interests and Needs of Our Women” *History*, p.64-65, Ida B. Wells Papers.

included within the realm of separate spheres.

The women of the NACW gained an even greater level of urgency when they turned their attention toward the targeting and entrapment of African Americans within the convict lease system. As early as 1876, laws were enacted throughout the South that would allow convicts to be leased out to private businesses for an annual fee.²¹² By the mid 1890s, the severity and violence of the convict lease system became a priority to the clubwomen. The convict lease system was a racialized part of the South's penal system in which the majority of prisoners leased out to work for private companies were black.²¹³ Essentially, convict leasing combined the exploitation of blacks with economics, making the fight against the system a top priority for the clubwomen. According to scholar Douglas Blackmon, the system was "slavery by another name."²¹⁴ Similar to their battle against Jim Crow, the clubwomen's fight to abolish the convict lease system was racially based and, thereby, far removed from the white community's realm of separate spheres. Thus, the unique sphere black women had created for themselves, which supported and encouraged such radical race work, held immense importance within the black community. The women of the NACW publicly denounced the mistreatment of convicts and demanded investigations into the brutality of the lease system and chain gangs. They used a variety of tactics, from publishing books and reports in order to educate the public, to stepping into the public sphere of politics by lobbying government representatives and petitioning for the release of the innocent and hardship pardons for the ill. The supreme

²¹² Jeffrey A. Drobney, "Where the Palm and Pine are Blowing: Convict Labor in the North Florida Turpentine Industry, 1877-1923," *The Florida Historical Quarterly* 72, no. 4 (April 1994): 413.

²¹³ Matthew J. Mancini, *One dies, Get Another: Convict Leasing in the American South, 1866-1928* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1996).

²¹⁴ Douglas A. Blackmon, *Slavery by Another Name: The Re-Enslavement of Black Americans from the Civil War to World War II* (New York: Anchor Books, 2008); Also see David M. Oshinski, *Worse than Slavery: Parchman Farm and the Ordeal of Jim Crow Justice* (New York: Free Press, 1996).

irony of this is that black women did not have the right to vote and, therefore, did not hold sway over campaign elections or political policy. This could easily lead to the assumption that their efforts in political territory would be futile. Yet, their denouncement of the penal system was heard throughout the country, making their efforts, and their accomplishments all the more significant.

Clearly, in 1895, one of the primary issues for the NACW was penal reform, yet, women's efforts to reform the penal system did not begin with the NACW's work.²¹⁵ In the early nineteenth century, first generation middle-class white female prison reformers were more shocked at the female convicts' behavior than how they were treated and focused on impressing the Victorian concepts of womanhood on white female convicts. They created situations where fallen women prisoners could be taught piety, moral purity, and domestic skills rather than improving prison conditions and petitioning for fair trials.²¹⁶ Unlike the women of the NACW, the early reformers were determined to remain within their feminine sphere and away from politics.²¹⁷ The NACW clubwomen did not have such a luxury. By the time of their formation in 1896, scientific racism was being used by white supremacists to further the racialized narrative of the time and to defend an ever-increasing, disproportionate number of black to white prisoners. The only way black clubwomen could halt this trajectory was by stepping into the political realm.

Scientific racism emerged in the United States during the nineteenth and twentieth

²¹⁵ For information on early penal reform, see Dorothea Lynde Dix, *Remarks on Prisons and Prison Discipline in the United States*, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: Joseph Kite & Co., Printers, 1845); and David J. Rothman, *The Discovery of the Asylum: Social Order and Disorder in the New Republic* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1971).

²¹⁶ L. Mara Dodge, "Whores and Thieves of the Worst Kind": *A Study of Women, Crime, and Prisons, 1835-2000* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2002), 16; Estelle B. Freedman, *Their Sisters' Keepers: Women's Prison Reform in America, 1830-1930* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1981).

²¹⁷ Freedman, 34; Dodge, 16.

centuries through the developing field of criminal anthropology and was used to promote the image of the black criminal. In what ultimately becomes known as eugenics, social scientists like Robert Bennett Bean measured 152 frontal lobes of the brains of blacks and whites. In 1906, he published his findings in the *American Journal of Anatomy* and stated that blacks have an instable character, lacking of self control, particularly in relation to sex.²¹⁸ Italian criminal anthropologist, Cesare Lombroso, expanded that line of inquiry when he theorized that criminals could be identified by their physical features.²¹⁹ He gained widespread notoriety in the United States as his work gave white social scientists and white criminal reformers fuel for their fires for racial demagoguery in the area of criminal justice. In 1911, Lombroso's work, *Criminal Man*, was published in English, specifically for his American audience.²²⁰ For example, Lombroso declared that in criminals and "degenerates," the "foot is often flat, as in negroes."²²¹ Lombroso continued to assert that in Africa, thievery was considered an honorable and highly praised act, the increased rate of homicide in parts of Italy were "fundamentally due to African...elements" and, turning his attention to the United States, he avowed that in states where there is not a large black population, the number of crimes was significantly reduced.²²²

White supremacists used these theories as propaganda in an attempt to influence white minds into believing that most blacks were dangerous and the only way white society would be safe was to lock up a majority of them in prison. In 1889, Philip A.

²¹⁸ Gutman, 458.

²¹⁹ Dodge, 47.

²²⁰ Gina Lombroso-Ferrero, *Criminal Man, According to the Classification of Cesare Lombroso* (1911; repr., Montclair: Patterson Smith, 1972), xxix. Lombroso's theories were put into use during trials and in reformatory establishments.

²²¹ *Ibid.*, 21, 243.

²²² *Ibid.*, 128, 140, 173.

Bruce argued that the nature of African Americans retained a “latent ferocity” and when a white man was murdered, it was due to a “sudden scheme on the part of two or three negroes for the purpose of securing money which they know to be secreted about his person, and the deed is always committed with a degree of atrocity that is unsurpassed in the criminal annals of any country.”²²³ Bruce continued to state that rape was the most appalling crime blacks executed against whites, and their “disposition to perpetrate it has increased in spite of the quick and summary punishment that always follows.”²²⁴ These opinions were supported by a visible shift in prison populations from a white to black convict majority after the Civil War.²²⁵

Women were not immune from becoming targets of the penal system. During the Civil War, an increasing number of women were sentenced to prison.²²⁶ For example, as illustrated by Illinois statistics, sixty-three percent of the female convicts in the North were immigrants and thirty-one percent were migrants from the South. Eighty-seven percent of these women had been convicted of larceny.²²⁷ Following Emancipation, imprisonment of black women skyrocketed in the South. However, as a deluge of African Americans migrated north, the population of black female prisoners rose from two percent to twenty-five percent in Illinois alone.²²⁸ The drastic escalation of imprisoned African American women in the South and the racial imbalance in prison populations

²²³ Bruce, 80, 82.

²²⁴ *Ibid.*, 83. The “quick and summary punishment” Bruce referred to was lynching. At the same time, Frederick Douglass explained that it was only after Emancipation that blacks were accused of raping white women. See Frederick Douglass, “Introduction,” in *The Reason Why the Colored American is Not in the World’s Columbian Exposition: The Afro-American’s Contribution to Columbian Literature*, ed. Robert W. Rydell (1893; repr., Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999), 11-12.

²²⁵ See Kahlil Gibran Muhammad, *The Condemnation of Blackness: Race, Crime, and the Making of Modern Urban America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010).

²²⁶ Dodge. For a brief look at female prison populations prior to the Civil War, see Dix, 107-108.

²²⁷ Dodge, 37.

²²⁸ *Ibid.*, 42.

became a target of the NACW's attention.²²⁹ Using the Virginia penitentiary as an example, the clubwomen noted that there were 1,459 blacks to 287 whites, and all sixty-six female prisoners were black.²³⁰ Black women were looked upon negatively and "denied the benefits of official chivalry" and official pardons. Additionally, black women were given harsher sentences than white women convicted of the same crime.²³¹

The women of the NACW were fully aware of the history of many of the prisons and their failure to keep correct records of prisoners, the conditions they lived in, and the punishments that were carried out. Much of the information that was accurately documented is due to prison board inspections or changeovers in prison administration. For instance, in Alabama's prison, there were wild discrepancies in the reporting of conditions. In 1880, the prison management described clean and comfortable conditions. Yet, in 1882, a new administration took over and described the conditions of the previous administration as punishing cruelly and neglecting the sick. The new warden reported that both "the prisons and prisoners were infested with vermin" and, in addition to punishment and neglect, the prisons lacked a proper supply of fresh water. He declared that the "system is a disgrace to the state, a reproach to the civilization and Christian sentiment of the age, and ought to be speedily abandoned."²³² Additionally, the records of the Tennessee prison were rife with errors. Prisoner counts were incorrect and some prisoners being held were not even on the prisoner roll. From this, it can be inferred that the prison officers did not know what the exact count of the prison population should

²²⁹ Ibid.

²³⁰ "Why the N. A. of Women Should Devise Means of Establishing Kindergartens" November, 1899, Notes, Mary Church Terrell Collection.

²³¹ Dodge, 58-59.

²³² George W. Cable, *The Silent South* (1889; repr., Montclair: Patterson Smith Publishing Corporation, 1969), 168.

have been.²³³ Furthermore, during an inspection, it was noted that “several convicts are reported as white men when they escaped and as colored when recaptured.”²³⁴ The NACW clubwomen were appalled at the fact that, rather than reforming these issues, government officials focused on the financial gains to be made through incarceration and were dismayed at the new, bigger prisons being built in the South to house the growing number of convicts, the majority of whom were black.²³⁵

The clubwomen extended their benevolence to their prison reform work through activities such as cleaning prisons and visiting the incarcerated. Although these were prisoners, the NACW did not neglect these men and women and continued to include them as part of their community, deserving a place under the umbrella of their support. For example, in 1899, the Tuskegee Woman’s Club reported that, although the Macon prison they visited each Sunday was once filthy, they were instrumental in ensuring its vast improvement. The women on the committee for prison work stated that the floors had been scrubbed and the walls whitewashed. The prisoners were then supplied with combs and brushes, clean clothes, and reading material, and the prisoners who could read promised to read to those who could not.²³⁶ The Tuskegee Woman’s Club continued their prison work, visiting the black men and boys in the local jail thirty times in 1905, bringing food and clean clothing with them each visit.²³⁷ Also coming out of Alabama, a specific announcement was recorded in the NACW’s 1900 minutes that Mrs. J. R. England of Birmingham, Alabama, was interested in working with prison reform in

²³³ Ibid., 139-140.

²³⁴ Ibid., 140.

²³⁵ “Third Day, Morning Session, Convict Lease System” NACWC, 1896; “Do We Need Reformatories” February, 1900, Notes, Mary Church Terrell Collection.

²³⁶ “Notes from Tuskegee” June, 1899, Notes: Vol. 3, No. 1, Mary Church Terrell Collection.

²³⁷ White, *Too Heavy a Load*, 28.

Birmingham.²³⁸

Additionally, within their charitable efforts, the NACW clubwomen cared for the sick within the penal system. In Texas, as in most other states where the convict lease system was in use, seriously ill convicts were forced to work and were quartered with healthier men, allowing illness to spread rapidly.²³⁹ It was recorded that Alabama's convicts were forced to endure cruel punishment and the sick were neglected. Meanwhile, Florida's annual reports stated that the leading causes of death were tuberculosis and venereal disease.²⁴⁰ Similar to the Tuskegee Woman's Club, other members of the NACW continued to provide food and clothing for prisoners and also visited the sick in hospitals.²⁴¹ The clubwomen petitioned states to release ailing convicts and, at the annual NACW meeting in 1900, the clubwomen of Tuskegee announced they were able to secure the release of a convict who was very ill.²⁴²

The importance of an educated mind in relation to community and racial uplift was also emphasized by the NACW clubwomen and they established libraries in prisons and focused on literacy toward that end. In 1899, the NACW recorded the story of Linda Gilbert of Chicago. Gilbert had devoted her life to establishing libraries in prisons. As related, when she was a young girl, she was passing by a prison on her way to school when a weary prisoner caught her attention. He begged her to bring him something to read. For several weeks she brought him a book every Sunday from her father's library. One day she was called to the prisoner's deathbed. When Gilbert arrived he told her that her kindness had saved his soul. He then asked her of one last favor—to bestow the same

²³⁸ "Notice" November, 1900, Notes, Mary Church Terrell Collection.

²³⁹ Cable, 161.

²⁴⁰ Drobney, 428, 429.

²⁴¹ "Philanthropy and Prison Work" October, 1904, Notes, Mary Church Terrell Collection.

²⁴² "Club Notes" February, 1900, Notes, Mary Church Terrell Collection.

generosity on other poor prisoners as she had done for him. By the time this story was shared with the members of the NACW, Gilbert had visited and helped a great number of prisoners, six hundred of whom had been reformed.²⁴³

Assisting imprisoned women and children was yet another area in which the NACW acted while remaining within the realm of feminine and maternal work. In 1901, a story was shared among the NACW in which a woman and her nine children in Montgomery, Alabama, were convicted and sentenced to prison for the murder of her husband, the stepfather of her children. One of the children was nine years old and had no other option but to follow his mother to prison. The Superintendent of Convict Camps in Montgomery wrote to Booker T. Washington and asked him to take the child or help find a home for him. Presiding over the weekly meeting of the Tuskegee Woman's Club, Margaret Murray Washington related the child's story, inspiring her fellow clubwomen to find a home for the boy. After two of the clubwomen offered to adopt him, the decision was made to place the boy with Mrs. Mary J. Cole, "in whose home the boy will be well cared for, and given excellent advantages in every respect."²⁴⁴ The clubwomen also "persistently lobbied state officials to provide separate facilities for juvenile delinquents to keep them from coming under the influence of hard-core adult criminals."²⁴⁵

In the 1904 NACW report, "Philanthropy and Prison Work," it was stated that certain members of the NACW dedicated their time to the treatment of the female prisoners while others focused their efforts on saving young girls "from the gulf of immorality and vice, several of whom have subsequently married." The clubwomen provided financial assistance to relieve "families in distress," quite possibly in the hopes

²⁴³ "What a Little Girl Did" January, 1899, Notes: Vol. 2, No. 8, Mary Church Terrell Collection.

²⁴⁴ "National Officers" February, 1901, Notes, Mary Church Terrell Collection.

²⁴⁵ White, *Too Heavy a Load*, 32.

of avoiding arrests for larceny, a crime the majority of black female prisoners were still convicted of.²⁴⁶

By the turn of the twentieth century, women of the NACW turned their efforts toward preventing children from winding up in prisons. They justified arguing for reform by using maternalism and feminism in their defense of children and the establishment of reformatories. In 1900, the question of the necessity of reformatories for children who showed a “predisposition to crime” was raised by the clubwomen. The considered markers for predisposition to crime included gathering on street corners, smoking cigarettes, chewing tobacco, and using foul language. These women explained that the children who were often from bad homes and surrounded by negative influences, were likely to continue on a downward path and end up being arrested and leased out to work.²⁴⁷

Early white reformers in the state of New York made advances in women’s prison regimes by using juvenile reformatories as inspiration. In 1887, New York’s House of Refuge at Hudson was opened, followed by the 1893 opening of Western House of Refuge at Albion. These two institutions for women were the first “to incorporate cottage units in remote rural settings.”²⁴⁸ Based on the Victorian image, these houses of refuge worked toward reforming female prisoners and their conduct by using the concept of home and family life. The female convicts at these reformatories were trained in domestic duties, such as sewing and cooking, and were taught proper behavior. The women also took part in outdoor exercise and “labored at gardening, farming, and animal

²⁴⁶ “Philanthropy and Prison Work” October, 1904, Notes, Mary Church Terrell Collection.

²⁴⁷ “Do We Need Reformatories” February, 1900, Notes, Mary Church Terrell Collection.

²⁴⁸ Dodge, 18-19.

husbandry.”²⁴⁹

Continuing the NACW clubwomen’s topics of interest in 1900, specific reformatories were discussed. The women cited a white establishment for delinquent boys in the town of Glenn’s Mills, outside of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. The House of Refuge, as it was named, consisted of 410 acres with fifteen separate cottages that housed the boys, an administration building, and a chapel. Behind the chapel, a gymnasium was built. A portion of the land was made up of a farm that the boys worked to provide themselves and their teachers with added food. Part of their day was spent attending school. The women explained there was to be a reform school built outside of Birmingham, but, once again, only for white boys. The women declared that something needed to be done for black boys as well.²⁵⁰

By 1912, clubwomen of the Alabama State Federation of Colored Women's Clubs, a member of the NACW, had worked to build a reform school for black juvenile lawbreakers. In January of 1912, their work was “recognized, endorsed, and adopted by the state.”²⁵¹ Known as the Mt. Meigs Reformatory for Juvenile Negro Law-Breakers, with the later addition of the Mt. Meigs Rescue Home for Girls, the reform school was situated fourteen miles outside of Montgomery, Alabama, at Mt. Meigs.²⁵² The school was for delinquent boys who were turned over to the clubwomen by Alabama judges. Modeling the reformatory after the women’s refuge houses established previously in New York, the reformatory at Mt. Meigs was a cottage structure in a rural area in which the

²⁴⁹ Ibid., 19.

²⁵⁰ “Do We Need Reformatories” February, 1900, Notes, Mary Church Terrell Collection.

²⁵¹ “What our Women in Alabama Have Done” National Association of Colored Women's Clubs, February, 1912, National Association Notes [hereafter cited as Notes], Tuskegee University Collection, LexisNexis Primary Sources in African American History via Texas State University Alkek Library [hereafter cited as Tuskegee University Collection].

²⁵² White, *Too Heavy a Load*, 32; “What our Women in Alabama Have Done” February, 1912, Notes, Tuskegee University Collection.

boys were responsible for cultivating gardens. Although the cottages were considered too small and crowded, the clubwomen declared it was better for the boys to have “the crowded home than prison walls and the companionship of confirmed criminals.”²⁵³ At the time this was reported, there were forty-four boys in the reform school. It was explained that the boys sent to the reformatory were often “arrested for some trifling misdemeanor.” Sometimes the boys were generally runaways “found sleeping in a doorway and taken up as a vagrant,” hungry and arrested for stealing food, or nabbed for fighting.²⁵⁴

Following the turn of the century, many African Americans emigrated northward in an effort to escape the racialized violence, only to find themselves in a situation where the arrests of black migrants, usually for vagrancy, were rapidly escalating. In an effort to rescue some of the migrants from such an arrest, settlement houses were created.²⁵⁵ In September, 1908, leading NACW clubwoman and anti-lynching activist, Ida B. Wells, established the Negro Fellowship League (NFL) in Chicago. Although the League’s formation was inspired by the 1908 race riot in Springfield, Illinois, Wells used it in support of prisoners’ rights.²⁵⁶ She had visited victims of the penal system in the North at both Joliet Penitentiary and the Bridewell prison for women and discovered many prisoners were black migrants. Wells realized there was not a single social agency available to migrating blacks, leaving them vulnerable to the vices Chicago had to offer,

²⁵³ “What our Women in Alabama Have Done” February, 1912, Notes, Tuskegee University Collection.

²⁵⁴ Ibid.

²⁵⁵ See Jane Addams, *Twenty Years at Hull-House* (1910; repr., New York: Buccaneer Books, 1994); Ralph E. Luker, “Missions, Institutional Churches, and Settlement Houses: The Black Experience, 1885-1910,” *The Journal of Negro History* 69, no. 3/4 (Summer-Autumn 1984):101-113; Charles Hounmenou, “Black Settlement Houses and Oppositional Consciousness,” *Journal of Black Studies* 43, no. 6 (September 2012): 646-666.

²⁵⁶ Giddings, *Ida*, 472, 578-579.

and decided the NFL would help to serve this purpose.²⁵⁷

The NACW clubwomen also fought to secure pardons for those believed to be innocent. In March, 1896, the Woman's Club of Atlanta investigated "suspicious charges" of a male prisoner. Eighteen-year-old Adolphus Duncan was imprisoned and sentenced to death twice for an offense that had "no material evidence to verify the charges." The women of the club began investigating the validity of the accusations against Duncan and, through their investigation, were able to prove his innocence. The Atlanta committee petitioned Georgia's Governor Atkinson for the release of Duncan and secured his freedom.²⁵⁸ In 1904, it was recorded that Alice Dugged Cary, NACW member, president of Georgia's WCTU and Georgia's State Federation of Colored Women, as well as a probation officer in Atlanta, secured a pardon for an eleven-year-old black boy named Earnest.²⁵⁹ Earnest had been arrested, along with several white boys, for a trifling offense. The white boys were released while Earnest was sentenced to four years in Georgia's state prison. Cary additionally secured the release of a black woman named Henrietta, who was arrested for murder at the age of ten and had already served twenty-one years.²⁶⁰

Due to her work with the NFL, Ida B. Wells was appointed as the first female

²⁵⁷ Ibid., 488.

²⁵⁸ "Report of the Minutes of the Woman's Club of Atlanta" NACWC, 1896; "Report of the Minutes of the Woman's Club of Atlanta for the Six Months Ending June 30, 1896" *History*, p.101, Ida B. Wells Papers.

²⁵⁹ "Prison Work" Biennial Report of the Department of Rescue Work. July 11-15, 1904, National Association of Colored Women, Manuscript Collection No. 6, Harris, Julian LaRose Papers, Box 13, Emory University [hereafter cited as Julian LaRose Papers]; "Alice Dugged Cary" in *History of the American Negro and His Institutions: Georgia Edition*, ed. Arthur Bunyan Caldwell (Atlanta: A. B. Caldwell Publishing Co., 1917), 175; William J. Breen, "Black Women and the Great War: Mobilization and Reform in the South," *The Journal of Southern History* 44, no. 3 (August, 1978): 434; Jacqueline Anne Rouse, "Out of the Shadow of Tuskegee: Margaret Murray Washington, Social Activism, and Race Vindication," *The Journal of Negro History* 81, no. 1 (1996): 35.

²⁶⁰ "Prison Work" Biennial Report of the Department of Rescue Work. July 11-15, 1904, Julian LaRose Papers.

adult probation officer for Chicago's municipal court in 1912.²⁶¹ Both Ida B. Wells and her husband, Ferdinand Barnett, were involved with the Board of Pardons in 1917 and 1918, and testified on behalf of prisoners. In 1918, Wells proved the innocence of William Smith, a Joliet, Illinois prisoner who had been found guilty of kidnapping a child. Later, it was discovered that the parents had the child living with them.²⁶²

By the mid 1890s, the penal system's escalating severity and violence imposed throughout the South became a main concern to black clubwomen, and the women of the NACW entered areas that pushed beyond gendered limitations. Specifically, work in this area definitively fell within the separate sphere black clubwomen had created for themselves where they were proactively involved in radical racial uplift. The introduction of the convict lease system and its stabilizing effect on state economies led to an even more drastic increase in prison populations and further cemented the shift to a black majority. On May 11, 1868, Georgia's first lease was granted to William A. Fort of Rome, Georgia, by General Thomas Ruger.²⁶³ By 1880, there were 1,200 convicts in Georgia's prisons.²⁶⁴ From 1870 to 1890, North Carolina's prison population rose from 121 to 1,302, eight hundred of whom were leased out. Florida experienced a sharp climb from 125 prisoners in 1881 to 1,071 in 1904.²⁶⁵ Similarly, Alabama's prison population escalated from 374 in 1869 to 1,183 in 1892.²⁶⁶

By the turn of the century, the overall number of convicts in southern prisons skyrocketed by an average of one thousand percent and more than ninety percent of those

²⁶¹ Giddings, *Ida*, 510.

²⁶² Giddings, *Ida*, 578-579.

²⁶³ Matthew J. Mancini, "Race, Economics, and the Abandonment of Convict Leasing," *The Journal of Negro History* 63, no. 4 (October 1978): 341.

²⁶⁴ Cable, 153-154.

²⁶⁵ Mancini, "Race, Economics, and the Abandonment of Convict Leasing," 343; Cable, 130, 140, 142, 170.

²⁶⁶ Mancini, "Race, Economics, and the Abandonment of Convict Leasing," 343.

incarcerated were black.²⁶⁷ Time and again, those arrested were convicted of crimes once considered misdemeanors, such as fighting and vagrancy, and yet, African Americans were commonly sentenced to several years of imprisonment.²⁶⁸ In 1904, the NACW published a report in which they stated that “little discrimination is made between...hardened thugs and careless mischief-maker[s]” and a conviction of a petty misdemeanor made “the victim a confirmed criminal for life.”²⁶⁹ The women knew that, despite the crime, *any* African American convicted of *any* crime was permanently viewed as a criminal.

While the racist ideology of the South provides an explanation to the reason why African Americans made up the majority of the prison population, economic gain allowed the system to proliferate. Following emancipation, the convict leasing system emerged out of black codes and ensured the continuation of white supremacy’s societal and economic dominance in the South.²⁷⁰ One of the black codes used to control blacks stated that, if they could not show they had a contract for labor, they would be arrested for vagrancy.²⁷¹ Ida B. Wells, insisted that in order to understand racism, one needed to look at society’s political and economic variables that supported it.²⁷² Wells was correct in this because, as a result of the Civil War, the South’s entire infrastructure was destroyed. Following Reconstruction, when the number of arrests escalated in connection with black codes, states needed a way to offset the costs of maintaining prisons. At the

²⁶⁷ Ibid., 343.

²⁶⁸ Ibid., 339.

²⁶⁹ “County Chaingangs” Biennial Report of the Department of Rescue Work. July 11-15, 1904, Julian LaRose Papers.

²⁷⁰ Mancini, “Race, Economics, and the Abandonment of Convict Leasing,” 339.

²⁷¹ Linda K. Kerber, *No Constitutional Right to be Ladies: Women and the Obligations of Citizenship* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1998), 57.

²⁷² Robert W. Rydell, “Editor’s Introduction: “Contend, Contend!”,” in *The Reason Why the Colored American is Not in the World’s Columbian Exposition: The Afro-American’s Contribution to Columbian Literature*, ed. Robert W. Rydell (1893; repr., Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999), xli.

same time, entrepreneurs in the South lacked the funds and the labor necessary to “fulfill the prophecy of the New South.”²⁷³ Through convict leasing, cheap labor was created and prison costs were defrayed. Concurrently, natural resources were able to be scavenged, businesses in the South attracted Northern investors and their capital, and surplus money made its way into the state treasury, helping to stabilize and strengthen the “new Democratic regime.”²⁷⁴ As scholar Jeffrey A. Drobney elucidates, the labor provided by the convict lease system “bridged the gap between an agricultural slave economy and a society in the earliest stages of industrial development.”²⁷⁵

In addition to subsidizing prison costs, state treasuries profited on the leasing out of their convicts. Many states, including Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, Nebraska, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Washington, insisted there was not enough money in the state treasury alone to support their prison populations, thus justifying the continuation of the leasing system.²⁷⁶ Local sheriffs initiated weekend round-ups to earn commissions on those arrested who could be sold directly into the convict lease system.²⁷⁷ Crap games and gambling houses were raided and sheriffs were able to arrest many black workingmen in one fell swoop. Those arrested faced court fines amounting to \$25 or \$50.²⁷⁸ Most could not afford to pay the fines and were subsequently sold into the system to labor for a private company. By

²⁷³ Drobney, 414.

²⁷⁴ Mancini, “Race, Economics, and the Abandonment of Convict Leasing,” 339; Drobney, 413; Mary Ellen Curtin, *Black Prisoners and Their World, Alabama, 1865-1900* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2000), 9.

²⁷⁵ Drobney, 414.

²⁷⁶ Ida B. Wells, “The Convict Lease System,” in *The Reason Why the Colored American is Not in the World’s Columbian Exposition: The Afro-American’s Contribution to Columbian Literature*, ed. Robert W. Rydell (1893; repr., Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999), 23; Martha Myers, *Race, Labor, and Punishment in the New South* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1998).

²⁷⁷ Cable, 153-154; Oshinsky.

²⁷⁸ Curtin, 208.

1896, the clubwomen of the Lucy Thurman Union reported that four-fifths of the prisoners in jails and workhouses were black.²⁷⁹

African Americans were frequently arrested for minor offenses and leased out to railway contractors, mining companies, large plantations and farms, the hemp industry, and public works, to name a few.²⁸⁰ In her writings on convict leasing, Ida B. Wells explained that the states received a “handsome revenue for their labor.”²⁸¹ In 1904, this prompted the NACW clubwomen to declare that the states had a “traffic in crime for the sake of revenue” rather than reforming criminals.²⁸² In essence, they created criminals to fill the needs of the system and the pockets of those individuals involved. The written terms of Georgia’s first lease in 1868 lend support to this. It called for one hundred black convicts to work on the Georgia and Alabama Railroad for one year for \$2,500.²⁸³ In 1882, Alabama’s prisoners brought in more than \$50,000 in state revenue.²⁸⁴ That same year, there was an advertisement for the convicts held in the Nashville, Tennessee Prison, who were skilled laborers, to be leased out for no less than \$100,000 per year, payable to the state.²⁸⁵ By 1908, the annual income in Georgia for leasing out convicts came to \$250,000. These funds were distributed to more than one hundred counties for the “cause of common school education, the majority of which went to schools for white children.”²⁸⁶

²⁷⁹ “Report of the Lucy Thurman Union.” *History*, p.76-77, Ida B. Wells Papers.

²⁸⁰ Cable, 130, 152; Alabama’s convicts were leased out to either the Tennessee Coal and Iron Company or the Sloss Iron and Steel Company, as discussed throughout Curtin’s *Black Prisoners and Their World*, 1, 62-63.

²⁸¹ Wells, “The Convict Lease System,” 23.

²⁸² “County Chaingangs” Biennial Report of the Department of Rescue Work. July 11-15, 1904, Julian LaRose Papers.

²⁸³ Mancini, “Race, Economics, and the Abandonment of Convict Leasing,” 341.

²⁸⁴ Curtin, 76.

²⁸⁵ Cable, 130.

²⁸⁶ “Georgia Women Fighting the Convict Lease,” *New York Times*, September 6, 1908.

From the inception of the convict lease system, the prisoners' living and working conditions were heinous. Moreover, punishments were brutal, often enforced to assert white supremacy's dominance, and death rates were extreme.²⁸⁷ Conditions in the convict labor camps regularly translated into a death penalty. Men, women, and children were often sentenced to terms anywhere between fifteen and fifty years.²⁸⁸ In 1880, 538 of Georgia's 1,200 convicts had sentences of ten years or longer. However, as George W. Cable explained in his 1889 publication, *The Silent South*, ten years was the longest length of "time that a convict can be expected to remain alive in a Georgia penitentiary."²⁸⁹ Convicts regularly faced the possibility of an excruciating death through the contraction of one of the many diseases from the unsanitary conditions at camp or the rigorous demands of their work. Often this was the result of sunstroke, a mine cave-in, inhalation of poisonous gas, or even a dynamite explosion. Furthermore, it was not uncommon for a convict to die from injuries inflicted during torturous punishments. Mortality rates surpassed ten percent in North Carolina, Virginia, and Louisiana and rose to sixteen percent in Mississippi, twenty-five percent in Arkansas, and Alabama reached forty percent.²⁹⁰ During the 1896 NACW convention, Victoria Matthews related that she had recently taken a trip through the Deep South. She shared what she witnessed of the convict lease system and described it as a "blot on the fair fame of the United States."²⁹¹ Following Matthew's description, the NACW's Resolutions Committee continued their resolve to address the convict lease system and asked the WCTU to help them in their

²⁸⁷ See Oshinski; and Mancini, *One Dies, Get Another*.

²⁸⁸ Cable.

²⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 153.

²⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 144, 170, 173; Drobney, 428; "Convict Leases," *The Daily Picayune*, March 25, 1898.

²⁹¹ "Minutes of the First National Conference of Colored Women" NACWC, 1895; "Evening Session. 8.15 P. M." NACWC, 1896.

efforts.²⁹²

Robert E. Burns, a white, two-time escapee, wrote a first-hand account on convict life in Georgia.²⁹³ In it, he explained that one was shackled and chained at every point of the day, even in their cots at night, and prisoners would often end up with sores from the shackles and contract “shackle poison.”²⁹⁴ Burns also detailed that the food was filthy, unsanitary, and filled with sand and worms. They were allowed one bath a week and were lucky if they were able to brush their teeth as often. The convicts were given a filthy straw mattress, an even dirtier pillow, and “a blanket so glazed with dirt as to feel slimy to the touch.”²⁹⁵

Other examples of the ghastly environment in convict camps came from Tennessee, Kentucky, and Alabama, although conditions were comparable in any of the aforementioned states benefitting from the system. In a report on Tennessee’s prisons, it was noted that “the majority of inmates are allowed an airspace at night less than the cubic contents of a good-sized grave” and the physician stated that the air was “almost insupportable.”²⁹⁶ In 1881, Kentucky’s convicts who were leased out to the hemp industry worked in confined areas that lacked ventilation and were not allowed time to bathe. That same year, 144 of Kentucky’s leased convicts had cases of “inflamed eyes and 202 of acute bronchitis.” The convicts were also forced to eat improperly cooked food and there were “616 cases of acute disease of the bowels and 101 of

²⁹² “Minutes of the First National Conference of Colored Women” NACWC, 1895; Giddings, *Ida*, 374-375; “Evening Session. 8.15 P. M.” NACWC, 1896; “Third Day, Morning Session, Convict Lease System” NACWC, 1896; “Club Work in Colorado” July, 1904, Notes, Tuskegee University Collection.

²⁹³ Robert E. Burns, *I am a Fugitive from a Georgia Chain Gang!* (New York: The Vanguard Press, 1932; repr., Detroit: Gale Research Company, Book Tower, 1972).

²⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 47-49.

²⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 52, 56, 147.

²⁹⁶ Cable, 133.

impoverishment of the blood.”²⁹⁷ Within eighteen months of leasing to the hemp industry, five convicts, in efforts to be spared from their leases, attempted to amputate their fingers and two others cut off a hand.²⁹⁸ In 1892, it was explained that many of Alabama’s convicts suffered from “mining itch.” Mining work caused painful sores to accumulate around the groin which would tear open and trap mine dust, leading to “unbearable” pain and possible infection.²⁹⁹

As with African American men, black female prisoners were leased out to private companies and forced to share the same camps as male prisoners. These women were frequently victims of sexual abuse by other convicts as well as guards. Often, female prisoners were forced to live with prison wardens or company bosses, leaving them exposed to sexual abuse and rape and vulnerable to illegitimate and unwanted pregnancies.³⁰⁰ However, as historian Mary Ellen Curtin argues, many of these women developed what Darlene Clark Hine refers to as a culture of dissemblance, in which black women maintained a “cult of secrecy...to protect the sanctity of inner aspects of their lives.”³⁰¹ Hine explains that the “dynamics of dissemblance involved creating the appearance of disclosure, or openness about themselves and their feelings, while actually remaining an enigma.”³⁰² Curtin asserts that many of the black female prisoners used dissemblance in their efforts to deny being defenseless against white authorities and to survive. Women who did come forward with accusations of sexual assault were often punished with beatings and some were killed.³⁰³

²⁹⁷ Ibid., 148.

²⁹⁸ Ibid., 149.

²⁹⁹ Curtin, 101.

³⁰⁰ Drobney, 423-424; Curtin, 120; Feimster, 65.

³⁰¹ Hine, “Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women in the Middle West,” 915.

³⁰² Ibid., 912, 915.

³⁰³ Curtin, 122, 127.

Even children were victims of the convict lease system. During slavery, Wilma King explains, blacks were denied a childhood.³⁰⁴ White supremacists did not perceive black juveniles as children and, through the racialized penal system and convict leasing, continued to deny many blacks their childhood. In 1882, out of 1,336 convicts, fifty boys under the age of eighteen were sentenced to Tennessee prisons.³⁰⁵ Between 1879 and 1880, North Carolina's prisons held 234 youths under the age of twenty, none of whom were sentenced to less than twelve months.³⁰⁶ The average age of prisoners in Georgia became younger after the convict lease system was initiated. By 1896, almost half of Georgia's convicts were minors. That same year, prisoners between the ages of sixteen and twenty-one became the largest age group, making up thirty-eight percent of Georgia's prison population. Less than twenty percent of Georgia's prisoners were older than thirty.³⁰⁷ Moreover, many of the boys sentenced to jails or labor camps became victims of sexual abuse.³⁰⁸

One of the NACW members shared a story about several young boys working among a gang of convicts. The clubwoman illustrated that the youngest of the convicts was about ten years old. "This little fellow, as dirty as he could be, with the regulation prison stripes on, was carrying water for the others. Between his lips was a cigarette, which he evidently enjoyed, and occasionally passed to some of the men, who would take a whiff or two at it."³⁰⁹ This story was used to articulate that the contemporary means of devising punishment among youth by housing them with adult convicts was inherently

³⁰⁴ Wilma King, *Stolen Childhood: Slave Youth in Nineteenth-Century America*, 2nd ed. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011).

³⁰⁵ Cable, 135.

³⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 145.

³⁰⁷ Mancini, "Race, Economics, and the Abandonment of Convict Leasing," 343.

³⁰⁸ Curtin, 209.

³⁰⁹ "Do We Need Reformatories" February, 1900, Notes, Mary Church Terrell Collection. The NACW member was not identified.

faulty.

Furthermore, the punishment enforced was not only wicked, it often led to the death of convicts. Whipping was the common form of convict punishment, especially if the worker did not meet his quota for the day.³¹⁰ Robert E. Burns described one of the whippings he witnessed in which a prisoner was stripped of his pants and held down, bent over on a bench. “A leather strap six feet long, three inches wide, one-quarter inch thick was brought forth...with a terrific crash, the heavy strap came down on bare flesh with all the strength of the wielder behind it.” Burns related the convict’s pleas for mercy going unanswered and after ten lashes, “the convict, half fainting or perhaps unconscious, was stood up on his feet—blood running down his legs, and one of the guards carried or led him back into the sleeping quarters.”³¹¹ Other punishments included stringing a convict up by the thumbs, putting the prisoner into a sweat box, or having the convict “strapped down and a funnel forced into his mouth, into which water was poured. The effect extended the stomach, producing great pain and occasional death.”³¹²

In a letter to the president of the Alabama Board of Inspectors, a convict from the Pratt Mines in Jefferson County, Alabama, begged for help. The prisoner stated that “[w]e being convicts is some thing like a man drowning...we are in the same condition...and by so falling we have lost every friend on Earth.” In his letter, the prisoner explained that he could not discuss the daily atrocities they faced with the inspector while he was visiting the camp because they were warned by the warden and guards to keep their mouths shut. He further stated that a man could be alive during the

³¹⁰ Mancini, “Race, Economics, and the Abandonment of Convict Leasing,” 347; Cable, 161; Drobney, 429.

³¹¹ Burns, 54.

³¹² Drobney, 429.

day, but dead by nightfall. “Sir I wish I could show you our condition clearly,” he said. “Day after day we looked Death in the face and was afraid to speak.” He further explained that their cells were “filled with filth and vermin” and they remained chained to their beds. They were forced to make it “the distance of three miles through rain or snow” to the mines and “our agony and pain seems to have no end.” When it rained, they were forced to work in waist-deep water, remain “bound in chain,” and had no choice but to stand out in the rain waiting for their supper. The convict stated the “we go to cell wet go to bed wet and arise wet the following morning.”³¹³ In another letter to the same president, two black convicts described how their mistreatment far surpassed that of the white men in the camp even though black men made up the majority and brought in the most coal from the mines.³¹⁴

The NACW women’s reformative efforts expanded to include the issue of chain-gangs, part of the convict lease system. At the 1896 convention, Victoria Matthews reported that there were children consumed by the chain-gangs, sometimes being sentenced for up to twenty years over what would be considered a petty incident in the North.³¹⁵ Selina Butler, one of the original NFAW committee members involved in the formation of the NACW, became the chairman of the committee on prison work for the Woman’s Club of Atlanta. She dedicated her time to researching the black women and

³¹³ Letter from a convict laborer at Pratt Mines in Jefferson County, Alabama, to Reginald Dawson, president of the Alabama Board of Inspectors of Convicts, January 18, 1884, Alabama Board of Inspectors of Convicts, Administrative Correspondence, Alabama Textual Materials Collection, Alabama Department of Archives and History, Montgomery, Alabama [hereafter cited as Alabama Textual Materials Collection].

³¹⁴ Letter from Ezekiel Archey and Ambrose Haskins, convict laborers at Pratt Mines in Jefferson County, Alabama, to Reginald Dawson, president of the Alabama Board of Inspectors of Convicts, January 26, 1884, Alabama Board of Inspectors of Convicts, Administrative Correspondence, Alabama Textual Materials Collection. Both letters are possibly written by the same convict.

³¹⁵ “Evening Session. 8.15 P. M.” NACWC, 1896.

girls who had been forced into chain-gangs and the prison system in the South.³¹⁶ In 1904, Alice W. Gary, the Superintendent of NACW's Department of Rescue Work, presented a detailed report of her work in prison reform, and spoke of assisting those "bound by the peonage system...and...county chain gangs."³¹⁷

The clubwomen repeatedly vowed to work toward the elimination of the convict lease system and used the written word to enlighten other members, as well as the public, to the horrors of the system. Ida B. Wells, who began fighting the system prior to the formation of the NACW, wrote an essay entitled "The Convict Lease System" as part of a pamphlet put together in response to African Americans' exclusion from the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago. Wells asserted that convict labor was not just a moral issue, but a channel for "maintaining the imbalance of wealth and power in the South."³¹⁸ She later presented a paper entitled "Reform" at the 1896 NACW conference.³¹⁹ At the Society of Christian Endeavor's 1897 convention, Victoria Matthews presented her essay, "The Awakening of the Afro-American Woman," in which she discussed the needed reformatations within the penal system.³²⁰ In January, 1898, the NACW printed and mailed out five hundred copies of their work titled "Chain Gang System."³²¹ The following year, Selina Butler and Mrs. J.W.E. Bowen, both members from Atlanta, Georgia, wrote and published several papers concerning the

³¹⁶ "Notice" June 15, 1897, Notes: Vol. 1, No. 3, Mary Church Terrell Collection.

³¹⁷ "N. A. C. W. Convention in St. Louis" October, 1904, Notes, Mary Church Terrell Collection.

³¹⁸ Rydell, "Editor's Introduction," xli.

³¹⁹ Giddings, *Ida*, 374-375.

³²⁰ "The Awakening of the Afro-American Woman: An Address Delivered At the Annual Convention of the Society of Christian Endeavor, San Francisco, July 11, 1897" Yale Collection of American Literature; "Victoria Earle Matthews" in *With Pen and Voice: A Critical Anthology of Nineteenth-Century African American Women*, ed. Shirley Wilson Logan (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1995), 123, 124.

³²¹ "Financial Report" "1898" January, 1900, Notes, Mary Church Terrell Collection.

convict lease system.³²² In 1904, Alice Dugged Cary authored “My Work Among the Lowly,” in which she reported on her rescue work among convicts.³²³

The separate spheres ideology dictated that the political realm was reserved for white men, yet, in another example of black clubwomen defining their own sphere, the women of the NACW did not hesitate to take their fight to eliminate the convict lease system to legislators and other politicians. At the 1896 conference, Ida B. Wells was selected to represent the NACW at the upcoming Prison Congress of the United States to encourage the eradication of the convict lease system.³²⁴ At that same conference, a committee of women living in Washington, D. C., made up of Mrs. Rosetta Lawson, Mrs. B. K. Bruce, and Mrs. Arthur Gray, was established to gather information and advice from those living in the states where the system was in use. The committee accepted the assignment of interviewing those states’ congressional representatives concerning the wickedness of the system and wearing them down.³²⁵

By 1899, the NACW announced that the convict lease system in Louisiana was abolished as the result of “enlightened public sentiment.”³²⁶ They also stated that “Georgia has abolished [convict leasing] after it has been the practice there for thirty years. Hereafter the State will work the convicts under the supervision of State guards, and the men will be led and imprisoned in State convict camps.”³²⁷ Despite these announcements, Louisiana’s system, although outlawed in 1898, continued until 1901

³²² January, 1899, Notes, Mary Church Terrell Collection.

³²³ “Alice Dugged Cary” in *History of the American Negro and His Institutions: Georgia Edition*, ed. Arthur Bunyan Caldwell, 175; Breen, “Black Women and the Great War,” 434; Rouse, “Out of the Shadow of Tuskegee,” 35; “Prison Work” Biennial Report of the Department of Rescue Work. July 11-15, 1904, Julian LaRose Papers.

³²⁴ Giddings, *Ida*, 374-375.

³²⁵ “Third Day. Afternoon Session. 2.30 P. M.” NACWC, 1896.

³²⁶ “Club Notes” May, 1899, Notes: Vol. 2, No. 12, Mary Church Terrell Collection.

³²⁷ *Ibid.*

and Georgia allowed the system to persist until 1909.³²⁸ In the interim, the clubwomen reaffirmed their dedication to “calling attention to the barbarity of the convict lease system,” of which blacks, especially black women, were the primary victims.³²⁹

Separately, white clubwomen in southern states showed concern over the convict lease system as well, but continued to work within the Victorian parameters. As late as 1908, the *New York Times* printed an article in which it was stated that in dealing with the convict lease system, “the clubwomen of Georgia have had to work silently.”³³⁰ In this same article, the distinction was made that, although the convict lease had been in use already for around thirty years, it was not until the legislative investigating committee reported on the system that it became a “public scandal.” The committee’s report made its way into newspapers and public disapproval of the system’s brutality “spread like a forest fire.”³³¹

The article illustrated how the leaders of the Atlanta Woman’s Club of Georgia relied on their husbands’ connections to quietly propose ideas about the negative side of the system. Described as “feminine diplomacy,” those women used social gatherings, such as dinner parties, to discuss matters with politicians after first spending hours being obsequious. The journalist explained that “when they are trying to push a reform through, as for instance prison reform...and the convict-lease system, they have worked silently, fearing to antagonize the City Council, the Commissioners of various organizations, and the Legislature.”³³²

³²⁸ Mark T. Carleton, *Politics and Punishment: The History of the Louisiana State Penal System* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1971), 82.

³²⁹ “Do We Need Reformatories” February, 1900, Notes, Mary Church Terrell Collection.

³³⁰ Georgia Women Fighting the Convict Lease, *New York Times*, September 6, 1908.

³³¹ Ibid.

³³² Ibid.

Using their limited strategies, however, by 1908, the Atlanta women had established a boys' juvenile court so delinquent boys would not be "thrown into companionship with older and hardened criminals," and secured a probation officer to watch over the boys.³³³ In 1908, Georgia's governor, Hoke Smith, ordered a legislative investigation into the convict lease system in Georgia. The aforementioned journalist insinuated that Governor Smith may have taken a cue from the white clubwomen of Georgia.³³⁴

The NACW clubwomen's strides toward the abolishment of the leasing system coincided with several other factors that quickened its demise. By the late 1880s and early 1890s, newspapers began publishing investigations on the convict lease system and revelations on the atrocities committed appeared in "state documents, northern publications, and proceedings from national prison associations."³³⁵ Historian Jeffrey A. Drobney argues that "public opinion, combined with opposition towards the system by organized labor, seems to have been the most effective weapon in ending the system."³³⁶ Ironically, economics and the continued suppression of African Americans, the two main reasons the convict lease system was initiated, were also the primary reasons for its downfall. By 1907, the cost of leasing a prisoner averaged \$670 per year, risen from \$100 in 1899. Since this amount had come to about the same cost of free labor, there was no longer a huge profit to be made.³³⁷ Furthermore, when the system was finally abolished in Georgia in 1909, it coincided with the disfranchisement of blacks.³³⁸ This exemplifies

³³³ Ibid.

³³⁴ Ibid.

³³⁵ Drobney, 430; The New Orleans' *Daily Picayune* was a leading investigator into the atrocities of the system.

³³⁶ Drobney, 431.

³³⁷ Mancini, "Race, Economics, and the Abandonment of Convict Leasing," 348.

³³⁸ Ibid., 349.

that, by stripping blacks of the few political rights they had, the system was no longer necessary to ensure white dominance.

As scholar Matthew J. Mancini points out, the system's "demise occurred when both its economic and social utility were undermined."³³⁹ By 1898, the convict lease system remained in only nine states in the South. It was officially ended in Louisiana, Mississippi, Oklahoma, Georgia, Texas, Florida, and Alabama in 1901, 1906, 1907, 1907, 1910, 1919, and 1923 respectively.³⁴⁰ However, in states such as Florida and Alabama, while the legislature ended the practice at the state level, convicts were still being leased by counties. Florida allowed this practice to continue until 1923 and Alabama did so until 1928.³⁴¹

The mission statement of the National Association of Colored Women addressed the need for uplift of African Americans in areas traditionally under the umbrella of motherhood and domesticity. However, in order to promote racial uplift for the black community as a whole, many of the NACW clubwomen pushed beyond society's imposed boundaries and gendered constructs and relied on the distinctive sphere in which radical racial activism was not only acceptable, but expected. These women saw it as their duty, and part of their goal of uplifting the black race, to support prison reform, petition officials to secure pardons for the innocent and ill, establish juvenile reformatories, and fight the convict lease system. They made it clear they were

³³⁹ Ibid., 349.

³⁴⁰ Drobney, 431; Curtin; Carleton, 58.

³⁴¹ Drobney, 433-434; Curtin, 10. Although it was declared by the Alabama State Board and the Governor that all convicts were to be removed from all mines by January 1, 1902, this was overturned. See "The Lease of State Convicts," *The Daily Register* November 9, 1902, Alabama Textual Materials Collection.

determined to battle “all...barbarities” which degraded African Americans.³⁴² Though their efforts cannot always be measured in terms of definitive, identifiable successes, their revolutionary activism is significant in itself. Quoted from the recorded minutes of the 1900 NACW meeting, the members of the National Association of Colored Women swore to “protest with such force of logic and intensity of soul that those who oppress us will either cease to disavow the inalienability and inequality of human rights, or be ashamed to openly violate the very principles upon which this government was founded.”³⁴³

³⁴² “Do We Need Reformatories” February, 1900, Notes, Mary Church Terrell Collection; “Third Day, Morning Session, Convict Lease System” NACWC, 1896.

³⁴³ “What Colored Women Have Done” November, 1900, Notes, Mary Church Terrell Collection.

CHAPTER V

Conclusion

In 1895, black clubwomen came together for the first time on a national level to form a cohesive, unified front for the purposes of strengthening their individual efforts in fighting the rising tide of racial violence and defending black womanhood. The following year, the NACW was officially formed and is currently the oldest surviving African American women's organization. Over the past several decades, historians have been working to unravel the lives, motivations, and accomplishments of black women activists. Yet, there are still vast areas awaiting exploration regarding these women in general and the NACW in particular. In looking at black activist clubwomen, Darlene Clark Hine noted in 1989 that, while the NACW "quickly became the largest and most enduring protest organization in the history of Afro-Americans," it failed to gain the same scholarly recognition as did the male-led black associations.³⁴⁴

In their efforts to defend black womanhood against the racialized narrative, the women of the NACW focused their work on racial uplift and benevolent activities, which were often maternal and nurturing in character. For example, they trained women and girls on proper housekeeping and hygiene, formed classes to instruct mothers on proper methods of raising children, and sent missionaries into rural areas to teach these skills. They opened industrial schools for black children, established homes for orphans and the elderly, and cared for the sick. They also focused on temperance and moral purity. Additionally, these women included the incarcerated as part of their community, tending

³⁴⁴ Hine, "Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women in the Middle West," 917.

to the ill and establishing prison libraries. They argued for cleaner prison conditions and, when that did not work, they cleaned the institutions themselves. These activities fell within the parameters of the white community's definition of what was appropriate for women to be involved in under the separate spheres ideology.

The women of the NACW knew the only way to uplift the race as a whole was to focus on explicit race work. As part of that endeavor, they fought to eradicate Jim Crow in all its forms. They actively protested segregation and black women's exclusion from the ladies' car. They also lobbied government officials for anti-lynching legislation and pardons for the unjustly imprisoned. One of the greatest areas demanding their attention was the abolishment of the convict lease system, which combined the exploitation of blacks with economic gain and maintained white dominance after the end of slavery. All of these efforts were far outside the white community's established parameters for women. However, as black women, they were automatically excluded from those parameters by the white majority. Therefore, they had the unique ability, as well as the intrinsic obligation as activists, to establish their own sphere of womanhood.

At the first national gathering of the group that became the NACW, there were fifty-three delegates from fourteen states. Upon inception, the organization's numbers rose to five thousand. By 1915, the NACW roster boasted a membership of fifty thousand, with over one thousand affiliated clubs and twenty-eight federations, "far surpassing the membership of every other protest organization of the time, including the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People."³⁴⁵

The NACW expanded their goals in the 1920s. They made economic

³⁴⁵ Hine, "Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women in the Middle West," 917; Dossett, 16; Giddings, *When and Where I Enter*, 95.

opportunities for black women a new priority and added a department for businesswomen.³⁴⁶ They also turned their attention to the international realm. Several leading members of the NACW, including Margaret Murray Washington, Mary Church Terrell, Lugenia Burns Hope, Mary McLeod Bethune, and Nannie Burroughs formed the International Council of Women of the Darker Races (ICWDR) in 1920 as an adjunct to the NACW.³⁴⁷ In 1922, these women branched out of the NACW, making the ICWDR “the first autonomous international organization among African American women.”³⁴⁸ The ICWDR was formed with the goal of economic, social, and political advancement for blacks internationally.³⁴⁹ Following her involvement in the NACW and the ICWDR, Mary McLeod Bethune formed the National Council of Negro Women in 1935, which served as an umbrella for all black clubwomen’s national organizations and maintained a global outlook.³⁵⁰ Simultaneously in the 1920s, political representation for the black community became the core of the black clubwomen’s motivation and during the presidential race of 1924, the women of the NACW shifted their focus toward partisan politics.³⁵¹ Black clubwomen began organizing Republican clubs and became extensively involved in promoting the Republican Party platform. When the Republican Party won the election, black clubwomen saw the victory as having much to do with their efforts.³⁵²

Only when the white supremacist violence and retrogressionist ideology pushed black clubwomen beyond the edge of their tolerance did they find the fortitude to take up the challenge to organize their individual parts into a whole. Only then could they grasp

³⁴⁶ Gill, “Civic Beauty,” 82.

³⁴⁷ Neverdon-Morton, “The Advancement of the Race,” 130; Rief, 215.

³⁴⁸ Rief, 214; Neverdon-Morton, “The Advancement of the Race,” 130.

³⁴⁹ Neverdon-Morton, “The Advancement of the Race,” 130; Rief, 214-219.

³⁵⁰ Rief, 218.

³⁵¹ Higginbotham, “Clubwomen and Electoral Politics,” 138, 140, 141.

³⁵² *Ibid.*, 141-143.

the power essential to bring about a civil revolution. The NACW connected black communities throughout the nation and promoted collective action. Although many aspects had to come into play to end the atrocities and abuses that were commonplace throughout the South, it is clear that the members of the NACW actively played an important role in eradicating the injustices perpetrated. The racist ideology that black clubwomen faced did not deter these women. Instead, a new set of “leaders, alliances, and strategies” came forth.³⁵³ Racial uplift for all African Americans, the primary goal set by the enraged clubwomen who came together in 1895, was slowly but surely being achieved through the unwavering commitment of the leading ladies of the National Association of Colored Women.

³⁵³ Higginbotham, “Clubwomen and Electoral Politics,” 144, 151.

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