



# MONASH University

**'REFLECTING THE BEST SIDE OF OUR CONDITION': THE BLACK PRESS AND  
RACIAL UPLIFT IN THE UNITED STATES, 1900-1959**

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the history of the black press in the first half of the twentieth century through the lens of racial uplift. African American newspapers have, since the first publication in 1827, performed a social advocacy role where they encouraged readers to adopt middle-class ideals of hard work, self-sufficiency, and respectability to "uplift" them to secure their future as free citizens of the United States. The thesis argues that the twentieth century black press, as the most important communication medium for the African American community, continued this social advocacy role by formulating racial uplift narratives to fit contemporary social conditions.

The thesis explores the evolution of the twentieth century black press from small local entities to national publications with circulations in the hundreds of thousands, and follows changes in African American society around which the press constructed uplift narratives. It also reveals that approaches to racial uplift were contested, and that the press incorporated issues of colour, class, and gender within the uplift narratives to express its middle-class view of the most acceptable version of African American society for the purpose of assimilating fully into mainstream American life.

The thesis reshapes the study of the black press and of racial uplift by investigating the unexplored link between these two important areas of African American social history. The small body of literature on the black press neglects its contribution to racial uplift, and while there is a richer body of work on racial uplift, historians have not considered the twentieth century black press as a repository of racial uplift narratives. The thesis brings these two areas together to show the strong interrelationship between racial uplift, as a means of advancing the African American cause for equality, and the black press as the vehicle for communicating it, and adds another dimension to the black press as a shaper of African American attitudes and as a rich source of African American social history.

## DECLARATION

This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma at any university or equivalent institution and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, this thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference is made in the text of the thesis.

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Once the project got underway, questions and comments from family, friends, and interested strangers about the topic made me realize that there was very little knowledge about the black press in the wider community. I hope that my project helps to generate further interest in and understanding of this fascinating medium.

## NOTE ON TERMINOLOGY AND USAGE

The thesis is concerned with the period between 1900 and 1959, and is based on African American newspapers and commentary published in this era. Much has changed in the sixty years since the concluding year of the study in the way we express some of the concepts that are discussed in the thesis. Ideas about "race" and biological difference that were prevalent at the turn of the twentieth century and that were held to be true during much of the period of the study have been dismissed as scientifically invalid and nonexistent. When referring to ideas and terminology that were current for the period under discussion in the thesis, for example, when discussing the 1900 census, I use concepts of race and terminology that were current at the time, as expressed in the newspapers, to convey context and the historical significance of these ideas as they impacted African American life.

Furthermore, over the past sixty years much of the terminology that was considered appropriate in referring to people of African descent in the United States has fallen out of favour. I use both "African American" and "black" throughout the general discussion, to reflect both current usage, and to differentiate from "white" or "mainstream" American society, but the term "Negro" also appears throughout the text in the names of groups and organizations, and in quotations taken from the newspapers, as this was the accepted designation and most commonly used term throughout the period of the study.

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## INTRODUCTION



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Figure 1: Afro-American, September 19, 1942.

On the occasion of its fiftieth anniversary in September 1942, the *Afro-American* newspaper published this cartoon. At first glance it is a simple rendition of the paper's history, but on deeper examination, the image provides a succinct representation of the many services the black press provided to the African American community. Framed between two of the most famous African Americans of their times, the illustrious abolitionist Frederick Douglass and champion boxer Joe Louis, are international events, culture, gossip, and political achievements.



While not evident in the cartoon, each of these "headlines" can be investigated to reveal an undercurrent of racial uplift – the elevation of the social and economic condition of African Americans through education, achievement, and an ethos of respectability. This thesis will open the pages of the *Afro* and other twentieth-century black newspapers to reexamine news and content that has been overlooked, ignored, or forgotten, to bring to light the importance of racial uplift in the black press, and the different ways in which it was manifested.

Newspapers published by and for African Americans have been an essential part of African American community life since the antebellum era, when the first newspaper, *Freedom's Journal*, was launched in 1827. Conveying news and opinion, advocating for civil rights, educating, informing, and entertaining, newspapers were, until well into the twentieth century, the main communication medium serving the needs of African Americans. Historians have long noted the role of the black press as a source of news and information for the black community, a service that the white press had little interest in offering. The white press was unconcerned with reporting news about African Americans unless it related to crimes committed, and such articles were, more often than not, published to support whites' negative preconceptions of blacks. This lack of interest, and negativity when news was published, worked to strengthen the link between the black press and its readers, and enabled the black press to play a central role as a source of news for and about African Americans, and to construct and portray positive images of "race progress."

Newspaper editors were, from the dawn of newspaper publishing, part of the elite in black society. As communicators, and by virtue of their educational or professional attainments, they were well placed to promote ideals of a strong work ethic, of church and family as the source of moral and social stability, and of the benefits of education in advancing one's own or one's

family's fortunes.<sup>1</sup> They promoted these values as part of a broader belief among African Americans that demonstrations of respectability in deportment and lifestyle, and advancements in educational, economic, and social attainments would lead to acceptance as worthy citizens, and eventual political and social equality. The concept is referred to as racial uplift, and the black press's role in promoting racial uplift is the focus of this thesis. Spanning the first six decades of the twentieth century, the thesis shows how the press, the most important and influential mass media at the time, promoted racial uplift in the years before television brought civil rights and equality issues out of the African American sphere and placed them before the entire nation.

It must be acknowledged that the black press was, first and foremost, a commercial operation. However, its success as a business enabled it to perform a community service by using its ubiquity and voice as an agent for positive change in the black community. The press was a middle-class entity that, while it was consumed by all levels of black society, was the main conduit for conveying what could be considered middle-class aspirations, and a middle-class morality of respectability designed to improve opportunities for acceptance into American society. The black press contributed to setting standards of contemporary respectability through articles and illustrations that built positive constructions around certain behaviours, fashions, or accomplishments, and reinforced them through negative constructions of indicators that it deemed did not conform.

The black press is arguably best known for its role in advocating for equality and civil rights, but its role as a recorder of black life and social change, and in particular as an authority on racial uplift and middle-class aspiration, has been overlooked. The black press is, at the same time, a significant repository of black social history because it reveals, through its news, editorials, columns, and advertising, a society that adapted to racial discrimination and urbanization; a society that recognized distinct class divisions within itself; and a society that did

<sup>1</sup> David Howard-Pitney, "Calvin Chase's Washington *Bee* and Black Middle-Class Ideology, 1882-1900," *Journalism Quarterly* 63 (1986); Betty Lou Kilbert Rathbun, "The Rise of the Modern American Negro Press, 1880 to 1914" (PhD Dissertation, State University of New York at Buffalo, 1978), 229.

not question its place in America or its loyalty to the nation, but was yet buffeted from without by prejudice and misunderstanding, and from within by contradictory forces, each striving to find the best way forward to equality and acceptance.

This thesis argues that the black press was heavily invested in promoting racial uplift, and that it continued to do so in various forms throughout the sixty years that form the scope of this study. This thesis will show that the black press constructed multiple and varied uplift narratives according to perceived need at the time, based on the understanding that racial uplift was an essential part of African Americans' ultimate objective of achieving equality. These narratives presented multiple pathways to achieving uplift and permeated all aspects of black life: through articles on education, featuring both schools and successful graduates; through features on people who had achieved success in business; through expressions of respectability such as taking pride in one's appearance and one's home; through the activities of women's clubs in promoting family life; and through consumerism. Applying the lens of racial uplift to the black press is a way to increase our understanding of the undercurrents of class, respectability, and aspiration that were integral to the uplift agenda, and to acknowledge the social value of the newspapers within their communities.

Despite the important role the black press has played in African American life, it has attracted less historical attention than it deserves. This could be indicative of a lack of interest in the details of African American daily life in an era when African Americans were "invisible" to the white mainstream, and is evidenced by the fact that African Americans themselves were responsible for drawing attention to the black press as worthy of historical attention and for writing the first surveys. The black press had been in publication for almost seventy years before the first attempt to record its history was made. The first work, published in 1891, is *The Afro-American Press and its Editors*, by Irvine Garland Penn, a teacher who later became a journalist on various black papers. It was written at a time when Booker T. Washington's philosophy of

racial uplift through industrial (vocational) education was gaining prominence within the black community, but the book pays little attention to the role the press played in promoting racial uplift – a role it had taken on since the first newspaper – and instead emphasizes the biographies of the editors and publishers.<sup>2</sup> General histories that followed Penn rely on his work for descriptions of the early newspapers, and are supplemented by newspapers that were published after his study.<sup>3</sup> Some brief histories produced in the 1920s and 1940s were written by African American journalists.<sup>4</sup> The most recent dedicated overview was written in the 1990s.<sup>5</sup>

There has been less focus on broad overviews of press history in the last thirty years, and more interest by historians in detailed studies of particular aspects of the black press, such as profiles of single newspapers, newspapers in a particular region, or a theme within a specific newspaper.<sup>6</sup> Historian Henry Lewis Suggs has made a significant contribution to black press studies through his regional focus, in edited collections of studies of the black press in the South and the Midwest, but there is no regional historiography on newspapers in the Northeast or West Coast. Studies of these newspapers tend to be of single newspapers, or biographies of their owners. Suggs and others have contributed biographies of some of the more controversial or influential editors in the twentieth century, but the studies are more concerned with the men behind the newspapers and the difficulties they encountered in maintaining the newspapers as

<sup>2</sup> I. Garland Penn, *The Afro-American Press and Its Editors* (Salem: Ayer Company, 1891); Jacqueline M. Moore, *Booker T. Washington, W.E.B. Du Bois, and the Struggle for Racial Uplift* (Wilmington: Scholarly Resources, Inc., 2003), 29.

<sup>3</sup> Frederick G. Detweiler, *The Negro Press in the United States* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1922); Roland E. Wolseley, *The Black Press, U.S.A.*, 2 ed. (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1972).

<sup>4</sup> Eugene Gordon, "The Negro Press," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 140, *The American Negro* (1928); Doxey A. Wilkerson, "The Negro Press," *The Journal of Negro Education* 16, no. 4 (1947).

<sup>5</sup> Armistead S. Pride and Clint C. Wilson II, *A History of the Black Press* (Washington, DC: Howard University Press, 1997); Shirlet E. Thompson, "The Black Press," chap. 20. In *A Companion to African American History*, ed. Alton Hornsby Jr. (Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2005). Wiley Online Library, 2005.

<https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/9780470996720>. Thompson's overview is more recent, but it is a book chapter, not a complete work dedicated to the black press.

<sup>6</sup> Henry Lewis Suggs, ed. *The Black Press in the South, 1865-1979* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1996); Mae Najiyya Duncan, *A Survey of Cincinnati's Black Press & Its Editors, 1844-2010* (Philadelphia: Xlibris Corporation, 2011). Examples of investigations of specific content are: Frances Gatewood, John Jennings, and Daniel F. Yezbick, *The Blacker the Ink: Constructions of Black Identity in Comics and Sequential Art* (Newark: Rutgers University Press, 2015); Mark K. Dolan, "Extra! Chicago Defender Race Records Ads Show South from Afar," *Southern Cultures* 13, no. 3 (2007).

viable operations than they are overviews of content.<sup>7</sup> There has also been some investigation of women in journalism, such as Rodger Streitmatter's studies, and biographies and memoirs of individual women journalists.<sup>8</sup>

The existing literature on the black press provides satisfactory overviews of newspaper history since 1827, insights into the (almost always) men who ran the newspapers, and some more focused studies, but there is a gap in the historiography of the twentieth century press. Much of the historiography of the twentieth century black press focuses on its political advocacy role in calling for equal rights and political representation.<sup>9</sup> While this is an important aspect of black press history, it suggests that advocacy was the press's primary role because it was ultimately directed outside the black community toward the white power structure. Limiting investigation of the black press to its advocacy role raises the following questions: Was political advocacy the only role that the black press played? If advocacy was directed outside the black community, what role did the black press play within its own community? These studies overlook the role of the black press as a channel of communication within the community. Examining the black press through the lens of racial uplift allows us to explore the relationship

<sup>7</sup> Representative biographies include: Roi Ottley, *The Lonely Warrior: The Life and Times of Robert S. Abbott, Founder of the Chicago Defender* (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1955); Stephen R Fox, *The Guardian of Boston: William Monroe Trotter* (New York: Atheneum, 1970); Andrew Buni, *Robert L. Vann of the Pittsburgh Courier: Politics and Black Journalism* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1974); Henry Lewis Suggs, *P.B. Young Newspaperman: Race, Politics, and Journalism in the New South 1910-1962* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1988); Julius E. Thompson, *Percy Greene and the Jackson Advocate: The Life and Times of a Radical Conservative Black Newspaperman, 1897-1977* (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, Inc., 1994).

<sup>8</sup> Rodger Streitmatter, *Raising Her Voice: African-American Women Journalists Who Changed History* (Lexington: University of Kentucky, 1994); "African-American Women Journalists and Their Male Editors: A Tradition of Support," *Journalism Quarterly* 70, no. 2 (1993); Mia Bay, *To Tell the Truth Freely: The Life of Ida B. Wells* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2009); Carol McCabe Booker, ed. *Alone Atop the Hill: The Autobiography of Alice Dunnigan, Pioneer of the National Black Press* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 2015); James McGrath Morris, *Eye on the Struggle: Ethel Payne, the First Lady of the Black Press* (New York: HarperCollins, 2015).

<sup>9</sup> Patrick S. Washburn, *The African American Newspaper: Voice of Freedom* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2006); Charles A. Simmons, *The African American Press: A History of News Coverage During National Crises, With Special Reference to Four Black Newspapers, 1827-1965* (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, Inc., 1998). Recent dissertations have also focused on the press's advocacy role. See: Frederick James Carroll, "Race News: How Black Reporters and Readers Shaped the Fight for Racial Justice, 1877-1978." (PhD Dissertation, The College of William and Mary, 2012); Kerri K. Greenidge, "Bulwark of the Nation: The Northern Black Press, Political Radicalism, and Civil Rights 1859-1909." (PhD Dissertation, Boston University, 2012).

between the press and the black community that will broaden the scope of current historiography to include the press's role in constructing and reflecting social norms.

In contrast to the historiography of the black press, the historiography of racial uplift is more comprehensive. Racial uplift is a broad term that historians have not sought to define categorically, but the historiography, in all its narrative approaches, conforms to a common understanding of racial uplift as a multi-faceted endeavour designed to construct a positive identity for African Americans to counter racist beliefs and to improve their political, social, and economic position in American society. Racial uplift was to be achieved through self-help, economic independence, mutual assistance, and interracial cooperation.<sup>10</sup> It has been described by historians as a long-term social project, as it was devised in the antebellum era for the benefit of the African American community as a whole and remained a goal of the middle class well into the twentieth century.<sup>11</sup>

The historiography of racial uplift emphasizes class and respectability. Uplift is often framed as a top-down effort led by the middle class, that is, the educated, privileged group who felt it was best placed to lead uplift efforts. Definitions of "middle class" are not consistent across the racial divide, but in the context of racial uplift, historian Kevin Gaines defines the African American middle class as a social or ideological organization rather than an economic unit.<sup>12</sup> This is due in part to differences between white and black society in economic capacity and in definitions of what were considered middle-class occupations.<sup>13</sup> Historians also

<sup>10</sup> Allyson Nadia Field, *Uplift Cinema: The Emergence of African American Film and the Possibility of Black Modernity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015). While historians of uplift refer to these aspects generally or individually according to their focus, Field lists them specifically.

<sup>11</sup> Vanessa Isabel Rouillon Calderon, "Reconfiguring Racial Uplift: Church-Sponsored African American Rhetorical Work in the Early Twentieth Century." (PhD Dissertation, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2013); Field, *Uplift Cinema*; Kevin K. Gaines, *Uplifting the Race: Black Leadership, Politics, and Culture in the Twentieth Century* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996).

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>13</sup> For discussions on the fluidity of class definitions, see August Meier, *Negro Thought in America 1880-1915: Racial Ideologies in the Age of Booker T. Washington* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993), 150-54; St. Clair Drake and Horace R. Cayton, *Black Metropolis: A Study of Negro Life in a Northern City* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1945), 507. Drake and Cayton's study of Chicago in the 1930s and 1940s also demonstrates that economic class determinants were not equally applicable across white and black societies.

acknowledge an inherent conflict within uplift ideology that relates to class. Gaines contends that racial uplift generated class conflict because, while its ultimate objective was for the advancement and benefit of the group, it also manifested in the adoption of ideas of social organization, gender roles, status indicators, and class differences that were closely aligned to those of white society. When these class and social divisions became apparent in black society, they were deemed indicators of progress, of moving closer to the mainstream.<sup>14</sup> Uplift narratives are also based on a shared understanding that uplift was patriarchal and middle-class-led, and designed to reinforce an agenda for social acceptance by whites, using class and status distinctions to establish distance from the "masses."<sup>15</sup> Group uplift, the ultimate goal, was, therefore, achieved through the development of class divisions within black society.

An integral part of this top-down effort was the notion of respectability, that is, the manner in which one conducted oneself, on a personal level and at the community level. Respectability was inextricably linked to uplift, as one could not be achieved without the other. It was essential to the construction of a positive identity, for the individual and for the group. It affected class status and reinforced the desirability of establishing social distance, and, ultimately, it represented progress and worthiness of citizenship.<sup>16</sup> Respectability was a tangible concept, in that its existence was verifiable through indicators such as dress, deportment, and speech. It was also promoted as a social aspiration, as Noliwe M. Rooks discusses in her study of African

<sup>14</sup> Gaines, *Uplifting the Race*, 45-46.

<sup>15</sup> This idea of establishing distance from the masses so as to be more acceptable to white society is present in much of the historiography of African American life. See Angela Hornsby-Gutting, "Politics of Respectability." In *The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture, Vol. 13: Gender*, pp 238-42, ed. Nancy Bercaw, Charles Reagan Wilson, and Ted Ownby (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009); Willard B. Gatewood, *Aristocrats of Color: The Black Elite, 1880-1920* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2000).

<sup>16</sup> Respectability influenced class status, but it did not define class. As noted in the body of the thesis, great wealth did not automatically assign upper-class status if respectability was seen to be lacking; alternatively, the existence of respectability opened up paths to social advancement for less economically advantaged people in certain circumstances.

American women's magazines that promoted the formation of class identity through various indicators of respectability.<sup>17</sup>

A particular focus within the historiography of racial uplift is the relationship between uplift, respectability, and gender. There are a number of studies of the role of African American women as the initiators and the subjects of uplift activities through the women's club movement, and the emphasis the movement placed on respectability.<sup>18</sup> Elite women encouraged lower-class women to adopt ideas of the sanctity of marriage and respectable womanhood to counteract white stereotypes of black women's promiscuity, and positioned the home as the site of race progress – and where magazines in Rooks's study encouraged the purchase of tasteful furnishings as further visual indicators of respectability. Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham has explored a similar uplift effort led by women in the Baptist Church for the benefit of women migrants.<sup>19</sup> Other studies have focused on racial uplift and the politics of respectability in the urban context as rapidly increasing populations resulting from migration created social tensions and increased the urgency of instructing newcomers on acceptable conduct in the urban environment.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Noliwe M. Rooks, *Ladies' Pages: African American Women's Magazines and the Culture That Made Them* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2005).

<sup>18</sup> Darlene Clark Hine, *Hine Sight: Black Women and the Re-Construction of American History* (Brooklyn: Carlson Publishing, 1994); Shirley Wilson Logan, *"We Are Coming:" The Persuasive Discourse of Nineteenth-Century Black Women* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1999); Allison Berg, *Mothering the Race: Women's Narratives of Reproduction, 1890-1930* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2002); Michelle Mitchell, *Righteous Propagation: African Americans and the Politics of Racial Destiny after Reconstruction* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004); Anne M. Knupfer, *Toward a Tenderer Humanity and a Nobler Womanhood: African American Women's Clubs in Turn-of-the-Century Chicago* (New York: New York University Press, 1996).

<sup>19</sup> Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994).

<sup>20</sup> Nina Banks, "Uplifting the Race through Domesticity: Capitalism, African-American Migration, and the Household Economy in the Great Migration Era of 1916-1930," *Feminist Economics* 12, no. 4 (2006); Victoria W. Wolcott, *Remaking Respectability: African American Women in Interwar Detroit* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013); Jay Winston Driskell Jr., *Schooling Jim Crow: The Fight for Atlanta's Booker T. Washington High School and the Roots of Black Protest Politics* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2014); Jane Rhodes, "Pedagogies of Respectability: Race, Media, and Black Womanhood in the Early 20th Century," *Souls* 18, no. 2-4: African American Representation and the Politics of Respectability (2016). Rhodes' study provides an excellent overview of the background to the philosophy of respectability as well as an overview of the historiography.



Historians have used other lenses to examine the construction of uplift narratives.

Elizabeth McHenry uses literature to explore uplift in different contexts. She describes the antebellum black press's efforts to encourage the pursuit of intellectual, social, and cultural activities through instructional and general-interest content, and moves beyond the press to explore the way in which literary societies formed in the nineteenth century encouraged the discussion of citizenship and identity through intellectual engagement with different literary forms. Her work also links to other historiography on the use of the arts to promote racial uplift, for example through exposure to classical music and, in the twentieth century, the new medium of film as a means of artistic expression.<sup>21</sup> African Americans were quick to adopt the new medium of film, and Cara Caddoo and Allyson Nadia Field have studied the different applications of film in racial uplift. Caddoo describes the use of film shows by churches to encourage membership, which would contribute to group uplift efforts. Films provided entertainment, but they were also used to convey uplifting messages about self-help, morality, and "race pride." Field describes the use of film as a promotion medium to record specific examples of uplift activities, such as the work of the Hampton Institute in education.<sup>22</sup>

The historiography of racial uplift is significant, but there is little focus within this historiography on racial uplift in the black press beyond the antebellum press.<sup>23</sup> These studies of the antebellum press are important, however, because they show that there was a strong intention, from the earliest years of newspaper publishing, to promote a philosophy of racial

<sup>21</sup> Elizabeth McHenry, *Forgotten Readers: Recovering the Lost History of African American Literary Societies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002); Lawrence Schenbeck, *Racial Uplift and American Music, 1878-1943* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2012); "Music, Gender, and 'Uplift' in the Chicago Defender, 1927-1937," *The Musical Quarterly* 81, no. 3 (1997). Schenbeck considers the role of music in racial uplift and extends his examination to its relationship with class and gender through the pages of the *Chicago Defender*.

<sup>22</sup> Cara Caddoo, *Envisioning Freedom: Cinema and the Building of Modern Black Life* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014), 23; Field, *Uplift Cinema*. For a discussion of the church and racial uplift, see Calvin White, *The Rise to Respectability: Race, Religion, and the Church of God in Christ*. (Fayetteville, University of Arkansas Press, 2012).

<sup>23</sup> Frankie Hutton, *The Early Black Press in America* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1993); Jacqueline Bacon, *Freedom's Journal: The First African-American Newspaper* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2007). Hutton considers multiple newspapers, and Bacon explores *Freedom's Journal*, the first black newspaper. Both authors focus on the press's quest for equality to be achieved through civil rights advocacy and the uplift of the black population through self-help, a code of morality, and gender roles that reflected those of middle-class white society.

uplift through the medium of the newspaper. It seems appropriate, therefore, that the black press, as such an important communication medium for the African American community, would be an ideal vehicle for conveying concepts of racial uplift well beyond the antebellum era. The legacy of slavery, the need to adjust to freedom, the social and structural impediments to advancement that were put in place in the nineteenth century, and the social changes brought about by mass migration during World War I necessitated the continuation and adaptation of racial uplift efforts into the twentieth century. Trends in recent historiography of the black press reveal, however, a preference for investigating narrow topics over short time periods, or specific topics within individual newspapers, and generally ignore the modern press's role in racial uplift.

This study is intended to address the need for a study of the twentieth century black press over a longer time span to increase our understanding of its role and its contribution in the broader social context. Investigating racial uplift narratives as they were represented in the black press in the first six decades of the twentieth century will bring together two areas of African American studies that have, for the most part, been studied separately. Examining the black press through the lens of racial uplift will acknowledge the black press as a medium that had a role beyond that of political advocacy, and will also give us a greater understanding of the way in which uplift narratives were created, adapted, and applied in the context of everyday community life.

This understanding can be achieved by engaging with individual newspapers as their contemporary readers would have. African Americans were Americans; they were patriots who lived their lives with the same aspirations and challenges as the rest of the American population; they followed politics, popular entertainment, and fashion as did the rest of the population; they went to church and work, and hoped to raise their children to be valuable citizens. With the exception of short-lived "back to Africa" movements in the nineteenth century, and the Marcus Garvey-led black nationalist movement in the 1920s, the focus for African Americans was on

adapting to and being accepted into mainstream American life. When discrimination and laws prevented economic and social participation on an equal footing, African Americans worked within the confines of the system to establish businesses, schools, churches, and other institutions that replicated those of the dominant culture. Calls for separatism and self-sufficiency may have gained traction in some instances, but they eventually failed, and the main thrust of African American efforts to gain acceptance was always directed toward conforming with and contributing to American life and culture, and the black press, through its promotion of racial uplift, played an integral role in achieving this objective.

The social value provided by the black press existed alongside the fact that the black press was a business that needed supporting. An article in the *Afro-American* in 1902 made a direct appeal to readers to purchase more papers, but it clearly identified the public service that the press provided. The article affirmed the press's community-centred role, and its role in advocating for black equality. It claimed that the newspaper was "an organ of thought" ranking in influence with the pulpit. Even though editors and publishers did not get credit for their contribution, it was the press's role to report "the best side of our condition." To that end, it was imperative to support "our own papers which defend us and reflect us to the world as we should be."<sup>24</sup> These sentiments remained as valid in the 1950s as they did in 1827.

## Methodology

The thesis is constructed around a sixty-year timeframe between 1900 and 1959 that is designed to showcase twentieth-century African American newspapers and their promotion of racial uplift. The decision to start the study in 1900 was made not because there had been any substantial change in the African American condition with the approach of the new century – the steady erosion of civil rights and increase in violence directed against African Americans was

<sup>24</sup> "The Negro Press," *Afro-American Ledger*, February 15 1902.

evident – but because the 1900 census, a national effort on which multiple newspapers focused, represented a point from which to commence a discussion of racial uplift in the black press. The endpoint of 1959 represented the close of the last decade in which African American efforts to improve their social and political situation remained aligned toward a middle-class assimilationist objective, in contrast to the Afrocentric cultural shift and more overt black nationalist ideals that came to dominate the political and cultural discourse in the 1960s.

The hundreds of newspapers that were published by African Americans in cities and towns across the United States in the twentieth century provide a rich source of information on African American attitudes, aspirations, and culture, and insight into the role of racial uplift. The thesis includes content from thirty-one African American newspapers published in different regions and at different times to support the contention of this thesis that the black press was a communication medium that continually valued and promoted the concept of racial uplift, but also presented racial uplift narratives in different forms at different times.<sup>25</sup> The methodology is based on a qualitative survey of these newspapers, all available in digital form in newspaper databases, and discourse analysis of texts on specific racial uplift themes. The project was structured so that newspapers would be examined in discrete time periods around a specific uplift theme, in chronological order over the course of sixty years. Newspapers were selected to identify those that were most influential in the eras into which the thesis is divided, and a close reading of newspapers was followed by identification of a racial uplift theme to be discussed in each era. Relevant articles were selected and a discourse analysis was applied to these to compare and contrast different newspapers' contributions to the selected racial uplift theme.

Because of the large number of newspapers published, and the sixty-year timeframe of the study, it was necessary to first establish a selection process to determine which newspapers would be examined. After the newspapers were identified, they were sorted according to era,

<sup>25</sup> The *Interstate Tatler* brings the total to thirty-two, but this paper is included only in reference to the discussion of Gerri Major in chapter four.

which generally represented a particular decade, and region. The first selection criterion for the newspapers was a publishing history of at least ten years.<sup>26</sup> This was most relevant for the early years of the twentieth century, when many newspapers were published by individuals, usually on a shoestring, and did not survive beyond a year or two. A publishing history of at least ten years indicated that the paper was a successful business and that it most likely had a loyal readership. A longer publishing history also allowed for an examination of the way in which a newspaper addressed social changes over time, especially in representations of racial uplift. While many newspapers were included in the study, the influence and importance of each rose and fell over time, so each era highlighted in the thesis features publications that were most influential at that point. Some, such as the *Baltimore Afro-American* and *Chicago Defender*, were established before the turn of the twentieth century or shortly thereafter, and remain active today, and so were relevant for most periods of the study.

The second criterion was newspaper type. Newspaper selection was limited to those that were published for a general audience. The selection did not include newspapers or magazines published by religious or political organizations, as these papers had a specific editorial agenda to support their cause. For example, *Negro World*, published by Marcus Garvey for the Universal Negro Improvement Association, was very successful – at its peak rivalling the *Chicago Defender* in circulation – but it did not cover general news, and its content was designed to promote the Association and the interests of an African diaspora extending beyond the United States.<sup>27</sup> *Crisis*, the publication of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, was directed at a well-educated readership interested in politics and the arts, and also occupied a narrower niche than a "city" newspaper.<sup>28</sup> While it is also reasonable to assume that a city newspaper published by an individual would be likely to reflect that person's political

<sup>26</sup> While this was the main criterion, chapter one includes two newspapers with shorter publishing histories because of their relevance in the context of the 1900 census.

<sup>27</sup> Wolseley, *The Black Press USA*, 47-8.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 138.

views as editorial policy – a case in point being the Chicago *Broad Ax* (1895-ca 1927), which was the political mouthpiece of its owner and editor Julius F. Taylor – the city newspapers were, nevertheless, designed to appeal to a wide audience and present news and opinion that appealed to the broad interests of all African Americans, even allowing for differences in the degree of militancy or conservatism among individual editors.

Geographic location also played a part in newspaper selection. African American newspapers published in the South were under pressure to curb their reporting of content that would disturb the racial status quo, so tended to be more conservative than the Northern papers for fear of white backlash.<sup>29</sup> The study includes Southern papers in the early years of the century, when there were many newspapers in the North and the South that served smaller areas and it was necessary to review a larger number of publications to identify regional trends. However, because of the economic constraints under which the smaller papers operated, and the political constraints faced by the Southern papers, both became less relevant after World War I, when the more successful newspapers began to leap ahead in circulation and influence.

The focus of the thesis moves to the urban North after World War I, as this was where the most successful newspapers grew and thrived. That said, newspapers such as the *Washington Bee*, *Baltimore Afro-American*, and *Norfolk Journal and Guide* are examples of papers that straddled the North/South geographic divide, being located in Southern cities, but having editorial approaches more aligned with Northern papers in that they were not hesitant to report lynching and other offences against African Americans. Regional differences also became less important in the years following World War I, as the most successful newspapers were transported and read across the nation and shared news items and regular columns from news service agencies such as the Associated Negro Press. Smaller regional newspapers, by virtue of their local nature, did not add value to the news and opinion expressed in the mass circulation

<sup>29</sup> Henry Lewis Suggs, ed. *The Black Press in the South, 1865-1979* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1983), vii.

newspapers, so did not play a role in the study once the major weekly papers became dominant. From the 1920s onward, therefore, the focus of the study is based on content in the major Northern and Mid-Atlantic newspapers, whose wider circulations give a better indication of the news that was read by the broadest segment of the black population.

After establishing the newspaper selection process, the newspapers were examined through a qualitative analysis based on close reading.<sup>30</sup> The premise of this project is that the black press was an important vehicle for constructing and conveying different uplift narratives, so reading was done to identify narratives and the level at which each newspaper engaged in uplift reporting. Four or five issues of each of the major newspapers were selected for each year. Issues were selected across different dates and different months over the course of each year to provide a general coverage, and these issues formed the basis of the initial reading. This process was repeated for the years covered in each chapter. The reading process involved scanning the front page, which presented headline news, then more detailed reading of the inside pages. Newspapers at the turn of the century tended not to segment news and opinion, but as they were generally only four to eight pages in length, they were able to be read in their entirety. Once the newspapers began to segment news into feature pages or columns, and grew to twenty or more pages, it was more efficient to focus on qualitative reading of particular sections such as the editorial pages and omit, for example, theatre and sports news and classified advertisements.

Based on the assumption that racial uplift took different forms and was applied in different contexts, such as to African Americans as a group, to individuals, or framed as class or gendered issues, I approached the reading with few preconceived expectations as to where uplift content might appear, and read different sections and columns to identify relevant articles which I then assessed and developed into chapter themes. There were, however, areas where gender

<sup>30</sup> Lisa M. Given. *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Qualitative Research Methods*. (Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, Inc., 2008). DOI: 10.4135/9781412963909.

determined the placement of articles. The women's pages, which were found in all the newspapers, were the location of society and club news, and were the source of articles related to the home and family, and they featured women who had achieved success in their academic or business careers. Women writers and reporters were also producers of uplift content, but their writing was not confined to the women's pages. The reading process was supplemented by word searches in the newspaper databases to more easily identify similarities and contrasts in the presentation of the identified uplift theme in competing newspapers.<sup>31</sup>

I applied a discourse analysis to each article identified as relevant, to distill its historical context, the message it was attempting to convey and why, the position taken by the writer, and the tone used as evidence of its role in promoting uplift.<sup>32</sup> Language changed over time, moving from directives conveying prescriptive uplift messages targeted at less sophisticated readers in the early years of the century, to more sophisticated and subtle uplift messages in later decades. Language differed within the same newspaper, most noticeably between sensational front-page headlines designed to attract attention and newsstand sales, and dry second-page articles on lodge or church activities. Differences in language served different purposes – to sell newspapers, but also to appeal to different groups of readers with different interests.

I also paid attention to the presentation of uplift messages in gendered terms, when directed toward women on the women's pages, or, for example, toward men in columns related to business and occupations. Gendered language was also evident in the editorial pages, as the opinions expressed represented contemporary ideas of gender roles. I decoded uplift messages by considering the era in which they were written against what I understood from secondary literature to be the historical context, the type of uplift narrative the article addressed, and its purpose. For example, in the context of aspirational uplift, the press's descriptions of large homes

<sup>31</sup> Archive of Americana: African American Newspapers Series 1, 1827-1998; African American Newspapers Series 2, 1835-1956; The ProQuest Historical Newspapers™ – Black Newspapers.

<sup>32</sup> Marianne Jørgensen and Louise J. Phillips, *Discourse Analysis as Theory and Method*. (London: SAGE Publications Ltd, 2002). DOI: 10.4135/9781849208871.



and gracious living needed to be considered against the reality of overcrowded living conditions for the majority of people in the urban North. Similarly, for gendered respectability narratives, representations of idealized motherhood where women did not work needed to be considered against the need for many women to work outside the home to help support their families.

The most useful way to organize the qualitative exploration of racial uplift in the newspapers was to take a thematic approach. A thematic approach was valuable for exploring different racial uplift narratives, but each theme was also set in a discrete time period around which each chapter was organized. Linking a theme to a time period served two purposes: first, it enabled an understanding of the way in which the black press changed over time, in breadth of influence and as a business enterprise; and second, it enabled a case to be made that racial uplift concepts were fluid and were presented in ways that were applicable for the social realities of each era. Thematic representations of racial uplift also enabled an exploration of African American social history and the press's role in constructing social norms, particularly in areas related to social class and gender roles. Archival research and secondary sources supplemented the thematic investigations, the former by providing records of events and actions and the latter historical context and interpretation against which to position the newspapers' perspectives.

The broad time period covered in the thesis necessitated limiting the number of themes that could be investigated in depth. This meant making decisions on the focus of each chapter that passed over important areas of racial uplift such as education, and omitting political developments that other historians have investigated, such as efforts to organize labor unions in the 1930s, and the civil rights boycotts of the 1950s. These omissions, however, made it possible to identify and bring to light areas that have attracted little historical attention, such as the social life of black "high society" during the Great Depression. Focusing on lesser-known uplift themes, while representative rather than comprehensive, nevertheless adds to our knowledge of

racial uplift and social history, as well as the role of the black press in African American society in the first half of the twentieth century.

### Chapter outlines

The thesis begins by examining the 1900 census, a single event that had broad implications for African American racial uplift at the dawn of the twentieth century. The chapter examines the way in which the black press presented the census as an opportunity to promote racial uplift as something that could be measured. Empirical evidence of progress in areas such as lifespan, literacy rates, and personal wealth would, it was believed, encourage further efforts by African Americans to improve in these areas, to counteract increasing disfranchisement and intimidation, particularly in the South. The chapter explores the way in which the press promoted the census, in marketing it as an important national event in which African Americans should participate. The census provided the press with many opportunities to engage readers through articles on interesting facts about the census operation, to foster patriotism through articles conveying the technical and bureaucratic superiority of the United States, and to foster a sense of citizenship by stressing the important role that African Americans would play in this national undertaking. The census operation also shed light on issues of skin colour and social class, the implications of which are evident in the racial uplift agenda through subsequent decades.

Chapter two focuses on newspaper content more broadly, to show that there were differences in editorial policy and approaches to racial uplift that were not evident in the articles about the 1900 census. The first part of the chapter looks at a selection of newspapers published on a single day in 1905 to highlight these differences. The purpose of this fine-grained investigation is to establish a general understanding of the nature of the black press in the early twentieth century, and to provide a frame of reference as newspaper publishing began to change in the years prior to World War I. The second part of the chapter looks at the emergence of

highly influential newspapers that operated in wide geographical areas. Differences in editorial opinion were also evident as newspapers followed the significant changes in African American political thought that emerged in these years, particularly in leadership challenges and the way that different leaders believed that racial uplift was best achieved. The growing influence of the black press at this time was also evident in the Great Migration, the vast movement of people out of the South, which spiked in the World War I years. The chapter concludes with an overview of this movement, the press's engagement with it, and the implications of the movement for racial uplift approaches.

Chapter three shifts the focus of the thesis to the North. Following World War I there were large African American populations in many Northern cities, which caused racial uplift efforts to move away from promoting uplift through agricultural pursuits to focusing on survival in the urban environment. This chapter looks at the way in which the press harnessed business activity in urban areas to achieve racial uplift, from business development efforts to the first businesses that served a growing black consumer marketplace. Newspapers promoted the importance of African American economic self-sufficiency through business development, but they also debated the advantages and disadvantages of segregated business activities when the ultimate goal of racial uplift was integration into the broader economy and mainstream society. Newspapers also began to note a shift in uplift concepts from group advancement to individual advancement in line with the development of nascent conspicuous consumption, and women's roles in business and in promoting this new form of "race progress."

Chapter four continues the urban theme with an examination of wealth in the African American community and the class structure, with particular focus on the activities of the "upper class" as it was portrayed in the society pages of the press. This chapter marks a definite shift in emphasis on uplift from one based on the concept of uplift for the benefit of the broader community to one based on class distinctions as an example of progress. The press was an

important source of information on the lifestyles and social activities of affluent African Americans, as it created a public record of their doings. Positive reporting of "high society" set implicit standards that could be followed by others aspiring to similar lifestyles, while stressing the importance of maintaining respectability and setting an example. Society reporting also included features on people who had achieved success in their educational or career pursuits, to show that self-help remained an important part of success. The society pages therefore combined an entertainment element with serious information on what could be achieved through application and dedication. Chapter four also looks at African American life in the Northern urban environment through the eyes of a woman reporter who contributed columns and commentary on African American society in the 1920s and 1930s. Her background as a member of the African American elite, and the type of columns she wrote, offer insights into class attitudes, gender attitudes, and the role of the "upper class" in promoting racial uplift in the African American community.

Chapter five is situated in the World War II years, and narrows the focus to a single edition of the *Chicago Defender*. The *Defender* published a Victory Edition in September 1942 for the purpose of boosting African American morale around the war effort. The chapter focuses on the Victory Edition because it is a compendium of the many issues that affected African Americans in wartime. While much historiography of the black press focuses on the government's reaction to the press as it became increasingly aggressive in its objections to discrimination in the armed forces and in civilian life, this chapter looks at the war from inside one newspaper, as it adhered to government policy but at the same time gave full expression to African American opinion that was often at odds with government actions. The Victory Edition highlights racial uplift through its expressions of patriotism and demonstrations of progress in African American military and civilian life, but more importantly, it reshapes the issue of racial equality from a domestic to an international issue, and aligns African American thinking with

colonialism and repression, and the potential for achieving equality in the postwar order. The Victory Edition is also evidence of the stronger voice that the black press had achieved by the 1940s.

Chapter six examines racial uplift as it was formulated through the postwar consumer economy. This chapter shows that the debate over the merits of segregating black business, discussed in chapter three, was no longer an issue as African Americans became full participants in the national endeavor to promote consumption to boost domestic industrial productivity. Conspicuous consumption became, for all Americans, a means of raising standards of living, and African American entrepreneurs, many associated with publishing, launched efforts to promote the African American consumer market to white manufacturers and advertisers. The black press promoted consumption through articles and, to a lesser extent, advertising to encourage higher living standards and better quality of life – aspirational uplift. In the 1950s African Americans were making some, although still limited, headway in breaking down racial barriers in education and employment, and more people were moving into the middle class, but the remaining barriers did not prevent the enjoyment of a degree of "lifestyle" equality. The black press was one of the most important vehicles in advancing racial uplift in its various forms, to the point where African Americans had the strength and confidence to make a concerted push for legal equality and civil rights in the 1960s.

## CHAPTER ONE: The black press and the 1900 census

*To the Negro race, particularly, the completion of each census bears the relation of a milestone, marking our progress along the path of life. The status given us by the 12<sup>th</sup> census will reveal to the world a race that is slowly but surely working out its own salvation.*<sup>1</sup>

This excerpt of an article in the *Cleveland Gazette* typifies the role the black press played as a community advocate and promoter of racial uplift. The *Gazette* recognized that the twelfth census, to be conducted in 1900, marked an important stage in the development of African American society in the years since Emancipation in 1863. The paper was confident that the census results would reveal progress, and would set the stage for further development and progress in the twentieth century. Participation in the census also represented a milestone in the evolution of the black press, whose various constituents joined forces to support this significant national initiative.

By the turn of the twentieth century, the black press had been a part of the African American community for over seventy years. The first newspaper, *Freedom's Journal*, founded in New York in 1827, set the tone for the industry as it evolved over subsequent decades. It was founded to speak out against slavery and discrimination, and to demonstrate to whites and blacks alike that there was an educated, thinking class of African Americans who demanded respect and their rights as American citizens.<sup>2</sup> The paper also established a role for the black press as a public service for the black community, and to promote racial uplift, which it presented through a variety of content, from encouraging self-help, habits of thrift and industry, and practical information for daily life, to well-written editorial opinion and literature for the stimulation of the more educated reader.<sup>3</sup> Publishers of the antebellum press were highly educated and were often members of the clergy or the professions or were successful businessmen, and many of

<sup>1</sup> "A Good Showing," *Cleveland Gazette*, March 24 1900.

<sup>2</sup> Pride and Wilson, *A History of the Black Press*, 7, 9.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

them supported their newspapers through the income from their main occupations, as the newspaper business was notoriously difficult to sustain financially.<sup>4</sup> Dedicated to serving their community, they formed a leadership cohort who used the press as a medium for expressing their political views and promoting racial uplift.<sup>5</sup>

In the post-Civil War environment, the greatest immediate need in the African American community was to educate former slaves to live as free people, and the press took up this role, instilling racial pride, publishing survival techniques, and informing readers of political and social developments.<sup>6</sup> Newspaper titles included: *The Free American* (1866); *The Free Man's Press* (1868), *The Free South* (1868), and *The Free Press* (1868), suggesting the euphoria of the time.<sup>7</sup> Their optimism was short-lived, although the desire to publish was not. The failure of Reconstruction to formalize legal equality for African Americans also resulted in the introduction of laws that increasingly restricted black freedom, accompanied by an upsurge in violence against blacks in the South.<sup>8</sup> These developments also affected the viability of newspapers in the South, as many editors became the victims of attempts to stem their opposition to the racial status quo. Acts of violence against black editors in the South, as well as the financial constraints that affected newspapers in all areas at the time, caused many of the small newspapers to fail. At the same time, better economic and educational opportunities were attracting people to urban areas and to the North, growing the ranks of an educated middle class.<sup>9</sup> Larger concentrations of people in urban areas, higher rates of literacy, as well as technological developments in printing and the use of advertising to support it as a business, provided a stable market for a newspaper industry that finally established a permanent footing from the 1880s.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Washburn, *The African American Newspaper*, 23.

<sup>5</sup> Dann, *The Black Press*, 1827-1890, 13.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. 16.

<sup>7</sup> James P Danky, Editor, and Maureen E. Hady, Associate Editor. *African-American Newspapers and Periodicals: A National Bibliography* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), 236-38.

<sup>8</sup> Simmons, *The African American Press*, 16.

<sup>9</sup> Pride and Wilson, *A History of the Black Press*, 97.

<sup>10</sup> Emma Lou Thornbrough, "American Negro Newspapers, 1880-1914," *The Business History Review* 40, no. 4 (1966).

In spite of their strong local focus and often limited local readerships, the newspapers retained the objectives of the first black newspapers: to provide a service that met the social and commercial needs of their immediate communities; to address their readers' needs on a national level through editorials criticising state and federal governments for failing to support black interests; and opposing those who were working to further dismantle their citizenship rights. Newspapers in 1900 expressed different political views, and differed according to their locations in the North or South, or in rural or urban settings, but they showed that they were able to unite around a cause they believed supported broader African American interests. The 1900 census represented a critical point in black press development by enabling it to emerge as a unified force representing all African Americans in support of a national cause that could well set the course for their future progress.

The black press's interest in the 1900 census, however, raises the question as to why it would support an exercise sponsored by a state that had shown nothing but contempt for African Americans' rights as citizens since the failure of Reconstruction. From the 1870s, African American political and civil rights were increasingly suppressed. Legal and extra-legal practices were put in place to varying degrees in different regions, most frequently in the South, to restrict these rights, culminating in state sanction, through the Supreme Court decision in *Plessy v. Ferguson* in 1896, of the legality of segregation of blacks and whites. The "separate but equal" prescription in the decision was never realized, and was in practice "separate and unequal" in most areas of life, from education, health care, and housing, to public transport and the use of public spaces.<sup>11</sup> Federally-sanctioned segregation was a legal affirmation of what had become, in the South in particular, terror campaigns to intimidate blacks in order to preserve a racial status quo of white supremacy. Lynching and other acts of violence had increased to unprecedented

<sup>11</sup> Meier, *Negro Thought in America*, 72.



levels in the 1890s, with little effort by the federal government to put a stop to it.<sup>12</sup> Under these circumstances, a census, which Benedict Anderson describes as "an instrument of state power," could have meant something quite sinister to the black population, as a means of the state learning more about it and thereby exerting further control over it.<sup>13</sup> As historian Melissa Nobles points out, from 1850, the census had been used to establish scientific ideas of race, and to justify "de jure and de facto" segregation.<sup>14</sup> Considered from this perspective, it is perhaps surprising that the black press both welcomed the census and encouraged community participation based on a trust in the government that the census would be conducted objectively, and that the community had more to gain than to lose.

The black press anticipated more than one potential gain from participation. As the main medium for expressing African American political and social concerns, the black press regarded the 1900 census as an excellent opportunity to gain political advantage, and to dispel white prejudice. The census provided an opportunity for African Americans to engage politically with the federal government while not drawing adverse attention to themselves as a group opposing the government and demanding change, and thereby inviting further restrictions. Political advantage lay in increased black representation, so participation was, in effect, a non-aggressive means of achieving the potential for political change. However, the larger goal of census participation was the social outcome, to dispel contemporary beliefs in a racial hierarchy that placed African Americans in an inferior position. Participation in the census, and the belief that the results would show progress in all areas of black life, would draw national attention to African Americans as engaged citizens who were worthy of political and social equality. While certainly not losing sight of the political end-game, the black press framed community

<sup>12</sup> Daniel Kato, *Liberalizing Lynching: Building a New Racialized State*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 29.

<sup>13</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 2006), 167.

<sup>14</sup> Melissa Nobles, "History Counts: A Comparative Analysis of Racial/Color Categorization in U.S. And Brazilian Censuses," *American Journal of Public Health* 90, no. 11 (2000).

participation in the census as a nation-wide racial uplift effort that would reinforce ideas of citizenship within the black community, engender pride in progress, and encourage further group efforts toward advancement.

Newspaper editors of all persuasions welcomed the census and focused on the positive aspects of a national count, but they approached this mission differently according to their location, and according to the political interests of individual publishers. For example, newspapers in the Northern states were concerned with population statistics, as these had a direct link to political representation. In the South, where representation was being increasingly denied, newspapers were concerned with improving the material condition of their largely agricultural communities. Despite regional differences, newspapers were well aware of the potential within the census results to demonstrate racial progress, through the gathering of statistical evidence, and used this potential as the basis for urging readers to participate. Racial progress, encompassing economic gains and improvements in literacy, education, health, and birthrates, was a key element in disproving assumptions of racial inferiority, manifested, for example, in claims that the African American would never be able to survive outside of the paternalism of the slave system, an opinion that was being expressed by race theorists in academic papers even as late as the 1890s.<sup>15</sup> It was essential, therefore, for African Americans to demonstrate not only survival, but advancement and vigor, in order to take their rightful place in national life. Full participation in the census would mean more accurate results, and accurate results would give a true picture of the state of the African American population in 1900, providing empirical evidence to support their belief that they had made progress in the thirty-seven years since the Emancipation Proclamation.

The black press focused on the census as a means of building race pride and potentially strengthening African Americans' political position, in the expectation that the government

<sup>15</sup> George M. Fredrickson, *The Black Image in the White Mind: The Debate on Afro-American Character and Destiny, 1817-1914* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), 248.

would conduct the census in an objective and neutral manner. "To be counted by the Federal government is a right that cannot be taken away by any local or state government," declared the *Savannah Tribune*.<sup>16</sup> This is an indication of the inherent confidence of African Americans in the federal government, and of their position as American citizens, despite demonstrable efforts by the state to restrict these rights. It was also indicative of a belief, and a basic premise of racial uplift, that quantifiable improvement in their material condition would advance the cause of acceptance and equality. The use of the latest computational technology, combined with the government's desire to ensure an accurate count, would produce statistics for the development of "scientific" solutions to social problems, and would enable African Americans to identify and address their unique situation to further racial advancement efforts. Within the African American community, promoting census participation also represented an opportunity for the many local papers that made up the black press to establish a stronger sense of black identity and community on a national scale, and to boost racial pride and uplift efforts channeled through the medium of the newspaper. It was a means of uniting the black population around a positive event, and a rare opportunity to show progress in an increasingly repressive political climate where black leaders seemed unable, or unwilling, to defy the status quo.

This chapter is organized into four broad sections. The first is a general description of some of the newspapers which were most engaged with reporting the census, to establish an understanding of the industry at the turn of the century. The second section examines the way the newspapers engaged with the census through their articles, to reinforce its importance for the community, and to introduce various aspects of the census process for the edification and entertainment of their readers. The third section examines the way the census operation was conducted, including the involvement of African Americans in collecting and processing data. The physical operation of the census also sheds light on African American attitudes to national

<sup>16</sup>"About the Census," *Savannah Tribune*, March 17 1900. The same article appeared in the *Washington Bee* on the same date. The article assured readers that to be counted was a right, and that replies would not be used to assess additional taxes, or for other harmful purposes.

pride and themselves as American citizens. The fourth section looks at the census results, their implications, and how the results were presented in the press. The black press's engagement with the 1900 census also reveals African American thoughts on issues of colour, class, and status that were unacknowledged by mainstream society. The implications brought to light by the census count are evident in the way that subsequent racial uplift efforts were conceived and carried out.

Twenty-four newspapers that were active in the census year or immediately after form the basis of the census study. Fifteen newspapers were located in the Midwest, three in the South, five in the East Coast/Mid-Atlantic region, and one on the West Coast.<sup>17</sup> Whether they published just one or two articles or many, the papers were able to create a sense of national community across large cities and small towns, and into rural areas, to unite African Americans around a cause that concerned them all.

### Newspapers in 1900

Many of the papers that are discussed in this chapter had been established for over ten years by 1900, and many continued to be published over the following decades, but most were still small concerns that operated on slim financial margins, and struggled to support themselves through advertising, subscription sales, job printing orders, and patronage. Booker T. Washington, founder of the Tuskegee Institute in Alabama, was the de facto spokesman for the black community at the highest levels of business and government in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.<sup>18</sup> He exerted influence over a number of newspapers, through outright ownership (of the *Colored American*) or through financial support in the form of loans,

<sup>17</sup> The large number of Midwest newspapers indicates both current availability of newspaper records, and also the wide geographic area of my grouping, which is a triangle stretching from Ohio in the east to Minnesota in the north and Kansas in the southwest.

<sup>18</sup> Louis R. Harlan, "Booker T. Washington and the Politics of Accommodation," in *Black Leaders of the Twentieth Century*, ed. John Hope Franklin and August Meier (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1982), 3. Harlan describes the Tuskegee Institute as the largest black educational institution in its day. The Institute focused on education in the skilled trades.

advertising, and printing orders that ensured support for his opinions and strengthened his influence.<sup>19</sup> Most newspapers, whether they depended on his financial support or not, reflected his general popularity in the community with favourable reports of his activities.

The mastheads of the newspapers offer insight into the role they established for themselves. The Indianapolis *Freeman* declared itself to be "The Acknowledged King of All Negro Newspapers." The *Washington Bee* (Washington, DC) spoke for truth in reporting: "It is true if you see it in the Bee," and the *Colored American* (also Washington, DC) presented itself as "A National Negro Newspaper." The latter claim was possibly true, as it was owned by Booker T. Washington's Tuskegee organization and presumably benefited from circulation among its network of business and educational facilities across the country. However, considering the proportion of news in the other papers that was devoted to local people and events, it is difficult to assume that most newspapers were as confident of their position as their mastheads indicated. The reality of their limited reach is supported by an article in the *Washington Bee* in February 1904 which confirms the local nature of much of the press, and the small circulations of many newspapers.<sup>20</sup> Basing its claims on circulation figures from Rowell's Newspaper Directory of 1903 and the 1900 census, the article shows that fourteen papers were published in Georgia and Alabama respectively, in contrast to fewer than five papers in most of the Eastern states.<sup>21</sup> Despite the larger number of newspapers in the South, access to them was much more restricted, with just one newspaper serving 80,000 people, compared with one serving 20,000 people in the East. These figures suggest that newspapers in the South were probably read in very small geographic areas such as towns, where there would have been a

<sup>19</sup> Robert H. Brisbane, *The Black Vanguard* (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1970), 33.

<sup>20</sup> "The Negro Press," *Washington Bee*, February 13 1904.

<sup>21</sup> Rowell's Newspaper Directory was established by advertising agency owner George Presbury Powell in 1869. The directory claims to be the first comprehensive index of newspapers published in the United States and Canada. It lists newspapers with circulations of over 5,000 alphabetically by state and town, and by category, such as agriculture or fraternal organization. The directory was absorbed into N.W. Ayer & Son's American Newspaper Annual in the early 1900s. It is now listed as N.W. Ayer & Son's American newspaper annual. The first and limited subsequent issues are available online at: <https://www.hathitrust.org>. Accessed January 25 2017.

higher degree of literacy and more opportunity to see a newspaper. While the article does not provide an analysis of the statistics, its point was to promote the value of the black press as a source of knowledge, and implicitly, power, by encouraging more people to read newspapers as a means of exchanging information and "absorbing facts."

While there were contrasts in the physical appearance of the papers' mastheads and layouts, differences in content were less evident. Each newspaper covered a similar range of news items, both international and domestic, with slight variation according to region, such as the inclusion of agricultural news in some of the Kansas newspapers. They included social news noting out-of-town visitors, illnesses, marriages, church news, and the charitable activities of women's clubs and fraternal societies. They included humorous anecdotes, and advertising from local businesses. The degree of political protest expressed in the black press varied, and was very much a reflection of the personality and opinion of the owner or editor, often the same person, although not many demonstrated a desire to break away from a pro-Republican, pro-Tuskegee position. A sampling of three newspapers in different parts of the country in 1900 shows how alike they were in their Republican affiliation, in their support for Booker T. Washington, and in their promotion of racial uplift.<sup>22</sup> They are highlighted here as they were also the most prolific publishers of census articles in 1900.<sup>23</sup> They are the *American Citizen* (Kansas, 1888-1909), *Savannah Tribune* (Georgia, 1875-present) and the *Washington Bee* (Washington, DC, 1882-1922).

The *American Citizen* was one of a number of African American newspapers that were established in Kansas in the 1880s.<sup>24</sup> It was first published by the American Citizen Publishing

<sup>22</sup> Meier, *Negro Thought in America*, 30-33. Meier discusses the way in which editors such as Calvin Chase, T. Thomas Fortune of the *New York Age*, and H.C. Smith of the *Cleveland Gazette* were ambivalent in their support of the Republican party at different times according to its policies and electoral maneuvering, and were critical of it in their publications, but remained loyal to the party.

<sup>23</sup> The Baltimore *Afro-American Ledger* also included many articles related to the census, and although it was active in the last years of the nineteenth century, and presumably in 1900, records are not available until 1901.

<sup>24</sup> Teresa C. Klassen and Owen V. Johnson, "Sharpening of the *Blade*: Black Consciousness in Kansas, 1892-97," *Journalism Quarterly* 63, no. 2 (1986). Six of the newspapers referred to in this chapter were published in Kansas, the destination of a large number of African Americans who migrated from the South to Kansas in the 1870s – the

Company in 1888, and was run by a succession of editors who held the position for terms of several months to several years until the paper closed down in 1909. It was a four-page paper of six columns, and was published each Friday. Under the masthead was a line urging readers to be happy and "work for the uplift of the race." It carried few illustrations, and its front page was devoted to a variety of news ranging from editorial rejoinders to comments made by politicians against African Americans, political news from Washington, and local happenings. As was common to most papers at the time, its inner pages contained local news items, notices of Masonic and church events, and on page two, a large proportion of space was taken up by advertisements for local retail establishments selling produce, fuel, or clothing. Pages three and four contained general interest articles reprinted from other newspapers such as the *New York Tribune* or *Boston Post*. The paper also included articles supporting Booker T. Washington and his activities in education.

The *Savannah Tribune* was similar in appearance to the *American Citizen*, with a plain masthead across six columns. Each issue ranged in length from four to eight pages, and was published each Saturday. It was established in 1875 by John H. Deaveaux, who was active in Republican party politics in Georgia, and a supporter of Booker T. Washington. He was succeeded in 1896 by Sol C. Johnson, who maintained the paper's pro-Republican editorial policy, and reflected the interests of Savannah's black middle class. Johnson held the position of editor until his death in 1954. Long-term Grand Secretary of the Prince Hall Masons, and with other business interests, Johnson was one of Savannah's (and Georgia's) black elite.<sup>25</sup> The paper featured local crime news on the front page, followed by national and international news, church and Masonic news, as well as brief items of interest from around the world. It also included a range of advertising from local retailers, undertakers, and insurance companies.

so-called "Exodusters." The large number of newspapers active at the same time suggests the existence of an educated and politically aware population. Klassen and Johnson note the "unusually strong tradition of local weekly newspapers" in Kansas.

<sup>25</sup> John M. Matthews, "Black Newspapermen and the Black Community in Georgia, 1890-1930," *The Georgia Historical Quarterly* 68, no. 3 (1984); "This Week's Census," *Jet*, March 18 1954.

The *Washington Bee* was established in 1882. William Calvin Chase, a wealthy businessman, edited the paper until his death in January 1921, and the paper closed down in 1922.<sup>26</sup> It ran to eight pages of six columns, and featured on its front page large and elaborate illustrations of people who were prominent in the political, academic, or religious world. No other newspaper rivalled the *Bee* in its elaborate illustrations that almost always took up the whole of the front page. As newspapers of this era were often owned and run by one or perhaps two individuals, it is possible to speculate that the front page layout was an example of Chase's personal taste, or his desire to have the paper appear more magazine-like. Another unusual feature of the *Bee* was the inclusion of a musical score on page two. The rest of the paper resembled other newspapers, and carried a mix of social events, international news, and reprints of general interest articles. Its advertising content was similar to the *American Citizen* and *Savannah Tribune*, and featured retail establishments, hotels, and railroads. The paper supported Booker T. Washington.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>26</sup> Typesetting was apparently subject to error, as the *Afro-American*, which noted Chase's death on page one, has the date on the masthead and each page as January 7, 1920.

<sup>27</sup> Howard-Pitney, "Calvin Chase's Washington *Bee*." Howard-Pitney describes Chase as a wealthy Washington businessman, which suggests that the *Bee* had a degree of financial independence that did not require it to toe the Tuskegee line for its survival. Nevertheless, the paper endorsed Washington's self-help policies, if sometimes ambivalent about his politics.





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Figure 2: Contrasting layouts of two newspapers. American Citizen, January 19, 1900 (top) and Washington Bee, January 20, 1900.

### Newspapers and the 1900 census

Newspapers' approach to the census took several forms. The first was conveying the importance of the census. The second was promoting participation in the form of instructional articles designed to overcome potential problems or misunderstandings about what was involved. The third was to engage the community through human interest articles on the people working in the Census Office, and the processes used to count the entire population. Regardless of how each paper promoted participation in the census, they used the census as an opportunity to promote pride of citizenship – pride that African Americans were a part of a great and modern society that was leading the world in its ability to organize such a large undertaking, using advanced technology to ensure its success.

Newspapers were optimistic that census results would show an increase in the black population over the 1890 census, and kept up a steady stream of articles prior to June 1900, when the census would be taken.<sup>28</sup> The emphasis on population reflected the original purpose of the United States census when it was introduced in 1790 as a mechanism for determining political representation and taxation based on population.<sup>29</sup> The *Pittsburg Plain Dealer* (Kansas), for example, noted that there were 48,713 African Americans in Kansas in 1895, and believed that the upcoming census would show an increase to 75,000 or perhaps 100,000, as "the government census is always more thorough than the state census."<sup>30</sup> It also estimated that the census would reveal an increase in the state's total population that would entitle it to an apportionment of seven or possibly eight congressmen.<sup>31</sup> In two articles in the same month, the *American Citizen* declared its expectation of a population increase.<sup>32</sup> It also noted that Minnesota's expected population of 1,810,000 would entitle it to nine congressmen instead of

<sup>28</sup> There were also some mid-decade censuses conducted at state level, but they were done randomly, from as early as 1782 in Delaware, but not all states conducted them. United States Census Bureau website: [https://www.census.gov/history/www/genealogy/other\\_resources/state\\_censuses.html](https://www.census.gov/history/www/genealogy/other_resources/state_censuses.html). Accessed April 18 2017.

<sup>29</sup> Margo J. Anderson, *The American Census: A Social History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015), 6.

<sup>30</sup> "Kansas Notes," *Pittsburg Plain Dealer*, February 3 1900.

<sup>31</sup> "Kansas Notes," *Pittsburg Plain Dealer*, December 23 1899.

<sup>32</sup> "Kansas Notes," *American Citizen*, January 5, 12 1900.

seven.<sup>33</sup> The *Wichita Searchlight* reported the earlier than expected release of population results, in November 1900, noting that completion of the tabulation would enable Congress to "dispose of the question of reapportionment of representatives" as soon as it convened in December.<sup>34</sup>

While these articles indicated an interest in political representation, generally the focus on results was to provide evidence of racial progress, and this was indicated in the way in which newspapers presented positive census results when more details began appearing in 1901. Newspapers were aware of the importance of the census in demonstrating that a positive evaluation of racial progress would go a long way to dispelling negative impressions held of blacks by whites that were based on ideas of racial hierarchy. The *Colored American* clearly articulated this aspect of the census in an article in March 1900 in which it described the census as a milestone that would represent "a stronger blow given to those who have long maintained that the American Negro is an inferior being."<sup>35</sup> It employed particularly florid prose, even for the standards of the day, to repeat the message two months later: "the showing will go far to overrule the indictment brought against our capacity by antiquated fossils of the [white supremacist Senators] Tillman and Morgan type of misrepresentative Americans."<sup>36</sup>

The expectation of evidence of racial progress, and its early confirmation in some cases, was also a result of the changing nature of the census, which by 1900 had evolved from a means of determining political apportionment to an important tool for the state to monitor changes in American society and a basis upon which to design social policy.<sup>37</sup> Most newspapers chose, therefore, to focus on the benefits of census participation to ensure that the African American population and its social conditions were correctly assessed. Accurate results would confirm

<sup>33</sup> "Minnesota's Population," *American Citizen*, February 9 1900.

<sup>34</sup> "Increase of 21 Percent," *Wichita Searchlight*, November 3 1900. This article gives the national population as 76,203,220. The official figure listed in the Vital Statistics report for 1900 is 75,994,575. The document is available on the United States Census Bureau website: <https://www2.census.gov/library/publications/decennial/1900/volume-4/volume-4-p2.pdf>. Accessed January 8 2017.

<sup>35</sup> "The Twelfth Census Its Importance to the Afro-American," *Colored American*, March 17 1900.

<sup>36</sup> "Operations of the Census Bureau," *Colored American*, May 5 1900.

<sup>37</sup> Anderson, *The American Census*, 88.

their position as citizens, and would also highlight areas where further uplift efforts could be targeted.

In addition to their function as political commentators, newspapers were a valuable source of practical information and general knowledge, to support their mission to educate and inform. Each issue included informative articles on a variety of subjects of historical, geographical, or scientific interest on aspects of life beyond the communities where they were read, and information extended to the census. Practical advice included educating readers about what was required to participate in the census, such as the information each person was required to give, and to whom it would be given. Several newspapers often published the same article, such as one that described the census enumerator as someone who would arrive carrying a "long book" and wearing a badge.<sup>38</sup> At the time, census enumerators called door to door, asked questions of the householder, and completed the census forms accordingly.<sup>39</sup> To assist in providing accurate responses to the enumerator, the *Richmond Planet* published a detailed article that gave the definition of a farm and the types of produce that were to be tabulated.<sup>40</sup> Although the *Planet* was a city newspaper published in Richmond, Virginia, the article reflected the importance of farming in the African American community. The *American Citizen* educated readers about some unfamiliar terms that would be used in calculating the census results. It explained the meaning of the term "median," which it described as a new word. It also gave a detailed explanation of the difference between "median" and "average" and how each was calculated.<sup>41</sup>

The census was a popular topic, and newspapers presented census-related information in both serious and light-hearted tones, and sometimes included jokes with census themes. One

<sup>38</sup> "Taking the Census," *Recorder*, April 7 1900. This article also appeared in the *Washington Bee* on April 7 and the *American Citizen* on April 8.

<sup>39</sup> Michael Wayne, *Imagining Black America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), 191. This system was maintained until 1970, when the Census Bureau began mailing out census forms which householders were to complete.

<sup>40</sup> "Facts About the Census," *Richmond Planet*, February 17 1900.

<sup>41</sup> "'Median' in the Census," *American Citizen*, April 18 1900.

enterprising magazine publisher, the Press Publishing Association, took advantage of the interest in the census and placed an advertisement in the *American Citizen* on two occasions under the headline, "\$25,000 for Guessing New Census." The advertisement listed a series of cash prizes to be awarded for guessing the final census count, and readers could lodge a guess with the purchase of a subscription to the *Weekly Enquirer* (in the advertisement on March 23) or *Farm News* (June 29).<sup>42</sup> This was obviously a ruse to sell papers, but it is an example of the way in which the census could be appropriated for both entertainment and commercial purposes.

**\$25,000**  
—FOR—  
**Guessing New Census**

The Weekly Enquirer is anxious to engage all the subscribers in a study of their own country. To this end it has placed in the safe of the Cincinnati Enquirer Company cash amounting to \$25,000. It will, for solutions received of the population of the United States, to be verified by the Director of the United States Census, give as follows:

To the Nearest Correct Guess received . . . . .	\$3,000.00
To the Second . . . . .	1,500.00
To the Third . . . . .	750.00
To the Fourth . . . . .	500.00
To the Fifth . . . . .	250.00
To the Sixth . . . . .	200.00
To the Seventh . . . . .	150.00
To the next 10, each \$100, amounting to . . . . .	1,000.00
To the next 50, each \$50, amounting to . . . . .	2,500.00
To the next 100, each \$25, amounting to . . . . .	2,500.00
To the next 500, each \$10, amounting to . . . . .	5,000.00
To the next 1,530, each \$5, amounting to . . . . .	7,650.00
<b>Total number of prizes, 2,197, amounting to . . . . .</b>	<b>\$25,000.00</b>

In case of a tie the prizes are to be equally divided.

**Subscription Price for the Weekly Enquirer (Including Guess)**  
**IS ONLY \$1.00 A YEAR**  
For further particulars address  
**ENQUIRER COMPANY, CINCINNATI, O.**  
Copyrighted 1899, Weekly Enquirer.  
Write today. This ad. appears but once.

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Figure 3: Encouraging involvement in the census, *American Citizen*, March 23, June 29 1900.

Newspapers did not limit their promotion of census participation to articles. One notable example of engaging community support was a Letter to the Editor sent to multiple papers by Booker T. Washington, who was able to use his financial influence with the press as well as his

<sup>42</sup> "\$25,000 for Guessing New Census," *American Citizen*, March 23, June 29 1900.

standing in the community to promote the census. The letter emphasized the importance of the census, and called on people to declare their property accurately, as "we will be very largely judged by the world as a result."<sup>43</sup> Property ownership was an area in which to demonstrate racial progress in tangible form. It did not appear to matter whether a newspaper was located in a larger city or in a rural community in terms of its support for property ownership. Any increase in property ownership shown by the census would be a vindication of what African Americans had achieved since Emancipation.

Land ownership, or home ownership in an urban area, represented an important part of establishing personal independence and achieving the respectability that came from economic success, set an example to the lower classes, and showed the white community that African Americans were capable of advancement.<sup>44</sup> Newspapers encouraged property ownership through stories of those who had succeeded through hard work to become wealthy landowners, or by linking property ownership to ideas of worthiness as citizens.<sup>45</sup> The Chicago *Broad Ax* declared property ownership "the American virtue," where signs of advancement in this area demonstrated "progress and thrift, honesty, industry, and education."<sup>46</sup> The *Cleveland Gazette* expressed hope for the future, claiming that "colored land owners are largely on the increase," and suggested that the next census "would reveal gratifying progress along this line."<sup>47</sup> The *American Citizen* and others reassured readers that "every colored man who owns a house or farm should feel pride in participating" in the census, which would result in an accurate assessment of African American property ownership.<sup>48</sup> The paper also offered practical advice to aid in answering the enumerator's questions, by defining the term "homeowner" so as to make

<sup>43</sup> The letter was published in at least half a dozen newspapers, including the following: "Mr. Washington on the Census," *Colored American*, May 5 1900; "Very Important," *Freeman*, May 5 1900; "Get up Your Statistics," *Savannah Tribune*, May 5 1900.

<sup>44</sup> August Meier and Elliott M. Rudwick, *From Plantation to Ghetto: An Interpretive History of American Negroes* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1996), 134.

<sup>45</sup> "Education a Part of the Sum," *Plaindealer*, July 26 1901.

<sup>46</sup> "Progress of the Negro Race," *Broad Ax*, February 28 1903.

<sup>47</sup> "As Landowners, Etc.," *Cleveland Gazette*, January 13 1900.

<sup>48</sup> "Untitled," *American Citizen*, April 10 1900. The same untitled article appeared in the *Washington Bee* and the *New Age* (Portland, Oregon) on April 21.

clear the difference between this status and that of a tenant.<sup>49</sup> The Washington, DC *Colored American* linked property ownership with the industrial education philosophy of its owner, Booker T. Washington. The article, in a nod to the rural South, echoed the expectation of progress in property ownership, but also took the opportunity to express its support for agriculture, stating unequivocally: "the Negro does better industrially and morally on a farm."<sup>50</sup>

The interest of city newspapers in farming is also a reflection of their general support for Booker T. Washington and the work of the Tuskegee Institute, which was heavily involved in vocational training to help African Americans become self-sufficient as farmers, or in industries that supported farming. The Indianapolis *Freeman* expressed its support for industrial education in a long article in April 1901, which described the visit to the Tuskegee Institute of "expert economist and statistician" H.T. Newcome of the Census Office.<sup>51</sup> Newcome stated that the purpose of his visit was to gain first-hand knowledge of African American involvement in agriculture "to insure an intelligent interpretation of the facts shown by the tabulations of [the Census Office]."<sup>52</sup> This article is noteworthy as it not only outlines the benefits of industrial education, which the *Freeman* supported, but because of the opinions on race and uplift that were expressed by a white statistician with considerable status within the Census Office. Newcome praised the results that the Tuskegee Institute had achieved, and declared that "ideas of industry, integrity, frugality, personal cleanliness, and intellectual advancement need to be spread among a very large percentage of the white population," and that modern scientific methods of agriculture employed at the Institute could be of benefit to poor white farmers, for the benefit of both blacks and whites. He went on to say that the "race" problem was rather an

<sup>49</sup> "'Owner' or 'Tenant'?", *American Citizen*, March 30 1900.

<sup>50</sup> "Where We Do the Best," *Colored American*, March 10 1900; August Meier, "Booker T. Washington and the Negro Press: With Special Reference to the Colored American Magazine," *The Journal of Negro History* 38, no. 1 (1953): 67-68. The article title refers to the *Colored American Magazine*, but this existed alongside the *Colored American* newspaper, which the article also states was supported financially by Washington.

<sup>51</sup> "Is There a Race Problem?," *Freeman*, April 13 1901. Newcome was a key figure in the Census Office, as he had contributed to a report on the conduct of the eleventh census, and was responsible for the preparation of a report on agriculture for the twelfth census. See Richmond Mayo-Smith, "The Federal Census," *Political Science Quarterly* 14, no. 2 (1899).

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*

"industrial" issue, and that when African Americans achieved a certain level of industrial development, the race issue would disappear.<sup>53</sup> With Newcome's affirmation of industrial education, its supporters in the black press could understandably feel optimistic that the census results would indicate black progress in the agricultural area. Newcome's comments also corroborated the core conviction of racial uplift that once improvement was evident, African Americans would be accepted as equals.

### The census operation

The newspapers were keen promoters of participation in the census, but when it came to details of the census operation, they were more critical, and protested the lack of black representation in the Census Office. The January 6, 1900 edition of the *Colored American* reported the Afro-American Council's complaint that African Americans had "practically no representation in the census work."<sup>54</sup> The *Cleveland Gazette* claimed in January that there were as yet no "Afro-American" clerks in the Census Office, and the *Afro-American Citizen* in Charleston, South Carolina asked why African American applicants for clerkships in the Census Office were being turned down.<sup>55</sup> Racial representation was not the papers' only concern, as they also reported complaints about partisanship in the appointment of supervisors, with complaints coming from both sides of politics.<sup>56</sup> By March 1900, however, the newspapers were more positive, as they were increasingly able to report black appointments.<sup>57</sup> While the articles gave no specific reason for the increase, they seemed to express a general confidence that the Census Office was acting in their interests. The *Cleveland Gazette* was optimistic that black clerical

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> "Under Brighter Skies," *Colored American*, January 6 1900.

<sup>55</sup> "As We Predicted," *Afro-American Citizen*, January 17 1900.

<sup>56</sup> The *Afro-American Citizen* complained that supervisory positions were being given to Democrats, not Republicans, in South Carolina, and the *Parson's Weekly Blade* (Kansas) reported the complaint by a Kansas senator that all the supervisors were Republicans. "As We Predicted;" "Kansas Census Supervisors," *Parson's Weekly Blade*, January 19 1900.

<sup>57</sup> "Under Brighter Skies"; "Doings of the Race," *Cleveland Gazette*, January 27 1900; "Untitled," *Colored American*, March 24 1900.



employment would increase, "it being the policy of the bureau to recognize merit rather than race, creed or color."<sup>58</sup>

Newspapers expressed their confidence that African Americans would be involved in the census operation by reporting appointments, even though they were very few. One significant appointment to the Census Office (renamed the Census Bureau in 1902) was that of R.W. Thompson, a member of the editorial staff of the *Colored American*, who was assigned to the Division of Manufactures. His appointment was reported in the *Freeman* and in the *Plaindealer*, which stated that he would be receiving a salary of \$1,200.<sup>59</sup> The *Wisconsin Weekly Advocate* reported the appointment of William L. Hawkins, a young African American from Milwaukee, to a clerkship. The article stated that the young man would continue his studies at Howard University at night, and also included information that the man's grandfather had been brought as a slave from Africa and had escaped to Canada.<sup>60</sup> The *Colored American*, in an article entitled "Director Merriam Not to Blame," reported that forty African American men and women were employed in the Census Office, and that more would be given places "as demand increases." Blame for the previous lack of appointments, it stated, lay with senators and members of Congress.<sup>61</sup> The title of the article indicates the positive reception in a number of papers of William Rush Merriam, the (white) director of the census operation, whose "efforts are meeting with universal approval at the hands of the Negro people."<sup>62</sup> The *Freeman* was lavish in its praise of Merriam, a businessman the paper described as "the most energetic, faithful, painstaking and conscientious chieftain this great bureau has ever had."<sup>63</sup>

<sup>58</sup> "A Good Showing," *Cleveland Gazette*, March 24 1900.

<sup>59</sup> "The 'American Men'," *Colored American*, January 27 1900; "Untitled," *Freeman*, January 13 1900; "Washington, D.C.," *Plaindealer*, January 26 1900. It is possible to speculate that Booker T. Washington had some influence in the appointment, and to conjecture how a relationship between Booker T. Washington and Thompson, and Thompson's Census Office employment, might have worked to interest Newcome in the visit to Tuskegee, described above.

<sup>60</sup> "Appointment of Negro," *Wisconsin Weekly Advocate*, February 8 1900.

<sup>61</sup> "Director Merriam Not to Blame," *Colored American*, March 31 1900.

<sup>62</sup> "Operations of the Census Bureau."

<sup>63</sup> "Of Vast Importance," *Freeman*, April 7 1900.

These favourable reports of black appointments should be considered in light of what was a negligible level of African American employment in government at the time. The 1900 census listed just 718 African Americans holding positions as government officials.<sup>64</sup> Despite the slim possibility of employment in the census operation, the *Dallas Express* published a list of local supervisors and advised those interested in jobs as enumerators to write to the supervisor for their area. The article also gave details of the rates of pay for enumerators, which were, for example, 2 cents for each death, 15 cents for each farm, and 20 cents for each "establishment of productive industry." Rates ranged from \$3 to \$6 per day depending on population density.<sup>65</sup> The article did not specify race as a criterion for applying. Eventually the 1900 census employed almost 53,000 enumerators across the country, who were managed by 300 supervisors.<sup>66</sup> The final tally of African Americans employed by the Census Office appeared in the *Colored American*, which listed three African American supervisors and "at least 150 enumerators."<sup>67</sup> It went on to describe African American appointments in other government departments, praising the "open-handed and generous administration of (President) William McKinley."<sup>68</sup>

The *Colored American* and the *Freeman*, after praising Director Merriam in 1900, had changed their tune by 1903, when he announced his retirement from the Census Bureau. In a piece printed in both papers on March 28, 1903, they expressed their scorn for his record in failing to appoint black supervisors, and for his suggestion that "Negro enumerators would not

<sup>64</sup> Walter F. Willcox, ed., "Bulletin 8: Negroes in the United States," United States Census Bureau, *Bulletins of the Twelfth Census of the United States* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1904), 164.

<sup>65</sup> "Texan Census Supervisors," *Dallas Express*, January 13 1900.

<sup>66</sup> Anderson, *The American Census*, 84.

<sup>67</sup> The source of this figure is not clear, as the Census Bureau stated in a letter to W.E.B. Du Bois that it did not keep official records of its employment of African Americans. The Census Office in fact asked Du Bois, who wrote the section on Agriculture in the Census Bulletin "Negroes in the United States," for any data that he may have held on such employment: United States Census Office to W.E.B. Du Bois, May 10 1910. W.E.B. Du Bois Papers (Ms 312). Special Collections and University Archives, University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries website. <http://credo.library.umass.edu>. Accessed July 10 2017.

<sup>68</sup> "Four More Years of McKinley!," *Colored American*, July 14 1900. The article was a positive survey of African American employment in various government departments in addition to the Census Office, including the Government Printing Office, Interior Department, Post Office Department, and Indian Office.

be welcomed" in the communities where they were to be employed.<sup>69</sup> Merriam's apparent suggestion that they would not be welcomed was, however, validated by a brief note in the *American Citizen* saying that "colored enumerators" would not be permitted to perform their duties in three towns in Mississippi "on account of race prejudice."<sup>70</sup> The *Cleveland Gazette* also included a short piece on March 14, 1903 which said "good riddance" to Director Merriam and expressed its disappointment that he had not resigned sooner.<sup>71</sup> Other papers ignored the announcement, or noted the resignation briefly, without comment. This limited reporting on Director Merriam's record appears to be the only evidence of negative commentary in the black press about the 1900 census, and he appears to have been a scapegoat for some papers to express a wider disillusionment at the failure of the federal government to address discrimination in employment.

Newspapers were more positive about the new technology to be used in the census operation, and expressed their pride and delight in the techniques which would make this census the most accurate, most modern, and most scientific ever conducted. They described at length the modern technology that would be used in calculating the results, which "will be sent to Washington to be worked out by electricity."<sup>72</sup> The Indianapolis *Recorder* explained that the results would be tabulated by "one of the most marvelous mechanical calculators ever contrived" that used "a system of perforated cards" to ensure accuracy.<sup>73</sup> This was the Hollerith machine, which electromechanically sorted punched cards containing census data to produce much faster, more accurate results. It was invented by Herman Hollerith, a Census Office employee, and first used in the 1890 census.<sup>74</sup> Approximately three thousand clerks and messengers were to be

<sup>69</sup> "The Crum Affair!," *Colored American*, March 28 1903; "The Crum Affair!," *Freeman*, March 28 1903.

<sup>70</sup> "Race News," *American Citizen*, May 25 1900.

<sup>71</sup> "Untitled," *Cleveland Gazette*, March 14 1903.

<sup>72</sup> "The Coming Census," *Savannah Tribune*, March 31 1900. The same article was repeated in the *Savannah Tribune* on April 14, appeared twice in the *Washington Bee* (March 24 and April 14), and in the *Iowa State Bystander* on March 30.

<sup>73</sup> "Calculating Machines," *Recorder*, April 14 1900.

<sup>74</sup> Anderson, *The American Census*, 104.

employed to process one hundred million cards through one thousand tabulation machines over a period of four months, to meet the deadline for the release of the first reports in 1902.<sup>75</sup> The considerable effort that was applied to improving methods and accuracy in the conduct of the twelfth census was an example of the increasing importance placed on scientific knowledge at the time, to be enhanced by the gathering of statistical data. In preparation for the 1900 census, the American Economic Association appointed a committee to study the results, scope, and method of the eleventh census (1890) and prepare critical reports and recommendations for improvements. The twelfth census was positioned as an objective and scientific study designed to be "a contribution of permanent value to the science of statistics."<sup>76</sup>

The use of the latest equipment and a highly skilled workforce to process the census results positioned the United States as the most technologically advanced nation in the world. This was at a time when the United States was extending its territorial influence into the Pacific and Caribbean regions and establishing new colonies. Black newspapers used the advanced technology and competence of the United States to contrast it with those territories it had recently taken from Spain, and used the census as a point of comparison. They suggested that the advanced state of technology of the United States and the efficiency of its census operation was far superior to the corrupt and haphazard way in which the Spanish had conducted a census of Cuba and Puerto Rico in 1887. The *Indianapolis World* claimed that the 1887 census of Cuba and Puerto Rico was not accurate, as money allocated for it had been misappropriated.<sup>77</sup> The *Washington Bee* also compared the manner in which the United States census would be conducted with the Cuba and Puerto Rico census, which, "like most Spanish enterprises, was largely a matter of guess work."<sup>78</sup> The *American Citizen* also declared that the previous census of Cuba was "absolutely unreliable" as the results were published when appropriations ran out. It

<sup>75</sup> William R. Merriam, "The Census of 1900," *The North American Review* 170, no. 518 (1900): 101.

<sup>76</sup> Mayo-Smith, "The Federal Census."

<sup>77</sup> "Untitled," *Indianapolis World*, January 27 1900.

<sup>78</sup> "Census Figures," *Washington Bee*, April 14 1900.

reassured readers that the latest census of Cuba, undertaken by the United States government in 1899 after it had gained control over the territory, was "conducted on strictly business principles."<sup>79</sup>

Highlighting the differences between the United States and Spain was a means of expressing pride in the evident strength of the United States, which would bring democracy and efficiency – and uplift – to the people of the newly acquired territories. The *Colored American* expressed satisfaction in the appointment of "Judge Taft" (later President William Howard Taft) to the position of civic governor of the Philippines, declaring that he "will make American rule respected in the new possessions," and that "American sovereignty must be recognized."<sup>80</sup> The newspapers' incorporation of the United States' territorial expansion into discussions of the domestic census indicates their broader interest in expressing patriotism and African Americans' fundamental commitment to the nation as citizens. Such expressions of patriotism and citizenship, regardless of whether individual newspapers supported or opposed government actions overseas, was an integral part of the African American struggle to convince the nation of their entitlement to full legal and political equality.<sup>81</sup>

<sup>79</sup> "How the Cuban Census Is Taken," *American Citizen*, February 21 1900. The articles use the singular, suggesting that the two territories were covered by one census.

<sup>80</sup> "Untitled," *Colored American*, February 10 1900; Mark C. Carnes and John A. Garraty, *American Destiny: Narrative of a Nation*, vol. 2: Since 1865 (New York: Longman, 2003), 730-31. Taft, later the 27<sup>th</sup> President, was appointed civilian governor of the Philippines by President McKinley in 1901.

<sup>81</sup> Literature on the attitudes of African Americans towards expansionist activities in the former Spanish colonies, while acknowledging differences of opinion expressed in the press, is less focused on broad-picture attitudes toward expansion as U.S. foreign policy than on race, namely the failure of the U.S. government to address lynching and other forms of repression at home, and the impact of expansionist policies on African Americans domestically. For specific references to the black press, see Randall B. Woods, "The Black American Press and the New Manifest Destiny: The Waller Affair," *Phylon* 38, no. 1 (1977); Richard E. Welch Jr., *Response to Imperialism: The United States and the Philippine-American War, 1899-1902* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1979), 107-08. Woods and Welch describe black press support for expansion as a path to citizenship at home, and as an opportunity for black capitalism in the new territories. Welch discusses the contradictory opinions expressed in the black press, citing the *Broad Ax* and *Cleveland Gazette* as opposing the Philippine war, and the *Indianapolis Freeman*, the *Savannah Tribune*, and *Colored American* as supporting expansion, for both economic and patriotic reasons, and quotes E.E. Cooper, editor of the *Colored American*: "[The Negro] was first of all an American and would fight beside his white brother wherever it was necessary." There is, clearly, a tension within the black press between not wishing to support a nation that did not offer civil rights to blacks at home, and the potential to demonstrate black soldiers' superior skills, loyalty, and patriotism in the battlefield, in the belief that such service would result in civil recognition. This tension is also evident in subsequent U.S. involvement in both World Wars.

The United States had proven its efficiency in conducting census counts in its newly acquired territories, but it also made efforts to improve the design of the 1900 census, after changing the classifications significantly, but unsuccessfully, in 1890. Prior to Emancipation, the classifications were simply slave or free person, for purposes of assessing taxes and representation.<sup>82</sup> African Americans were classified as "black" and "mulatto" (a person with both black and white ancestry) in the 1850, 1860, and 1870 censuses, together with categories for Chinese, Indian (native American), and White. In 1890 the government added designations of quadroon (where one of four ancestors was black) and octoroon (where one of eight ancestors was black) to the black and mulatto categories, and added Japanese to the Chinese category, making a total of eight racial classifications.<sup>83</sup> The subdividing of the black population in 1890 was designed to determine different characteristics among people with different ratios of white ancestry, based on scientific racism that held to a belief that there were intrinsic differences between the races. Proving differences was designed to preserve, in the language of the time, "the purity of the white race" by preventing "passing," that is, a light-skinned person erasing all connections with the black community and living as a white person, and to support white supremacy in the South.<sup>84</sup>

The additional categories were also designed to prove, through statistical data, the convictions of some American race theorists that mulattoes were less fertile, lived shorter lives, and would die out as a result.<sup>85</sup> However, the prevalence of this group among the most powerful blacks in Washington, DC, which had the biggest concentration of African Americans in an urban area in 1900, belied this assumption of weakness. Positions of wealth and power in

<sup>82</sup> Anderson, *The American Census*. See pages 12-13 for details of the debate between North and South as to the categorization of slaves for tax purposes. A compromise was reached with slaves representing three-fifths of the equivalent free population.

<sup>83</sup> "Measuring Race and Ethnicity Across the Decades: 1790-2010." United States Census Bureau website. [http://www.census.gov/population/race/data/MREAD\\_1790\\_2010.html](http://www.census.gov/population/race/data/MREAD_1790_2010.html). Accessed November 19 2016.

<sup>84</sup> Paul Schor, *Counting Americans: How the US Census Classified the Nation*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 109-10.

<sup>85</sup> Melissa Nobles, *Shades of Citizenship: Race and the Census in Modern Politics*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 54.

African American society were generally held by people considered "mulatto," many of whom could boast wealthy white ancestors and families that had been free since antebellum times. Such families existed in all the major cities, and many were linked by marriage.<sup>86</sup> The mulatto sub-categories only appeared in the 1890 census, however, as they proved to be impossible to accurately define and quantify. The African American category was simplified in 1900 to "Black (Negro or of Negro Descent)." Other racial categories were Indian, Chinese and Japanese, and White.<sup>87</sup> This simplification, however, also represented a hardening of binary racial classifications that considered a person with any degree of black ancestry as "black," and gave official sanction to the "one drop" determination of race in American society.

For African Americans, the census was the most definitive means of showing that there was no weakness or dying out in the "mulatto" group, but the findings also revealed subtleties of class within the African American community that were otherwise not apparent in census classification by ancestry. The *Plaindealer* made reference to the simplified 1900 census classification categories, saying that "no provision is made for the shades of the Negro race."<sup>88</sup> Such colour distinctions, which were important in African American society as status indicators, carried no weight in white society, which was uninterested in exploring class divisions within black society.<sup>89</sup> However, the issue of "shades" raised by the *Plaindealer* is an acknowledgement of colour sensitivity within African American society, where lighter-skinned people had historically formed a buffer group between slaves and whites, due to advantages of kinship ties to whites, or as free people providing services to the white community. This group formed the earliest elite class in black society and was well-established in antebellum times. Lighter-skinned

<sup>86</sup> Gatewood, *Aristocrats of Color*, 39-41. Gatewood discusses the social and economic background to the development of elite mulatto groups in large urban areas in the nineteenth century.

<sup>87</sup> "Measuring Race and Ethnicity Across the Decades."

<sup>88</sup> "All Alike to the Census Man," *Plaindealer*, August 2 1901.

<sup>89</sup> Gatewood, *Aristocrats of Color*, 50. Kathy Russell-Cole, Midge Wilson PhD, and Ronald E. Hall PhD, *The Color Complex: The Politics of Skin Color in a New Millennium* (New York: Anchor Books, 2013), 54-60. The two books reference the issue of skin colour and class in their discussion of the desire of the "elite" group to distinguish itself from "the black masses."

people continued to be over-represented among black leadership – Booker T. Washington is a case in point. The *Plaindealer* would have seen this failure to acknowledge "shades" as a lack of recognition of the existence of class distinctions within African American society. Class distinctions were evidence of "race progress," as it brought African American society closer to the mainstream, by mirroring white class distinctions. By failing to acknowledge the colour differences which were so closely tied to class, the government was overlooking key differentiating factors which African Americans felt should entitle the elite group to better treatment, based on their accomplishments, which separated them from the rest of the black population. For the most part, however, white society did not make such social distinctions, and considered all African Americans a single group.

Scholars of the United States census have attempted to discover the reasons for the many changes to race classifications, and have concluded that government policy was haphazard and unsystematic. The rapidly increasing U.S. population, the influence of Darwinian ideas of evolution that were being applied to the human population in the 1880s and 1890s, differing opinions as to who belonged to what "race," and the prevailing belief that there were inherent differences between races in terms of "evolutionary development," made it difficult to establish a fixed basis upon which a scientific evaluation of the constituents of the American population could be made.<sup>90</sup>

The Census Office acknowledged the technical difficulty of obtaining complete results on race, and by simplifying the questions asked, and training the enumerators, it was hoped that incorporating these improvements into the 1900 census would ensure "the validity of [census] methods and the trustworthiness of its results."<sup>91</sup> The Census Office, however, repeated the

<sup>90</sup> Jennifer L. Hochschild and Brenna M. Powell, "Racial Reorganization and the United States Census 1850-1930: Mulattoes, Half-Breeds, Mixed Parentage, Hindoos, and the Mexican Race," *Studies in American Political Development* 22, no. 1 (2008). Hochschild and Powell discuss the various theories that scholars have developed, and conclude that variations in census race categories were the result of "an unsystematic and fluid mixture" of political, scientific, and ideological motivations.

<sup>91</sup> Mayo-Smith, "The Federal Census."



confusion over the 1890 race categories by attempting to produce "scientific statistics" from highly subjective data. This was because instructions given to enumerators were vague, and enumerators were to determine race according to how the person was "classed in the community in which he resides." The enumerator was "supposed to know this fact or to ascertain it by observation or inquiry."<sup>92</sup> Such instructions reinforced the Census Office's binary racial categorization in terms of who was to be determined "Negro or of Negro descent." The instruction to consider "the community in which he resides" suggests that, if in doubt, skin colour was to be a secondary consideration if a person resided in a black community, but skin colour could be the main determinant if the person was light enough to "pass" as white and had melded into the white community, in which case the individual would be considered white by that community.

Subjective determination of race based on skin colour was meaningless in terms of providing accurate statistics, but both whites and blacks used the resulting statistics to their own advantage. For African Americans, evidence of a growing black population would indicate robustness and success in overcoming social and political obstacles, whereas for the white population, a clear indication of the number of African Americans in the population would support its efforts to keep the races separate politically and socially to preserve white supremacy.

### Census results

The optimism expressed by the newspapers in early 1900 was borne out by the census results, many of which began appearing in 1901. Newspapers reported favourable results showing an increase in the black population, and included editorial comment as to the reason for the results, and the implications of these results for the future. Population increase, first indicated in late 1900, was of particular interest, in light of popular belief in racial differences that

<sup>92</sup> Willcox, "Bulletin 8: Negroes in the United States," 14.

assumed that "weaker" races were destined to succumb in a "survival of the fittest" world. The 1890 census had shown a decline in the rate of increase of the black population, a finding that was used by race theorists to support their assumptions of the gradual demise of "the black race."<sup>93</sup> As late as 1913, Cornell University statistician Walter Willcox, who summarized part of the 1900 census results, appeared to remain confident, despite evidence to the contrary, of the demise of African Americans in the South, arguing that by the close of the twentieth century their proportion in the South would decline from one-third of the population to one-sixth due to a lower birthrate.<sup>94</sup> The *Sedalia Times* had already contradicted this assumption when it reported census results in September 1901 showing that "the Negro seems to be holding his own, and he is the prop and stay of the industrial South." According to the article, census findings disputed the belief that African Americans were gradually dying out due to "high rates of infant mortality and the deficient stamina that results from a shiftless mode of life."

Other external factors instead appeared to account for the decline. While the black population ratio had moved from 11.9 percent in 1890 to 11.8 percent in 1900, the slight decline was due to the increase in whites in the North.<sup>95</sup> The *Plainedealer* echoed these statistics, citing white immigration as the reason for the slight proportional decline, and that the natural increase of native-born whites was almost the same as that of blacks. It also noted that the census disclosed little migration of agricultural workers to the North, confirming that the majority of the black population "is attached to the South and the soil, and there he appears to be fixed and immovable."<sup>96</sup> References to the South acknowledge the fact that the majority of the black population lived in the South, and as a supporter of Booker T. Washington and his industrial

<sup>93</sup> Fredrickson, *The Black Image in the White Mind*, 246. Fredrickson notes that race theorists used the statistics to support their beliefs, and failed to account for the increase in white immigration which effectively reduced the percentage of African Americans in the population.

<sup>94</sup> Walter F. Willcox, "A Statistician's Idea of Progress," *International Journal of Ethics* 23, no. 3 (1913).

<sup>95</sup> "The Negro in the Census," *Sedalia Times*, September 29 1901.

<sup>96</sup> "Negro Census During Last Decade," *Plainedealer*, November 8 1901. The attachment "to the South and the soil" is supported by statistics from the 1900 census which indicate that just 17.2 percent of the black population lived in urban areas in the South, compared with 70.4 percent in the North and West: Reynolds Farley, "The Urbanization of Negroes in the United States," *Journal of Social History* 1, no. 3 (1968).

education approach, the *Plaindealer* would be inclined to note any outcome that showed progress in this area, as in its reference to blacks in the cotton belt, whose "industrial condition has greatly improved."<sup>97</sup> As early as August 1901 it reported an 8.1 percent gain in literacy, and a 7.3 percent rise in "educational progress" among "the colored voting population" of Alabama. This was compared with a modest 2.1 percent gain for whites, a result that "seems to speak well for the future of the colored race."<sup>98</sup> The article described Booker T. Washington as "jubilant over the educational showing of Alabama in the census returns."

In each census year, the Census Bureau demonstrated an increasing concern with "social statistics," in the form of more detailed population breakdowns, to better understand society as it became more industrialized. While census results showed the vast majority of the black population living in the South, and little black migration to the North and West, the United States was moving irrevocably from an agricultural economy to an industrial economy, and by 1880 half the U.S. population was employed in non-agricultural sectors.<sup>99</sup> The black press was also interested in presenting these scientific "facts" to readers.<sup>100</sup> Statistics were useful in showing how regional differences accounted for variations in results. For example, the *St. Paul Appeal* reported that the Census Bureau recognized geographic differences in causes of death, and that climatic conditions were responsible for most deaths in country areas, and social conditions were responsible for most deaths in the cities.<sup>101</sup> In January 1902 the *Plaindealer* reported "a healthy increase in Negro population" and a decrease in the death rate due to "the growing intelligence and knowledge of hygiene." It proposed that race improvement efforts be targeted toward children, who were now robust and healthy, "and capable of the highest possible

<sup>97</sup> "Negro Census During Last Decade," *Plaindealer*, November 8 1901.

<sup>98</sup> "Current Comment," *Plaindealer*, August 9 1901.

<sup>99</sup> Anderson, *The American Census*, 87.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid., 88. Michael Schudson, *Discovering the News: A Social History of American Newspapers*, (New York: Basic Books, 1978), 72, 75. Schudson refers to this trend seen in the mainstream press at the turn of the century, but the point can be extended to reporting in the black press.

<sup>101</sup> "Causes of Deaths, Census Department Gives Interesting Statistics," *Appeal*, April 25 1903. The article named the prevalence of malaria in the South as an example of a climatic cause, and consumption and pneumonia in New York City as examples of diseases resulting from social conditions.

development."<sup>102</sup> This proposal is indicative of the importance to African Americans of physical health in dispelling Social Darwinist notions of inherent weakness in different races. The decline in the death rate also attracted attention for its broader impact. The Baltimore *Afro-American Ledger* linked the declining death rate and improved health to pride of citizenship, stating: "the country that grows the strongest, hardiest, and long-lived men is the country that will lead the world."<sup>103</sup>

The newspapers were uniformly pleased to report positive census results on population growth as evidence of African American advancement. The *Plaindealer* expressed satisfaction with the results, declaring that, based on population increase, the social conditions of African Americans were, according to sociologists, "approximating that of the superior race."<sup>104</sup> This was important because any sign of closing the development gap, such as an increase in robust and healthy children, was an indication that African Americans were moving closer to mainstream standards. The *American Citizen* published a general overview of the patterns of population increase across the United States, with a telling sub-heading: "Show No Signs of Race Suicide Here."<sup>105</sup>

Advertisers had profited from the general encouragement to participate in the census, and now they turned to the census results for profit. What appeared to be a serious article in the *Savannah Tribune* entitled "Death Rate Decreasing" showed, on closer reading, that the decline was due to "Dr. King's New Discovery for Consumption, Coughs and Colds."<sup>106</sup>

<sup>102</sup> "They Are Studying the Race," *Plaindealer*, January 17 1902.

<sup>103</sup> "Human Life Lengthening," *Afro-American Ledger*, December 7 1901.

<sup>104</sup> "Negro Census During Last Decade," *Plaindealer*, November 8 1901.

<sup>105</sup> "Millions More," *American Citizen*, August 21 1902.

<sup>106</sup> "Death Rate Decreasing," *Savannah Tribune*, March 7 1903.

**Death Rate Decreasing.**

The 1900 census shows a decrease of 10 per. cent in the general death rate. The decline in Consumption is more marked than any other disease. Many causes are attributed, but it is safe to say that Dr. King's New Discovery for Consumption, Coughs and Colds is responsible for this decline, to a large extent. Many a life has been saved by its use. There is nothing anywhere just as good for Lung and Throat troubles. It's positively guaranteed by Knight's Pharmacy Company. Price 50 cents and \$1.00 Trial bottles free.

6

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Figure 4: Profiting from the census results. Savannah Tribune, March 7 1903.

Once the fear of a decline in the black population had been put to rest, newspapers turned their attention to other statistics. The *Colored American* noted a 10.7 percent reduction in illiteracy in the black population in Washington, DC.<sup>107</sup> Many papers presented unusual findings from the census, with no editorial comment. The Kansas City *Rising Son* informed its readers that women were "invading" occupations formerly considered exclusively male, such as plumbing, bricklaying, and carpentry, noting that there were now 545 women carpenters.<sup>108</sup> The *Broad Ax* stated that there were fifteen thousand more women than men in New Orleans, and the *Colored American* claimed that African Americans were the only race in the country with more females than males, at an excess of 60,900.<sup>109</sup> This finding also appeared in the *Afro-American Ledger*.<sup>110</sup> The latter paper accounted for regional differences as due to "a marked movement of both the males and the females of the colored population," where there were more men in the

<sup>107</sup> "Colored Census Facts," *Colored American*, March 28 1903.

<sup>108</sup> "Women Now Follow Trades," *Rising Son*, April 17 1903. Employment statistics also appear in "Chips," *Broad Ax*, October 24 1903; "About the Negro," *Wichita Searchlight*, October 17 1903.

<sup>109</sup> "In Our Larger Cities," *Broad Ax*, March 14 1903; "Colored Census Facts."

<sup>110</sup> "Excess of Females in Negro Population," *Afro-American Ledger*, August 2 1902.

Western states, but more women in the North and South. Migration patterns may have accounted for the greater number of African American men in the Western states, and in terms of the white population, immigration of single men from Europe in the late 1800s may have also affected the male-female ratio among the general population. While migration can explain regional imbalances, the great increase in the ratio of African American women over African American men between the 1890 and 1900 censuses may be the result of an inaccurate count in the 1890 census, which the Census Bureau had attempted to address in 1900, particularly in racial categorization.<sup>111</sup> It is difficult to know whether newspapers at the time had access to information about inaccuracies in the 1890 census, and may simply have preferred to publish figures showing any kind of increase as a positive news item.

The census breakdown of the American population by country of origin as well as race revealed differences that were of interest to the black press as evidence of black progress that would, it was hoped, boost their position in American society. For example, the *New York Age* reported that there were fewer paupers in the African American population than there were in other ethnic groups. The article expressed the opinion that some populations were more inclined to pauperism: "the degree of thrift, combined with racial characteristics, seems to determine the tendency towards pauperism."<sup>112</sup> The commentary shows that the black press was just as capable of making race-based generalizations as the white press, but it is also a reflection of ideas popular at the time around eugenics, where negative character traits and behaviour, as well as physical condition, were thought to be characteristic to particular groups, and were inherited.<sup>113</sup> The equating of statistics and morality is also seen in the article in the *Sedalia Times* quoted above, which considers negative behaviour ("a lack of stamina resulting from a shiftless way of life") as relevant as statistical evidence such as mortality rates in determining racial survival.

<sup>111</sup> An inaccurate count in 1890 may also explain the fear after the 1890 census that "the race" was "dying out" that was put to rest with the 1900 results.

<sup>112</sup> "Untitled," *New York Age*, August 1906.

<sup>113</sup> Garland E. Allen, "Eugenics and Modern Biology: Critiques of Eugenics, 1910-1945," *Annals of Human Genetics* 75, no. 2011 (2011).

This also explains why African Americans were so determined to dispel beliefs about their own supposedly inherent characteristics through evidence that they were not inferior. The ability to demonstrate a lesser degree of "negative" characteristics placed African Americans in a position that was closer to the "native" white population and helped them set themselves apart from particular immigrant groups who were considered less "advanced."<sup>114</sup>

Newspapers took great interest in the census results as soon as they began appearing, quoting various findings that showed improvements in black life, but they paid less attention to what was in fact the most important output of the 1900 census for the black population, the Census Bureau Bulletin 8, entitled "Negroes in the United States."<sup>115</sup> This lack of interest was possibly because the bulletin did not appear until 1904, after many of the findings of most interest to the black press had been released. Nevertheless, the bulletin was important because it was the first time that the Census Bureau had produced a dedicated report on the African American population. One of the few papers to report on its publication was the *Plaindealer*, which described it as "a very interesting and valuable contribution to the classified statistics available to students of the Negro race."<sup>116</sup> The bulletin comprised an eighty-eight page summary, written by statistician Walter Willcox, followed by 230 pages of supporting tables. The summary was a rather dry overview of the methodology, covering areas such as accuracy, types of questions, and determination of race. It also outlined findings such as population increase and distribution. While generally a recitation of statistical findings, the summary included results that were favourable to African Americans insofar as it noted increases in the

<sup>114</sup> John Higham, *Strangers in the Land: Patterns of American Nativism, 1860-1925* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2002), 110, 113; Mae M. Ngai, *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 21. Opinions on degrees of inferiority assigned to immigrant ethnic groups by the native white population strengthened and weakened over time, according to the degree of economic, social, or political threat they represented, but had peaked in the late 1890s, when immigration restrictions were first introduced.

<sup>115</sup> Willcox, "Bulletin 8: Negroes in the United States."

<sup>116</sup> Different aspects of the American population were emphasized in different census years. For example, the 1890 census bulletins included four reports on Native American populations. This study was not repeated in the 1900 census. A bulletin entitled "Negroes in the United States" was published in 1900 and again in 1910, but not in 1920. "Publications," United States Census Bureau. <https://www.census.gov/prod/www/decennial.html>. Accessed November 19 2016; "Negroes in the United States," *Plaindealer*, August 19 1904.

black population and in literacy. It is also worth noting that in some cases it departed from a simple recitation of results to speculate on future improvements, stating, rather vaguely, that if present education standards were maintained, illiteracy among the black population would drop by one third "by the end of that generation," which seems to suggest that the "problem" would resolve itself if left alone. This is a rather strange conclusion when statistics were supposedly the foundation for designing social policy, but, as historian Mark Aldrich suggests in his article about Willcox and the bulletin, racism may have influenced the statement.<sup>117</sup>

Although the black newspapers paid little attention to the "Negroes in the United States" bulletin, many of them reprinted an article by Samuel E. Moffatt, a writer for the *Saturday Evening Post*.<sup>118</sup> The article appeared to be based on information available in the bulletin, and was a comprehensive review of the contribution that African Americans were making in all areas of American life, stating that their involvement was to such a degree that "the colored race is steadily developing a complete social and industrial system of its own," and that "a large [completely self-sufficient] city could be formed without a single white man in it." The article concluded that the figures would be a source of pride to the African American when "he is accused of preferring the midnight chicken and the surreptitious watermelon" over "the joys of labor." The article proved extremely popular in the black press, and was reprinted in at least four papers, and over three consecutive weeks in the *Rising Son*. Its popularity could be explained in

<sup>117</sup> Willcox, "Bulletin 8: Negroes in the United States." Economists and statisticians involved in the census, although confident of the objectivity and "truth" of statistical analysis, were influenced by racial attitudes prevalent at the time. See Mark Aldrich, "Progressive Economists and Scientific Racism: Walter Willcox and Black Americans, 1895-1910," *Phylon* 40, no. 1 (1979). Aldrich discusses Willcox's involvement with the "Negroes in the United States" bulletin, arguing that his belief in intrinsic differences between the black and white races influenced his findings, in that when analyzing the census results he compared "Negro" progress with white progress when he should have compared it with previous statistics on African Americans. By discounting the structural impediments to black progress and by relying on statistical findings alone, Willcox was able to confirm his belief in racial differences. His opinion that literacy rates would increase also suggests that he either held a degree of optimism that "the Negro" would improve without any particular government effort to remove impediments, or that he was uninterested in the ability of social policy to influence change for African Americans.

<sup>118</sup> "Negro Steadily Advancing the Race," *Broad Ax*, December 10 1904; "Race Progress," *Cleveland Gazette*, October 29 1904. Both papers named the *Saturday Evening Post* as the source, the *Broad Ax* naming the author as Samuel Moffett, and the *Gazette* stating that the article appeared "in the *Saturday Evening Post* of last week." The article also appeared under the title "Colored Brother at Work" under the byline Samuel E. Moffatt in the *Rising Son*, November 4, 11, and 18 1904, and "The Negro at Work!" in the *Plaindealer*, March 3 1905, but without reference to Moffatt or the *Saturday Evening Post*.



several ways: first, it was a comprehensive summary of a long and detailed report, and so could be easily accessed and reproduced by the black press; second, it showed the black population in a positive light, as self-sufficient and capable; and third, because this positive article appeared in a magazine that was directed toward and widely read by the white population.

### Conclusion

The black press at the turn of the twentieth century was a collection of small-scale, scattered newspapers, yet it was able to harness its collective voice on a national scale to promote participation in the 1900 census for the purpose of improving social and political prospects for African Americans. The census results, and a dedicated report on the African American condition, justified the press's expectations of favourable results. Quantified data highlighted the significant progress that African Americans had made since Emancipation, and offered insight into the areas where they lagged behind the white population.<sup>119</sup> The findings were cause for confidence, proof positive that racial uplift efforts designed to improve physical and material conditions were effective in narrowing the development gap, and were ammunition for disproving accusations of inherent inferiority and "race suicide."

The findings were also cause for reflection. While the physical and material progress indicated by the census had drawn most press attention, there were other implications to be drawn from the census results. The *Washington Bee* cautioned that, although there had been clear improvements in literacy, and in property and business ownership, "material and intellectual progress" should not be at the loss of "true manliness and genuine public spirit," indicating that racial uplift was not merely a matter of economic improvement, but that character was the mark of true progress.<sup>120</sup> "Manliness" did not indicate the possession of masculine characteristics such as physical strength, but was "respectability" expressed in gendered terms. The preservation of

<sup>119</sup> "Negroes in the United States," *Plaindealer*, August 19 1904.

<sup>120</sup> "Things on Which We Can Unite," *Washington Bee*, January 14 1905.

manliness reflected a view, held by blacks and whites, that deportment, morality, and character marked a "civilized" modern man, distinguishing him from the uneducated and uncouth.

Manliness was not intrinsic, and had to be developed. Such ideas were important to African Americans, who by virtue of prevalent beliefs in racial hierarchy, were deemed to lack "civilization." For African Americans, preserving manliness (respectability) was an essential element of racial uplift efforts to achieve broader social acceptance as men and citizens.<sup>121</sup> It also spoke to class issues, which were not apparent in census discussions generally, but which would become more important as racial uplift efforts advanced in later decades.

Census director William R. Merriam also touched on the moral aspect of the census in an article in January 1900, before the census was taken. He described improvements in census enumeration procedures and in tabulating the results, and anticipated economic growth "that will astonish the great trading nations of the civilized world." He concluded the article on a cautionary note, questioning the rightness of "the desire for bigness" if it was to the detriment of the duties of citizenship and public service. He also questioned whether increased opportunities for advancement would equate to advancement "in public morals and higher standards of citizenship."<sup>122</sup> Despite disapproval in some of the black newspapers of Merriam's performance as census director, his belief in the importance of moral advancement and the duties of citizenship aligned with African American uplift efforts.

The 1900 census proved to be an effective vehicle through which the black press was able to promote racial uplift, and it was able to represent it in a number of ways: in physical terms such as population increase, longevity, and improved health; in social terms such as literacy and property ownership; and in moral terms such as race pride, pride of citizenship, and concern for public morals and the social good. Positive results affirmed the value of racial uplift

<sup>121</sup> Gail Bederman, *Manliness & Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880-1917* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1995), 27, 29. See also pages 16-31 for a discussion of the intersections between class, gender, and race at the turn of the twentieth century, and how these elements were used to support Anglo-Saxon dominance.

<sup>122</sup> Merriam, "The Census of 1900."

efforts by the African American community and the role of the black press in communicating them.

Progress ensured that the black press would continue with its mission to work for the uplift of the race, but new political movements appearing later in the first decade of the twentieth century propelled the press to engage in debates on how best to promote racial uplift. By the second decade, the entry of new players with louder voices had upset the status quo of the black press and set new standards for reporting and news presentation. A number of papers became nationally recognized and read, establishing the black press as a national force capable of having lasting impact on African American society. These developments, and their implications for racial uplift, will be examined in chapter two.

## CHAPTER TWO: The black press, 1905-1917: a force for change

*If the Negro Newspaper has any reason for living at all, it is that it shall give, as far as possible, a weekly epitome of the race from the Atlantic to the Pacific and from the Great Lakes to the Gulf.*<sup>1</sup>

The black press was keen to extend its role as a recorder of events and source of information for the black community to the four corners of the nation, and in doing so, play its part in racial uplift – the advancement of African American economic, social, and political interests. Expanding on chapter one, which looked at a single event around which the press focused for the purpose of promoting racial uplift, this chapter will examine the press as it engaged with the broader political and social changes that emerged up to 1917, and its development as an entity with national reach and influence. The changes include disruption within the newspaper industry with the entry of new players, the emergence of new political movements to challenge Booker T. Washington's leadership role and political influence to forge new paths to racial uplift, and, as World War I advanced, the social changes brought on by mass migration from the rural South to the urban North. These changes occurred against the backdrop of the Progressive Era, a period of social activism and reform in wider society to counter the effects of rapid industrialization and its attendant political and social problems. African Americans established their own organizations to effect political and social improvement that mirrored the national trend.<sup>2</sup>

The need to force political change became urgent in the face of ongoing erosion of black rights. Segregation and disfranchisement of black communities were continuing across the South, and were reinforced by lynching and other forms of violence designed to support white

<sup>1</sup> "The National Negro Press Association. Will It Do Something?," *Afro-American*, August 12 1911.

<sup>2</sup> The Progressive Era, from around 1890 to 1920, coincided with a shift in the U.S. economy from an agricultural to an industrial base. Progressives, generally an educated, professional cohort with an interest in social improvement, established a number of influential organizations to benefit society and address the various social problems that the shift initiated. Andrew J. Dunar, *America in the Teens*, (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2016), 8-9.

supremacy. Jim Crow laws and de facto segregation were extending beyond the South, as was racially-targeted violence, against which successive Republican Administrations were disinclined to take action. At the same time, fissures were appearing in black leadership in the form of challenges to Booker T. Washington's politics and influence. Washington was greatly admired by African Americans, and his approach to racial uplift was followed widely, yet his influence, which extended beyond the black community to the white power structure, made him a target of frustration against his apparent reluctance to exert his influence in this direction.

The changes occurring in the newspaper industry and divisions over the leadership struggle did not prevent the newspapers from preserving their mission to promote racial uplift. Although the 1900 census had shown improvements in many areas of black life, African Americans lagged behind whites in social measures such as literacy rates, lifespan, and access to education, so there was no question that efforts to address these disadvantages were to be promoted. None of the newspapers examined in this chapter presented any evidence of a disagreement with the concept of advancement through various means, or in the encouragement of thrift, hard work, education, and churchgoing as the way forward. Lack of debate suggests that working toward the economic, social, and political advancement of African Americans to the level at which they would secure equality with the white population in all respects was an essential goal of black life, even when the newspapers varied in the way in which they emphasized different paths to achieving uplift.

The chapter will discuss the changes in the black press and political and social developments in the black community in three parts. The first part will review the black press as an industry, initially as it existed in 1905, through a study of four newspapers published on one day. An examination of the contents and political stance of each newspaper, and its engagement with racial uplift, will provide an overview of the press at the start of this period of change. After around 1910 the press began to modernize, expanding its reach as new and influential players

joined its ranks. It also formed an industry association which sought to establish a degree of uniformity in setting commercial standards and promoting business viability on a national scale.

The second part will examine political changes, as new leadership groups exerted their influence out of a sense of deep frustration with a lack of progress, both in combatting racial violence against blacks, and in establishing African American political rights and social equality. Booker T. Washington became a lightning rod around which efforts to force political change developed within black leadership. Differences between the newspapers were expressed most clearly in the debate over whether to follow Washington's slow and steady "accommodationist" approach of advancing black interests within existing political parameters, or to support a more radical path to political equality.

The third part will examine the large population movement from the South to the North during World War I, which came to be known as the Great Migration. The press was closely engaged with this movement, to the extent that one newspaper became a major driver of the migration, and again press opinion was divided over its benefits. This time, newspaper coverage did not divide along pro- or anti-Booker T. Washington lines based on his politics, but along broader lines of the papers' adherence to his traditional uplift philosophy.

#### Review of four newspapers

A review of four newspapers published on June 3, 1905 shows that "the black press" was not a homogenous entity. The review reveals a number of similarities in layout and a shared promotion of racial uplift, but it also reveals that the newspapers, although published on the same day and presumably with access to the same news sources, took very different approaches to what they presented as "news." The papers are the *Savannah Tribune*, the *Cleveland Gazette*, the *Baltimore Afro-American Ledger* (later the *Afro-American*) and the *Indianapolis Freeman*. They were selected to reflect regional differences, if any, and the Midwestern papers were

selected as they represented two opposing political stances, i.e., pro- and anti-Booker T. Washington and Tuskegee. This selection of four newspapers is designed to be representative of the similarities and differences that existed among the many newspapers, of both short and long duration, that made up the black press in the early 1900s.

The four papers were all established between 1875 and 1892, so were stable and successful business enterprises in 1905. The year was chosen because it was well into the first decade of the twentieth century, but came before the establishment of two organizations to promote political equality and civil rights, namely the Niagara Movement and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. It was also before the entry of new newspapers and the formation of the National Negro Press Association, and before the launch of any major news syndication initiatives for the black press. The publication date was chosen because it fell toward the middle of the year, so as to be representative of the year 1905, and not as subject to any influences or news events that could have carried over from 1904.

Black newspapers in 1905 relied on text rather than headlines or illustrations to convey news stories, although some newspapers made more use of illustrations than others. The papers were little changed in appearance from newspapers in 1900, in that they did not rely on attention-grabbing headlines.<sup>3</sup> As in 1900, they distinguished themselves visually in masthead design, with some variation in the use of illustrations. The *Savannah Tribune* continued to adopt a plain layout, with a simple masthead across six columns, and no illustrations. The *Cleveland Gazette* had a more elaborate masthead, with an illustration of an eagle in the centre and the motto "In Union there is Strength." Although the paper was a seven-column sheet of close-set type, each of its four pages contained illustrations, making the paper visually appealing despite its more compressed format. The Baltimore *Afro-American Ledger* and the Indianapolis

<sup>3</sup> As newspapers were often run on small margins, one may wonder why they did not employ the more lucrative methods of the "yellow press" that used bold headlines and sensational copy to attract newsstand sales. In 1905, black newspapers were still relying on subscription sales, so would not have seen a need to use sensational copy and bold headlines. Their subscribers would have been educated and very likely middle class, and less likely to be swayed by sensationalism.

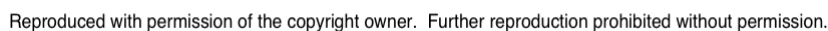


Figure 5: Indianapolis Freeman, June 3, 1905.



A brief outline of the background of each newspaper shows that, with minor exceptions, the owner/editors had business experience and often Republican party affiliations in common prior to their ventures into newspaper publishing. An examination of content, however, shows that similar backgrounds did not equate with shared editorial opinion, nor with newspaper content and focus. As mentioned in chapter one, the *Savannah Tribune* was established in 1875 by John H. Deveaux and Sol C. Johnson, both businessmen with Republican party interests, on a platform of "sustaining those who are battling for the cause of human rights."<sup>4</sup> Editor Sol Johnson supported Booker T. Washington but opposed his stance against African Americans actively seeking political equality.<sup>5</sup> The *Cleveland Gazette* was established in 1883 by Harry C. Smith, who, like Deveaux and Johnson, was closely involved with the Republican party and turned to journalism with a mission to shape and reflect the values of the black community.<sup>6</sup> He remained owner/editor of the *Gazette* until his death in 1941. Although a Republican, he too opposed Booker T. Washington's accommodationist stance. The *Afro-American* was established in 1892 by a company which went bankrupt in 1896. John H. Murphy, Sr., who had managed the printing department, bought the paper's printing machinery and kept the paper going. Although a small operation initially, with George Bragg as editor and Charles Stewart as columnist, the paper was never an owner/editor-run business, and operated as a company, raising capital through the sale of stock. The paper took a neutral stance toward Washington.<sup>7</sup> The *Freeman* was established in 1888 and sold to George Knox in 1892. Knox was active in the Republican party, owned several barber shops in Indianapolis, and embraced Washington-like values of thrift and self-reliance, which was reflected in the paper's content. He was also a strong supporter

<sup>4</sup> Alton Hornsby, Jr., "Georgia," in *The Black Press in the South, 1865-1979*, ed. Henry Lewis Suggs (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1983), 120.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 121.

<sup>6</sup> Summer E. Stevens and Owen V. Johnson, "From Black Politics to Black Community: Harry C. Smith and the *Cleveland Gazette*," *Journalism Quarterly* 67, no. 4 (1990).

<sup>7</sup> Haywood Farrar, *The Baltimore Afro-American, 1892-1950* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1998), 143. Farrar notes that there were ideological differences within the paper, between Murphy and Bragg, the former supporting and the latter opposing Booker T. Washington. He claims that the paper took a neutral approach in order to appeal to the differing opinions existing among the paper's readers, Baltimore's black elite.

of Booker T. Washington and Tuskegee.<sup>8</sup> The paper had a circulation of 16,000 in 1903, far outstripping its contemporaries, whose circulations were under 5,000, and was also distributed in the South.<sup>9</sup>

The newspapers will be examined by reviewing categories of content that typically engaged the black press, and which reflected the interests of the black community at the time. These are: news of the day; politics and race advocacy; business; education; and the church. This will enable a comparison to be made, to highlight common features of news presentation, or to show how each paper differed in content or editorial approach. The newspapers will also be analyzed according to the way in which they presented content related to racial uplift.

#### News of the day

The main news on June 3 was an international item, which was the defeat of the Russian navy by the Japanese in the Korea Strait, the body of water between southern Japan and the Korean peninsula. All four newspapers featured this event, but presented it in different ways. The *Savannah Tribune* included the news on the front page, and devoted much of the page and several articles to it, including Japan's future plans, celebrations in Tokyo, and discussions between the United States and British governments to broker peace. The *Cleveland Gazette* and *Afro-American* placed the item on page two, and included maps and logistical information about the defeat. Both papers devoted less space to this item than the *Tribune*, and included other international news that the *Tribune* neglected, such as an attempted assassination of the King of Spain and President of France in Paris, and a strike in Poland. International news appeared to be considered important, and each paper included detailed coverage of various events, even if their selections varied.

<sup>8</sup> Darrel E. Bigham, "The Black Press in Indiana, 1897-1985," in *The Black Press in the Middle West, 1865-1985*, ed. Henry Lewis Suggs (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1996), 57; Farrar, *The Baltimore Afro-American*, 144.

<sup>9</sup> Thornbrough, "American Negro Newspapers." This figure compares with a 1903 circulation of 5,000 for the *Cleveland Gazette*, and 2,400 for the *Afro-American*.

The defeat of the Russian navy by the Japanese was significant, as an important international event in itself, but also because it was the first time that a non-white country had defeated a white power. The Japanese victory had racial connotations, which the *Freeman* acknowledged editorially, but the other papers did not. This lack of editorial comment will become clearer in terms of the way in which the *Savannah Tribune* presented its news, as it preferred to take a neutral position on almost all issues. The lack of editorial comment is more surprising on the part of the *Cleveland Gazette*, which was otherwise vocal in discussing domestic race issues. The *Freeman* took a clear editorial position, stating that "the unexpected has happened," and "the color of the skin can no longer be regarded as an available asset in warfare." The victory, it claimed, would destroy "Caucasian conceit" that the white man must be the conqueror whenever pitted against another race.

Newspapers differed in which international news to feature, and not all of them published the same domestic news. Three of the newspapers reported on a news item from Chicago, where black teamsters who were employed as strike breakers had been attacked. The *Tribune* and the *Gazette* both reported the facts of the incident, but the *Freeman* again commented editorially, presenting the attack as a moral issue, and called on the church to become involved and oppose wrong wherever it was found. The *Afro-American* did not report the incident.

### Politics and race advocacy

The four newspapers differed in their political and racial commentary. The *Savannah Tribune*, the only Southern paper among the four, was the most reticent on both party politics and race. In his survey of black newspapermen in Georgia, John Matthews states that Sol Johnson did not engage in personal journalism of the type pursued by Harry Smith of the *Cleveland Gazette*, and reflected the interests of Savannah's middle-class black community. Matthews states that Johnson had political interests, and supported Republican party candidates, but after taking over as editor he devoted less content to politics and kept the paper "rather

sedate."<sup>10</sup> The *Tribune* included crime news, although the June 3 issue contained only one reference to lynching, which was reported in a neutral tone that gave the facts of the case, without apparent bias according to the race of the accused, or editorial comment, thereby avoiding controversy. The paper's avoidance of political news and editorial comment, which would normally be associated with a paper designed for sophisticated readers, could be a reflection of its location in the South, and Johnson's reticence on political issues could have been designed to avoid attracting unnecessary attention in view of the political restraints and physical intimidation that existed there. It could also have been a reflection of conservatism among the paper's middle-class readers who supported this "rather sedate" paper.<sup>11</sup>

Location may also have influenced the contents of the *Cleveland Gazette*, but in a very different way from the *Savannah Tribune*. The *Gazette* was the most outspoken on race issues, due to Harry Smith's interest in politics and race advocacy, but the paper's location in the North allowed him to express his opinions freely. The *Gazette* operated in an urban environment where there was still a degree of interdependence between the small African American community and white citizens, and race relations were comparatively good, giving Smith greater liberty to express his views.<sup>12</sup> The paper included an article on the front page comparing race relations in Jamaica favourably against those in the United States. It commented editorially that white Southern attitudes to race resulted in social terrorism. It also included an article deploring the lack of action in opposing a Louisiana disfranchisement amendment, the matter apparently having been "Booker Washingtonized," a reminder to readers that Smith opposed any move that appeared to be accommodationist.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Matthews, "Black Newspapermen."

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.; Hornsby, "Georgia," 126. The lack of party politics or race-related content, in this issue at least, contradicts Hornsby's claim that the paper was "an avowedly race paper" and that it devoted most of its space to politics. Matthews' description of the *Tribune* as rarely engaging in personal journalism and reflecting the interests of the black middle class appears to be a more accurate assessment based on the contents of this issue.

<sup>12</sup> Kenneth L. Kusmer, *A Ghetto Takes Shape: Black Cleveland, 1870-1930*. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1976), 252.

<sup>13</sup> Stephen Tuck, "Democratization and the Disfranchisement of African Americans in the U.S. South During the Late 19th Century," *Democratization* 14, no. 4 (2007). Tuck discusses moves by Southern political machines to

While the *Afro-American* was similar to the *Gazette* in its interest in politics, it was actively engaged in promoting involvement in the political process, whereas the *Gazette* focused on highlighting racial discrimination and inequality to make its political point. The main topic in this issue was organizing and getting out votes to oppose a disfranchisement amendment, and articles included a letter to women from the president of the Suffrage League urging their help in the vote drive.<sup>14</sup> In contrast, the *Freeman* did not include commentary on party politics, but expressed editorial opinion from a racial advocacy perspective, as in its presentation of the news about the defeat of the Russian navy by the Japanese. It also included a short piece stating that there had been thirteen lynchings in the South over the past six months.

### Business

Differences in political commentary also extended to differences in the papers' interest in business activities. While most of the editors had business backgrounds, business activities were not always featured. The *Afro-American* contained the most business news, publishing a "Financial" column of general news of a bankruptcy, director appointments, and insurance industry updates, and on another page general trade and business news, and commodity prices and quotes from both R.G. Dun's Weekly Review of Trade, as well as Bradstreet's comments on market conditions. There was also an article on a successful business owner who took care to get the most out of his employees' various talents by moving them to different roles in the organization, as "the man who stands still is a detriment to any business." The *Cleveland Gazette* included a small item on a bankruptcy hearing and another in which the International Railway Congress defended disparities in railway freight rates. Neither the *Savannah Tribune* nor the

claw back white political influence once the federal government had withdrawn its troops from the South following Reconstruction. Moves to disfranchise black voters began in the 1870s and gained particular momentum around the end of the nineteenth century. Tuck argues, in part, that blacks lacked sufficient social and economic power to effectively oppose disfranchisement moves. The *Gazette's* Harry Smith appeared to link Washington's accommodationist approach to this failure in Louisiana, rather than broader political and social factors that Tuck argues were responsible.

<sup>14</sup> Farrar, *The Baltimore Afro-American*, 144; Tuck, "Democratization." According to Farrar, opposing disfranchisement in Maryland was an *Afro-American* crusade. Tuck argues that the economic and political strength of the black population in Maryland enabled it to succeed in opposing disfranchise efforts there, where similar efforts had failed in, for example, Louisiana, as in the *Cleveland Gazette* article.

*Freeman* included any day-to-day business news. This omission is curious, as Sol Johnson had a wide range of business and fraternal interests outside the *Tribune*.<sup>15</sup> George Knox of the *Freeman* had been a successful businessman before becoming editor, yet the paper chose not to include business activities, and instead devoted a column to the interests of a single occupation, which is discussed below.

### Education

The papers differed widely on their presentation of education, from ignoring it to promoting it heavily. The *Savannah Tribune* and the *Cleveland Gazette* were unconcerned with education, which was surprising in that education was one of the core principles of racial uplift. Despite being the season for school graduation ceremonies, neither paper included any article devoted to the topic. Possibly differences in interest in education related to the editors' personal inclinations, although in the case of the *Cleveland Gazette*, education was perhaps less important as a news item in Cleveland, which enjoyed integrated school facilities at this time.<sup>16</sup> Integration, however, cannot explain the lack of interest expressed in the *Savannah Tribune*. In contrast, the *Afro-American* and the *Freeman* emphasized educational achievement. The large illustration of a graduate on the front page of the *Freeman* indicated the importance it placed on education as a stepping stone to a successful future. It also included on page two a two-column section entitled "Education Notes" that included a six-verse poem dedicated to Tuskegee graduates, and notices of commencement exercises.

The *Afro-American* shared the *Freeman*'s interest in education, and devoted space to education on more than one page. The front page featured the graduation ceremony at the Maryland Agricultural and Industrial School, including the program and a photograph of the reverend giving the commencement address, and also a detailed description of the commencement exercises of the Agricultural and Mechanical College in Normal, Alabama, and

<sup>15</sup> Matthews, "Black Newspapermen."

<sup>16</sup> Kusmer, *A Ghetto Takes Shape*, 99.

a list of those who had been awarded degrees. Despite its location in Baltimore, the paper's highlighting of two schools engaged in agricultural and industrial education reflect the editor's desire to appeal to the interests of readers who supported Booker T. Washington's educational philosophy.

### Church

Each newspaper included church news, because, as historian Alton Hornsby states, the church could not be separated from other aspects of black community life, and played an integral part in black social, economic, and educational activities.<sup>17</sup> Again, however, the papers varied in the degree of emphasis they placed on reporting church news. The *Savannah Tribune* limited church content to the practicalities of times of services and brief notices of church social events. The *Cleveland Gazette* included a small article about the establishment of a non-denominational church, and another piece criticizing political moves among several churches which, the paper claimed, would turn away African American members. True to form, editor Harry Smith used the article to focus on a potential racial discrimination issue. Church news featured most prominently in the *Afro-American*. It included an article about members of a white church coming to the aid of a disabled member of a black church by helping to plant his garden, after which the two churches held a joint banquet and made speeches on "Good Citizenship," "Race Unity," and "Our Growth." The paper also included a regular column entitled "The Sunday School," which contained a long bible extract that formed the week's lesson, and commentary on the lesson. The *Freeman* published notices of church services and social events, and also highlighted the community leadership activities of a number of churches in an article on black communities in the western part of the state.

<sup>17</sup> Hornsby, "Georgia," 124.

*Presentation of uplift content*

As part of their mission to inform and educate, each of the newspapers included a range of uplift content, but again, the focus and the way in which it was presented differed. Uplift content can be categorized into two types: prescriptive, where it was promoted in the form of a directive; and implied, where it was presented in the form of accepted class or behavioural standards, that is, what would be considered by the papers to be norms of middle-class respectability and therefore requiring no specific interpretation.

The *Savannah Tribune* presented uplift in both forms. As mentioned in chapter one, *Tribune* editor Sol Johnson was heavily involved in Prince Hall Masonry, an organization dedicated to both self-improvement and to charitable and other activities supporting African American progress. All of page two of the paper was taken up with news related to Masons and Knights of Pythias, under the heading "Masonic Notes." This information in the column was highly prescriptive, and was less concerned with news of the organizations' activities than it was a list of instructions to local Masonic societies. These included directives to establish meeting houses, to ensure that each member arrived at meetings on time, and also to be vigilant against allowing the "wrong" kind of people to become members: "Masonry appeals only to the better element in each locality," and, "The greed for numbers should not be offset by quality."<sup>18</sup> These quotes clearly show the class-consciousness of the organizations and a desire to preserve class status and respectability by restricting membership.

In other areas in the *Tribune*, uplift was implied. For example, the paper's emphasis on international news, and other articles reprinted from mainstream and international newspapers on subjects dealing with modernity and technology, suggest that it recognized its audience as educated and intelligent, with interests beyond Savannah and the South. Its complete lack of

<sup>18</sup> William A. Muraskin, *Middle-Class Blacks in a White Society: Prince Hall Freemasonry in America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975). Muraskin sets out in some detail the importance placed on preserving middle-class respectability and strict standards of private and public deportment, as well as economic success, as conditions for Prince Hall membership.



editorial comment suggests that it considered readers sophisticated enough to form their own opinions about the news.<sup>19</sup>

The *Cleveland Gazette* presented its uplift content as implied, and framed it around political successes to encourage racial pride. The various articles included in this issue suggest that the racial situation in Ohio was much more egalitarian than it appeared to be in other cities, even in the North. The June 3 issue reported on legal action taken by an Ohio attorney against a railroad company that forced him to ride in a Jim Crow car, and the success of civil rights legislation in New York that the paper claimed was almost identical to the law operating in Ohio.<sup>20</sup> The *Gazette* also highlighted personal achievements, describing appointments of African Americans to government positions and to the police force, and promotions and editorial changes at other black newspapers.

The *Afro-American* contained the most balanced ratio of news, politics, and business. It presented racial uplift in prescriptive and implied forms, the former in expressing the opinion that Maryland people behaved appropriately (i.e., not standing around on street corners) and were willing to work hard. It presented more implied uplift content in the form of educational achievements and in the paper's expectation that its readers would participate in local politics, and that they would embrace Christianity.

The Indianapolis *Freeman* was the outlier in terms of uplift content. As a newspaper, the most obvious difference from the other papers was that it contained no "news," and many of the articles were given a racial uplift perspective that was not seen in the other papers. For example, while the *Freeman* made reference to the Russian navy's defeat and the Chicago teamsters incident, each item was reported in the form of editorial opinion, and the opinion pieces were

<sup>19</sup> Schudson, *Discovering the News*, 90.

<sup>20</sup> Larry Cuban, "A Strategy for Racial Peace: Negro Leadership in Cleveland, 1900-1919," *Phylon* 28, no. 3 (1967). Cleveland enjoyed relatively peaceful race relations, integrated schools, and black voting rights. It was not unusual for African Americans to hold political appointments through Republican Party patronage. *Gazette* editor Harry Smith served two terms in the Ohio State Legislature, and had steered the Civil Rights law through the General Assembly in 1896.

concerned with opportunities, progress, and racial pride. R.W. Thompson, who had been with the *Colored American* paper before moving to a position in the Census Office in 1900, had returned to the newspaper industry and wrote a number of columns for the *Freeman*, one of which was "Thompson's Weekly Review," on page one. The column was a series of editorial opinions on the latest news, not reports of the events themselves. In his commentary on the attack on the Chicago teamsters, he stated that the paper was in favour of open-shop work practices, and supported the black strike-breakers' action because "nearly every strike has opened up opportunity for the race," in that, while unpopular, strike-breaking was a means to an end: African Americans who were hired as strike breakers were given work opportunities where they could demonstrate their abilities and, by implication, go on to secure permanent positions. Where a man was given "an opportunity to vindicate his manhood" he "made good." It seemed that the paper's objective was to establish a belief that the right attitude could turn a negative situation into an opportunity.

The *Freeman's* approach to presenting racial uplift content was much less subtle than the other papers, and was prescriptive. Almost every article was used to make a point about personal or social improvement. One example was an article in the paper's "Woman's World" section, entitled "When Not to Talk." The article advised that it was better to remain silent than risk wounding someone with a hurtful comment, to avoid gossip, and to avoid talking about oneself.<sup>21</sup> Other examples of the prescriptive approach appeared in "The Waiter" and "Stage" columns. Columns under bylines were a unique feature of the *Freeman* at the time. "The Waiter" column, edited by W. Forrest Cozart, was devoted specifically to the interests of this profession.<sup>22</sup> In this issue, the column described moves being made by some establishments to replace their black waiters and domestics with white staff, and suggested that the reason they

<sup>21</sup> While this piece was probably directed at women, based on its inclusion in the women's section, advice on behaviour was not limited to women, as seen in the advice given to waiters that follows.

<sup>22</sup> David M. Katzman, *Before the Ghetto: Black Detroit in the Nineteenth Century* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1973), 112. W. Forrest Cozart was president of the Head and Second Waiters' Association.

were being replaced was the "instability of the Negro." The article laid the blame at the feet of those with "no disposition among them to win permanency in any occupation." The column also included an address by George L. Lange, the head waiter at the Colored Hotel, Cleveland, before the Head, Second and Side Waiters' Convention in Pittsburgh. The address criticized head waiters for becoming too close to their staff, by drinking with them after work hours, lending them money, and otherwise failing to maintain a distance that would establish a degree of respect for their seniority: "Clean your hearts and your costumes and your men will be compelled to walk straight." The same combination of news and admonition appeared in "The Stage" column, written by Sylvester Russell.<sup>23</sup> In addition to general theatre news, the paper included a piece in which Russell defended himself against those who did not agree with his stage reviews. He pleaded his case in the cause of uplift, saying that his criticisms of those who did not behave as gentlemen were expressed for the purpose of improving the image of the stage.

While newspapers felt a shared obligation to present racial uplift as part of their mission, they approached it in a way that reflected the political interests of the editors, such as Harry Smith and George Knox, or the politics of the paper's readers, in the case of the *Afro-American Ledger*. George Knox, of the *Freeman*, was a strong supporter of Booker T. Washington and Tuskegee, and this support was evident in the way that much of the newspaper's content was formulated as lessons in taking personal responsibility and maintaining respectability. Harry Smith of the *Gazette* preferred to promote uplift in terms of generating race pride and calling attention to political developments that either favoured or hindered race advancement. The *Afro-American* was a blend of the two approaches, as it attempted to reconcile its editor's negative personal opinion of Booker T. Washington with his readers' approval of Washington's uplift approach. In contrast, the *Savannah Tribune's* focus on uplift was closely related to its editor's

<sup>23</sup> Russell's byline and photograph later appeared above the "Musical and Dramatic" column in the *Chicago Defender*.

involvement in fraternal society activities and commercial business, and did not overtly promote a Washington or Tuskegee uplift philosophy to its middle-class readers.

As the above overview shows, each newspaper contained a similar range of content, and shared a mission to present uplifting content for the benefit of its readers, but closer examination reveals that the black press was made up of papers that took a diverse range of approaches to presenting a common range of subject matter. The North-South divide that existed at the time in terms of political repression appeared to have a lesser impact on content than the political opinions of individual editors. It was easier to be outspoken politically in the North, yet not all Northern papers were outspoken on politics, and not all editors considered their papers as their own mouthpieces. The era of the newspaper as a reflection of the personality of the owner/editor did, however, continue for some years, even as the industry grew and gained wider influence. This is especially evident in the evolution of the *Chicago Defender*.

#### New players and industry consolidation

*"I am anxious to have an office of my own, not so much for my benefit but for the name of our school and office. I am now trying to start an office here also a weekly paper." Robert Abbott, Chicago, August 14, 1901*<sup>24</sup>

What appeared to be almost an afterthought for Robert Abbott in 1901 evolved into his weekly paper, the *Chicago Defender*, which made its appearance in 1905. With an initial run of 300 copies, little did Abbott or his one paid subscriber imagine that the *Defender* would become the most influential black newspaper in the country in just over a decade.<sup>25</sup> The four newspapers

<sup>24</sup> Robert S. Abbott to C.W. Betts, August 14 1901, Box 4, Folder 4-32. Abbott-Sengstacke Family Papers (Chicago Public Library, Woodson Regional Library, Vivian G. Harsh Research Collection of Afro-American History and Literature). [Hereafter Abbott-Sengstacke Family Papers]. "Our school" refers to Hampton Institute, of which C.W. Betts was principal.

<sup>25</sup> "Some Interesting Facts About a Great Newspaper." Box 11, Folder 11-4. Abbott-Senstacke Family Papers; Joel E. Black, "A Theory of African-American Citizenship: Richard Westbrooks, the Great Migration, and the *Chicago*

from 1905 had not changed in format and content since 1900, and the early issues of the *Defender* were laid out in similar fashion, with seven columns over four pages, a plain masthead, and few illustrations. Robert Abbott's decision to start a newspaper was ambitious, as there were already ten newspapers catering to Chicago's black population of 44,000.<sup>26</sup> The paper's first run would not have an impact on the market initially, but by 1910 it was firmly established, and had added a distinguishing feature in the form of a line printed above the masthead, rivalling it in font size, advertising the fact that "-,000 people have read Chicago's only weekly paper." The number was updated each week, and was over 25,000 by the end of the year.<sup>27</sup> This boastful claim as Chicago's only weekly paper ignored the fact that the *Defender's* newspaper rivals were still very much in existence, and it signalled the paper's early efforts to differentiate itself.<sup>28</sup>

Robert Abbott further consolidated the *Defender's* position as a disruptive force in the black newspaper industry when, around 1910, he hired J. Hockley Smiley, a journalist with skills in editing and design. The appearance of the paper began to change under Hockley's guidance, with news and features consolidated into sections.<sup>29</sup> By 1914 the *Defender* had adopted many of the practices of the more sensational mainstream newspapers published by the Hearst and Pulitzer companies, such as eye-catching content on page one, announced in large headlines in red ink across the full width of the front page. This approach had the immediate effect of boosting newsstand sales and positioning the *Defender* well ahead of the competition for readers, and establishing it as the most influential national black newspaper for many years.<sup>30</sup>

*Defender's* 'Legal Helps' Column," *Journal of Social History* 46, no. 4 (2013). Black estimates the *Defender* sold 16,000 copies each week by 1915. Its influence, particularly in promoting the Great Migration, is discussed below.

<sup>26</sup> Rathbun, "Rise of the Modern American Negro Press," 225-26.

<sup>27</sup> Ethan Michaeli, *The Defender: How the Legendary Black Newspaper Changed America* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2016), 27. Abbott calculated this figure by multiplying the actual number of papers sold by the number of times he assumed each copy was passed on to someone else.

<sup>28</sup> Rathbun, "Rise of the Modern American Negro Press," 226. Rathbun lists newspapers that were published in Chicago, and includes three papers that were launched in Chicago in 1910, and one that had ceased publication by 1910.

<sup>29</sup> Michaeli, *The Defender*, 27.

<sup>30</sup> Alan D DeSantis, "A Forgotten Leader: Robert S. Abbott and the *Chicago Defender* from 1910-1920," *Journalism History* 23, no. 2 (1997).



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Figure 6: Chicago Defender February 12, 1916; A typical front page showing the paper's modern layout.

Despite its radical approach to presentation, the *Defender* could be described as a hybrid, in that Robert Abbott was a supporter of Booker T. Washington and his approach to racial uplift, yet he was also very outspoken on race issues. The paper combined the race politics of the

*Cleveland Gazette*, which did not hesitate to publicize racial inequality on its front page, with the more measured politics of the *Afro-American*, which had an editor with radical opinions but a conservative readership that supported Booker T. Washington. On its inside pages, the *Defender* also took a prescriptive approach to racial uplift, such as was found in the *Freeman*. The clearest display of the combination of sensational headlines and prescriptive racial uplift was seen a few years later, during the Great Migration, when the *Defender* often headlined lynchings on the front page as motivation to leave the South, but also included on its inside pages lists of instructions on maintaining proper public behaviour once migrants began arriving in the North.<sup>31</sup>

Other influential and long-lived newspapers were also established around the time the *Defender* began to leap ahead in circulation, and remained viable and influential well into mid-century. They were the *New York Amsterdam News* (1909); the *Pittsburgh Courier* (1910); and the *Norfolk Journal and Guide* (1910).<sup>32</sup> The *Amsterdam News* rivalled the *Chicago Defender* in its bold headlines and sensational content, but the *Pittsburgh Courier* stayed close to the accepted norms of the black press at the time, with a plain layout and a large proportion of uplift content on page one.<sup>33</sup> The *Norfolk Journal and Guide* also retained the old style. It was a conservative paper with a strong editorial component that reflected the view of its owner/editor P.B. Young that the paper should be a link between the races. Young became a respected opinion leader, and his editorials were often reprinted in the mainstream press.<sup>34</sup> By the 1920s, it appeared that both the *Pittsburgh Courier* and the *Norfolk Journal and Guide* had succumbed to the commercial imperative that bold headlines sold newspapers, as both had adopted bold headlines on page one, even as inside content remained conservative.

<sup>31</sup> James R. Grossman, *Land of Hope: Chicago, Black Southerners and the Great Migration* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 81, 145.

<sup>32</sup> Both the *Pittsburgh Courier* and the *Norfolk Journal and Guide* had existed in earlier forms under different names, as a small paper under different ownership in the case of the *Courier*, and as a lodge paper in the case of the *Journal and Guide*, but both took their final forms and ownership in 1910.

<sup>33</sup> Although maintaining a conservative appearance, by 1911 the *Pittsburgh Courier* was copying the *Chicago Defender* in boasting, in a line above the masthead, the number of its weekly readers. By the 1920s the *New York Amsterdam News* rivalled the *Chicago Defender* in bold headlines and sensational content, but it is not clear when it adopted this practice, as there is a lack of accessible copies of the newspaper before the 1920s.

<sup>34</sup> Suggs, P.B. *Young Newspaperman*, 24, 119.

Although newspapers operated as independent businesses, they also recognized their common role as the voice of the black community and their duty to promote its interests. In their desire to expand circulation and increase their influence, many newspapers recognized the benefits of uniting as a professional body, which they did through the National Negro Press Association. The Association was established in 1909, as an extension of Booker T. Washington's National Negro Business League.<sup>35</sup> Typically of Washington, the NNBL and NNPA were established without overt aims of securing political equality, but with the objective of gaining strength, and eventually acceptance, through economic success.<sup>36</sup> Earlier press organizations, such as the Afro-American Press Convention, established in 1881, and a later incarnation, the National Afro-American Press Association, had been quite politically aggressive in their activities, but the aim of the new National Negro Press Association was to concentrate on developing the press as a viable business.<sup>37</sup> The *Afro-American* reported on the Association's second annual meeting, and noted that R.W. Thompson had been named as its first president.<sup>38</sup> The article stated that the charter members of the Association included "some of the race's strongest molders of public sentiment." It also noted that all discussions at the meeting would be limited to the business side of journalism, on common ground that would allow the meeting to proceed "with a minimum of friction and the accomplishment of the most productive results." The Association comprised a number of departments that were headed by well-known figures in the press and society: T. Thomas Fortune of the *New York Age* led "Editorial and New Policies,"

<sup>35</sup> "Louisville, Ky," *New York Age*, May 9 1912. The *Age* notes the National Negro Press Association and the National Negro Bar Association as new extensions of the Business League.

<sup>36</sup> John Howard Burrows, "The Necessity of Myth: A History of the National Negro Business League, 1900-1945," (PhD Dissertation, Auburn University, 1977), 67. Burrows discusses the "gospel of wealth" in which Washington links Christian belief with the imperative to become financially successful.

<sup>37</sup> Meier, *Negro Thought in America*, 38, 72; "Negro Press Association," *Afro-American Ledger*, July 4 1903; "Negro Press Association," *Afro-American Ledger*, July 11 1908. Meier discusses political statements issued by the Convention on different occasions. The first newspaper article describes a politically charged address to the pre-1909 Association by T. Thomas Fortune of the *New York Age* which praised President Theodore Roosevelt and called anyone who was a Democrat "a cur." The second article announces the intention to establish a new press organization focused on promoting the welfare of the newspaper industry, as politics and party alignments were individual concerns.

<sup>38</sup> "Negro Press Association: Second Annual Meeting to Be Held in New York Aug 16," *Afro-American Ledger*, August 13 1910.



George L. Knox of the Indianapolis *Freeman* led "Circulation Building," and civil rights activist and educator Mary Church Terrell led "Women's Work in Journalism." The work of these and other departments formed the basis of the discussions at each annual meeting, which was held at the same time as the annual meeting of the National Negro Business League.<sup>39</sup>

The press that was not inclined to follow Booker T. Washington greeted the new organization with some contempt. The Chicago *Broad Ax* was particularly hostile, using personal attacks on the organization's leadership to make its point. Owner/editor Julius P. Taylor referred to Washington as "Booker Taft Washington," because Taylor objected to Washington's support of President Taft, and referred to Washington's private secretary as "little Emmett J. Scott."<sup>40</sup> He made his position against Washington's apparent political influence clear in a smaller headline above the article that described R.W. Thompson as follows: "Richard W. Thompson, who holds a government job at Washington DC by the grace of the political boss of Tuskegee and who is incapable of conducting or running a newspaper of his own." The *Cleveland Gazette*, while refraining from personal attacks, made its opposition to Washington clear by deriding the "national" scope of the Association in one article, and brushing it off as "fake" in another. On two occasions in 1911, however, the *Broad Ax* published letters from the Association announcing the production of a press directory that called for publications to provide details of annual business volume, circulation, number of employees, and other relevant information. It also published a notice of the upcoming annual meeting.<sup>41</sup> These actions suggest that the *Broad*

<sup>39</sup> "Negro Business League," *Afro-American Ledger*, July 30 1904; "Editors in Line for Convention," *Pittsburgh Courier*, August 12 1911. The first article mentions that G.E. Knox, editor of the Indianapolis *Freeman*, was in charge of local arrangements for the fifth annual meeting. The second article includes some history of the National Negro Press Association, and the interest of its members in the National Negro Business League, which led to both organizations meeting at the same time and place each year.

<sup>40</sup> "Booker Taft Washington Re-Elected President of His Negro National Business League," *Broad Ax*, August 28 1909.

<sup>41</sup> "President's Office," *Broad Ax*, March 18 1911; "Special Notice," *Broad Ax*, June 10 1911; "Newspaper Men to Meet in Little Rock," *Broad Ax*, August 5 1911; Allan H. Spear, *Black Chicago: The Making of a Negro Ghetto 1890-1920* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967), 83. Spear notes that *Broad Ax* editor Julius Taylor adopted a friendlier tone toward Booker T. Washington after 1910, when Washington became less partisan and more focused on education.

Ax was ambivalent, in that despite its opposition to Washington, it recognized the benefits of the organization to the extent that it was willing to publicize its activities.

The Association lived up to its business mission, and newspaper articles on its annual proceedings described efforts to improve the quality of advertising, and efforts to stabilize and grow subscriptions, signalling a new maturity and the intention to overcome personal differences for the good of the industry. An early effort at cooperation was evident in calls to establish a news exchange service, where each paper would, through its own correspondents in each state, prepare and forward news to out-of-state publications, thus making "home" news available throughout the country.<sup>42</sup> This was an early attempt to establish a national news service and strengthen relationships between papers. It would also enhance the press's community-building role by allowing migrants to feel connected to their communities back home. (The practice of including social news from around the country continued in the major papers into the 1950s.) Newspapers had always included articles taken from mainstream or overseas newspapers, but syndication of local news was the first step in sharing content designed specifically for African American newspapers. This was further developed with the establishment of the Associated Negro Press news service, an independent organization, in 1919.<sup>43</sup>

### Political developments and the press

Booker T. Washington cannot be separated from the history of the black press up to the period of the First World War (he died in 1915). As discussed in chapter one, Washington expressed his support for census participation through a number of newspapers, and the newspapers supported his objective of using the census as a means of establishing evidence of

<sup>42</sup> "National Negro Press Association's Ambition," *Afro-American Ledger*, December 7 1912; "'Bad Pay' Advertisers, Subscribers and Agents to Be Blacklisted," *Philadelphia Tribune*, February 8 1913.

<sup>43</sup> Jason Chambers, *Madison Avenue and the Color Line: African Americans in the Advertising Industry* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), 26. ANP founder Claude Barnett recognized a business opportunity in providing successful national newspapers with syndicated content. More details about his business are provided in chapter three. Newspapers encouraged Claude Barnett to establish a news service, although not the *Chicago Defender*, which feared competition for its national circulation.

race progress. Historian Kenneth M. Hamilton describes Washington as a "magnetic, philanthropic leader" who emphasized hard work, self-denial, conscientiousness, frugality, and education, and who taught that success was possible for all who adopted these principles.<sup>44</sup> Haywood Farrar describes him as "possessing more power over the black community than any other black leader before or since."<sup>45</sup> Washington's position as de facto black leader and his practical application of uplift tenets in his work with the Tuskegee Institute, the centre of African American industrial education, necessarily associates him with racial uplift efforts in the first decades of the century. His approach to racial uplift did not, however, extend to the masses taking political action to improve their position. He believed that African Americans, the vast majority of whom lived in the South and were poor tenant farmers or unskilled labourers, should concentrate their efforts on achieving self-sufficiency, economic independence, and enough education to invite respect from whites, who would eventually grant political concessions. This "accommodationist" philosophy sought to convince whites that they had no cause to fear any change to the current state of black subordination.

Although a broad segment of the black community considered Booker T. Washington their leader and therefore the person most qualified to represent their interests, to others he was a threat to racial advancement because of his apparent acquiescence to white power under worsening political and social conditions, and because of his supposed manipulation of his position for personal ends. Louis R. Harlan, who has written extensively about Washington, presents the conflict between Washington and his opponents from two perspectives: class, and Washington's relationship with whites. Washington's support of a passive proletariat content to engage in racial uplift within the narrow confines of its assigned status invited opposition from other black leaders as the "stifling of an emergent black educated elite," who should be the

<sup>44</sup> Kenneth M. Hamilton, *Booker T. Washington in American Memory*, (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2017), 38.

<sup>45</sup> Farrar, *The Baltimore Afro-American*, 142.

rightful leaders of the masses.<sup>46</sup> These opponents also accused him of pandering to white interests, but Harlan argues that Washington recognized that his leadership depended on his recognition by whites as the black leader.<sup>47</sup> Washington's influence was such that historians of the black press tend to classify newspapers as "pro-Washington" or "anti-Washington," and respectively "conservative" or "radical" as a result.<sup>48</sup> Support for or opposition to Booker T. Washington represented the main political division in African American society rather than a division along political party lines, as the great majority of African Americans, and the black press, supported the Republican party. In the press, however, support for the Republican party did not necessarily equate with support for Booker T. Washington.<sup>49</sup> While Washington played a key role in promoting racial uplift through his Tuskegee Institute and public relations activities supporting uplift goals, whether a newspaper supported or opposed him lay in an objection to his position as de facto spokesperson for African Americans, and the way in which he used his position of influence with whites to secure what some considered were self-serving ends.

In August, 1910 Booker T. Washington addressed the eleventh meeting of the National Negro Business League. His speech was reprinted in full in the *Chicago Defender*.<sup>50</sup> The speech praised the black press for its support of black business, then described the needs of the black community in order to advance: by acquiring property, exercising thrift, and acquiring an industrial education. Washington's message was little changed from ten years before, when he explained the importance of property ownership in encouraging participation in the 1900 census, and offered nothing new to his audience to boost prospects for African Americans. Political and

<sup>46</sup> Harlan, "Booker T. Washington and the Politics of Accommodation," 8.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid. 9.

<sup>48</sup> Farrar, *The Baltimore Afro-American*. 143. Farrar describes August Meier's use of the term "radical" in the black press as indicative of a position opposing Booker T. Washington.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 143; Stevens and Johnson, "From Black Politics to Black Community: Harry C. Smith and the *Cleveland Gazette*;" Matthews, "Black Newspapermen;" Hornsby, "Georgia," 121. Each of these newspaper overviews makes reference to the respective papers' support for or opposition to Booker T. Washington. *Cleveland Gazette* owner/editor Harry C. Smith made his opposition to Washington clear in the *Gazette's* pages. Hornsby notes that the *Savannah Tribune* rejected Washington's promotion of accommodation as the best strategy for blacks. Both Hornsby and Matthews discuss the *Tribune's* editors' involvement in Republican politics, and the paper's encouragement of voting.

<sup>50</sup> "Negro Business League," *Chicago Defender*, August 20 1910.

social conditions had shown no improvement over the course of the decade, and lynching and terrorism continued unabated in the South.

By the time of Washington's speech, those who were increasingly frustrated with his lack of political activism, his influence peddling, and his control over some of the black press, had come together to oppose what came to be known as the Tuskegee Machine because of its widespread influence.<sup>51</sup> There had been little group opposition or organized calls for political action in the first years of the new century, with the exception of the Afro-American League, later the Afro-American Council, established by the *New York Age's* T. Thomas Fortune in 1898. The Council was the last remnant of the Convention system that had flourished from around 1830, where black leaders had come together to debate political and social issues of concern to African Americans.<sup>52</sup> After starting out with a radical program to agitate for political rights and promote self-help, the Council changed its tone and became more conservative as it came under Washington's influence, and had dissipated by 1908.<sup>53</sup>

The new political direction took shape under the Niagara Movement, which was formed in 1905 by W.E.B. Du Bois. Its objective was to address the lack of progress in achieving political equality for African Americans, and to counter Washington's influence. Disillusioned with Washington's subjugation of black interests to his popularity with white political and business leaders, Du Bois, initially a follower of Washington, had by this time come to believe that it was time for direct political action. He called on members of his so-called Talented Tenth, a cohort of highly educated men he felt were suited to leading the masses to a higher level of political awareness, to join together to promote a radical political and social agenda.<sup>54</sup> Twenty-nine African American activist intellectuals with backgrounds in law, education, and publishing

<sup>51</sup> W.E. Burghardt Du Bois, *The Autobiography of W.E.B. Du Bois* (New York: International Publishers, Inc., 1983), 239. Du Bois claims to have coined the term Tuskegee Machine because of its network of control over information, funding, and political appointments.

<sup>52</sup> Meier, *Negro Thought in America*, 71.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 129-30.

<sup>54</sup> Du Bois, *Autobiography*, 247.

met at Fort Erie, Ontario (in a hotel beyond the reach of Jim Crow), to develop and promote an agenda with a list of aims that included full manhood suffrage, the abolition of caste distinctions based on race and color, the promotion of education, due process of the law, and a free, unencumbered press.<sup>55</sup>

Newspapers of all political shades reported on the development of the organization. Newspapers in 1905 were shown to have differences in the way they presented racial uplift, and in their opinions of Washington. These differences extended to their engagement with the Niagara Movement, but not in ways that may have been expected based on their June 3 contents. They showed themselves to be independent thinkers who were prepared to weigh a situation on its merits, and did not divide strictly along pro- or anti-Washington lines. The Movement had the immediate support of the *Cleveland Gazette*, as editor Harry Smith was a founding member, along with William Monroe Trotter of the Boston *Guardian*.<sup>56</sup> The *Gazette* published the full mission statement, as did the *Broad Ax* and the *Washington Bee*.<sup>57</sup> The politically middle-of-the-road *Afro-American Ledger* was "with the movement heart and soul," and declared "it would have been utterly impossible to have made a better selection" of leader than Dr. Du Bois. It qualified its support, however, by also declaring its long-standing opinion that Washington was right in his decision to avoid the suffrage issue, in that he was taking what he believed was the best course of action, but that there was a need for another leader to take up the fight for suffrage. This alternative leadership role was now manifested in the Niagara Movement.<sup>58</sup>

The *Freeman* seemed ambivalent about Du Bois. A declared supporter of Booker T. Washington, it reported on August 5 the formation of the Niagara Movement by "Prof. W.E.B.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 248-9.

<sup>56</sup> Meier, *Negro Thought in America*, 180.

<sup>57</sup> "Like Niagara Is This Splendid Address to the Country of the New National Organization Noted," *Cleveland Gazette*, July 22 1905; "The Niagara Movement," *Washington Bee*, July 22 1905; "The Niagara Movement New National Organization for Race Weal Launched at Buffalo," *Broad Ax*, August 5 1905.

<sup>58</sup> "The Niagara Movement," *Afro-American Ledger*, July 29 1905. This expression of both sides of the argument supports Haywood Farrar's statement that there was a difference of opinion within the paper regarding Washington and the Movement, and that the paper needed to appeal to readers of both persuasions.

Du Bois, author of the 'Souls of Black Folk.'" Typically, it avoided the political agenda of the Movement, simply noting that the group had formed committees "to work for the welfare of the colored people" and that it had adopted a platform "espousing equality in education."<sup>59</sup> Two weeks later, however, it took a political stand, and published a long article criticizing the press for taking sides over the Movement while not addressing its merits or the issues it stood for, and condemned press criticism of "Mr. Du Bois."<sup>60</sup> The paper acknowledged that its files contained "sufficient proof of our esteem for Mr. Washington," but that it was not prepared to "throw mud at all who may disagree with us," stating that it wished to remain neutral and faithful to the principle of "equal rights to all-special privileges to none." In other words, it was prepared to accept that there was room for varying viewpoints in the fight for progress.

The Niagara Movement failed within four years, mainly due to poor organization, as Du Bois acknowledged.<sup>61</sup> Many of those who did not sympathize with the protest tone of the Movement, or who wished to maintain a neutral position, avoided association with it, and William Monroe Trotter's personal vindictiveness against Washington eventually alienated him from many black leaders, including Du Bois. The *Freeman*, in an editorial in July 1907, provided a prescient analysis of the Movement that sheds light on why it eventually failed.<sup>62</sup> The *Freeman's* point was that both Washington and Du Bois wished for the same outcome, but each had hold of one of the two horns of a dilemma. The paper criticized the Movement's aim to achieve "the utmost liberty," and its assumption that "they would have right because it is right in the eyes of man's and the moral law." The Movement was rash in its intent to "cut through the Gordian knot and not untie it." The members' mistake was to discount the reality of prejudice

<sup>59</sup> "Race Gleanings," *Freeman*, August 5 1905.

<sup>60</sup> "The Niagara Movement," *Freeman*, August 19 1905.

<sup>61</sup> Du Bois, *Autobiography*, 253; Susan D. Carle, *Defining the Struggle: National Organizing for Racial Justice, 1880-1915* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 211; Fox, *The Guardian of Boston*, 113. Du Bois describes "the dynamic personality of Trotter" and his own inexperience in managing an organization as reasons for the failure of the Movement. Carle suggests that Du Bois came to the conclusion that the Talented Tenth, who constituted the Movement's membership, were not natural leaders. Fox cites poor organization, a lack of headquarters, and a strident protest tone that was difficult for the majority of blacks to embrace.

<sup>62</sup> "At the Editor's Desk. The Niagara Movement," *Freeman*, July 27 1907.

and accept that blacks were "a subject race" in the United States, and were therefore dependent on whites to change their attitudes. Unfortunately, the editorial concluded, history offered no solution, it was up to God: "We are optimistic enough to believe that God will evolve a plan as He did when He sent Abraham Lincoln into the world."

The Movement's expectations of political accommodation were, as the *Freeman* hinted, simply out of touch with the reality experienced by the vast majority of African Americans.<sup>63</sup> The leadership approaches of both Washington and Du Bois failed to the extent that neither approaches were broad enough to address the needs of all African Americans. Washington's promotion of practical methods of achieving racial uplift for the majority resonated for generations, and there is no doubt that he was a skilled politician, which Du Bois acknowledged.<sup>64</sup> Washington's failure was in a lack of intellectual leadership of vision and ideals, and in alienating potential allies through his political maneuvering and self-interest.<sup>65</sup> Du Bois, in contrast, was an intellectual leader who had vision and ideals in abundance, but lacked "the common touch." He also approached leadership from a class perspective, but from the top down. Susan Carle argues that Du Bois made assumptions about a correlation between social class and character, where he believed that intellectual sophistication would be sufficient to address social and political problems.<sup>66</sup> Du Bois' failure, however, did not mark the end of the use of class differences in the construction of uplift narratives, as will be seen in later decades.

The failure of the Niagara Movement marked the end of an era where a single, charismatic individual was able to speak for African American interests. Charismatic leadership gave way to group efforts to promote advancement, and this became the dominant approach until the brief period when Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. became the acknowledged leader in the 1960s.

<sup>63</sup> The *Freeman's* recognition that the majority of African Americans were not in situations where they could expect political equality, speaks to the emphasis it placed on prescriptive racial uplift in its pages in 1905, and a Booker T. Washington-type philosophy of advancement from the ground up.

<sup>64</sup> Harlan, "Booker T. Washington," 15.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> Carle, *Defining the Struggle*, 213.



Despite its failure, the Niagara Movement's aims survived and gained traction in the organization that became the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, with Du Bois establishing and editing the organization's monthly journal *The Crisis*.<sup>67</sup> The NAACP, which grew to a membership of six thousand in fifty branches by 1914, was not directly concerned with racial uplift on an individual level, that is, in fostering self-improvement, but focused instead on achieving wider social goals by working within the system, through the courts, to achieve change.<sup>68</sup> While Booker T. Washington was promoting the same message in 1910 that he had promoted in 1900, the NAACP was positioning itself to advance the cause of political equality which Washington had avoided.

Another organization, the League on Urban Conditions among Negroes, later named the National Urban League, was established in 1911 to address practical community needs in the urban environment. Like the racially integrated NAACP, the Urban League was formed by a group of like-minded whites and blacks who were interested in improving employment and housing conditions for urban dwellers. Both organizations played an increasingly important role, eclipsing Washington's rural self-sufficiency approach epitomized by the Tuskegee Institute, and directing the focus of racial uplift to the Northern cities, in order to assimilate hundreds of thousands of Southern migrants who began arriving in the first years of World War I. Both organizations attracted the support of the black press, and in some cases membership in the organizations.<sup>69</sup> The conflict over Booker T. Washington that divided the black press was on one level an indication of contested approaches to racial uplift, and these remained open for debate, but the main point of conflict centred around Washington's use of his personal influence. After his death, this ceased to be an issue. The black press now turned its attention to a new social movement that opened up opportunities to construct racial uplift narratives around new social

<sup>67</sup> Du Bois, *Autobiography*, 256.

<sup>68</sup> Meier and Rudwick, *From Plantation to Ghetto*, 228.

<sup>69</sup> Matthews, "Black Newspapers." Matthews notes that Sol Johnson was a member of the NAACP and Urban League in Savannah, and that P.B. Young, editor of the *Norfolk Journal and Guide* established the NAACP in Norfolk.

conditions, and not around a personality. As they did so, they revealed the potential to adapt and apply Washington's philosophy in new ways.

### Migration and a new focus on racial uplift

The great social movement to which the black press turned its attention was the migration of hundreds of thousands of African Americans out of the rural South to cities in the North. The movement, which came to be known as the Great Migration, gathered force from around 1915. The key player was the *Chicago Defender*, which, through its aggressive promotion of migration, initiated a radical approach to racial uplift by couching it in economic terms. In contrast to Booker T. Washington's advice to "cast down your buckets where you are," the *Defender* encouraged Southern blacks to take the initiative to leave behind oppressive social conditions and poverty and move to the North to take up well-paying factory jobs.<sup>70</sup>

The facts of the Great Migration and the role of the *Chicago Defender* are well documented. Historians, most notably James R. Grossman, have examined the role of the *Chicago Defender* in encouraging Southern agricultural workers to move to the North to take advantage of job opportunities in manufacturing.<sup>71</sup> These jobs opened up for them during World War I as a result of the halting of immigration from Europe, which had up until the War been the source of manufacturing labour.<sup>72</sup> Grossman states that editor Robert Abbott initially encouraged blacks to remain in the South, but changed his mind when he saw opportunities for economic

<sup>70</sup> David Sehat, "The Civilizing Mission of Booker T. Washington," *The Journal of Southern History* 73, no. 2 (2007). Washington expressed the sentiment that blacks should remain in the South and work for the interests of both races, without desiring to achieve political equality. The advice was included in a speech made to a mixed audience at the Cotton State and International Exposition in Atlanta in 1895. The speech was later referred to as the "Atlanta Compromise," and established Washington's reputation as a political accommodationist.

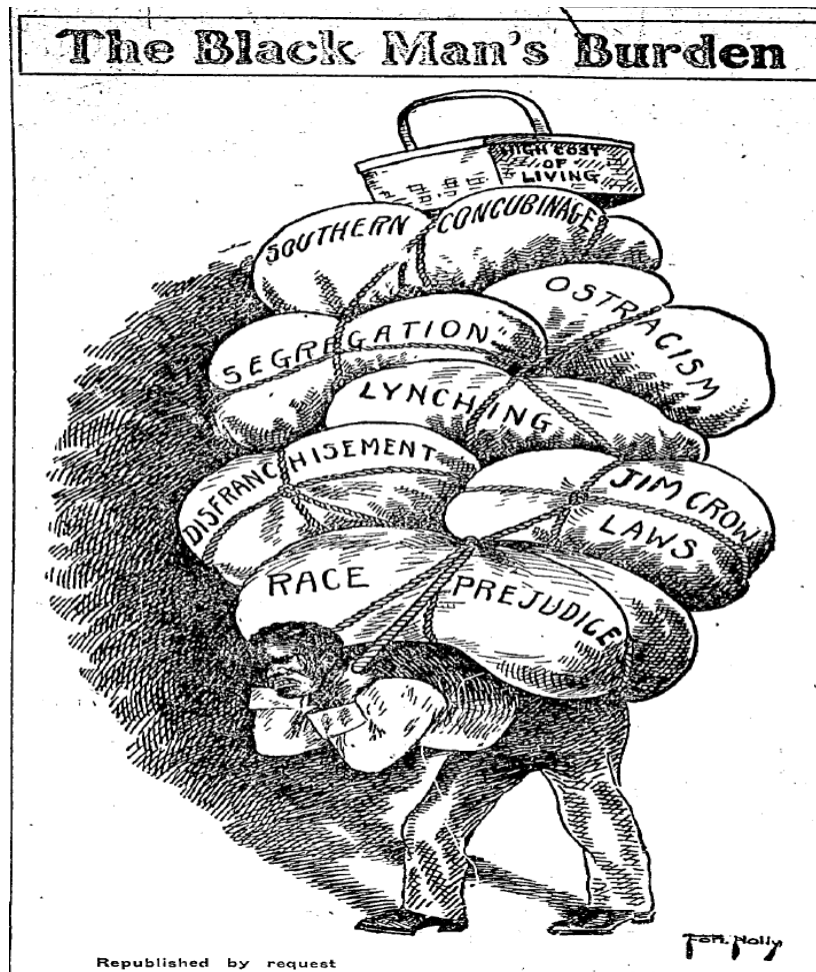
<sup>71</sup> Whether the migrants came straight off the farms or were already living in towns before migrating, the majority of them were not accustomed to the large urban environments or the factory jobs that they encountered in, for example, Pittsburgh or Chicago. Grossman, *Land of Hope*, 111-12.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 13; Carolyn Stroman, "The Chicago 'Defender' and the Mass Migration of Blacks, 1916-1918," *Journal of Popular Culture* 15, no. 2 (1981); James N. Gregory, *The Southern Diaspora: How the Great Migrations of Black and White Southerners Transformed America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 45-51. See Stroman for a discussion of the migration from the perspective of *Defender* contents. Gregory provides an expanded discussion of the press, including both white and black press reactions to the migration, the debate within the black press of the pros and cons of migration, and the *Defender's* role.

advancement, and by extension, improved educational opportunities and living conditions for blacks through migration.<sup>73</sup> Carolyn Stroman addresses the question of whether promoting migration was for the paper's financial gain, and concludes that Abbott believed that the advantages for the race as a whole outweighed the profit motive. That said, Robert Abbott's methods of securing circulation and profits, described below, made it possible for the paper to indulge its social advocacy role. Whether by accident or by design, the *Chicago Defender* effectively initiated a new form of racial uplift through a mass social movement that had political and social consequences far beyond what any political organization could achieve.

The *Defender* succeeded in this initiative, not only through the enthusiasm of Robert Abbott, but because of its wide distribution network, and its new format of attention-grabbing headlines. In encouraging people to better their economic and social conditions through migration, the paper employed its sensational format to best effect, including, alongside information on employment opportunities, stories of lynching and intimidation, and visual reinforcements such as bold headlines and editorial cartoons. One such cartoon showed the "weight" of the many burdens the black man had to bear while living in the South.

<sup>73</sup> Grossman, *Land of Hope*, 82.



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Figure 7: Editorial cartoon from the *Chicago Defender*, January 6, 1917.

The *Defender* was also a key source of information about employment and living conditions in the North, and many copies of the paper reached Southern towns and hamlets via porters working on the railroads. In 1910, well before the migration gained momentum, the paper included a column entitled "In the Railroad Center." While a railway information column was not unique to the *Defender*, its column went further, naming individual porters and their upcoming routes, and included advice on where to deliver bundles of the *Defender* so that they would be distributed to the desired destination.<sup>74</sup> Robert Abbott had devised a method of employing Pullman porters to act as subscription agents along their routes – a scheme which

<sup>74</sup> "In the Railroad Center," *Chicago Defender*, June 25 1910. Other newspapers included railway timetables, usually for lines that left or passed through their cities, and some railway companies also advertised excursions, but the *Defender* was unique in the details it provided.

netted additional income for the porters, helped build the *Defender's* circulation across the country, and put in place a distribution system that later ensured maximum impact for the migration cause.<sup>75</sup>

The black press tracked, and debated, the movement, and was again divided in its opinions. Newspapers responded to the migration in various ways, in terms of their attitudes to racial uplift and the way it would best be achieved. While some pro-Washington papers attempted to preserve the status quo, where the path to uplift was through agricultural or small business pursuits, others supported the *Defender's* actions. Yet others remained somewhat detached, or expressed qualified support. The migration debate was more closely related to racial uplift approaches than to the personal animosity toward Washington that had divided the press in earlier years. The newspapers also showed some inconsistency in their support for or opposition to migration when considered in terms of their geographical locations in migration departure points or destinations.

Most newspapers reported the migration and expressed their opinions about it, but few actively promoted or tried to halt it.<sup>76</sup> The exception was the *Norfolk Journal and Guide*, which declared its editorial policy to be against migration. In an article in March 1917, without naming the *Chicago Defender*, it seemed to directly oppose the *Defender's* position, advising readers to find out the facts of the Northern labour market before leaving, and to beware of "ill-advised agitators and fanatics on the race question," and claims of Southern oppression that the *Journal and Guide* suggested were "pure buncombe."<sup>77</sup> One of its arguments in this article was that African Americans had lived in the South for fifty years (since Emancipation) without feeling sufficient resentment to move North. This logic, however, failed to take into account the

<sup>75</sup> Grossman, *Land of Hope*, 78.

<sup>76</sup> The *Cleveland Gazette*, for example, included articles suggesting that racial intimidation was the motive behind migration: "Southern Atrocities Are Seldom Published in the Newspapers, North or South--Why Our People Are Leaving That Section of the Country," *Cleveland Gazette*, June 9 1917; "Cause of Race Migration. Lynching and Bad Politics Responsible for Great Exodus, Says Manning," *Cleveland Gazette*, September 22 1917.

<sup>77</sup> "The Facts of Labor Migration," *Norfolk Journal and Guide*, March 24 1917.

influence of the new job opportunities that had become available, even if it preferred to deny the existence of lynching and intimidation that the *Defender* exposed. Instead, the paper suggested that migrants would face many difficulties in employment and acculturation, and promoted opportunities that it claimed were opening up in the South. Its main recommendation was for Southern blacks to remain where they were and make efforts to improve their poor living conditions themselves – with no reference to dealing with the intimidation that was also driving people away.

The *Journal and Guide* emphasized its stance on the migration issue by following the example of the *Defender* in using an editorial cartoon to make its point. A cartoon appearing in March 1917 left no question as to the *Journal and Guide's* position. The use of the sun as an image of a bright tomorrow above a list of advantages provided in the local environment contrasted with Northern promises in the form of clouds that could be blown away at any moment. As a supporter of Booker T. Washington, the paper believed that the path to racial uplift was to be found in agricultural pursuits in the South. Nevertheless, in his biography of *Journal and Guide* editor P.B. Young, Henry Lewis Suggs suggests an ulterior motive for opposing migration. Young was also a prominent member of the business community in Norfolk, and may have opposed migration on the grounds that he wanted to preserve a labour supply for the local business community.<sup>78</sup> This suggests that self-interest on the part of some editors may have existed alongside genuine beliefs in the way in which racial uplift should be promoted.

<sup>78</sup> Suggs, *P.B. Young Newspaperman*, 35.

## WHICH--THE OLD OR THE NEW?



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Figure 8: Editorial cartoon from the *Norfolk Journal and Guide*, March 30, 1917.

The Indianapolis *Freeman* echoed the *Journal and Guide* to a lesser extent, stating that while people had the right to move where they pleased, they would be best served by remaining where they were.<sup>79</sup> This was a rather muted reaction from a newspaper that was so pronounced in its Washington/Tuskegee approach to racial uplift in 1905. The *Freeman*, in Indianapolis, was not far from Cleveland geographically, yet its editorial approach echoed that of 1905 in its difference from the *Cleveland Gazette*, which was open in its opinion that racial intimidation was a motive for migrating. The *Norfolk Journal and Guide*, and the *Freeman*, with its more

<sup>79</sup> "Make Haste Slowly," *Freeman*, December 9 1916.

measured approach, took a stronger stance against migration than even the *Savannah Tribune* in Georgia. Considering the *Savannah Tribune's* avoidance of editorial opinion and politics in 1905, it was quite outspoken in expressing its opinion that migration was a fact of life, and could not be halted without a concerted effort by the white population to increase wages and introduce the rule of law.<sup>80</sup> It appeared to be hedging its bets, however, as it also reprinted articles from the white *Savannah Morning News*, which stated that the remedy to the situation lay with whites.<sup>81</sup> As with the *Journal and Guide*, there may have been a degree of self-interest in the *Tribune's* stance. It may have been protecting itself, in view of its location, by repeating the opinion of a white newspaper, and it also attempted neutrality by printing both positive reports of those who had made good in the North, and articles out of Tuskegee which recommended staying.

Tuskegee continued to exert a degree of influence over some parts of the black press by generating articles for reprinting. These generally followed a pattern of promoting the economic opportunities in the South – if problems such as the boll weevil infestation could be addressed – but one particular article backfired.<sup>82</sup> As it had done in its promotion of the 1900 census, Tuskegee released a Letter to the Editor from Principal Robert Russa Moton, Washington's successor, stating that lynching had declined. This was good news for the Institute's promotion of the South, but it did not quite serve its purpose, as in the final paragraph Moton admitted that, while lynching and mob violence had declined, fear was still a factor in causing people to migrate. The letter was picked up by the anti-Tuskegee newspapers such as the *Broad Ax* and *Cleveland Gazette* under headlines that emphasized the fear factor but did not mention the decline in mob violence.<sup>83</sup>

<sup>80</sup> "Changing Attitude," *Savannah Tribune*, May 5 1917; "Migration and Wage Scale," *Savannah Tribune*, May 19 1917; "The Wanderlust Again," *Savannah Tribune*, February 9 1918.

<sup>81</sup> "Awakening to True Facts," *Savannah Tribune*, May 26 1917; "The Definite Solution," *Savannah Tribune*, June 2 1917.

<sup>82</sup> "To Check Migration of Negroes to Cities," *Savannah Tribune*, July 17 1915; "Tuskegee Negro Conference to Discuss Migration," *Savannah Tribune*, December 23 1916.

<sup>83</sup> "Record of Lynching for the First Six Months of 1917," *Broad Ax*, July 6 1917; "Record of Mob Violence," *Cleveland Gazette*, July 14 1917.



Newspapers in destination cities such as Cleveland, Baltimore, and New York took somewhat different approaches in their presentation of migration stories. Reflecting its interest in race issues, the *Cleveland Gazette* declared intimidation to be the most important push factor. It was also positive about migration in terms of the political consequences, commenting editorially in May 1917 that the 500,000 people who had left the South since the beginning of 1917 "know that they are entitled to the ballot."<sup>84</sup> While Baltimore was not a major destination city, the *Afro-American* was the most consistently positive in its reporting, and often included articles on local employment opportunities.<sup>85</sup> The *New York Age*, as a leading black newspaper in one of the most important destination cities, was more balanced in its reporting of migration. While generally positive in its editorial tone, it reprinted articles from the black and white press that both favoured and opposed migration. Its most important contribution to the debate, however, was the inclusion of many articles from the white press that acknowledged racial injustice in the South and the need for the South to change its attitude if it was to retain its labour force.<sup>86</sup>

Press interest in migration, which was a major news story, was presented in terms of benefit to the race, regardless of whether a newspaper supported or opposed it. Those newspapers that encouraged or supported migration did so to introduce opportunities that were available in the North in the form of better-paying jobs and education. Sometimes they chose to emphasize racial injustice, and sometimes not. Those that opposed migration did so for the same reason – benefit to the race – although they claimed that opportunities for betterment existed in the South.

Newspapers in the North and South and on both sides of the migration question took an interest in the activities of the Urban League, and indicated a concern with the physical

<sup>84</sup> "Political Meaning of Race Migration," *Cleveland Gazette*, May 26 1917.

<sup>85</sup> "Opportunity at Steel Works," *Afro-American*, October 21 1916; "A Man's Chance in the North," *Afro-American*, January 20 1917.

<sup>86</sup> "Negro Migration," *New York Age*, September 7 1916; "Public Sentiment and the Negro," *New York Age*, November 23 1916; "Negro Press on Migration North," *New York Age*, March 15 1917; "Southern Press on Migration," *New York Age*, April 5 1917; "Thanks for the Truth," *New York Age*, December 14 1916.

conditions faced by migrants at their new destinations. They supported the League's activities, and publicized the Urban League's Conference on Negro Migration, held in New York in January 1917.<sup>87</sup> The *Afro-American* included a detailed article on the conference speakers and program, and also printed the resolutions that were adopted. Resolutions covered practical issues such as the need to provide adequate food, clothing, and shelter to migrants, and extended to the moral and philosophical, calling on the races to establish a better understanding and awareness of each others' worth. The article stated that African Americans would provide "dependable, loyal, constant American labor," and at the same time reassured the South that despite the mass migration, "the great mass of the Negro population will remain in the Southland."<sup>88</sup> The *Savannah Tribune* included many articles on the work of the Urban League, including a letter from the League which discouraged the "wholesale migration of the shiftless" seeking higher wages.<sup>89</sup> This focus on maintaining respectability reflected a concern that even a small unsavory element among migrants would tarnish the whole of the migrant community, reduce employment prospects for the serious-minded, and make adjustment difficult. The letter claimed that "indolent, inefficient men bring reproach and humiliation to thrifty colored citizens" in communities where black residents had not previously been considered undesirable.<sup>90</sup> The *Afro-American* was confident, however, that the migrants arriving in the spring (of 1917) would be composed mostly of "middle class, hard-working, church-going, upright, sober citizens."<sup>91</sup>

As tens of thousands of migrants settled into new communities in the North, inevitably social tensions surfaced as new arrivals brought with them Southern cultural practices that upset the status quo of established black and white communities who were living together in relative

<sup>87</sup> The *Broad Ax*, *Freeman*, *Norfolk Journal and Guide*, and *New York Age* also reported on the Conference.

<sup>88</sup> "Conference on Negro Migration," *Afro-American*, February 3 1917.

<sup>89</sup> "Against Shiftless Men Going North," *Savannah Tribune*, December 2 1916. The letter was also printed in the *Freeman* and the *Norfolk Journal and Guide*, which used the advice to support their arguments against migration.

<sup>90</sup> Thomas N. Maloney, "African American Migration to the North: New Evidence for the 1910s," *Economic Inquiry* 40, no. 1 (2002). Maloney addresses the question of the type of person who migrated. He states that contemporary sources suggested that migrants after 1910 were less educated and more "footloose" than previous groups. He argues that migration increased among the literate, and among married people during this time.

<sup>91</sup> "A Deluge of Migration in April," *Afro-American*, March 31 1917.

harmony.<sup>92</sup> Sheer pressure of numbers of new arrivals also caused a change in concepts of racial uplift, shifting its focus from establishing a class of self-sufficient farmers to supporting survival in an industrial economy in the urban North. As the *Freeman* pointed out in commenting on the demise of the Niagara Movement, the Talented Tenth discounted the reality of life for the majority of African Americans. Abstract uplift ideals now became immediate and urgent needs, and took shape within an urban environment which brought class distinctions into sharp relief. This development will be explored further in chapter three.

## Conclusion

The black press became a stronger force in black society in the first two decades of the twentieth century, gaining in circulation and welcoming new, influential players. Newspapers began the century with rather similar formats of closely printed pages and few illustrations, and common content covering general and race news, church and social information, and entertainment. This apparent similarity proved to be superficial, because while they shared an interest in racial uplift, they also distinguished themselves in the way in which they presented uplift, and in their differing degrees of political engagement. Generally supporters of the Republican party, this support did not always extend to Booker T. Washington, even though, through his access to presidents Roosevelt and Taft, he also identified with the party. No newspaper expressed any disagreement with the practicalities of racial uplift that he expressed, such as working hard, saving money, and gaining an education, but they were divided over his approach to attaining political equality. Years of inaction by the federal government on this front, and an apparent lack of interest on the part of Booker T. Washington, caused the papers to

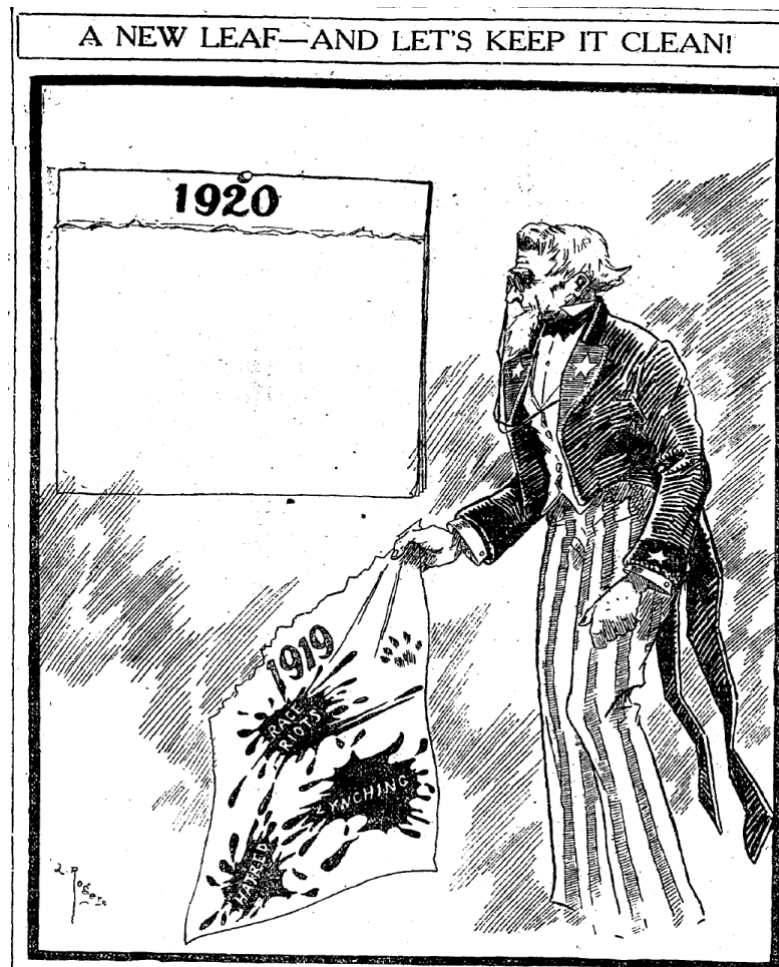
<sup>92</sup> While there was never true racial equality, and the degree of harmony in black-white relations varied by city, a number of historians of African American settlement in the urban North have shown that where black populations were small, they were more spatially integrated, and black and white populations had a degree of economic interdependence. Representative literature on urban environments before the Great Migration includes Katzman, *Before the Ghetto*; Kusmer, *A Ghetto Takes Shape*; Spear, *Black Chicago*; Quintard Taylor, *The Forging of a Black Community: Seattle's Central District from 1870 through the Civil Rights Era* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1994).

rally around new political initiatives such as the Niagara Movement which were determined to make headway on the matter. Many newspapers which were strong supporters of Washington, such as the *Freeman*, nevertheless acknowledged the merits of the Niagara Movement and encouraged rational consideration of its aims.

Newspapers were independent thinkers on different issues affecting black society, but they also recognized themselves as part of a whole – the black press – and recognized the benefits of collaboration and collegial relationships to support their viability as businesses, and their social mission. Booker T. Washington acknowledged the differences of opinion existing in black society, but his words, spoken in 1910, summed up the attitude of the black press as the second decade of the twentieth century drew to a close: "We have the ability when the time comes to sink all of these [differences] and unite on any project that has for its purpose the betterment of the whole community or the whole race."<sup>93</sup> This interest in collaboration for the benefit of the race was matched by a recognition of the economic benefits of such collaboration, which saw the black press grow further in wealth and influence in the 1920s.

<sup>93</sup> "Booker T. Washington's Address to Negro Business League," *Savannah Tribune*, September 17 1910.

## CHAPTER THREE: Uplift in the urban environment: the press and black business



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Figure 9: Editorial cartoon, *Chicago Defender*, January 3, 1920.

The *Chicago Defender*'s first editorial cartoon for 1920 expressed the optimism of a new start. The accompanying editorial began by acknowledging the reality of black life in 1919, including an increase in lynching, race riots (so widespread and violent that the summer of 1919 is now referred to as the Red Summer), segregation, and enduring racial prejudice.<sup>1</sup> Despite this litany of gloom, the editorial concluded on a positive note: "the yesterdays with us are passed; we are looking forward to the tomorrows. 1919 has given us much for which we are thankful; we are expecting more of 1920." The sentiment expressed seems out of place when considering the

<sup>1</sup> Wayne, *Imagining Black America*, 71.

heights of racial hatred that were demonstrated in 1919, yet it is also an expression of the essential optimism of the black press that race relations would eventually improve. Improvement and moving forward against all odds had always been the basic philosophy of the black press, and was also the premise behind racial uplift. When considered in this light, the optimism is understandable.

The *Defender's* desire to turn a new page was also perhaps an acknowledgement that African American participation in World War I had done little to improve political conditions for them, and that it was time to regroup and take a new approach. The image of a clean page does not suggest a particular way forward, but social change was opening up opportunities in the urban environment where racial uplift could be achieved through new paths such as business development, which is the subject of this chapter. The *Defender's* optimism may therefore be considered a reflection of these new opportunities. Following the migration out of the South, many African Americans were now living new lives in new circumstances in the urban North, and must have shared in the sense of a new start. Life in northern cities, however, proved challenging for both new arrivals and established residents. The demographic impact of an influx of tens of thousands of arrivals over a period of a few years was seen in the rapid development of ghettos, or at least segregated residential areas, in most destination cities. The newspaper that was so influential in bringing many migrants to their new situations now became a means of support for the community by providing news and entertainment, but also subtle and less subtle advice on how to assimilate, not so much into mainstream society, but into the new African American enclaves which were rapidly developing their own class structures and culture. This was the new meeting point of opportunity and racial uplift.

Historians provide evidence that supports the *Defender's* idea of a new start. Migration, the war, and widespread race riots changed African American attitudes, and shifted the focus of racial uplift to the urban environment and economic development. Wilson Jeremiah Moses

describes this change as a shift from a "Christian civilizationist pattern" of racial uplift that applied in the nineteenth century to a more secular pattern of development that was based on efficiency, industrial management, and the emergence of a black urban culture.<sup>2</sup> Kevin Gaines notes a new militancy arising from the sense of political impotence due to the failure to achieve any political advances following World War I.<sup>3</sup> At the same time, he cites social advances as contributors to a new attitude of race pride that was flourishing in the urban environment, such as a growing number of black students enrolled in higher education, and an expanding population of qualified professionals such as doctors and lawyers, and others engaged in business activities.<sup>4</sup> Davarian Baldwin suggests that the urban environment triggered a new interest in directing racial uplift toward enterprise and the development of consumerism among the urban population, and that newspapers were at the forefront in articulating this direction.<sup>5</sup>

The growth of large and spatially segregated black communities led to the development of separate institutions beyond the traditionally separate entities of the African American churches, women's groups, and fraternal societies. These new institutions were businesses that were developed within the boundaries of economic and social realities, and a number of historians have discussed their impact on African American communities, particularly on the growth of a new urban middle class. In his study of Chicago in the 1920s, Christopher Reed outlines the fortuitous circumstances that set the stage for business prosperity in that decade. These were: the philosophy of personal initiative and ideas of race pride and self-sufficiency that were promoted through the press; the influx of migrants who were gainfully employed and had money to spend; better provision of goods and services through economies of scale that larger populations allowed; and the practical guidance provided by professional organizations such as the National

<sup>2</sup> Wilson Jeremiah Moses, *The Golden Age of Black Nationalism: 1850-1925* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978).

<sup>3</sup> Gaines, *Uplifting the Race*, 216.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 237.

<sup>5</sup> Davarian L. Baldwin, *Chicago's New Negroes: Modernity, the Great Migration, and Black Urban Life* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 36-37.

Negro Business League. He argues that business became such an energizing force in the new urban environment that the NAACP, which continued to promote anti-lynching campaigns and political equality, was failing to generate much attention among the masses.<sup>6</sup> Historian Michael Fultz shows the way in which the development of segregated communities led to the creation of mass urban markets and an economic base within these communities. He also argues that the physical restraints of increasingly segregated residential and business areas caused black leaders to focus more toward developing a self-sufficient black community than toward immediate integration. He also confirms what was apparent in the black newspapers in the 1920s, that themes of self-help, solidarity, character-building, and racial uplift continued to be promoted by the Talented Tenth, but also by a new class of black businessmen.<sup>7</sup>

The increase in numbers of people engaged in the professions and business, and the associated wealth that was derived exclusively from within the black community, also began to change traditional African American attitudes to class and status. In writing about Cleveland, Kevin Kusmer looks inside the physical phenomenon of urban segregation to show how it changed black and white commercial relationships, and as a result, class attitudes within the black community. He argues that these changes were manifested in a shift from personal service relationships where black barbers, tailors, caterers, and servants worked for or provided services to well-to-do whites, but were now increasingly catering to their own communities. Physical separation in ghetto areas, and white immigrants taking over many jobs as barbers or servants, meant both a drop in the social status of these formerly high-status personal service roles, and the increasing importance and status in the community of self-made businessmen and professional occupations.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Christopher Robert Reed, *The Rise of Chicago's Black Metropolis, 1920-1929* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2011), 72, 75.

<sup>7</sup> Michael Fultz, "'The Morning Cometh': African-American Periodicals, Education, and the Black Middle Class, 1900-1930," *The Journal of Negro History* 80, no. 3 (1995).

<sup>8</sup> Kusmer, *A Ghetto Takes Shape*, 103; Spear, *Black Chicago*, 111. Spear describes a similar change in Chicago that began around the turn of the century.



This chapter will examine the way in which newspapers adapted the racial uplift philosophy to conditions in the urban environment through the promotion of business activity. The growth of a consumer marketplace in these cities-within-cities was a ready opportunity and a proving ground for business development. Business activity within this separate market could now be measured, and reflected in the press, as tangible evidence of race progress and modernity. The chapter will also show that, while the black press was generally united in its objective to promote racial uplift through business development, it sometimes expressed opposing views, and also faced challenges to its uplift and assimilation objective from some quarters within African American society. Generally, however, the press was united, and joined forces to support organizations such as the National Negro Business League and the newly formed Associated Negro Press. Both organizations harnessed the opportunities presented through urbanization and the nascent black consumer market.

The focus on business development in the press sent a clear message that economic development was the way forward, but business development also supported the newspapers in becoming highly successful and growing businesses in their own right. With contributions from columnists and access to services such as the Associated Negro Press, as well as membership in their own industry organization, the National Negro Press Association, newspapers were now much more than the voices of individual editors. As Henry Vance Davis points out in his study of the black press, editors of the newspapers that were established in the first decades of the twentieth century were less inclined than the longer-established papers to pursue publishing based on personal ideology – such as Harry Smith of the *Cleveland Gazette* – and were more concerned with the profitability of their papers, and embraced the consumer economy enthusiastically.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Henry Vance Davis. "A Critique of the Influence of the Socioeconomic Environment on the Black Press, 1900-1928," *The Black Scholar* 22, no. 4, Black Culture (1992).

Women also benefitted from opportunities that business development opened up. In the postwar era, and despite obtaining the vote in 1920, African American women lost political influence in organizations such as the NAACP and Urban League. Where they once held positions of influence alongside men, especially during the war years, by the 1920s there was a clear separation between men and women in their roles in racial uplift, as men took the lead in the public arena, and women were encouraged to participate in the private sphere.<sup>10</sup> At the same time, racial segregation and the particular needs of the black community presented openings for women entrepreneurs such as Madam C.J. Walker, who developed a cosmetics empire that provided skills training and employment to women who would otherwise have not had access to jobs outside of domestic service. This apparent contradiction in women's roles, where they were visible in business if not in politics, did not appear to be an issue, as the press was generous in its praise for women who were successful in any way that supported African American progress, and saw no social conflict in women establishing careers.<sup>11</sup> New businesses developed by women, most notably in the cosmetics industry, helped break down Victorian ideas of respectability, as these businesses changed ideas about grooming and personal appearance to create a modern approach to respectable womanhood built around the use of cosmetics.

The decade proved extremely profitable for many newspapers, as they benefited from large populations of potential readers, increased their circulations, and took advantage of the potential market for advertising that boosted their revenues. They were, however, also aware of currents within African American society that forced them to accept the limitations of the segregated economy. Newspapers were enthusiastic promoters of business as a means of racial advancement, but they were concerned about the longer-term implications of economic self-sufficiency that arose from the growth of separate businesses. The opportunity to establish

<sup>10</sup> Nikki Brown, *Private Politics and Public Voices: Black Women's Activism from World War I to the New Deal*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 114, 116.

<sup>11</sup> Possibly this is because economic circumstances kept many women in the workforce to supplement their family's income.

businesses catering to the black community demonstrated African Americans' ability to participate in the American economy on the one hand, but it also meant that such participation was conducted quite separately from the mainstream, and forced the community to put aside expectations of rapid assimilation. The dilemma was not resolved, and could not be under a racially divided social structure. Newspapers compromised by recognizing business development as the most important immediate need, so turned their attention to promoting black business and showcasing examples of success, around which they constructed messages of racial uplift.

Although conducted in a segregated environment, business development activities were formulated for acceptance, and were to be measured against white standards of wealth and business success, so when these standards were challenged in the 1920s by black nationalist Marcus Garvey, the press united in opposition. The ideas of self-help and race pride that were emphasized in the post-World War I era, and espoused by disparate groups including militants, black nationalists, and those engaged in artistic endeavours, were generally not a call for separation or independence from the mainstream, but could and did exist within mainstream parameters. Garvey's philosophy of developing race pride and black nationalism through business activity appeared to be conducted within the accepted parameters, but his ultimate objective was the establishment of an African diaspora which saw Africa, not the United States, as its future.<sup>12</sup> The black press understood the advantages of fostering race pride and black nationalism within the separate black community, but ultimately as American citizens, which set them apart from Garvey, who was using business development for a different end. The press's response to the Garvey movement and its large following among the lower classes sheds light on the black press's middle-class aspirations and its desire for assimilation, and the way that race pride and black nationalism could take different paths. In his study of race pride as expressed in the black press during this decade, Ronald Walters supports the black press's position, and argues

<sup>12</sup> Mark Christian, "Marcus Garvey and African Unity: Lessons for the Future from the Past." *Journal of Black Studies* 39, no. 2, Marcus Garvey and the UNIA: New Perspectives on Philosophy, Religion, Micro-Studies, Unity, and Practice (Nov. 2008).

that race pride was unrelated to the establishment of a unique black identity, which Garvey promoted. Walters argues that the black press was in fact a unifying voice in the black community, identifying the common ground between radicals and conservatives, as each group understood that race pride and economic success were inseparable.<sup>13</sup> Even while debating the pros and cons of separate institutions, as participants in American capitalism through their newspaper businesses, black editors believed that success achieved according to white standards would benefit all African Americans.

### The dilemma of separate institutions in the black community

Not all of the black press saw the advantages of developing separate business institutions. The reality of urban segregation opened up a debate about whether to pursue opportunities in the segregated environment for short-term gain, or whether the pursuit of intra-community business activity would be self-limiting and prevent the assimilation of black business into the broader economy. To some, such as Harry Smith of the *Cleveland Gazette*, any push for separate institutions was seen as a backward move that was accommodating to white prejudice. He published numerous articles on the dangers of separate institutions, which he believed would harden Jim Crow attitudes: "Jim Crow feeds upon itself and grows."<sup>14</sup> He also published the opinions of others who opposed segregation, such as a letter to the editor which stated, "These institutions aid in keeping the toiling masses apart. [Separate institutions] are but another barrier to the progress of the race."<sup>15</sup> He also published comments by *Boston Guardian* editor William Monroe Trotter, who urged support for "Editor Smith" to help him break down prejudice: "When we submit to one segregated idea, others follow as night follows day."<sup>16</sup> It may be no

<sup>13</sup> Ronald G. Walters, "The Negro Press and the Image of Success: 1920-1939," *Midcontinent American Studies Journal* 11, no. 2, Perceptions of Black America (1970).

<sup>14</sup> "'Jim Crow' Segregation," *Cleveland Gazette*, February 12 1921; "Some 'Negroes' Favor Segregation," *Cleveland Gazette*, June 24 1922.

<sup>15</sup> "'Jim-Crow' Y.M.C.A.," *Cleveland Gazette*, January 24 1920.

<sup>16</sup> "Cleveland Social and Personal," *Cleveland Gazette*, May 15 1920.

coincidence that both Cleveland and Boston enjoyed relatively good race relations and integrated societies, at least before the migration, which may have encouraged Smith and Trotter to oppose any moves to upset the traditional relationships, even while circumstances were changing with in-migration. The desire for integration and assimilation was strong within the black community, but the structural impediment of discrimination was the overriding constraint within which black business was forced to operate, a factor which Smith and his supporters seemed to overlook. To the majority, however, structural impediments to economic development necessarily forced the growth of separate, parallel businesses to compensate for the lack of access to mainstream services and financial support.

While the development of separate institutions was a less-than-ideal solution to institutional racism, and meant that the growth of black businesses was limited to the capacity of the black community to support them, separate institutions had advantages. As historian David Jackson argues, separate black institutions were considered beneficial in that they fostered the development of businesses, professional organizations, and community leaders, all of which allowed African Americans to exercise a degree of control within their communities.<sup>17</sup> From the perspective of the banking industry, Abram Harris, a contemporary African American economist and academic who conducted an extensive survey of black banking, published in 1936, believed that the development of separate institutions was a means of establishing "amity" between the races. It advantaged whites by reducing inter-racial contact, and it benefitted blacks by providing opportunities for talented individuals to rise to positions of leadership.<sup>18</sup> The *Savannah Tribune* noted the importance of black institutions in providing employment opportunities: "Our business

<sup>17</sup> David H. Jackson, Jr., "The Growth of African American Cultural and Social Institutions," in *Companion to African American History*, ed. Alton Hornsby, Jr., Wiley Online Library, 2005. <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/9780470996720>, 322.

<sup>18</sup> Abram L. Harris, PhD, *The Negro as Capitalist: A Study of Banking and Business Among American Negroes* (The American Academy of Political and Social Science, 1936. Reprinted by Peter Smith, Gloucester, 1968), 103.

institutions will give our young men and women employment after having fitted themselves in the schools and colleges."<sup>19</sup>

The *Cleveland Gazette* and the *Boston Guardian* opposed separate institutions, but other newspapers recognized the need for separate institutions, namely businesses, as the most efficient way to achieve racial uplift. They believed in the importance of projecting to black and white communities an image of African Americans as capable of adopting modern ideas of business and economic development. Kelly Miller, a Howard University professor and frequent contributor to the black press, spoke optimistically of the future for black business and the benefits of independence, if in spiritual rather than in practical terms, claiming in 1922 that "the race is now standing at the end of one era and the beginning of another." While he suggested that churches and schools were "waning in moral authority," in business there was "encouraging indication of a progressive spirit." It was time for African Americans to rely less on "generations of philanthropy" and more on their own efforts within the "segregated life in which he is forced to live apart." Miller concluded: "The new task of Negro leadership is to gear up his latent power to the enginery of race uplift and reclamation."<sup>20</sup>

P.B. Young of the *Norfolk Journal and Guide* was more pragmatic. A supporter of Booker T. Washington both personally and politically, he saw segregation as an opportunity for self-help, and outlined this philosophy in an article in 1922.<sup>21</sup> He expressed his support for separate black institutions by stating the example of the churches, which were developed because white institutions rejected black participation, and so it was for business. The churches and business institutions that African Americans established were based on principles of self-respect and self-help, and "we are building magnificently." He extended the argument to the black press, which was meeting the local needs of the people and working for their "social, civil and economic betterment." The article became somewhat self-serving when it focused on the services offered

<sup>19</sup> "Stand by Our Institutions," *Savannah Tribune*, January 26 1922.

<sup>20</sup> "Kelly Miller's Letter," *Washington Bee*, January 14 1922.

<sup>21</sup> "Why We Need Our Own Home Newspaper," *Norfolk Journal and Guide*, April 29 1922.

by the *Journal and Guide*, but it was nonetheless factual, as the growing circulation of the paper was a testament to its success as a business. While these articles rationalized separate institutions, the *Pittsburgh Courier* was more forthright in urging their development. Without black businesses, and with economic dependence on "white people," the black community was "compelled to give away the greater part of its dollar immediately upon receiving it," never to become prosperous or self-sufficient.<sup>22</sup>

#### Press engagement with business activity

Newspapers were enthusiastic supporters of black institutions, and printed a number of articles on the need to support them. The *Savannah Tribune* reprinted an article from the *New York Amsterdam News* which reminded readers of the importance of economic development, and of supporting black businesses: "No people can be influential who have nothing but their labor to sell."<sup>23</sup> The article stated that while it was natural to want to purchase from a merchant who offered better prices and a wider selection of merchandise, it was important to patronize black businesses, especially because of the difficulty they had in competing against white operations with access to credit and favourable locations. In another article that same month, it impressed upon readers a sense of community and the importance of business for racial uplift, in that "institutions belonging to the race are part of us" and should be supported, as the greater their success, the easier it would be for "the larger group to gain success and more justice."<sup>24</sup>

While acknowledging the advantages of establishing separate institutions as a means of racial uplift, newspapers chastised black businesses that did not try hard enough to attract customers. The *Norfolk Journal and Guide* criticized businesses for failing to advertise their services sufficiently. A survey of black businesses in New York found that many believed that they were not receiving sufficient patronage from the black community, yet these same

<sup>22</sup> "Utilizing Our Assets," *Pittsburgh Courier*, July 23 1927.

<sup>23</sup> "Do We Patronize Our Merchants," *Savannah Tribune*, July 6 1922.

<sup>24</sup> "Editorial Excerpts," *Savannah Tribune*, July 27 1922.

businesses were not advertising themselves in the press.<sup>25</sup> The article noted the recent rapid growth of the black press and the power it held to reach markets through advertising: "the press now has the largest audience and the strongest possible grip upon the consciences and confidence of the people." In another article later in 1922, the *Journal and Guide* criticized black corporations for failing to deposit money in African American-owned banks, calling it a glaring piece of hypocrisy to call on the community to patronize these companies, yet they deposited the money taken from the black community into white banks.<sup>26</sup> The article declared that a white bank was no safer than a black bank, and cited the example of a Georgia fraternal society that had lost money more than once through the failures of the white banks in which it had deposited funds.

Newspapers also frequently called attention to what they saw as poor standards of business operation. Criticism of indifferent attitudes that offended notions of race pride was intertwined with issues of respectability and racial uplift. The *Chicago Defender* warned of "foreign" competition from businesses owned by other ethnic groups who were successful because African Americans were not achieving the same standards of ethics and service: "The surest way to hold our own is to put more brain, more industry and more personal service into our business life."<sup>27</sup> The *Pittsburgh Courier* pointed out that too many people were ignoring the laws of good business such as cleanliness, politeness, and efficiency, and the too-frequent feeling among business operators that "Negroes should patronize his business, regardless of its deficiencies, just because it is owned and operated by a Negro."<sup>28</sup> The article held up the successful insurance and cosmetics businesses as examples of efficiency and high standards of service that should be emulated. The *Broad Ax* noted the importance of maintaining firm standards of Christian morality when doing business, and that Christianity had a role to play in business success. This

<sup>25</sup> "A Brief for Race Newspapers," *New Journal and Guide*, May 6 1922.

<sup>26</sup> "Negro Banks and Negroes," *New Journal and Guide*, February 26 1921.

<sup>27</sup> "Big Business," *Chicago Defender*, June 4 1921.

<sup>28</sup> "Good Advice," *Pittsburgh Courier*, February 5 1927.



was the message of a speech given at the Hampton Institute by Principal Dr. James E. Gregg.<sup>29</sup> It was a warning to avoid "double mindedness," which was the sanctioning in the head what the heart disapproved of. The excuse of engaging in any dubious practice in one's job "because I was instructed to do so," or "because others are doing worse" was not the road to "real success, honorable happiness." The world sorely needed "Christianity that is efficient, and efficiency that is Christian."

Throughout the decade the press continued to promote business and the need to take advantage of every opportunity. The *Pittsburgh Courier* pointed out that white merchants were supplying many of the restaurants operated by blacks in the black community.<sup>30</sup> The paper asked why it was not possible for an African American truck farm to supply these restaurants. Even an item as lowly as shoe polish was an opportunity for a black business. If the community supported an African American shoe polish manufacturer, the paper claimed, such a business would be worth one hundred thousand dollars and would be a source of employment. A group that failed to support its own enterprises "could never become prosperous and economically self-sufficient." The *Philadelphia Tribune* acknowledged the success that many women had made in hairdressing, as their first steps into business, but suggested that there was a market for clothing that was being overlooked, or being left to white businesses to fill.<sup>31</sup> The article noted that there was much more money to be made and opportunities for women if they would start selling clothing, or stockings at the very least.

Newspapers promoted business development, and expressed support for pro-business associations such as the National Negro Business League, but their inclusion of content related to the workings of the broader economy was sporadic, and apparently never included news from Wall Street. Newspapers carried business-specific columns at various times, but much of the content was aspirational, or provided general information. The *Norfolk Journal and Guide's*

<sup>29</sup> "Double Mindedness Must Be Fought," *Broad Ax*, June 17 1922.

<sup>30</sup> "Utilizing Our Assets."

<sup>31</sup> "Dressing the Head Vs. Dressing the Body," *Philadelphia Tribune*, February 12 1927.

"Business Brevities" column featured the business endeavours of specific individuals. The *Pittsburgh Courier's* 1925 column "In the Realm of Business and Finance" combined advice, information, and aspiration. One column offered practical advice on how to invest successfully, and explanations of how stocks and bonds worked. Another featured a successful finance company and described the operations of finance companies generally. The article acknowledged the constraints of segregation on business, but noted the advantages of having black-owned enterprises because of the employment opportunities they provided – in this case creating jobs for bookkeepers, accountants, and lawyers who could not gain employment in white institutions. The article repeated the ideas expressed earlier in the decade about the potential for successful black businesses to generate "racial confidence" that would "burst the bounds of prejudice."<sup>32</sup>

The *Afro-American's* "Business and Industry" column, published between 1926 and 1929, covered various topics such as an overview of the real estate industry, and business news from other cities, but it also provided insight into the way in which the consumer culture was expressed in public spaces. An early column described the bustling scene along Baltimore's main black thoroughfare on a Saturday night, emphasizing the vibrancy of the community which was built upon black commerce.<sup>33</sup> The main streets of the African American communities were public spaces where people gathered to "stroll," and engage in displays of fashionable dress. The displays were evidence of a growing interest in consumption, but they were also indications of an interest in personal presentation, and were a means of affirming the wearer's respectability as a lady or gentleman.<sup>34</sup>

Business success was demonstrable proof of progress, which newspapers preferred to showcase rather than to discuss the intricacies of economics, commerce, and industry. One early example of a great business achievement was the opening of the Binga State Bank in Chicago on January 3, 1921. The bank was a new public entity that had evolved from a private bank

<sup>32</sup> "Business Reviews," *Pittsburgh Courier*, October 20 1928.

<sup>33</sup> "Business and Industry," *Afro-American*, October 2 1926.

<sup>34</sup> Rooks, *Ladies' Pages*, 66.

established in 1908 by businessman Jesse Binga, who, along with Robert Abbott and cosmetics and publishing entrepreneur Anthony Overton, formed a "triumvate of black Chicago commercial enterprise."<sup>35</sup> The *Broad Ax* declared the bank's opening to be "a history-making event among the colored people residing in Chicago." The bank was "state-controlled" and "absolutely safe and sound," and had received deposits of over \$200,000 on the first day, including a \$6,000 deposit by a white man.<sup>36</sup> The article listed the officers and directors, with Jesse Binga as bank president and Robert S. Abbott as vice president. Other directors included attorneys, physicians, and government employees – in other words, representatives of the black business and professional elite.

Newspapers were keen to show that business activity was contributing to racial uplift, but they also expressed class-based assumptions in their reporting. In 1920 the *Chicago Defender* published an article on a meeting of the Binga Bank's stockholders and the benefits of establishing a bank for the black community.<sup>37</sup> The article used prescriptive racial uplift language, and its quotes exposed assumptions about migrants that were typical of contemporary attitudes. The bank's purpose, according to Mr. Binga, was to "relieve the present conditions that are said to be making our people the undesirable citizens of Chicago." "We want an organization which will educate the ignorant people who are flooding our city." The bank saw its duty in developing a "thrifty, desirable person out of an indolent, reckless spendthrift." Whether or not banks succeeded in this education mission, they were the main source of investment and loans that encouraged the growth of many businesses in the black community, from manufacturing to restaurants, personal service businesses, and entertainment.<sup>38</sup>

<sup>35</sup> Reed, *Chicago's Black Metropolis*, 74, 76; Robert E. Weems Jr., "A Man in a Woman's World: Anthony Overton's Rise to Prominence in the African American Personal Care Products Industry," *Journal of African American History* 101, no. 4, African Americans and Business: Race, Capitalism, and Power (2016). Anthony Overton also established the Douglass National Bank and the Victory Life Insurance Company in Chicago.

<sup>36</sup> "The Opening of Binga State Bank Monday, January Third, 1921," *Broad Ax*, January 8 1921.

<sup>37</sup> "Binga State Bank Stockholders Meet," *Chicago Defender*, April 24 1920.

<sup>38</sup> Reed, *Chicago's Black Metropolis*, 83.

Racial uplift was not always presented in prescriptive forms, although class-based representations were common. A popular approach was to present racial uplift through example, by featuring people who had achieved business success from lowly beginnings. A profile of Wilbur Ceasar White, a boilermaker who had become a successful business owner, is typical.<sup>39</sup> Leaving school at the age of eight with nothing but "an ambition to make something of himself," White found work as a boiler-maker's helper, learned the boiler-making trade, and joined the Great Migration, moving from Florida to Pittsburgh, where he found lucrative employment and rapid promotion at the Carbon Steel Company. Not content to rest on his laurels, White acted on a long-held ambition to own his own business. He became an apprentice shoemaker, and "with diligent application" mastered the trade, and established his own business in 1921. He continued to seek out opportunity, and identified an area of the city with potential for establishing a factory. The business continued to expand, and achieved success outside the black community. The article noted that White had received many letters of praise for the company's "reliability and character" from the athletic departments of leading universities, and one from the U.S. Navy, which had assigned ninety-six pairs of football shoes to White's business for repair. Finally, as was characteristic of profiles appearing in the black press, the article concluded with some personal details about White, to convey the social credentials he had established, including information that he and his wife had "a beautiful home on Roan Avenue," and that he was also a communicant of Central Baptist Church, "and is interested in civic and social advancement among our group."

New buildings were visible evidence of African American economic progress. The *Norfolk Journal and Guide* published a speech made at the dedication of the new North Carolina Mutual Insurance Company building in Durham, North Carolina, along with a description of the "strictly

<sup>39</sup> "Who's Who in Business," *Pittsburgh Courier*, July 23 1927.

modern fire-proof building, six stories high towering 86 feet."<sup>40</sup> The *Pittsburgh Courier* ran an article on the new Presbyterian Hospital in New York, to be built at a cost of ten million dollars, which was "the most important building project now under construction in New York."<sup>41</sup> The point of this article was that the foundation work was being handled by an African American construction company that had bid successfully against a field of several hundred competitors. In Chicago, the *Broad Ax* published two articles in 1927 about the construction of the five-storey Binga Arcade, "the last word in European design," which was to house shops and offices and part of the Binga National Bank's operation. Due for completion in May 1928, the building was an expression of "the confidence in the business future of State Street."<sup>42</sup>

In 1919, young black entrepreneur Claude Barnett identified the black press itself as the target of a new line of business. After an early career selling advertising to the *Chicago Defender* and then establishing a cosmetics company, he saw an opportunity in news provision. Learning that black editors had difficulty in obtaining content, he decided to set up a news exchange service, as was earlier proposed by the National Negro Press Association for the exchange of regional social news. His format, in a more sophisticated form, was based on the business model of the white Associated Press, where papers submitted news items to be shared among member publications, stringers supplied news copy, and dedicated correspondents provided regular columns and international copy. Within a year of setting up the Associated Negro Press, Barnett had signed eighty newspapers, and employed international correspondents.<sup>43</sup> He was concerned with supplying high quality content to the newspapers, and spurned sensational news. The

<sup>40</sup> "North Carolina Mutual Opens Handsome New Home Office Building," *Norfolk Journal and Guide*, December 31 1921.

<sup>41</sup> "Race Contractor Builds Foundation for \$10,000,000 Presbyterian Hospital," *Pittsburgh Courier*, October 10 1925.

<sup>42</sup> "Southside Arcade Building to Be Completed Next March," *Broad Ax*, July 23 1927; "\$400,000 Arcade to Be Erected on South Side," *Broad Ax*, August 13 1927.

<sup>43</sup> Gerald Horne, *The Rise and Fall of the Associated Negro Press: Claude Barnett's Pan-African News and the Jim Crow Paradox* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2017), 24; Sheldon Avery, *Up From Washington: William Pickens and the Negro Struggle for Equality, 1900-1954* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1989), 55. William Pickens, well known in the black community as an academic, orator, and political activist, was a contributing editor. He spoke German, and was also an early international correspondent for the ANP. By the end of the decade his columns were appearing in most of the black newspapers in the country.

respected *Norfolk Journal and Guide* frequently published material provided by the ANP, which Barnett biographer Lawrence Hogan suggests is a testament to the quality of the ANP's reporting.<sup>44</sup> National distributions of the major newspapers, and the shared content provided by the Associated Negro Press, established a consistency of information and ideas, including perspectives on racial uplift, that was conveyed to black communities throughout the country.<sup>45</sup> Barnett was also a pioneer in promoting the African American consumer market to white companies and encouraging them to advertise in the black press through his agencies, Claude Barnett Advertising, and Associated Publishers' Representative.<sup>46</sup>

### The National Negro Business League

The black press supported organizations that were promoting racial uplift through business development, such as the National Negro Business League. The League was established by Booker T. Washington in 1900 amidst growing social and economic barriers to black participation in mainstream society, and his legacy of racial uplift lived on in the new urban environment. Washington believed that wealth creation, as evidence of African American business acumen, would generate respect among the white community, and the fact that the black press was promoting these same ideas in the 1920s showed that they remained valid over time. Historian John Burrows explains the promotion of business in relation to contemporary thought at the turn of the twentieth century. He suggests that Washington's promotion of the "gospel of wealth" echoed the belief, in both black and white communities, in the virtues of strong moral character and "survival of the fittest," and in wealth accumulation as an indication of Divine favour. As "there was no prejudice in the American dollar," money-making would

<sup>44</sup> Lawrence D. Hogan, *A Black National News Service: The Associated Negro Press and Claude Barnett, 1919-1945* (Rutherford: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1984), 89.

<sup>45</sup> Walters, "The Negro Press and the Image of Success."

<sup>46</sup> Jason Chambers, *Madison Avenue and the Color Line: African Americans in the Advertising Industry* (Philadelphia: University of Philadelphia Press, 2008), 23, 27-29.

surely reduce racial prejudice.<sup>47</sup> (As mentioned in chapter two, a number of other professional organizations were launched under the League's auspices, including the National Negro Press Association.)

The press expressed its support for the National Negro Business League and its objectives in the large amount of publicity it gave to the League's activities. In August 1920 the *Philadelphia Tribune* reported an address to the League by its Executive Secretary, Dr. Emmett J. Scott.<sup>48</sup> Scott discussed the background to the League's establishment in 1900, noting that Washington had recognized that African Americans were "woefully weak" in business operation and tangible property ownership, and that establishing a sound footing in business was a "prerequisite to power, prosperity, and happiness." While acknowledging that 1920 was a time of upheaval, Scott emphasized the League's role in racial uplift, reporting that the League was growing every year, and that it had made a substantial contribution, not only to business growth, but to home ownership, health, and sanitation – in fact, "every element of valuable citizenship."

The press that had opposed Washington in his lifetime was by the 1920s generally supportive of the League. For example, the *Broad Ax* had changed its anti-Washington tone, and printed a number of articles in support of the League and its activities, including "racial progress" profiles released by the League of successful business men and women. It also published an article announcing that Dr. Robert R. Moton, Principal of the Tuskegee Institute, had been re-elected President of the NNBL.<sup>49</sup> The strong connection between the Tuskegee Institute and the NNBL ensured that Booker T. Washington's principles and legacy were preserved in the League's activities. Broad press support for the League is also evidence that the press was behind economic uplift that was relevant for its time and place. The article included a

<sup>47</sup> Burrows, "The Necessity of Myth," 60, 65-66.

<sup>48</sup> "The National Negro Business League. What It Is: What It Has Achieved: What It Seeks to Accomplish," *Philadelphia Tribune*, August 21 1920. The article also includes a brief biography of Scott, as the former secretary to Booker T. Washington, Special Assistant to the Secretary of War "advising on matters concerning colored troops and colored citizens," and author of a book entitled *The American Negro in the World War*. Scott remained an influential figure in African American life long after Washington's death.

<sup>49</sup> "Dr. Robert Moton Heads National Negro Business League," *Broad Ax*, August 28 1920.

long speech by Dr. Moton, who stated that there was never a greater need for a "strong, wise, progressive business organization." The speech included a racial uplift element, advising that business success "was not conditioned upon color but upon character," and that success was colour blind. He also noted the value of the black press, and encouraged support for it. The press had the ability to "carry a message in an effective way to the twelve million Negroes of this country." "Negro business must advertise in Negro papers. Advertising makes business, both for the advertiser and for the newspapers. The benefits are mutual; the co-operation should be mutual."

In the month prior to the meeting, the *Savannah Tribune* spoke of the League's mission of racial uplift, the inspiration that it provided to young men, and the opportunities it provided for them to come in contact with successful businessmen. The League aided and encouraged business ventures that availed themselves of its services, and these businesses achieved good results from this support. The League was no longer a social gathering of men who had made money, but was becoming a valuable organization where "generalizations of the past" were giving way to "the specific and concrete."<sup>50</sup>

The *Cleveland Gazette*, traditionally opposed to Booker T. Washington, made little mention of the League, but it included articles in which Scott and Moton expressed comments that agreed with the *Gazette's* editorial policy. For example, the paper led with a headline, "Spingarn Medal for Scott!" in which Scott had defended the right of Southern blacks to migrate to escape racial abuse and poor wages – an apparent reversal of the Tuskegee Institute's previous policy.<sup>51</sup> It also published in part comments by Moton at the 1920 NNBL meeting in Philadelphia in which he praised the press for its support of business, and urged support for the press through subscriptions and advertising.<sup>52</sup>

<sup>50</sup> "The National Negro Business League," *Savannah Tribune*, July 17 1920.

<sup>51</sup> "1923 Spingarn Medal for Scott!," *Cleveland Gazette*, May 5 1923.

<sup>52</sup> "On Race Newspapers," *Cleveland Gazette*, September 4 1920.



Despite general support in the press for the League and its activities, newspapers did not hesitate to express criticism of the League's activities when they saw fit. After giving a glowing account of the League in 1920, the *Savannah Tribune* criticized it in the following year for becoming a social organization that, while offering conference attendees opportunities to meet with successful businesspersons, it did not offer any strong program that attendees could take away with them.<sup>53</sup> The *Cleveland Gazette* included the League in an article critical of the large number of associations that had sprung up, supposedly for the benefit of African Americans, but which were becoming "a menace to the economic and social welfare of the race."<sup>54</sup> The complaint was centred around the amount of money spent to hold national meetings for the many organizations, from fraternal societies to church conventions and the NNBL. The article questioned the return on investment for the money spent on travel and hospitality, and expressed the opinion that it could be better spent if it were allocated directly to individual cities for the purpose of supporting business development. It was particularly critical of insurance companies that spent large sums on sending delegates to conventions, but were slow and niggardly in paying out small claims.

The League attracted support from at least one white newspaper. The *Philadelphia Tribune* reprinted an article from the *Evening Bulletin*, a white Philadelphia paper, which aligned itself fully behind the activities of the NNBL, stating that there was considerable support in the white community for the organization and its work for "the betterment of the race." It praised the League for its focus on identifying opportunities for African Americans within the United States. An important point in the piece was the way it contrasted the League with another African American organization in New York that was attempting to establish "a negro nation in Africa," and to sow race hatred.<sup>55</sup>

<sup>53</sup> "The National Negro Business League," *Savannah Tribune*, August 25 1921.

<sup>54</sup> "The New Race Menace," *Cleveland Gazette*, October 8, 15, 22 1921.

<sup>55</sup> "The Hope of Negro Uplift," *Philadelphia Tribune*, August 28 1920. The *Tribune* reprinted the article as it appeared in the *Evening Bulletin*, without capitalizing "Negro."

### Marcus Garvey, business, and the black press

The *Evening Bulletin* article did not name the organization that was supposedly sowing race hatred, but it was clearly black nationalist Marcus Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association. Jamaican-born Marcus Garvey came to the United States in 1915. He established his Universal Negro Improvement Association to promote race pride and a doctrine of revitalization, which appealed to a large segment of the African American population who were struggling in the urban industrial environment. However, his black nationalist movement was controversial and divisive.<sup>56</sup> By reprinting the *Evening Bulletin* article, the *Philadelphia Tribune* aligned itself with the anti-Garvey group.

Marcus Garvey appeared to incorporate all the values that the black press was supporting. He echoed much of Booker T. Washington's philosophy of taking responsibility for one's destiny, particularly in establishing economic independence, stating that: "A race that is dependent on another for economic existence sooner or later dies."<sup>57</sup> He attracted a large number of followers – claiming millions by the early 1920s – who supported his message of black self-determination. He also established a number of businesses, including restaurants, grocery stores, a laundry, and a printing plant, as well as his own newspaper, *Negro World*. The crowning glory of his business enterprises was the Black Star Line, which was designed to grow into a fleet of steamships carrying the products of black-owned factories around the world.<sup>58</sup>

Initially Garvey attracted some support within the black press for his promotion of race pride among his followers, but later the press turned against him. Lawrence W. Levine notes that objection to Garvey was a class-based phenomenon, as much of his following came from the less fortunate who were feeling alienated in the urban environment. Levine claims that the concentration of support within the lower classes, as well as Garvey's personal style, alienated

<sup>56</sup> Cristina Mislan, "An 'Obedient Servant:' Internationalizing and Capitalizing on Blackness in Marcus Garvey's *Negro World*," *Journalism History* 39, no. 2 (2013).

<sup>57</sup> Lawrence W. Levine, "Marcus Garvey and the Politics of Revitalization," in *Black Leaders of the Twentieth Century*, ed. John Hope Franklin and August Meier (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1982), 119.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 126, 27.

the educated and affluent, the group that ran the black press. Evidence in the newspapers shows that this was not entirely so, and that the black press was initially divided in its opinions of Garvey. The *Afro-American*, *Norfolk Journal and Guide*, and *Philadelphia Tribune* were positive about Garvey's views of uplifting the race through self-sufficiency.<sup>59</sup> The *Chicago Defender* was negative in its reporting, possibly due to a libel action by Robert Abbott against Garvey over an article published in Garvey's *Negro World* newspaper.<sup>60</sup>

The press, whether supporting or opposing Garvey, took an interest in his business activities, as he was building his movement through conventional economic channels. Interest increased after his Black Star Line shipping company failed, and he was unable to sustain his other enterprises. The failure of his business empire must have been painful for the black community, not only in personal financial loss among Garvey's followers, but because the scale of the downfall must surely have been a blow to those who were counting on business success to secure a level of respect for the black community, and this would include the black press. Newspapers, however, drew attention to the business failure in terms of Garvey's personal lack of business ability, possibly to disassociate themselves from this failure, with the *Defender* using particularly sarcastic headlines.<sup>61</sup>

Garvey lost press support as his pronouncements became more controversial. Formerly supportive newspapers began to turn against him when, for example, he blamed his financial troubles on "light colored Negroes who resent the fact that I, a black Negro, am a leader."<sup>62</sup> This open expression of colour prejudice within the black community was divisive, as it called up issues of class and status, as Garvey spoke for the lower classes and appeared to be stoking class

<sup>59</sup> "We'll Fight for Garvey," *Afro-American*, April 22 1921; "The Demosthenes of Garveyism," *Norfolk Journal and Guide*, June 18 1921; "Marcus Garvey, Appeals to the Press and Pulpit," *Philadelphia Tribune*, October 22 1921. The *Philadelphia Tribune*'s reprinting of the article from the *Evening Bulletin* casts Garvey in a negative light, but generally the *Tribune* was positive at this time.

<sup>60</sup> "Garvey Backs Down in Fight with Defender," *Chicago Defender*, August 6 1921. According to the article, Garvey counter-sued but failed to appear in court, and the case was dismissed.

<sup>61</sup> "\$600,000 for Experience," *Afro-American*, June 23 1922; "Garvey Line Losses May Total Million," *Afro-American*, June 23 1922; "Black Star Line at Bottom of Deep Blue Sea," *Chicago Defender*, November 4 1922; "I'm Forever Blowing Bubbles,' Sings Marcus," *Chicago Defender*, December 23 1923.

<sup>62</sup> "Marcus Garvey Draws the Color Line," *Norfolk Journal and Guide*, July 21 1923.

resentment based on skin colour. The *Afro-American* and *Chicago Defender* objected to remarks Garvey made in a speech in North Carolina that appeared to support white racism against blacks in the South, with the *Defender* headline reading: "'Lynching Good for My People' – Mr. Garvey," and referring to him in the article as "provisional president of the invisible empire of Africa."<sup>63</sup> This final comment highlighted black press concern with Garvey's separatist philosophy that was diametrically opposed to the objective of assimilation.

The successful black middle class may have preferred to distance itself from Garvey from a class perspective, as Levine argues, but there was another issue that was equally important in the press's objection to Garvey. Historian Cristina Mislán states that Garvey used the white economic structure to promote his black nationalist ideas, but describes his ultimate goal as the overthrow of European colonialism, and the establishment of an independent African nation and pan-African diaspora.<sup>64</sup> Considering both Levine's and Mislán's perspectives, opposition in the black press may well have been class-based, but it was also identity-based, because Garvey's ultimate objective was not the integration of blacks within the United States as American citizens. The *Chicago Defender* supports this conclusion. In a piece on Garvey in 1921, the *Defender* stated: "Mr. Garvey may talk of Africa for the Africans [but] the Negroes are in the United States to stay, and the white and black elements must sooner or later learn to live amicably side by side."<sup>65</sup> A letter to the editor of the *Chicago Defender* stressed the importance of concentrating business activity in the United States: "Why should the American Negro contribute to Africa when in this country his salvation might be easily gained by the accumulation of capital. There are marvelous avenues for the investment of the Negro's money

<sup>63</sup> "'Lynching Good for My People' - Mr. Garvey," *Chicago Defender*, November 11 1922; "Marcus Garvey Thanks White Southerners for Lynching Negroes," *Afro-American*, November 3 1922.

<sup>64</sup> Mislán, "An Obedient Servant."

<sup>65</sup> "A Pioneer of Negro Culture," *Chicago Defender*, August 20 1921.

[which] could build factories, manufacture any kind of goods, and could be invested in self-paying properties."<sup>66</sup>

The Garvey phenomenon, which had enormous impact on a large section of the urban African American community in the early 1920s, served to reinforce the idea within the black press that racial uplift was a cause that was to be promoted within the United States. While Garvey's business endeavours came to nothing, he too recognized the importance of working within the parameters of the mainstream economy, but to achieve his pan-African agenda outside the United States. In opposing Garvey, the black press was able to move forward with confidence that its support of black economic enterprise within the American mainstream to achieve assimilation was the most efficient path to racial uplift.

#### The new consumer culture and the African American cosmetics industry

Through the course of the 1920s the focus of racial uplift in the press gradually extended beyond self-help and physical evidence of economic success to incorporate a psychological element where conspicuous consumption boosted a sense of personal achievement and allowed consumers to establish their own versions of success. The press participated in the consumer economy by including advertising from which it profited, but it was also a vehicle for disseminating, through advertising, the benefits of consumption. The press played a key role in showing that the accumulation of wealth through business, and evidence of wealth and success demonstrated through the acquisition of consumer goods, was the surest way to affirm African Americans' citizenship and rightful place as equal participants in the enjoyment of American modernity. Business success was also aspirational, as a growing black middle class set new standards of consumption and lifestyles to be emulated, and the press presented successful black entrepreneurs as images to engender feelings of race pride.

<sup>66</sup> "Editor's Mail," *Chicago Defender*, June 10 1922.

The development of an American consumer culture in the 1920s was the culmination of a change that T.J. Jackson Lears argues began around the turn of the twentieth century, in which there was a shift from the Protestant ethos of self-denial to one of self-realization, where the individual became the focus.<sup>67</sup> The growth of manufacturing, and the development of technology such as cinema and radio, and the expansion of the print media, assisted advertisers in promoting new images of success centred around personal presentation and the purchase of consumer goods. African Americans may have been increasingly segregated in northern cities, but they were nevertheless as subject to mass media influences as mainstream society, and the black press played its part in supporting these new images of success.

Buildings were physical manifestations of African American economic success and of modernity, but cosmetics epitomized a psychological shift to modernity. The cosmetics industry made an important contribution by offering women opportunities to improve their lives through consumption and through employment, and it also helped change social attitudes through its approach to respectability. The cosmetics industry was a way for African American women to participate in the growing consumer economy of the 1920s through the use of products that enhanced their self-confidence, but also by participating as providers of products and services through the new careers that the industry opened up for them. Arguably the most successful and sustained African American industry, cosmetics was unique in that it was both a manufacturing and a service enterprise, and offered paths to uplift through skills training. The industry provided training for women of all classes as hairdressers, beauticians, and as selling agents, and enabled them to escape domestic service and become economically and psychologically independent.

The cosmetics industry was unique in that the most successful businesses were run by women, and employed women at all levels of their operations. Two early successes were Poro Cosmetics, founded by Annie Malone in 1900, and the Madam C.J. Walker company,

<sup>67</sup> T.J. Jackson Lears, "From Salvation to Self-Realization: Advertising and the Therapeutic Roots of the Consumer Culture, 1880-1930." In *The Culture of Consumption*, eds. Richard Wightman Fox and T.J. Jackson Lears (New York: Pantheon, 1983), 4.

established by Sarah Breedlove, one of Poro's early sales agents, in 1904.<sup>68</sup> When the Poro and Madam C.J. Walker companies first went into business, the use of cosmetics was frowned upon as the antithesis of "pure," unadorned womanhood around which images of respectability and morality were built.<sup>69</sup> The companies offered skin creams and hair treatments, but these were sometimes associated with products designed to bleach the skin or straighten the hair artificially. This negative association was due to the debate within the black community about the morality of using skin bleaches and hair straighteners, which were also frequently advertised in the black press.<sup>70</sup> While lighter skin and "good" (straight) hair were considered desirable physical traits within the African American community, the use of products to achieve these results was also frowned upon as evidence of a lack of race pride, and trying to "look white."<sup>71</sup> As discussed in chapter one, and in relation to Marcus Garvey, skin tone was a complex issue that had historical roots in the favoured status accorded to blacks with white ancestry in the antebellum era, and continued to resonate within the African American community, along with hair type, as a status indicator. Both the Poro and Walker companies avoided this controversy over race pride by promoting their products as a means of improving the condition of one's hair or skin for the sake of health and well-being. This type of advertising also had a degree of class appeal, as hair and skin that was in poor condition was associated with poverty.<sup>72</sup>

Cosmetics advertising in the black press promoted images of success, initially in racial uplift terms, and then through the use of cosmetics for enhancing one's image or status. Advertisements by Poro, Walker, and other major cosmetics companies appeared regularly in the black press, and early in the decade they promoted their products from the perspective of

<sup>68</sup> Freeman Institute Black History Collection website. <http://www.freemaninstitute.com/poro.htm>. Accessed March 10 2018.

<sup>69</sup> Baldwin, *Chicago's New Negroes*, 60; Susannah Walker, *Style and Status: Selling Beauty to African American Women, 1920-1975* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2007), 30.

<sup>70</sup> Regardless of what individual editors may have thought about the use of these products, whose advertising often made dubious claims, their inclusion in almost all papers suggests that economics prevailed over personal opinion.

<sup>71</sup> Walker, *Style and Status*, 29; Shane White and Graham White, *Stylin' African American Expressive Culture from Its Beginnings to the Zoot Suit* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998), 187-88.

<sup>72</sup> Baldwin, *Chicago's New Negroes*, 62.





was modern, sophisticated, and a full participant in American consumer citizenship.<sup>74</sup> This change was reflected in advertising as the decade advanced. By mid-decade, advertisements reflected the general acceptance of beauty products, and were changing the way in which the products were promoted.<sup>75</sup> While "glorifying our womanhood" on the one hand, the Walker advertisement also suggested that its products would "make you admired by men and the envy of women." A full-page advertisement in the *Pittsburgh Courier* led with the copy that if you wished to be singled out "as the most attractive woman at dinners, theatres and dances," you must possess beautiful hair, which could be had with the use of Pluko's hair dressing product.<sup>76</sup>

Claude Barnett, who had established the Associated Negro Press, was a key influencer in this change of direction for cosmetics advertising. Before launching the ANP, Barnett had had his first success in selling advertising space through his agency, Claude A. Barnett Advertising, and had established his own cosmetics company, the Kashmir Chemical Company, to support it financially.<sup>77</sup> While the company was fairly short-lived due to a copyright issue, it differentiated its products through a sophisticated advertising campaign designed by Barnett that emphasized attractive models in luxurious settings. He recognized the importance of presenting a product as credible, but also as attractive and aspirational.<sup>78</sup> He advertised Kashmir's Nile Queen cosmetics products in the black press, and later established his own advertising agency, which also represented the Poro Company. He placed Poro ads in newspapers that were part of the ANP membership – a beneficial relationship for himself and his client. As advertising became more focused on emotional appeal, Barnett promoted his own and Poro's products in terms of their ability to make women feel beautiful. Advertising copy linked consumption to luxury,

<sup>74</sup> Walker, *Style and Status*, 28.

<sup>75</sup> Roland Marchand, *Advertising the American Dream: Making Way for Modernity, 1920-1940* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 200, 347. Marchand's study is of mainstream American society, but the approach to advertising in terms of emotional appeal and the assignment of subjective and utilitarian values to products applies equally to the African American market.

<sup>76</sup> *Pittsburgh Courier*, September 8 1928.

<sup>77</sup> Chambers, *Madison Avenue and the Color Line*, 23.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid*, 24.

indulgence, and female success: "to be really smart and chic."<sup>79</sup> A Poro advertisement in 1929 claimed that its face powder would "make you more charming and enhance your beauty."<sup>80</sup> This approach to advertising influenced other cosmetics companies and their approach to advertising, which manifested in the changing emphasis from respectability to glamour. Hi-Ja, another cosmetics brand, boasted "superior products for superior people."<sup>81</sup> In this way, advertisements encouraged a belief in the possibility of an improved life or social standing through the use of a product. The well-dressed, well-presented woman enhanced the respectability of the race as a whole, but the use of cosmetics also aligned with a new attitude where personal appearance and first impressions were becoming more important than "character."<sup>82</sup>

The great success of the black cosmetics industry also had negative repercussions. As soon as white companies recognized the existence of a lucrative market for cosmetics within the black community, they moved in to take advantage of the market's unique needs. White companies had access to finance that African American companies did not, and it was very easy for a white company to create an impression through its advertising that it was a black company. Barnett recognized this problem, and he was not alone in his awareness that these companies, while profiting from the black community, did not employ any blacks in their businesses. He saw the benefits of advertising to counter the incursion of white cosmetics companies, and urged Poro and Madam C.J. Walker to increase their advertising, but they were unable to do so due to their inability to pay for big campaigns.<sup>83</sup> This is where the ideal of the independent black business hit the structural impediments of the segregated economy, and limited black business expansion.

<sup>79</sup> Walker, *Style and Status*, 27.

<sup>80</sup> This advertisement appeared in the *Pittsburgh Courier* on October 5 1929.

<sup>81</sup> *Pittsburgh Courier*, November 30 1929. Hi-Ja was one of a number of cosmetics lines produced for the African American market by white-owned companies. Advertising by both black-owned and white-owned operations appealed to emotion and promoted the apparent social benefits to be gained through use of their products. See Walker, *Style and Status*, 20-21 for a discussion of the encroachment of white-owned companies into the lucrative African American market.

<sup>82</sup> Erin D. Chapman, *Prove It On Me: New Negroes, Sex, and Popular Culture in the 1920s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 84, 86; James C. Davis, *Commerce in Color: Race, Consumer Culture, and American Literature, 1893-1933* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2007), 27.

<sup>83</sup> Walker, *Style and Status*, 13.

White cosmetics companies may have represented unwanted competition, but the black cosmetics industry contributed to black society in a way that white companies did not. Black cosmetics companies gave women opportunities to obtain work outside of domestic service, which remained one of the main avenues of employment for women in urban areas.<sup>84</sup> Employment was an example of the way that black cosmetics companies created a direct link between business success and self-sufficiency at the individual level. The companies' advertisements included invitations to "money, property, and success" through training to become a Walker or a Poro agent.<sup>85</sup> In what Kate Dossett describes as "charismatic capitalism," Madam C.J. Walker and Poro employed women as agents to sell their products. This employment enabled a woman to gain respectability through hard work, pride in being able to secure work free from dependence on white employers, and the opportunity to enjoy well-paid work in a glamorous business.<sup>86</sup> Those who trained as beauticians had the opportunity to gain professional qualifications and advance to owning their own businesses, or even their own salons.

Aspiration also played a part in the success of the industry, by providing authentic examples of what African American women could achieve. Madam C.J. Walker, the persona Sarah Breedlove adopted, became one of America's first black woman millionaires.<sup>87</sup> Her rags-to-riches story, which was often included in early advertising, encouraged working-class women to believe that they too could enjoy economic independence.<sup>88</sup> After Walker's death in 1919, her glamorous legacy lived on in the person of her daughter A'Lelia, who took over the business. The company's luxurious beauty salons, and A'Lelia's conspicuous consumption and presence in

<sup>84</sup> Susannah Walker, "'Independent Livings' or 'No Bed of Roses'? How Race and Class Shaped Beauty Culture as an Occupation for African American Women from the 1920s to the 1960s," *Journal of Women's History* 20, no. 3 (2008).

<sup>85</sup> Examples of Poro and Walker advertisements promoting career opportunities appeared in the *Afro-American* in December 1921 and in the *Chicago Defender* in June and October of 1924.

<sup>86</sup> Kate Dossett, *Bridging Race Divides: Black Nationalism, Feminism, and Integration in the United States, 1896-1935* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2008), 108, 112.

<sup>87</sup> There appears to be some disagreement about whether Walker or Malone was the first black female millionaire, but both women had achieved that status well before the 1920s.

<sup>88</sup> Walker, "'Independent Livings'".

the society pages of the black press, added an aura of sophistication that both celebrated beauty and linked race progress to consumption.<sup>89</sup>

There were close links between the cosmetics industry and the black press, for example in the synergistic relationships with newspaper and magazine publishing established by Anthony Overton, and in advertising through the press in the case of Claude Barnett. As mentioned above, Anthony Overton was a director of the Binga National Bank, and his business interests also spanned cosmetics and publishing. Overton got his start manufacturing baking powder before expanding into cosmetics production. He funded the *Half-Century Magazine* as a vehicle for advertising his High-Brown brand cosmetics, and as his wealth expanded, he also established an insurance company and the *Chicago Bee* newspaper.<sup>90</sup> Claude Barnett and Anthony Overton effectively merged their business interests with the black press, sometimes with the press as a vehicle for expanding their original business, or using a business as a pathway to involvement with newspapers. Either way, the results of their business activities boosted the presence and value of the press in the community.

Another example of a synergistic relationship between the press and the cosmetics industry is that of beautician Marjorie Stewart Joyner and the *Chicago Defender*. Joyner trained under Madam C.J. Walker, and rose to prominence in the organization, eventually managing some 15,000 agents.<sup>91</sup> She began writing a column for the *Chicago Defender* in the 1930s entitled "Irresistible Charm," which discussed beauty products, personal care, and deportment. This was an example of the way that racial uplift and consumerism merged to set new attitudes to respectability through personal presentation. Joyner was also actively engaged in the *Defender's* charitable activities, and helped organize one of the first events, the annual Bud Billiken Parade charity event and picnic, launched in 1928. The parade was named for Bud

<sup>89</sup> Dossett, *Bridging Race Divides*, 134.

<sup>90</sup> Rooks, *Ladies' Pages*, 101; Weems, "A Man in a Woman's World." According to Rooks, *Half-Century Magazine* was targeted at middle-class women and promoted images of respectable modernity. Overton's products would have fitted this image, and thereby reinforced the association between cosmetics and respectability.

<sup>91</sup> Michaeli, *The Defender*, 227.

Billiken, a character from the children's section of the paper, and continues today. Joyner remained closely associated with the event until the 1950s.<sup>92</sup> The *Defender* also took advantage of Joyner's influence in the beauty industry to increase its circulation, by requesting that she provide a list of member beauty shops in which the *Defender* might place copies for sale: "Your members' shops could serve as good outlets and at the same time provide additional income [for the shops] with little or no effort."<sup>93</sup>

As one of the most successful black enterprises, cosmetics companies provided excellent material for the press in highlighting business success in the first instance, but also for the way in which business contributed to African American life in various ways. The Poro Company in particular was a popular subject as it combined business success with an impressive physical plant in St. Louis, Missouri, as well as the Poro College, where young women received education and training in beauty culture. An additional attraction of the business was the extensive charity work undertaken by founder Annie Malone and her husband for the benefit of the black community. In an article in 1920, the Topeka *Plaindealer* described the success of the Poro business in terms of its contribution to racial uplift, if somewhat excessive in its description of Mr. and Mrs. Malone's charity work as "doing more for race advancement than all other institutions combined."<sup>94</sup> The Poro College was also featured in an *Afro-American* article, which described it as a "constant source of wonder to tourists" and one of the most popular destinations for visitors to St. Louis.<sup>95</sup> The article described a new \$750,000 building occupying half a city block, its business activities, and its employees' and students' routines. The article also noted the

<sup>92</sup> Ibid., 227. The Bud Billiken character, a boy who addressed children as their friend, appeared in the children's section of the *Defender* in 1921, and became a regular feature. "Help Me out, Please," *Chicago Defender*, April 2 1921. "Very Latest News; Bud's Big Party," *Chicago Defender*, October 13 1928; John Sengstacke to Marjorie Stewart Joyner, August 25 1955. Box 15, Folder 6. Marjorie Stewart Joyner Papers (Chicago Public Library, Woodson Regional Library, Vivian G. Harsh Research Collection of Afro-American History and Literature.) [Hereafter Marjorie Stewart Joyner Papers.]

<sup>93</sup> Charles P. Browning to Marjorie S. Joyner, August 19 1946. Box 3, Folder 3. Marjorie Stewart Joyner Papers. At that time, Joyner was National President of the United Beauty School Owners and Teachers Association.

<sup>94</sup> "Poro College Pride of Race," *Plaindealer*, May 28 1920.

<sup>95</sup> "'Poro', St. Louis, Constant Source of Wonder to Tourists," *Afro-American*, January 6 1923.

charitable activities of Mr. and Mrs. Malone, who had donated \$10,000 to an orphanage for African American children, \$16,000 to the Y.M.C.A., and "thousands to other businesses."

African American participation in commercial life in the 1920s was a new form of racial uplift where ordinary people could demonstrate their equality with whites, not through politics or social interaction, but through enjoyment of fashion and modern urban lifestyles. The cosmetics industry played multiple roles in racial uplift, in employment opportunities, and in its charitable contributions, but most of all in the products it sold, which encouraged participation in the consumer marketplace, where new ideas of group advancement and citizenship were manifested in the use and ownership of material goods.<sup>96</sup> Newspapers became an important format for linking racial progress through business success, as well as with the fruits of business success that enabled participation in consumer culture, and supported the consumer culture through visual presentations of cosmetics and other consumer products in their advertising. Newspapers also promoted race pride and community spirit through charitable events such as the *Chicago Defender's* Bud Billiken Parade, and through beauty contests. One such event was the Miss Golden Brown National Beauty Contest, held in May 1925 under the auspices of the Madame Hightower cosmetics company.<sup>97</sup> The major newspapers promoted the contest, and also featured articles about the finalists and the eventual winner, helping to generate social interest beyond product placement.<sup>98</sup> Beauty contests appeared to have become established as a popular summer event by the end of the decade, as evidenced by articles in the *Norfolk Journal and Guide* and the *Pittsburgh Courier*.<sup>99</sup>

<sup>96</sup> Reed, *Chicago's Black Metropolis*, 76.

<sup>97</sup> White and White, *Stylin'*, 199.

<sup>98</sup> "Josephine Leggett Miss Golden Brown," *New York Amsterdam News*, September 30 1925; "America's Miss Golden Brown," *Norfolk Journal and Guide*, October 3 1925.

<sup>99</sup> "Bathing Beauty Contest July 31," *Pittsburgh Courier*, July 7 1928; "Tidewater Bathing Beauty Contest Is Well under Way: Entries Are Coming in Fast," *Norfolk Journal and Guide*, July 21 1928; "Ringgold to Stage Classy Bathing Beauty Contest," *Pittsburgh Courier*, June 4 1927.

## Conclusion

What had black business achieved by the end of the 1920s? In his 1936 study of African American banking and business, economist Abram Harris concluded that, due to the concentration of capital in the hands of white capitalists and the structural constraints of racial prejudice, there was no possibility of black business enterprises becoming the means of the group's economic salvation. He criticized Booker T. Washington's "individualistic economics and optimistic naivete" in presuming that competitiveness would be sufficient to advance black economic interests. He also criticized W.E.B. Du Bois's approach to supporting black business through cooperatives and boycotts. Both men, he argued, failed to see the limits to black business that existed within the capitalist system within which they expected African Americans to participate.<sup>100</sup>

Current historians take a more sympathetic approach. Countering Harris's negativity, Christopher Reed argues that black business activities should not be compared directly with the white mainstream economy, but rather as the efforts of a single minority group. Operating within the confines of institutional racism, black business was successful, particularly in Chicago, which became the most important African American business centre in the United States in the 1920s.<sup>101</sup> In his work on race and the consumer culture, James C. Davis recognizes an essential conflict in the adoption of Booker T. Washington's uplift-through-commerce approach. On the one hand, Washington opposed spending one's hard-earned wages on non-essential items – the importance of thrift – yet he understood the value of outward appearance, through consumption and lifestyle choices, as evidence of solid middle-class status that positioned African Americans closer to acceptance.<sup>102</sup> Conditions in the 1920s, namely the development of large African American urban centres and the growth of a new era of consumption in the United States in which African Americans participated, meant that the contradiction Davis noted did not confuse

<sup>100</sup> Harris, *The Negro as Capitalist*, ix-x.

<sup>101</sup> Reed, *Chicago's Black Metropolis*, 74, 76.

<sup>102</sup> Davis, *Commerce in Color*, 11, 32.

uplift efforts, but enabled them to be moulded to new economic and social conditions. Whether Washington was naive in his expectation of business success, it was the appropriation of Washington's philosophy that allowed the racial uplift effort to be maintained in the new urban environment.

The newspapers, as growing and profitable entities in the 1920s, were well aware that their survival now depended less on traditional subscription sales and more on advertising to support their growth, so were an integral part of the African American business community. Claude Barnett, through the advertising agencies he formed alongside his Associated Negro Press organization, is a testament to this new understanding of the path to success. Newspapers recognized the value of promoting business in the urban environment to support racial uplift, but they must also have been aware that they, as conveyors of the uplift-through-commerce philosophy, were also its beneficiaries as businesses chose to advertise in their pages. This virtuous circle enabled them to expand as businesses, and establish economic viability to continue to promote a racial uplift philosophy.

African American business activities may not have influenced the broader United States economy, but they received sustained support from the black press, and from organizations such as the National Negro Business League. By 1930 African Americans owned some 70,000 business enterprises, and although most of these were small-scale service businesses, the 1920s saw dramatic growth in banking and insurance, as well as in cosmetics companies catering to the black community.<sup>103</sup> The quantitative success of African American business in the 1920s may be difficult to determine, especially based on present-day knowledge that the Depression was about to destroy much that had been created in the 1920s, but there is no doubt that business contributed to racial uplift in psychological as well as economic ways. As Reed notes, the middle class controlled the press, the schools, and the pulpit, so was able to keep ideas of racial uplift

<sup>103</sup> Harris, *The Negro as Capitalist*, 53.



and respectability in the public eye.<sup>104</sup> The black press performed this public service by constructing positive images of business success, and the wealth and respectability that came with it, as achievable by anyone with determination and the desire to work hard. The new interest in conspicuous consumption also allowed the black press to align racial uplift with aspiration for "success" as represented by acquiring the physical indicators of wealth and status. At the same time the press looked out for its own financial interests by reminding readers of its value as a product to be consumed. The *Pittsburgh Courier* declared itself to be "in a class by itself" as a newspaper, and appealed to readers' vanity by assuring them that they were "intelligent, progressive, forward-looking Negro Americans" because they read the *Courier*.<sup>105</sup>

As newspapers placed more emphasis on conspicuous consumption through their content and through advertising, they became increasingly interested in the activities of African American high society. The affluent classes, through their engagement with conspicuous consumption, set fashion trends and conveyed images of success and racial pride for the edification of the lower classes, using social occasions to display the latest fashions and set standards of what they considered "tasteful elegance"<sup>106</sup> What had once been one or two lines in local news columns about weddings or other social events now became feature articles, with photographs, of weddings, balls, and other gatherings. Each newspaper had its own society news page and columnists dedicated to reporting on the "social set's" activities. As social news was given more space, these columnists not only reported society news, but became arbiters of fashion and lifestyle trends in their own right. This trend continued unabated into the 1930s, even as the economic situation deteriorated as the Depression took hold. This phenomenon represented yet another approach to racial uplift and will be explored in more detail in chapter four.

<sup>104</sup> Reed, *Chicago's Black Metropolis*, 58.

<sup>105</sup> "The Courier Is Rated A Class By Itself," *Pittsburgh Courier*, September 3 1927.

<sup>106</sup> Reed, *Chicago's Black Metropolis*, 58; White and White, *Stylin'*, 238.

## CHAPTER FOUR: The society pages and elite women's roles in racial uplift

*"Our people are more and more beginning to pay attention the the finer things of life. They are really trying to observe the best rules of etiquette and good conduct. I think this means much for the social advancement of our group." Mrs. Earl B. Dickerson.<sup>1</sup>*

*"All black families are not from ghettos, did not live in ghettos, and have lived well." Gerri Major.<sup>2</sup>*

A constant challenge faced by the black community was countering the tendency among whites to see it as a homogenous social unit, and to judge the majority according to the behaviour of the few. The few were those people who appeared in the white press for crimes committed, or who otherwise created a negative impression through what was seen as loud or indecorous public behaviour. As the *Plaindealer* lamented in chapter one, when discussing the 1900 census categories, many whites thought of blacks as a single entity defined by race, and they failed to acknowledge the existence of distinct social classes. Beyond African Americans' basic right to equality under the law as American citizens, this failure to acknowledge distinctions of behaviour and status within the black community was a great barrier to gaining acceptance based on achievement and worth. Unacknowledged by white America, African Americans continued their efforts to better their material and social circumstances, and many were very successful. By the late 1920s, the society pages of the black press were providing evidence that there was a class of people who were fully enjoying the fruits of their labour and a level of social sophistication and culture that was beyond the reach of many whites. While racial uplift efforts may have failed to change whites' impressions, the efforts remained important in the black community "for the social advancement of our group."

<sup>1</sup> "'Our People Just Beginning to Live Socially' - Mrs. Earl B. Dickerson," *Pittsburgh Courier*, January 22 1927. Kathryn Dickerson was a prominent Chicago socialite. Her husband was general counsel and later CEO of Supreme Liberty Life Insurance, and was also involved in Chicago politics and the Chicago Urban League. See Earl B. Dickerson Papers Finding Aid, Chicago Public Library website. <https://www.chipublib.org/fa-earl-b-dickerson-papers/>. Accessed July 7 2018.

<sup>2</sup> "When She's 65," *South Bend Tribune*, August 10 1979. Gerri Major Papers, 1927-1985. New York Public Library (Schomburg Center). [Hereafter Gerri Major Papers.]

This chapter will explore the society pages of the black press through the 1930s, and, by extension, the role of women in this aspect of African American society. As noted in chapter three, in the 1920s gender roles became more clearly separated into public and private arenas, and the society pages were the main area within the black press where women's roles in the private sphere were most clearly articulated. Women took the lead in organizing the entertainment and charity activities that were showcased in the society pages, and they set the tone for upper-class respectability. Men, too, had their own social clubs and maintained social standards to preserve respectability and exclusivity, but because women had established their social niche in the private sphere, where they exercised their various talents and interests, their activities were most prominently featured in the society pages. Elite women, and men, ensured that membership of the "upper" class was not open to anyone, but at the same time they positioned themselves as social leaders whose standards of respectability and lavish lifestyles would reflect well on African American society to outsiders, and would also serve as an aspirational ideal for the lower classes. The society pages were also vehicles for featuring young people who had achieved educational or career success, and this added to the racial uplift focus that the elite class, and the black press, was able to construct.

Women journalists were the main recorders of black social life in the society pages, and were able to access the various activities organized by women, thus ensuring that these activities, and their organizers, were kept in the public eye. The reporters helped sustain the image that the elite class wished to establish for its own benefit, but they also reported on its achievements and activities for the edification of the wider reading audience. The chapter will also explore the women who were the society reporters through the writing and career of Gerri Major, a socialite and talented journalist who achieved national acclaim as a social commentator and was one of the most recognized of the group. Gerri's career sheds light on the women who wrote about the elite class, but also on the varied roles of women in racial uplift. Reviewing the writing and

career of a contemporary journalist enhances our understanding of the broader racial uplift discourse, as Gerri wrote about society from the perspective of a member of the black upper class. Her reporting of high society also provides insight into the type of people who made up the elite class, and the subtle nuances of aspiration and class that can be found in the black press. Her career also exemplifies the role of the society reporter in sustaining reader loyalty, and, ultimately, buoying newspaper circulation.

"Society pages" suggests an array of frivolous news of parties, debutante balls and the like, and while this is true at first glance, a deeper analysis of this under-explored area of the black press shows that it was also a vehicle for expressing ideas of racial uplift. The society pages are a valuable source of information about those African Americans who had achieved educational and economic success, and who considered themselves to be the vanguard of correct conduct and respectability. This "upper ten," while firmly ensconced behind class barriers, maintained its traditional belief that it had a duty to set standards for others to follow, and the black press was fully behind this effort through representations in the society pages of the "best" people.<sup>3</sup>

Newspaper reports on society activities illuminate upper-class attitudes toward racial uplift, and the part that this class played in establishing race progress. The society pages are also evidence of an awareness of white standards of refinement and an assimilationist objective. As "Chicago society matron" Mrs. Earl B. Dickerson observed in 1927, a rich social life was a part of racial progress: "We are beginning to get more out of life; beginning to really enjoy ourselves. Without a doubt the race is progressing culturally." She noted that people's homes were "more beautiful than we ever dreamed of" and that movies and "the best class of white people" provided inspiration for tasteful interior decoration and "fine manners."<sup>4</sup> Newspaper society pages, through the visual images they presented and their detailed descriptions of social events, were a way for African Americans to affirm social progress as a group, and establish individual

<sup>3</sup> Gatewood, *Aristocrats of Color*. 186. Gatewood uses the term "upper ten" throughout the book, possibly to mirror Du Bois' use of "talented tenth."

<sup>4</sup> "'Our People Just Beginning to Live Socially' - Mrs. Earl B. Dickerson."

status within their own community. As Kevin Gaines argues, this concept of race progress stemmed from the application of the core uplift tenets of self-help and wealth-building to advancing one's class status through a "bourgeois evolutionism" concept that enabled the more successful members of society to distinguish themselves as a group to be emulated by the masses.<sup>5</sup>

The society pages are also a lens through which to explore the role of elite women in racial uplift. These women were the arbiters of fashion and style, and arranged and set the tone for the many and varied social activities enjoyed by the upper ranks of the black community. These activities were generally reported by women journalists who furnished details of the parties, dances, theatre evenings, and club activities that upper-class women orchestrated, and thus contributed to the dissemination of "correct" and aspirational behaviour for the lower classes to emulate. Upper-class women were also, through their club activities, agents of racial uplift through their charity work. The black press, however, did not limit itself to accounts of the parties and elegant venues where charity fundraising was conducted, but also regularly featured women who had achieved academic or business success, or who, in addition to their position in "society," were engaged in business or civic activities that benefitted the wider black community.

#### Class divisions in African American society

Before investigating the newspaper society columns, it is necessary to outline how African Americans defined their social structure and class differences. I refer to two works on black society: *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy*, by Swedish economist and sociologist Gunnar Myrdal, published in 1944, an extensive study of contemporary African American life, and *Black Metropolis: A Study of Negro Life in a Northern City*, by African American sociologists St. Clare Drake and Horace R. Cayton, published in

<sup>5</sup> Gaines, *Uplifting the Race*, 2, 4, 21.

1945, which is a study of black life in Chicago.<sup>6</sup> Because these studies were based on research conducted during the 1930s, they are useful sources for defining African American class structure and the constitution of the upper class during the period considered in this chapter. Both studies suggest that while material wealth was uniformly important in both black and white communities in determining social status, there were other factors at work in defining social class in black society that did not apply to the same degree in white society. They note the importance of personal presentation in the form of tasteful dress, correct speech, impeccable manners, and a strict moral code – respectability – as essential elements that accompanied material wealth, not only in determining entry into the highest ranks of black society, but to emphasize distance from the uncouth elements that they believed created a negative impression of the black population in the white mind.<sup>7</sup>

Both of the research studies look at class divisions, and divide African American society into upper, middle, and lower classes, as in white society, and both acknowledge that the comparison with white society is limited. Myrdal noted that there was not a direct horizontal correspondence between the class levels of the two societies. This was because, in economic development terms, the black community was far behind the mainstream, as was reflected in the small ratio of wealthy people and the degree of that wealth, and the much bigger ratio of the poorer, working class. There was also no great wealth within the black community that was comparable to the vast industrialist wealth seen in white society. Myrdal suggested that what passed for wealth in the black community was more directly comparable to upper-middle-class wealth in the white community.<sup>8</sup> Drake and Cayton emphasized the bottom-heavy black class pyramid and the much smaller proportion of middle and upper classes compared with white society.

<sup>6</sup> Gunnar Myrdal, *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy*, (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1996); Drake and Cayton, *Black Metropolis*.

<sup>7</sup> Myrdal, *An American Dilemma*, 702; Drake and Cayton, *Black Metropolis*, 531.

<sup>8</sup> Myrdal, *An American Dilemma*, 694.

Northern cities were the sites of rapidly changing conceptions of class in African American society, and especially who was to be accorded upper class status. Formerly, those engaged in traditional service occupations catering to the white community were considered upper class, but this status was shifting in favour of those who were leading successful businesses catering to the black community. Increasingly, business or professional success and wealth were becoming upper-class indicators. Class boundaries were fluid, however, and subject to different interpretation by different groups within a single city, such as between long-term resident "old settlers" and newcomers. There were also differences between cities, particularly in the South. In his study of the history of the black upper class, Willard Gatewood notes historical differences between cities in the way in which residents determined upper class status. For example, in Charleston, light skin colour was important, but in Atlanta it was less important than education. In Jacksonville, Florida, family background counted more than occupation.<sup>9</sup> In the nineteenth and early twentieth century, coming from an "old family," usually descended from prominent mulatto families of free people in antebellum times, was a determinant of elite status, but this classification was weakening by the 1930s as more first-generation professionals were joining the ranks of high society.<sup>10</sup>

Greater availability of education and opportunities to advance to college, and greater opportunities to achieve economic success through business, meant that traditional class determinants based on family background, length of residence in the North, or skin colour became less important in assigning class status, but respectability remained important and relevant. Bettye Collier-Thomas and James Turner, in their discussion of African American identity, agree that African Americans developed a class structure where status was defined according to education and behaviour rather than strictly by occupation or wealth.<sup>11</sup> In whatever

<sup>9</sup> Gatewood, *Aristocrats of Color*, 90-92.

<sup>10</sup> Wayne, *Imagining Black America*, 91; Gatewood, *Aristocrats of Color*, 334.

<sup>11</sup> Bettye Collier-Thomas and James Turner, "Race, Class and Color: The African American Discourse on Identity," *Journal of American Ethnic History* 14, no. 1 (1994).

way a community constructed its class boundaries, both upper-class and middle-class groups shared an interest in distinguishing themselves from the majority of the poorer and labouring classes, and employed various means to do so, most notably through maintaining what they considered to be correct public deportment and respectability. From Booker T. Washington's exhortation to the community to participate in the 1900 census "because we will be largely judged on the result," to urban society in the inter-war years, the need to prove themselves as worthy citizens was a constant concern of the African American upper and middle classes.

Newspapers did not overtly assign class status to individuals, but they created a concept of what constituted the upper class through their positive descriptions of social events, the entertainment that was enjoyed, and the deportment and dress of the guests, presenting the upper class as a group to which to aspire. While it is not possible to draw distinct lines between what could be considered middle or upper class, as far as African American society was concerned, upper-class status was accorded to those with professional occupations such as doctor or lawyer, university professor, supervisory position in government, or successful businessperson.<sup>12</sup> According to Drake and Cayton, persons in service occupations such as hotel waiter or Pullman porter may also have been considered upper class if the individual had a post-graduate degree, as African American society placed a heavier weight on education than occupation.<sup>13</sup>

Apart from justifying the existence of class divisions, it was apparent that African Americans continued to chafe against white impressions that they were a homogenous group, thereby undermining the African American stance that class differences showed them to be a mirror of white society and its own class differences. In 1924, the *Norfolk Journal and Guide* criticized the white *Boston Chronicle* for expressing the opinion that (black) Boston high society was "a useless member and does more harm than good."<sup>14</sup> The *Journal and Guide* criticized the *Chronicle* for its apparent belief "that all Negroes look alike," arguing that there were differences

<sup>12</sup> Drake and Cayton, *Black Metropolis*, 508.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 515.

<sup>14</sup> "Social Differentiation Necessary," *Norfolk Journal and Guide*, March 22 1924.



between all people, and that it was natural that they "separate themselves socially into their own groups, to promote their best interests." Like associating with like was to everyone's benefit. The article stressed the necessity of differentiating between social classes, because "we have been much injured in the race name and reputation because, in the South at least, white law and public opinion insist upon rating our worst and best as being the same." The article concluded: "In order to get the most out of living, we must have social grouping which invites the good and desirable and repels the bad and undesirable members of the race."

### The newspapers and social reporting

While most cities around the nation with established black populations had their own elite classes, society reporting focused on the major population centres and their concentrations of wealth and "society" groups. Examination of the society pages will therefore focus on the newspapers serving the major black urban areas in the North, in a triangle reaching from the Mid-Atlantic region up to New York City and across to Chicago. Many from the upper ranks of black society in Southern towns had migrated to cities such as Philadelphia, New York, or Washington, DC to take advantage of professional or business opportunities, augmenting the ranks of high society in these cities and furthering the importance of the large Northern cities as centres of black cultural life.<sup>15</sup> Some papers extended their society reporting beyond their own cities. The *Chicago Defender* carried a New York Society column under the byline of Bessye Bearden, a reporter located in New York, and the *Afro-American* carried a column dedicated to society in Washington, DC.

Newspapers considered social reporting and the society pages an important element in boosting newspaper demand. An internal report prepared by the circulation department of the

<sup>15</sup> Gatewood, *Aristocrats of Color*, 157. Gatewood notes an exception in the upper class in New Orleans, which had a large population of wealthy Creole citizens who were descendants of slaves and French colonizers, but considered themselves to be separate from the black population. This group had established its own social rituals, spoke French, and did not have the wider connections through marriage as did the prominent families in other cities. Its social life, therefore, did not feature in the main black newspapers. See pp 84, 87, 90.

*Chicago Defender* in the 1930s indicates the importance of society reporting, and also an interest in the approaches that competing newspapers were taking.<sup>16</sup> The report notes the large circulation of the *Pittsburgh Courier* in the major Eastern cities, and that it included "plenty of news and pictures of the people who reside in these cities." The *Courier* was, according to the report, continually trying to obtain "pictures of prominent people" from its various sources. It appeared that "plenty of news and pictures" was the key to boosting circulation. The reports of the social activities of the largest concentrations of affluent people not only helped the newspapers increase their circulation, but help set fashion and entertainment trends for the rest of the country, supporting the newspapers' role as social influencers.

Newspapers supported the social life of the black community in three major ways: reporting social news to the community, as the white press did not concern itself with African American life; setting cultural standards through the reporting of social news; and providing entertainment. First, the traditional importance of church news in the black press and the large amount of space devoted to social news shows that the newspapers' role was more than simply a source of current events or political news. In the early years of the century, social news reporting consisted of the doings of people in the papers' immediate communities, such as news of people who were visiting from out of town, local people who were vacationing in other places, and church and club social activities. The biggest weekly newspapers with national distributions continued to provide this service by including social news from their surrounding districts. For example, the *Norfolk Journal and Guide* had a separate section for social news from neighbouring areas such as Richmond, Virginia, and North Carolina. The *Afro-American* also catered to readers in different localities by including social news from Virginia, West Virginia, Tennessee, and North Carolina. The *New York Amsterdam News* also included regional social news on separate pages devoted to general news from New Jersey, Brooklyn, and New York

<sup>16</sup> "Report of Circulation Conditions in Eastern Territory" (nd). Box 11, Folder 10. Abbott-Sengstacke Family Papers.

State, suggesting that the papers were keen to give equal space to readers across their main distribution areas. This aspect of social news reporting was maintained in the newspapers, including the major national papers, well into mid-century, and the papers appeared to have a vested interest in including this type of news. Contributing was a community effort, as the information was provided to the papers by private individuals or club members. This was clear from occasional instructions to contributors to "send in all bits of news you come in contact – all visitors, the sick, persons going away, all parties or entertainment of any kind."<sup>17</sup> Encouraging reader participation in this way was a means of promoting newspaper sales, as people would be interested in seeing their names in print, and a robust social news section would also be a way for the papers to attract advertising. By encouraging reader contributions, newspapers also strengthened their role as an important communication medium for the community.

The second function of the newspapers in supporting social life was to promote cultural standards through the reporting of social news. A certain event, such as a party where guests were entertained with a piano recital, for example, would suggest to other readers what was appropriate or popular in a community, which in turn influenced other groups who would hold similar types of events and report them to the papers, creating trends and setting standards of correct or respectable entertainment. As high society became more prominent in the press through the 1920s, the newspapers also played a role in constructing ideal images to which to aspire. In all decades, this role of establishing standards of respectability also included articles, often accompanied by photographs, featuring young men and women who had achieved academic or career success.

The third function, providing entertainment, allowed the reader to escape the realities of prejudice and hardship in daily life through reading reports of elegant homes, beautiful decorations, and fashionably attired people enjoying dancing and bridge. Social reporting was a

<sup>17</sup> *Norfolk Journal and Guide*, March 14 1936.

window into a world where people were able to express themselves and engage in creative and enjoyable pastimes within their own community. The press was, therefore, a key element in sustaining positive images of a respectable lifestyle, in fostering race pride through examples of high achievement, but also in publicizing the pleasure that successful African Americans were enjoying through their vibrant social life. The newspapers also provided an outlet that enabled the community engage with what was stylish and fashionable on African American terms, and not just to measure "progress" against "the best class of white people."

By the 1920s social news reporting had expanded to dedicated pages in the nationally distributed papers, and was often separated into social news – that is, notices of visits and club business – and a society column, which was written by a newspaper reporter. The latter columns went into more detail about events in which the most socially prominent people in the community participated, and here some class distinctions are evident. The social activities contributed by readers were of a more modest nature, in that the events were not substantial enough to warrant a separate piece written by the paper. Nevertheless, they were indicative of groups whose members were enjoying a standard of living that gave them the economic wherewithal to travel for pleasure, or the time to participate in the many club activities that were listed in the press. The large amount of space devoted to club and fraternal organizations, whether their activities were contributed by readers or whether their social events were written up by reporters, indicates the importance that such groups played in black social life.

### Club activity

The importance of club-based social activity in black society dates back to free black communities in the antebellum era. These communities included the wealthy and educated, and many who claimed white ancestry, but they were, to different degrees, restricted by custom or

law from interacting socially with the white community.<sup>18</sup> Noting the large number of social clubs and the high ratio of membership among African Americans, sociologist Gunnar Myrdal theorized in the 1940s that caste status and exclusion from mainstream social organizations forced African Americans to turn to their own organizations for creative, intellectual, and social expression.<sup>19</sup> While it was true that mainstream clubs and fraternities were often closed to them, racial segregation in itself does not explain the prevalence and popularity of clubs. The membership criteria that many clubs imposed, and the emphasis placed on the respectability of their members, particularly among the most elite clubs, suggests that they functioned as intra-race class determinants rather than simply as a means to overcome "caste" barriers. This was evident in the June 1905 issue of the *Savannah Tribune*, which issued instructions to Masonic club members to restrict their memberships to preserve their respectability and class status.

Clubs catered to different needs and filled different purposes. Some were focused on charity work, others were social clubs, and some combined both activities. Membership tended to be divided along gender lines, although married couples formed the membership of some more socially-oriented clubs. Many clubs had fewer than twenty members, but people were generally members of a number of different clubs. Fraternal societies such as the Masons or Knights of Pythias had large memberships, as did the various Greek letter alumni associations of prestigious black colleges.<sup>20</sup> Club structures also enhanced feelings of community and belonging, and were, through their membership selection processes, determinants of class and status. They were on the one hand used to preserve social exclusivity, by limiting membership to people of similar backgrounds and interests, but on the other hand, it was through these club organizations that men and women conducted their social lives and participated in charitable activities, which the newspapers reported.

<sup>18</sup> Anne S. Butler, "Black Fraternal and Benevolent Societies in Nineteenth-Century America," in *African American Fraternities and Sororities: The Legacy and the Vision*, ed. Tamara L. Brown, Gregory S. Parks, and Clarendia M. Phillips (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2012), 80.

<sup>19</sup> Gunnar Myrdal, *An American Dilemma*, 952-3.

<sup>20</sup> Geraldyn Hodges Major, *Black Society* (Chicago: Johnson Publishing Company Inc., 1976), 323.

Social clubs in particular required that a number of membership criteria be met, which enabled them to be selective and maintain their desired class position. While a certain standard of living was required, wealth alone did not dictate who could join. Drake and Cayton's survey of black life in Chicago provides details of the rituals surrounding club membership. Anecdotal evidence collected through interviews suggested that maintaining exclusiveness was the key criteria for admitting new members. Men who were interviewed about their club activities noted that clubs were careful not to allow the entry of people who, while possibly very wealthy, were engaged in "policy" activities, that is, numbers running or other gambling activities, racketeering, etc., or who were indiscreet in their sexual relationships. Men and women who appeared to be uncultured and engaging in lavish and conspicuous consumption and wearing loud dress were also avoided. These standards indicate the importance of respectability and behaviour as upper-class indicators in African American society. Typical selection criteria for an upper-class club that intended to maintain exclusivity would include having a college education, a professional occupation (or a husband with a professional occupation in the case of women's clubs), familiarity with correct etiquette, a tasteful, understated manner of dressing, and a shared interest in the activity of the club. Other considerations included a knowledge of the rules of bridge, as many of the clubs' social rituals involved bridge parties, but more importantly, "a good moral character" was essential for membership.<sup>21</sup> Potential members were proposed by existing members, and their application went before the other members, who made a unanimous decision as to whether the person was suitable for admission.

Women's club activities were the main focus of the society pages rather than the men's clubs, as women's sphere of activity had turned away from politics to their roles as guardians of African American home life, and this was reflected in their club activity and also on the society

<sup>21</sup> Drake and Cayton, *Black Metropolis*, 531-3.

pages.<sup>22</sup> Assigned to roles within this private sphere, ambitious women were able to exercise their intellectual and organizational abilities for the benefit of society through the outlet of the women's clubs. Women organized parties, receptions, and social events around fundraising efforts to support hospitals, kindergartens, and settlement houses, and also raised funds for scholarships. The newspapers supported the women's efforts through publicity in the society pages that highlighted the social and glamorous side of the functions, but they also ascribed importance and relevance to the charitable work.

Newspapers give little indication of the purpose of most of the clubs listed in the society pages. It is, however, possible to gauge the objectives of some of the clubs from their names. For example, the *Philadelphia Tribune* lists activities of clubs with titles such as the Superior Social Club, Club Incomparable, Just for Fun Club, Willing Workers Social Club, Alpha Charity Club, and the Carnation Social and Charity Club. These are typical of club names that are found in other cities, and most names suggest that they were formed for social purposes with the aim of establishing social cachet, or were formed for more practical charitable purposes.

### Women's clubs and racial uplift

Since the nineteenth century, women's clubs had been the preserve of the upper and middle classes, whose economic circumstances and generally better access to education gave these women both the time and the inclination to work for social betterment, and they provided the source from which much uplift activity emanated. In his analysis of the speeches given at the formation of the first national association of clubs, which became the National Association of Colored Women (NACW), formed in 1896, Wilson Jeremiah Moses stresses the "almost religious commitment to the uplift of the black masses" and notes founding member Mrs. Mary Church Terrell's belief that the work of the clubs was to firmly establish among black women the

<sup>22</sup> Mitchell, *Righteous Propagation*; Brown, *Private Politics and Public Voices*.

middle-class bourgeois morality of Victorian America.<sup>23</sup> Historian Erin D. Chapman supports this view of the NACW, expressing the organization's assumption that the bourgeois home was a woman's sphere of influence and the basis for the formation of respectable womanhood and motherhood.<sup>24</sup>

An important element of this emphasis on family life was to dispel the negative image of African American women's morality that had persisted as a result of slavery and concubinage, and this was best achieved by inculcating Victorian ideas of sexual restraint.<sup>25</sup> Michelle Mitchell describes how women's clubs encouraged behaviour that was based on middle-class values, where sexuality was placed within the realm of marriage and the family, and comportment and preserving moral standards were linked to a successful life.<sup>26</sup> In her study of inter-war black Detroit, Victoria Wolcott suggests that ideas of Victorian bourgeois respectability that encompassed domesticity, chastity, and self-restraint were fading among whites by the World War I years, but they remained a strong component of black middle-class reform ideology for much longer. This can be explained by the need to project an image of respectability to the white community, but it was also a means of establishing class boundaries and enabling class advancement within the black community.<sup>27</sup> Willard Gatewood points out that upper-class women's involvement in guiding racial uplift was often in conflict with the desire to disassociate themselves socially from those to whom they were directing their uplift efforts. While upper class women took their responsibilities for advancing the race seriously, this responsibility did not mean the erasure of class lines.<sup>28</sup> While club women's charity activities may have been

<sup>23</sup> Moses, *The Golden Age of Black Nationalism*, 118-9. The Association's motto, "lifting as we climb" indicates its uplift objective.

<sup>24</sup> Chapman, *Prove It on Me*, 11.

<sup>25</sup> Wolcott, *Remaking Respectability*, 6.

<sup>26</sup> Mitchell, *Righteous Propagation*, 139; Drake and Cayton, *Black Metropolis*, 521. That is not to say that there was no resentment of the more affluent classes, as reflected in the use of terms such as "dicties" or "stuck-ups" to describe them. These negative perceptions served to enhance class distinctions within African American society, where the "upper" class imposed arbitrary social criteria for entry, to distance itself as much as possible from "undesirable" elements.

<sup>27</sup> Wolcott, *Remaking Respectability*, 8.

<sup>28</sup> Gatewood, *Aristocrats of Color*, 190.



highly prescriptive, and based on assumptions of a lack of respectability and competence in the lower classes, as Michelle Mitchell describes, club women believed that lower-class women who aspired to better their condition would embrace club women's efforts to insinuate the notion that conduct reflected class and moral standards.<sup>29</sup>

The importance of women as agents of racial uplift was affirmed by the *Chicago Defender* in an article in 1932, in which it stated that "moral and cultural standards must be set by our young women," and that women had always been responsible for the "development of mankind" by setting proper standards of public and private conduct. "The Race cannot rise above its women and neither can it rise above its conduct: character and fitness are the watch-words of our success and advancement."<sup>30</sup> This sentiment was echoed in the community. In response to a series of articles on culture and higher education written by Robert Abbott in 1934, a woman wrote to the *Defender* lamenting the fact that "our standards have been lowered very much."<sup>31</sup> Declaring herself to be a young woman with a college education, she stated that "if it hadn't been for my home training that I had from my mother of the older school, my higher education wouldn't have done me any good." In other words, while education was important, the lack of proper moral instruction in the home to support it was the reason the writer believed "our people have lost ground." The woman's upper-class status is indicated first by her college education, and second by her membership in a sorority, to which she invited Robert Abbott to speak. The letter is an example of the interest the upper class took in raising respectability in the community, and the role of women in doing so.

The press devoted much space in the society pages to glittery social events, but, as the Abbott series indicates, they did not neglect the more serious aspects of racial uplift. Upper-class women interested themselves in promoting moral standards through education, which the press reported. An article about the Phi Delta Kappa sorority explains its launch of a nationwide essay

<sup>29</sup> Mitchell, *Righteous Propagation*, 139.

<sup>30</sup> "Culture and Refinement," *Chicago Defender*, August 6 1932.

<sup>31</sup> "'We Need Culture'," *Chicago Defender*, March 24 1934.

contest through schools "to stimulate better morals and manners among school children."<sup>32</sup> The article explained that "the sorority is exceedingly anxious to better the morals and manners of the Negro youth, feeling that this phase of development of the Negro youth has been neglected to some extent." The article also noted that the sorority offered scholarships to worthy students, and "in a few cases has borne the entire expense of the four years college course."

Not all clubs were devoted to charity work, but many still maintained a racial uplift component in terms of setting standards. Upper-class women considered that their role was to set standards of conduct, and, as "leaders" of society, they were able to convey these standards through the publicity they received in the society pages, expressed through lifestyle and cultural interests outside of their more targeted and specific charitable activities. Clubs met a variety of interests such as self-improvement, and differentiated themselves through their intellectual interests in such areas as art, music, or literature. Historian Lawrence Schenbeck acknowledges the belief in women "holding the key to race progress" and argues that the emphasis on establishing social hierarchy through club membership and engaging in cultural improvement was also a way to uplift the race morally, religiously, and intellectually.<sup>33</sup> The *Pittsburgh Courier* included a piece about the Fortnightly Club which illustrates this point. After the transaction of club business, the article noted, the group was entertained by a program presented by some of the members, which included a reading, two solo performances, and a piano recital.<sup>34</sup>

The newspapers' detailed reporting of club activities indicates their importance in the social lives of African Americans, but it is also indicative of the clubs' role in racial uplift. Whether through the clubs' charitable activities, through their strict maintenance of standards of respectability for gaining membership, or the aspirational examples that the reporting of their social activities set for the rest of the community, clubs were central to establishing a middle-

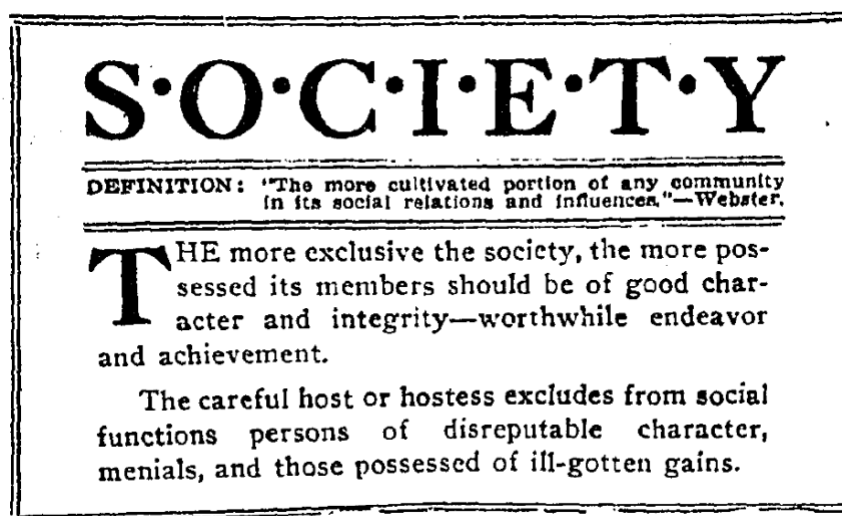
<sup>32</sup> "Phi Delta Kappa Inaugurates Contest," *Pittsburgh Courier*, March 12 1932.

<sup>33</sup> Schenbeck, "Music, Gender, and 'Uplift'" Schenbeck's article includes a similar comment made in 1909 about women's key role in racial uplift, which shows that this basic concept had considerable longevity.

<sup>34</sup> "Fortnightly Club," *Pittsburgh Courier*, March 12 1932.

class ideology of respectability and community engagement. The press, as the most accessible communication medium for the black community, provided news of club activities to support its own agenda of promoting racial uplift.

### Society pages



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*Figure 1: Column heading on the society page of the New York Amsterdam News, September 2, 1931, leaving no doubt as to the importance of respectability in social interaction.*

"Society" news was considered sufficiently important that most papers dedicated at least one or two pages to social news and society reporting. This news usually appeared as the first non-news segment in the paper, after the main news on the front page and secondary news on the following two or three pages. Society news was often combined with, or immediately preceded, women's-interest news, and was generally followed by entertainment news, sports news, and the editorials. The inclusion of social and society news on women's pages, or the close proximity within the papers of society news and the women's pages, attests to women's roles as the drivers of social activity within the African American community.

Treatment of social and society news was very similar across the major weekly newspapers with wide or national distributions. While there were minor differences in the arrangement of news within the papers, all gave approximately equal space and prominence to news relating to the "better" elements of black society. The content of the social news changed little over the decades, for example, information on out-of-town visitors usually included the name of the visitor and their home town, the person hosting, and the duration of the visit. Sometimes additional information was provided, such as the person's occupation or the school they were attending. These subtle class indicators were also apparent in engagement or wedding notices. The name of the bride's parents and the occupation of her father were often given, as was the occupation of the groom, and the school he attended.

The arrangement of social news shows broad, common trends among the different newspapers, but slight variations on emphasis. In the early 1930s the *Philadelphia Tribune* had a page dedicated to a "Flashes, Sparks, and Society" column, alongside "Evelynn Chats About Society and Folks," later shortened to "Eve Lynn Chats." The former contained social and club news, and the latter more detailed descriptions of social events. The *Chicago Defender* carried a society column under the byline "The Matron." The *Afro-American* dedicated a whole page to "The Washington Social Whirl." As the nation's capital, and also the traditional home of a black upper class dating back to the antebellum era, Washington society was, understandably, important to the paper, but possibly also because of the close proximity of Baltimore and Washington, DC.

Society columns under bylines were more detailed than the social news items, and were written in an upbeat style as if regaling a friend with a lively account of an event. An example of this type of reporting was the *Philadelphia Tribune's* "Evelynn Chats About Society and Folks," which described the following event in a tone that was typical of the byline columns: "Mrs. Malcolm Bryant was a charming hostess last Wednesday night at her pretty 'maison' at 1803

N21st street when she gave a delightful Bridge party."<sup>35</sup> All-round achievement was also highlighted: "Miss Alberta Alston, of the Minerva Apartments, is proving herself smart in more ways than one. Not content with being considered one of the 'fashionables' of the younger set, she comes forth now with a scholarship from Howard University, and a prize of \$50 and a key from a well-known sorority."<sup>36</sup>

Much entertainment was carried out in private homes, as de facto Jim Crow customs, if not law in Northern cities, prevented functions being held at large hotels or facilities frequented by whites. When describing a social function at a private home, it was customary for the newspaper to include the full street address, which seemed to be an additional factor that added social cachet, as local residents could thereby identify the homeowner as living in an affluent residential area. Many people also hosted parties for houseguests of their friends, and it seemed, from reports in the society columns, to be customary for visitors to participate in a full calendar of social engagements for the duration of their stays. Activities outside of private homes revolved around theatre visits, or dinners and dances at restaurants or casinos which would have been run by African Americans or located in black neighbourhoods.<sup>37</sup>

Articles on the most prominent social events of the week often devoted considerable attention to the physical details of the venue, the decorations, and the food served. Descriptions of elegant homes kept women at the centre of social events, in their role as guardians of home and family life. As much entertaining was done in private homes, women took the lead in planning and arranging their homes to accommodate often large numbers of guests. The descriptions of these homes were edifying to the less affluent, giving them an insight into how the homes were presented for these social events. An article in the *Chicago Defender* in early

<sup>35</sup> "Evelynn Chats About Society and Folks," *Philadelphia Tribune*, March 5 1931.

<sup>36</sup> "Pearlie's Prattle," *Washington Tribune*, September 28 1933.

<sup>37</sup> Major, *Black Society*, 358. Major notes that this began to change in the 1950s, when facilities catering to whites became more accommodating.

1933 featured a Christmas party hosted at the home of a member of the Pandora club.<sup>38</sup> After noting the street address, the article described the "Martin home's spacious rooms and wide entrance hall festooned with evergreen. The parlor, living room, library and dining room, opened en masse, were beautifully decorated in a red-and-green theme." Another article described a bridge party, where "guests were served a very delectable two-course luncheon at a perfectly appointed table rich with china, cut glass and silver."<sup>39</sup> It was also the practice to name all the guests in attendance. A report on a contribution tea held at the home of a member of the Windsor Art and Literary Club named sixty guests, suggesting that this home, too, was spacious and well appointed.<sup>40</sup>

An important aspect of society reporting was to include descriptions of guests' costumes, and these sometimes took up a considerable proportion of a single article. The society reporter must have been under some pressure to ensure both accuracy and neutrality, as well as needing to possess a knowledge of fashion, in order to record the event to everyone's satisfaction. For example, an "Eve Lynn Chats" column in the *Philadelphia Tribune* describing a Christmas dance devoted more than half the article to listing what the women were wearing: "Mrs. Wilbur Strickland chose flame in satin trimmed in sable. Mrs. Archie Morgan was stunning in black satin, trimmed with silver fox. A tiara in crystals was on her hair. Lovely is the only word to describe Mrs. George Deane in white satin. Miss Marion Turner was stunning in blue and gold."<sup>41</sup>

<sup>38</sup> "Pandora Club Gives Pretty Holiday Fete," *Chicago Defender*, January 7 1933.

<sup>39</sup> "Charity and Art Club Is Entertained," *Chicago Defender*, November 2 1935.

<sup>40</sup> "Windsor Literary Club Has Contribution Tea," *Chicago Defender*, June 1 1935. According to the article, a contribution tea involved guests placing money in a basket arranged for the purpose at the event, to be applied to a charitable cause. Guests then enjoyed refreshments and entertainment.

<sup>41</sup> "Commissioners Make Their Bow," *Philadelphia Tribune*, January 4 1934.



parties that the upper echelons of black society were unaffected. The *Philadelphia Tribune* did, however, draw readers' attention to the economic situation in one article in 1931: "What Are We Doing To Help Our Own Unemployed Group."<sup>42</sup> The article described the contents of "six Negro newspapers on our desk" that contained "page after page telling of the big social doings of Negroes running the full gamut of dances, card parties and every form of idle social effervescence." It noted that there was no suggestion that any of the events were being held for charitable purposes. "Come on, friends – let us get down to business," the paper urged, and do everything possible to aid "our poor and unemployed." This type of article was rare. An article in the *Afro-American* appeared to acknowledge the Depression in its heading: "Kappa's Furs, Diamonds, Dawn Dance Ignore Depression," but the content only served to highlight the extravagance of the event. "Diamond-wearing Kappa Alpha Psi delegates rolled in for four full days of merriment at West Virginia State College. It appeared as if there were no depression. Lovely and beautifully gowned ladies were present in large numbers on every blithesome occasion."<sup>43</sup>

This positive reporting of upper-class life in the midst of the Depression was a way to show the community that there was still a group that was maintaining its position as role models, and by its survival, was able to instill a sense of confidence that African Americans were not completely bowed down by economic circumstances. The press also potentially moderated resentment of the extravagant lifestyles of the wealthier members of the community, especially in the most difficult years of the Depression, when many African Americans, due to their weaker economic base and racial prejudice, were struggling to survive. Members of the "social set" were able to maintain this position through positive reporting in the press of their charity activities and, thereby, an apparent concern for the welfare of others in the African American community. The existence of a successful upper class kept notions of aspiration and hope in the public eye.

<sup>42</sup> "What Are We Doing to Help Our Own Unemployed Group," *Philadelphia Tribune*, January 1 1931.

<sup>43</sup> "Kappa's Furs, Diamonds, Dawn Dance Ignore Depression," *Afro-American*, January 7 1933.



The newspapers and black high society had an interdependent relationship, in that the black press was the medium through which the activities of high society were reported, and through which its members kept up to date on happenings in their community. The press was also the medium for displaying upper-class lifestyles and activities to the broader community, to reinforce the position of this class as "social leaders."

The mutually beneficial relationship between the press and the upper class was in large part maintained by the work of the society reporters who engaged with the upper class. These reporters had to embody standards of respectability and social cachet to enable them to infiltrate this group to the extent that they were able to report its activities in such detail. The second part of the chapter looks more closely at society reporting, with the focus on one woman who epitomized the close relationship between the black press and the upper class that worked to benefit both.

### Gerri Major

One of the best-known society journalists from the 1920s onwards was Geraldyn Dismond, later writing as Gerri Major. Her long and varied career and her popularity with the reading public are a testament to her achievements as a reporter, but she also established a name for herself on the other side of the reporter's notebook as a prominent member of the New York upper class, and a frequent presence in the society pages. Her columns attracted a large following of readers, and she in turn was the subject of columns by other writers. She was arguably the first of the well-known society columnists of the black press to establish this dual presence in the society pages. She was also unique among the society reporters in that she expanded her career into a managing editor role, and into radio and later television appearances,

in conjunction with her writing career.<sup>44</sup> Through a sixty-year presence in the press, from the 1920s to the 1980s, Gerri personified style, character, intelligence, and a desire to better the lives of her fellow African Americans through the various roles that she played in the collective effort to promote racial uplift.

While each of the major newspapers had its own society reporter, whether writing under a byline, such as Bessye Beardon who wrote a New York society column for the *Chicago Defender*, or under a nom-de-plume such as "The Matron," also in the *Defender*, Gerri set the bar high by quickly moving from writing a column to editing an entire newspaper. She had the fortunate combination of an affluent upbringing and a college education from which to launch her career, but her writing talent brought her a degree of success that enabled her to influence and entertain a national audience for over half a century. In 1976, toward the end of her career, she wrote *Black Society*, a book combining a history of the black upper class and her own story. In *Black Society*, Gerri expressed her belief in the role of the black upper class: "This class of people are and have been the vanguard of their people. They provide the leadership, the role models, the motivation and the dynamics which keep the central theme ever present and articulated before the larger community."<sup>45</sup>

Her entrée into New York society and access to the social events about which she wrote was assured by her background and by her marriage. She was born Geraldyn Hodges in Indiana in 1894, and after her mother's death, was raised by well-to-do relatives in Chicago. Although she was not able to attend a black college as she had hoped, a family connection enabled her to attend the University of Chicago on a working scholarship, and she graduated with a teaching qualification.<sup>46</sup> This achievement in itself was sufficient to gain her a high social status within

<sup>44</sup> Gerri Major's application for inclusion in *Who's Who in Colored America* 1950. Box 1, Folder 1. Gerri Major Papers. Typed and hand-written notes on her application indicate more than one television appearance.

<sup>45</sup> Major, *Black Society*, 390.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 306. Major notes that at the time she was considering college, just before World War I, girls considered the black colleges to be "the best schools for contacts," which meant potential marriage partners among those college men training to become doctors or lawyers.

the black community, but this was cemented when she married H. Binga Dismond, a talented track star at the University of Chicago, physician, and relative of Chicago banker Jesse Binga.<sup>47</sup>

What set Gerri apart from most women in her situation, who, after marrying a doctor, would have settled into a life of clubs and entertaining, was her intellectual curiosity and the drive to direct her many interests into a highly successful and varied career. Gerri fully embraced the upper-class lifestyle, but in doing so she also realized a talent for writing which she combined with an extroverted personality that allowed her to document the world of high society from the perspective of a reporter. As a member of the upper class, and active participant in and reporter of its social life, she also brought to her work this class's assumptions about "correct" behaviour and standards to be emulated. Gerri used her background, her position in society, and her talent for communication to present assumptions about racial uplift to the reading public, in the confidence that her readers were – or should be – of the same mind.

Gerri and Binga Dismond quickly made a name for themselves as a society couple when they moved to New York in 1922, shortly after Binga completed his medical training. The two set about joining as many organizations as possible, as they understood that the social life of the well-to-do was centred around clubs and other organizations, and building a network of contacts would help Binga build his practice.<sup>48</sup> Gerri joined the Urban League, the NAACP, and the New York branch of the Alpha Pi Alpha society, as she was a charter member of the society in Chicago. Throughout her life she was involved in various social clubs, theatre groups, and many social welfare organizations including the American Inter-Racial Peace Committee, Citizens' Welfare Council, and Harlem Community Council.<sup>49</sup> Certainly her marriage and memberships, along with her outgoing personality and willingness to engage socially, made her and Binga welcome in Harlem society. It was, however, her membership in the NAACP that opened the door to her journalism career. Floyd J. Calvin, New York editor of the *Pittsburgh Courier*,

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 306.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 337.

<sup>49</sup> "'Gerry' Dismond," *Afro-American*, February 1 1930.

recognized her writing talent after reading publicity material she had written for the NAACP, and invited her to write a column on Harlem society.<sup>50</sup> The column, "Through the Lorgnette of Geraldyn Dismond," appeared in 1924. Its length, at two column widths over the length of the page, allowed her scope to indulge her interest in people, and in social commentary. Each column generally featured three or four topics, including a profile of someone prominent in the community. This was not usually a "society" profile, but a more serious rendition of the subject's background and interests.

The column was also an opportunity to present an uplift message, in the form of profiles of personal success achieved through persistence and hard work, a topic which Gerri embraced and executed with flair and creativity. One of the columns she wrote in 1927 discussed the role of business in race progress, and kept up the tradition in the black press of profiling people who had achieved success through hard work. "One of the healthiest signs of the development and progress of the race is the ever increasing number of college-trained men and women who are going into business."<sup>51</sup> Success in business was achieved "through painstaking and thorough training," and she profiled William Jenifer Powell, a successful Chicago businessman, to make her point. First she featured Mr. Powell's education. He attended Chicago's Wendell Philips High School, and then the University of Illinois, where he obtained an electrical engineering degree. In just eight months in his first job as an electrical welding instructor, he saved enough money to build a service station. He quickly followed this by building a parking garage for 150 cars next door, and the rent from the garage financed a repair shop and two more service stations. He "prospered by careful planning and hard work" and accumulated \$20,000 worth of equipment at the shop. He was also a cultured man who had studied music, and in this connection had also studied French, Spanish, and Italian. The profile concluded with the description of Powell as "a

<sup>50</sup> "'Jerry', the Journalist, Turns Interior Decorator; Spurns Politics; 'Not Interested'," *Pittsburgh Courier*, June 28 1930.

<sup>51</sup> "Through the Lorgnette of Geraldyn Dismond," *Pittsburgh Courier*, September 3 1927.

shining illustration of what superior training can bring, and a proof positive of the ultimate salvation of the race."

The second part of the column discussed the presence of seventy-five thousand Elks in Harlem for a convention. The piece was written from the perspective of a feminine Harlem who was concerned with maintaining respectability: "She realized that unusual attention would be centered upon her by her white neighbors and that the most lasting picture many would get of her would be during this period. Her great problem was to keep Harlem a gay, merry and comfortable place, and at the same time retain her self-respect." The piece concluded on the positive note that the Elks, who had now departed, had behaved impeccably. The column is entertainingly written, but clearly reveals the ongoing concern of African Americans with the impression they were creating and how they would be judged by white society.

In August 1927 Binga Dismond wrote one of the "Lorgnette" columns in Gerri's place, ostensibly to give her a holiday on her birthday. The editor's comment at the top of the column states that Gerri had become famous for the "high plane" on which she conducted her work "and for this reason many readers want to know more about her – about her personal background and training."<sup>52</sup> It appears that she had very quickly established a loyal following of readers and was becoming a personality in her own right. The column offers some biographical details, in story form, of her mother dying when she was born, and that she was raised by her aunt, Mrs. Maud Lawrence (who also appeared in the society columns). The article discussed her early teaching career, first in Missouri, then in Chicago, where she demonstrated her organizational ability by forming the Douglas Community Center at a school where "95 percent of the teachers were non Aframerican." It also described how Gerri and Binga met, their wedding during World War I, and her service as a Red Cross nurse.

<sup>52</sup> "Through the Lorgnette of Geradyn Dismond," *Pittsburgh Courier*, August 6 1927.

Gerri had a wide range of interests beyond journalism, an enthusiasm for organization and participation, and an apparent aptitude for business. Binga listed some of the organizations in which she became involved in New York, such as the Women's Auxiliary of the Urban League, and various clubs and sororities, but the most significant of these was her ownership of the Geraldyn Dismond Bureau of Publicity, which had a mailing list of 10,000, promoted certain theatre productions, and also handled publicity for singer Ethel Waters' "Weary Feet" production on Broadway.

Gerri wrote the "Lorgnette" column for the *Pittsburgh Courier* until 1927, and also during this time made a start in society reporting, contributing a "New York Society" column to the *Courier*, as well as "In New York Town" to the *Chicago Bee*.<sup>53</sup> Her "New York Society" column showed early evidence of her special flair for society reporting. While other society reporters were careful in their descriptions of people, homes, and fashions, Gerri displayed an eloquence that made her column stand out from the rest. For example, she described an Urban League Fancy Dress ball as something unique: "Nothing gives quite a thrill than make-believe can produce. One must be very prosaic and unimaginative if masquerading can not quicken one's pulse. A Fashion Show is delightful but one only sits and looks. A dance is enjoyable but it is only another dance. But a Fancy Dress Ball – the staid physician becomes a bold buccaneer, the harassed school teacher a roving gypsy, the tired business man a desert sheik."<sup>54</sup>

After establishing a name for herself at the *Pittsburgh Courier*, Gerri was joined by a small group of well-known society reporters whose columns appeared in the black press over many years. Most of these reporters were women with journalism backgrounds who were in many cases "straight news journalists" before moving to society reporting.<sup>55</sup> Their status as journalists, that is, as educated women writing for nationally-distributed newspapers, would have

<sup>53</sup> Major, *Black Society*, 337.

<sup>54</sup> "New York Society," *Pittsburgh Courier*, October 30 1926.

<sup>55</sup> Major, *Black Society*, 358. While the columns were not exclusively written by women, they were the majority. One society column in the *Afro-American* appeared under the byline of Tad Winchester. Similar columns written by men tended to be more of a general gossip nature, extending to the world of entertainment.

given them an occupational status that ensured their membership of the upper class, but they too would have to have met the requirements of respectability and deportment needed to gain entry into exclusive social events and the confidence of hosts and guests. The reporters seemed to know and respect each other, and it appeared there was no rivalry between competing newspapers. In *Black Society*, Gerri names Ora Brinkley, society editor of the *Philadelphia Tribune*, Marion B. Campfield, editor of the *Chicago Defender's* women's page, Pearl Cox, writing as "Pearlie's Prattle" for the *Washington Tribune*, and Toki Schalk Johnson, society editor of the *Pittsburgh Courier*, among her cohorts in society reporting.<sup>56</sup>

Judging from the number of events the society reporters wrote about, it would appear that they were kept busy making the rounds of several events each night. Gerri described a typical evening, which began around midnight, as "dashing here and dashing there for a few moments so that none feel neglected."<sup>57</sup> The society editors were also renowned for their "incredible hats," as this was a way to add glamour to and extend a basic wardrobe on a reporter's income.<sup>58</sup> No doubt the self confidence and personality to carry off an "incredible hat" was also an essential part of a job that required making oneself known to hundreds of hostesses and guests to obtain the information that made a column entertaining. Gerri quotes Toki Schalk Johnson's description of the job qualification: "To be a social editor, you must have a strong constitution, cast iron stomach, private income, lots of good clothes, and the ability to say 'dahling.'"<sup>59</sup>

Women reporters were an essential element of a successful society page. Gerri confirmed that the personality of the society reporter and their own social status were the keys to a successful column that attracted loyal readers. The same women wrote their society columns for many years, and reader loyalty meant that the society reporters had more job security than other journalists. Gerri believed that the society reporters were some of the most important journalists,

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 358-9. Not all began writing at the same time, but because of their longevity, their careers overlapped, in the 1930s and 1940s in particular.

<sup>57</sup> "'Jerry', the Journalist, Turns Interior Decorator; Spurns Politics; 'Not Interested'."

<sup>58</sup> Major, *Black Society*, 359.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 358.

in that they interpreted the social patterns of the community, and in their roles "did more to dignify colored womanhood than all the other media specialists put together."<sup>60</sup> As upper-class women, they were ideally placed, through their lively descriptions, to convey subtle messages of "correct" conduct and deportment as well as the latest trends in entertaining and fashion to the wider reading public. For example, the *Washington Tribune's* "Pearlie's Prattle" column managed to name-drop, convey social status markers, and acceptable deportment in one brief report in 1937: "So you think Clifford is busy too (tall young son of Mr. and Mrs. Walter Jackson). What with being president of Dunbar's Honor Society and associate editor of the 'Year Book,' he most certainly is. But he still finds time at that to gallantly offer his arm when his grandmother's well-known sister (Mrs. Coralie Franklin Cook) goes a-music-hunting. Saw Clifford not so long ago hailing a taxi for 'Auntie' on O Street."<sup>61</sup>

While the society columns and women's pages were almost always handled by women journalists, this was not to say that women's roles as reporters were limited to these areas, as they also held positions as straight news reporters. As noted above, it was possible to move between genres, but a letter from Bessye Beardon, the *Chicago Defender's* "New York Society" reporter, to Robert Abbott in November 1934 indicates that the society reporters were in some cases also responsible for a wide range of news reporting. Beardon noted that her job "covers virtually everything that bears a New York headline, and much of the material from outside the United States. I cover theatrical, sports, national affairs, society, features, and miscellaneous items."<sup>62</sup>

There appears to have been little gender discrimination within the black press in the employment of women as reporters. Rodger Streitmatter, historian of women journalists of the

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 357.

<sup>61</sup> "Pearlie's Prattle," *Washington Tribune*, February 6 1937.

<sup>62</sup> Bessye J. Beardon to Robert S. Abbott, November 11 1934. Box 4, Folder 4-27. Abbott-Sengstacke Family Papers. Beardon outlined the work she covered to justify her request for an increase in her salary, which had been cut to \$12.50 a week, a sum that she claimed was insufficient to support her and her college-age son in New York City. She was possibly justified in her request, as an internal memo from the above collection dated August 31 1935 lists women cashiers' salaries at \$18. Editorial staff salaries (including one woman) were listed at between \$20 and \$30.



black press, makes the point that African American women were not subject to the gender discrimination experienced by white women journalists. He quotes nineteenth century journalist Lucy Wilmot Smith, who suggested that this was because African American men and women had been accustomed to working alongside each other, and therefore men did not feel threatened by a woman participating in similar work, in this case in journalism.<sup>63</sup> While acknowledging that academic investigation of this apparent lack of gender discrimination in journalism is limited, in one of his studies Streitmatter presents examples of several successful women journalists, and notes that some had, in addition, encouragement and mentorship from men throughout their journalism careers.<sup>64</sup> Gerri Major makes no reference to any negative impact on her own career due to her gender, nor does she mention any mentor who aided her progress, suggesting that her talent was recognized, and that in itself was enough to advance her career.

In the next phase of her career Gerri greatly expanded her role as an all-round journalist and established a reputation as a successful editor. In 1927 she left the *Pittsburgh Courier* to become a reporter and later managing editor of the *Interstate Tatler*, an entertainment and society tabloid published in New York. In a survey of the black press in 1928, by the time that Gerri was managing editor, contemporary journalist Eugene Gordon described the *Interstate Tatler* as "the best written, best edited, and best known" of the smaller sheets that "resembled magazines but classed themselves as newspapers."<sup>65</sup> According to Gerri, the *Tatler* covered society news, theatre and entertainment, gossip, sports, and politics. She later commented that her time with the *Tatler* gave her considerable experience in the physical process of getting a paper out each week, and that it was "one of my most exhilarating experiences as a journalist."<sup>66</sup>

<sup>63</sup> Streitmatter, "African-American Women Journalists."

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> Gordon, "The Negro Press." In the same article, Gordon ranks the "best all-round newspapers, 1927" in order as follows: *Pittsburgh Courier*, *Chicago Defender*, *Afro-American*, *New York Amsterdam News*, *Norfolk Journal and Guide*, *Philadelphia Tribune*, *Chicago Whip*, and *New York Age*.

<sup>66</sup> Major, *Black Society*, 337-8.

A typical page from the *Interstate Tatler* is full of witty and entertaining commentary on the social scene, showing Gerri's unerring ability to ruffle pretentious feathers. On one occasion Gerri featured Brooklyn, which she noted author James Weldon Johnson had written about fifteen years before "as the place where Negroes lived in beautiful homes, went in for card and dancing parties, and owned their evening clothes."<sup>67</sup> James Weldon Johnson was a member of the black elite in Jacksonville, Florida, and after moving to New York was welcomed into black high society, which had been established in Brooklyn since the mid 1800s, before the ascendancy of Harlem.<sup>68</sup> In her piece Gerri acknowledges Brooklyn as "at one time the only place in Greater New York that boasted of an elite society." She also hinted at who was included in this elite society, and reflected on the changes in the composition of the black upper class that had been taking place since the Great Migration. "Although the number of degrees you have earned and your literary output is more important these days than who your papa was or what influential white man took a fancy to one of your attractive grand-mammas, Brooklynites enjoy a very prominent position in the social Who's Who, and more than one good Harlem doctor and his ambitious wife have connived to be invited to their parties."<sup>69</sup>

This piece clearly notes the shift from "colour" and family background as class determinants, to one based more on personal achievement. It also appeared from this piece that Brooklyn still held its traditional status as the home of the "established" upper class. "Harlem doctor" suggests a first-generation upper-class "arrival" anxious to build social credentials by gaining entry into the older-established groups. This was not easy, as some sections of Brooklyn society appeared to believe that family background still counted. Jean Louise Simon, in her "Brooklyn Society Snapshots" column in the *Interstate Tatler*, described her own experience in 1931.<sup>70</sup> After receiving an invitation to the Shady Rest dance held by the Gay Northeasterners

<sup>67</sup> "Social Snapshots," *Interstate Tatler*, December 23 1927.

<sup>68</sup> Gatewood, *Aristocrats of Color*, 106.

<sup>69</sup> "Social Snapshots."

<sup>70</sup> "Brooklyn Social Snapshots," *Interstate Tatler*, July 30 1931.

club, a few hours before the dance "I was called on the phone and told I would not be admitted." The reason given was that her family could not be traced sufficiently far back (one hundred years appeared to be the qualification insisted on by the Gay Northeasterners). She concluded the piece thus: "We and most of the common, ordinary, everyday sort of people are tired of hearing about the doings of that very elegant, aristocratic body of young women."<sup>71</sup>

Gerri stayed with the *Interstate Tatler* until 1932, but was not, apparently, content with a single role as managing editor, because during this time she also contributed pieces to the Associated Negro Press, *Afro-American*, *Opportunity*, and other papers, covering general-interest topics, theatre reviews, profiles, society pieces, and press releases for the NAACP.<sup>72</sup> Her output was not limited to writing, as she was also involved in radio, as program director of the New York station WABC's Negro Achievement Hour, which featured music performances and prominent persons in the African American community as guest speakers.<sup>73</sup>

In the 1930s Gerri experienced changes in her personal life and in her career. Gerri and Binga divorced amicably in December 1933, although she continued to write under her married name until her marriage to John R. Major in 1946.<sup>74</sup> She left the *Interstate Tatler* in 1932, held a brief position as Women's Editor of the New York *Daily Citizen* after that, but left newspaper reporting in 1934 to become an Administrative Assistant with the New York Bureau of Public Health and Information.<sup>75</sup> It is not clear what was behind her decision to move away from newspaper journalism, although it is not surprising when considering her interest in community service. She seemed to benefit from the change in direction, as she later described her ten years

<sup>71</sup> As mentioned above, Jacksonville, Florida accorded high social status to family background, which no doubt aided James Weldon Johnson's entry into Brooklyn society.

<sup>72</sup> "'Gerry' Dismond."

<sup>73</sup> "Listening In," *Afro-American*, January 19 1929.

<sup>74</sup> "Geraldyn Dismond Gets Mexican Divorce," *Chicago Defender*, February 24 1934. Her marriage to Major was not reported widely, although it was mentioned in a gossip column in the *Amsterdam News* in on April 20 1946. The article incorrectly names John Major as Arthur. A death notice in November 1947 names him John R. Major: "Well Known Atlantic City Undertaker Dies," *Chicago Defender*, November 8 1947.

<sup>75</sup> "Gerri Major Quits Paper For Magazine Post; Will Circle Globe For Ebony," *New Jersey Herald News*, March 21, 1953. Box 1, Folder 3. Gerri Major Papers.

with the Bureau as "one of the most expansive periods" of her writing career.<sup>76</sup> In 1936, after passing a civil service examination, she was appointed to the position of Publicity Assistant. As the first African American to be appointed, this was a newsworthy event which was reported in several newspapers.<sup>77</sup> Supervising a staff of twenty-six, she was responsible for researching material and writing speeches on behalf of the Bureau head, as well as writing pamphlets and other health material for public consumption.

Although absent from newspaper journalism, Gerri maintained a continuous presence in the society pages through the 1930s. Not only was she frequently reported in many social contexts as both hostess and guest, she was also featured for her professional interests in addition to her job with the Bureau of Public Health. An article in the *Chicago Defender* announced the selection of new officers of the Business and Professional Women's Club, naming Gerri as second vice president. The aim of the club was to sponsor community projects, and to provide a venue for socializing for "the women who spend part of their lives in the fields of business and the professions during the day, and who represent the pioneers of their sex in broad fields of endeavor."<sup>78</sup> This organization suggests that there was a great deal of acceptance within the African American community of careers for women, which did not seem to conflict with society's encouragement of women to take up more traditional roles as wives and mothers, and sometimes the areas overlapped. Gerri's election to another position, as head of the Harlem Housewives' League in 1935, reported in two papers, seemed a rather unusual appointment for an unmarried businesswoman, but the organization would have matched her interest in improving the community, as it was engaged in community work such as placing African American clerks and managers in local chain stores, through picketing and boycott campaigns.<sup>79</sup>

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> The article, from a new service, was carried in the *Atlanta Daily World*, *Norfolk Journal and Guide*, *Cleveland Call and Post*, and *Pittsburgh Courier*.

<sup>78</sup> "Business and Professional Women Meet," *Chicago Defender*, May 20 1933.

<sup>79</sup> "Geraldyn Dismond Heads Housewives," *Norfolk Journal and Guide*, March 2 1935; "Geraldyn Dismond Chosen Chief of N.Y. Housewives," *Afro-American*, February 23 1935.

She also retained her interest in the theatre, and spoke alongside Walter White of the NAACP and Reverend Adam Clayton Powell at the inaugural meeting of the Negro Actors' Guild, and was listed as an officer of the organization.<sup>80</sup> Despite the assumption that women's main sphere of influence lay in the home, the newspapers recognized that women were also playing important roles in business and in community service, and did not appear to question this, or treat it as anything other than commendable in their reporting.

After her five-year absence from society reporting, the *New York Amsterdam News* announced that Gerri was returning to its pages as a staff columnist. The article stated that she would continue to work for the Department of Health, but would contribute a weekly column "that will be more than worth your while to read."<sup>81</sup> This column did not run under a title, but attracted much reader attention, and the *Amsterdam News* received many comments showing both excitement at her return to the paper, but also recognition of her wider role in advancing community interests: "Read your column today, - Boy, it is swell. Did I laugh. Write more in the same style. Most people need something to laugh about these days;" "Just finished reading your column. You were at your old tricks, brilliant and amusing;" and the more serious: "Miss Dismond's column provides interesting and significant side lights on Harlem and some of its outstanding contributions ... a real contribution to inter-racial understanding and respect."<sup>82</sup> As the comments attest, the column showed Gerri back in her usual form, where she described a "honey" of a party for author Roi Ottley. The hostess, Dorothy Norman, lived in "the swankiest house in the swank East Seventies – a World's Fair Home of Tomorrow, complete with pastel shades, glass bricks, indirect lighting and functional furniture. The house puts you in a party mood." Before listing the guests, she added, "Someone has said that the way to give a successful

<sup>80</sup> "First Step Taken for Negro Actors' Guild," *Pittsburgh Courier*, February 5 1938.

<sup>81</sup> "Geraldyn Dismond," *New York Amsterdam News*, April 29 1939.

<sup>82</sup> Typed list of reader comments (nd). Box 1, Folder 3. Gerri Major Papers.

party is to ignore all the people you should ask and invite only people who are interesting. Either Miss Norman doesn't know any uninteresting people, or she follows this rule."<sup>83</sup>

In 1939 Gerri wrote the "All in a Week" column for the *Amsterdam News*. This column was a series of opinion pieces on happenings around New York, and had quite a different tone from her society reporting. Gerri used the column to occasionally draw attention to negative aspects of the Harlem community. In one column she emphasized the perennial problem of the respectable majority being judged by the uncouth few.<sup>84</sup> She compared conditions in Chinatown in New York with conditions in Harlem, as they would have been seen by tourists who took bus tours through both areas while visiting New York for the World's Fair. "What a thrill to see the Chinese and Negro quarters! For many this one trip will be their only contact with America's colored peoples. Long will they remember the sights they see." About the Harlem portion of the tour, she wrote: "What do you suppose will be the visitors' reaction to our filthy sidewalks and streets? They may even have the pleasure of seeing Harlemites happily tossing their garbage out the window. What will the tourists think when they see Negro men and women half-clothed resting in apartment windows, lounging on doorsteps?" "Not a pretty picture is it? Yet the residents of Harlem who take pride in themselves and in the upkeep of their lovely streets through which the sightseeing busses never pass, will be judged by these sights." Chinatown, on the other hand, was "so gay, so colorful, so clean." The article was typical of commentary appearing regularly in the black press over the decades criticizing the public for not caring enough about the image it was projecting – a lack of respectability that would invite negative judgment of the whole community based on the actions of the few. Possibly there was a further incentive to criticize Harlemites' behaviour by comparing it with another "coloured" group who seemed to be doing so much better in living respectably.

<sup>83</sup> "Geraldyn Dismond Says," *Afro-American*, April 22 1944. (The column ran in both the *Afro-American* and the *Amsterdam News*.)

<sup>84</sup> "All in a Week," *New York Amsterdam News*, July 22 1939.

Whatever tourists may have thought when travelling around Manhattan, the growing presence and increasing wealth of the black upper classes and the presence of educated and sophisticated community leaders continued to be lost on the white community. In another "All in a Week" column, Gerri wrote a disparaging piece about an article in *Fortune* magazine, which showed the magazine to be quite ignorant of the black upper class.<sup>85</sup> The column also offers perhaps unintended insight into the determinants of class position: "It was not the socio-economic disclosures that set Harlem on its ear. The choice morsels which were served at bridge and tea parties were the article's social pronouncements." The *Fortune* article had apparently concluded that entertainer Cab Calloway was "upper class" merely because of his friendship with a Harvard-trained doctor. Gerri noted that the article failed to include Duke Ellington, whose family was unquestionably upper class. At the same time, she was not content to present the black upper class in a completely good light, and included an entertaining exposé of the way "strivers" went about trying to better their social positions ("strivers" had obviously confused *Fortune's* reporter). Her tongue-in-cheek description of the "old" way of entering the upper class tells us exactly how the socially competitive got ahead: "Persons of dubious social position worked diligently on Mrs. Association's fund-raising committee. If they sold enough tickets, they could count on being invited to the great lady's house at least once during the year." The description went on to say that it was also necessary to reference this invitation at every possible opportunity in order for the aspirants to "work their way into the charmed inner circle." She concluded the piece by saying that she herself was in danger of having to leave the "inner circle" if two of her doctor friends failed to recognize her.

While there were many talented and successful women writing for the black press, in the women's pages and in general reporting, none succeeded in establishing for themselves the place in the public eye that Gerri Major achieved. It seemed she was able to build a relationship with

<sup>85</sup> "All in a Week," *New York Amsterdam News*, July 13 1939.

her readers, who read her columns with interest but were also interested in her as a personality with whom they could join in an intelligent but highly entertaining dialogue about African American life. Throughout her career she played her part in narrating with intelligence and humour the bright, fun-loving side of upper-class life, for that group's own entertainment and for the edification of the lower rungs of society. She also played an important part in serving the African American community in its efforts to better itself, in its political efforts to achieve equality, and in keeping ideals of racial uplift before her reading public, in small enough doses not to nag or bore, but to remind the "social set" of its obligations, and what was true "class." As she reflected on the role of the society reporter, she stated that, "If the society editor knows her people, her columns, her pages, and her paper she will develop a following loyal to the death."<sup>86</sup> This was certainly true for many society reporters, but none more so than for Gerri. Her long obituary, appearing in *Ebony* in 1984, which concluded by saying that "life will be less exciting to her many friends, acquaintances and readers now that Gerri is no longer with us," could not quite capture the vibrant and exceptional talent that was Gerri Major.<sup>87</sup>

## Conclusion

The society pages, while not the repositories of the news stories of the day, were nevertheless a key component of the black newspaper, as their popularity, and the loyal following that many society reporters attracted, supported the press's role as the voice of the community. The newspapers' close and positive engagement with various social activities and personal achievements also attests to the role of the newspaper within the community in constructing, through the well-to-do classes, images of respectability and an aspirational racial uplift ideology. While the society pages were not "the news," they provided commentary on everyday lives, even if the lifestyles depicted were representative of a small minority – a

<sup>86</sup> Major, *Black Society*, 357.

<sup>87</sup> "Backstage," *Ebony*, October 1984.



minority who considered themselves leaders of the community and setters of standards of respectability and aspiration. The society pages also provide an insight into middle- and upper-class African American social life through the many descriptions of club activities, which were the centre of black social life and outlets for creativity and intellectual and social expression, as well as uplift efforts directed by middle-class women to those below.

The society pages reaffirmed for African Americans what white society failed to acknowledge when they judged African Americans as a uniform group. The newspapers acknowledged class differences, through descriptions of activities undertaken by the elite class, but also through narratives that reinforced the importance of respectability in one's appearance and conduct. The newspapers showcased group advancement through images of success, but they also used these images of success, including the elites' luxurious lifestyles, to show what was possible through hard work and the preservation of self-respect. The newspapers used the society pages to convey a serious uplift message, but also to provide entertainment. The popularity of the society journalists, and the detailed information they presented, attests to the interest of the community in these pages. As the *Chicago Defender's* circulation report noted, people wanted to see and read about themselves in the news. Society journalists, through their close association with members of the upper class, sought to present this class in a positive light that would set an example for aspirants from below. At the same time, in the case of Gerri Major, they were often commentators on the ills of society, and promoters of an uplift philosophy that encouraged people to think about how to improve the community. The society reporters were journalists, but their entertaining pieces gained them personal popularity as well as a loyal reader following, and because of this they played a part in developing a paper's image and, by extension, contributed to its business success.

By the end of the 1930s, as the effects of the Depression moderated, newspapers increasingly turned their attention to political developments in Europe, and found that they had

another role to play, not only as a voice within the black community, but in representing the interests of the black community to white America as war in Europe advanced. The society pages remained relevant during this time, because the newspapers refocused on the society pages as sources of inspiration and morale, by applying a patriotic lens to the charitable activities of the clubs and societies that were focused on the war effort. Chapter five examines the new and influential role the press played in balancing the interests of the African American community, and their own business survival, against the interests of the nation as a whole as it entered World War II.

CHAPTER FIVE: Patriotism and Uplift: the *Chicago Defender's* Victory Edition, September 26, 1942

*"The battle against race prejudice is no longer a family quarrel in America's house. The great storm that now sweeps humanity has swept all with it, and the Negro's fight against discrimination has become part of the tremendous struggle for human freedom upon this globe."*  
John Sengstacke.<sup>1</sup>

These remarks by *Chicago Defender* publisher John Sengstacke succinctly reflected the changing face of the African American fight to achieve equality in the context of World War II. By extending the race issue beyond America's borders and escalating it from "a family quarrel" to "a struggle for human freedom," he articulated a new focus for racial equality beyond the United States, as a role that African Americans could play in addressing inequality on the international stage. World War II was challenging for African Americans in many ways, but it also provided an opportunity to believe that true equality could be achieved by harnessing international forces toward a common solution to what many African American leaders were expressing as an international problem that was beyond the fight between democracy and fascism. The *Chicago Defender's* special Victory Edition, published on September 26, 1942, was an expression of this new outlook.

This chapter will examine the black press's response to World War II and the various issues the war represented for African American advancement through the lens of the Victory Edition. Advertised as "the biggest venture of its kind ever undertaken by the Negro press," it was designed to achieve several purposes: to boost black morale and support for the war effort by showcasing positive images of African Americans' contribution; to depict them as loyal and patriotic citizens; and to show that the black press supported the government.<sup>2</sup> The Victory Edition achieved these objectives admirably, but it also voiced to the wider community and the

<sup>1</sup> Address by John Sengstacke to the Robert S. Abbott Chapter of the American Women's Voluntary Services (nd). Box 24, Folder 16. Abbott-Sengstacke Family Papers.

<sup>2</sup> "To Our Readers...", *Chicago Defender*, September 26 1942.

government that African Americans were not content with the racial status quo, and that they had a vested interest in the postwar scenario, both at home and abroad.

This chapter will show that the *Chicago Defender*, one of the most widely read and influential of the black newspapers at the time, was able to work within the existing political and social climate to publish a special edition to enhance black morale and showcase racial uplift through African Americans' contribution to the war effort, but at the same time express a clear message that African Americans expected their due rights under the Constitution. The Victory Edition was a vehicle for the black press to express, again, ideas of citizenship, patriotism, and loyalty in the context of a national emergency, but it also contained an undercurrent of concern with issues beyond the United States and the war itself. It used calls to unite around the war effort to expose similarities between the domestic black experience and that of people in colonial states who were also struggling to achieve their rights as citizens under oppressive regimes. It was able to expose these issues and express the expectation that an Allied victory would mean the embrace of true democracy at home, and for colonial subjects in Asia and Africa. Its concern with the postwar scenario helped give African Americans a sense of community with other nations, the confidence that they were not alone in fighting for the cause of equality and civil rights, and that they were potential contributors to the postwar international order.

The Victory Edition provided an opportunity to construct racial uplift narratives, not so much in the sense that previous chapters have described, in terms of individuals taking advantage of every opportunity to advance their lives and looking to other African Americans for guidance on how to achieve this, but rather, in reflecting on their condition as a group. The national emergency presented by the war, and the entrenched discrimination that it highlighted, was an opportunity for African Americans to leverage the situation to achieve real change. The government acknowledged that it needed African American support in military and civilian capacities, and African Americans were very willing to give it, but they expected concessions in

return. The Victory Edition was confirmation that the black press was now a powerful medium whose voice reached beyond the African American community to speak on its behalf.

The war effort, and the black press's response, forced the issue of race and discrimination into the open, as the government struggled to overcome the impasse where it recognized that the African American contribution was essential, but was unable to fully utilize it due to entrenched custom and political expediency. Jim Crow notions of segregation meant, for example, that the armed forces were required to provide "separate but equal" facilities for black servicemen, an unnecessary waste of time and resources in wartime. In the run-up to America's entry into the war, President Roosevelt was under pressure to improve the nation's readiness, but his political survival meant doing as little as possible to change the social status quo, to avoid angering a politically-strong faction of Southern Democrats who objected to any move to dismantle Jim Crow. Once America was involved in the war, the need to overcome impediments to efficient deployment was an imperative that was fully understood in some quarters, but often not fully implemented in others.

The leading black newspapers played a key role during the war years in pressuring the government to allow African Americans to serve in both military and civilian capacities, and were outspoken about widespread discrimination encountered in both areas. Negative reporting opened up the black press to accusations of disloyalty, but by keeping instances of discrimination in the public eye, the papers showed that government policy was preventing loyal citizens from serving their nation. At the same time, the newspapers worked hard to sustain black morale, through their customary promotion of black achievements. Any step in a positive direction, particularly in the military context, was reported to counteract widespread feelings of anger and frustration at policies that were preventing African Americans from making their rightful contribution to their nation. The Victory Edition was a microcosm of the black press's

role in reporting all sides of the African American experience, but was aimed at a wider audience than the black press usually reached.

Few historians have examined the Victory Edition, although they have paid considerable attention to the *Pittsburgh Courier's* 1942 Double V campaign, launched to promote a "double victory" – victory at home to end inequality and discrimination, and victory abroad to defeat fascism.<sup>3</sup> Those who have looked at the Victory Edition have dismissed it as, in the words of one historian, "apparently designed to help offset Negro dissatisfaction."<sup>4</sup> Another considers it a means by which the *Defender* avoided government sanction.<sup>5</sup> Both are narrow assessments of the purpose of the Victory Edition. Certainly it was designed to boost morale, and while there may have been some motivation on the part of the *Defender* to appease the government through a direct expression of patriotism through the Victory Edition, this explanation overlooks the substantial content of the Victory Edition that opposed government policy and criticized the Allies, belying a concern for potential sanction. This chapter will show that the Victory Edition was much more than these assessments suggest, and that it deserves deeper scholarly attention.

The Victory Edition recognized the "double victory" approach, but it avoided catchy slogans to offer an in-depth construction of the two battle fronts. The Victory Edition offered both sophisticated opinion and compelling imagery of the war in an accessible format designed to appeal to the widest possible reader demographic: across class in African American society, and beyond race to the wider community. Through its collection of opinions from contributors not normally appearing in the black press, the Victory Edition portrays "double victory" as a more nuanced exercise. Achieving victory at home meant convincing African Americans that their patriotism was justified and would be rewarded, and convincing white readers that African Americans were loyal citizens who were ready, willing, and able to contribute to the war effort

<sup>3</sup> All the references listed in this chapter, and many others discussing the black press and/or African American participation in World War II mention the Double V campaign.

<sup>4</sup> Lee Finkle, *Forum for Protest: The Black Press During World War II* (Cranbury: Associated University Presses, Inc., 1975), 104.

<sup>5</sup> Carroll, "Race News: How Black Reporters and Readers Shaped the Fight for Racial Justice, 1877-1978."

and the broader community. Victory abroad meant the defeat of fascism, but for African Americans it also meant establishing solidarity with a "coloured" diaspora and engaging with civil rights beyond America's borders.

The chapter will first examine the state of the black press in 1940, its engagement with war reporting, and the background to the *Chicago Defender's* decision to publish the Victory Edition. It will then provide an overview of the layout and contents of the Victory Edition, and will highlight a selection of contributions to more deeply consider the themes that were explored, and the way in which it framed racial uplift in the wartime context. The chapter will conclude with a discussion of the impact of the Victory Edition to reassess its importance to the war effort, its contribution to racial uplift, and also its effectiveness as a voice for the black press in speaking to a wider audience.

#### The black press – a strong voice in a new era

The black press had continued to consolidate and grow during the 1930s, and a number of newspapers were recognized leaders in the field. Based on circulation, the *Chicago Defender*, *Baltimore Afro-American*, and the *Pittsburgh Courier* held the top positions, with subscribers numbering over 50,000 each, followed by the *New York Amsterdam News*, *Norfolk Journal and Guide*, and *Philadelphia Tribune*.<sup>6</sup> According to the Department of Commerce, the black press in 1939 had a combined circulation per issue of 1.4 million copies, and was read by up to six million people.<sup>7</sup>

These solid circulation figures indicated a new level of maturity for the black press, as did their ability to weather major turning points in their history, with the deaths in 1940 of the founders of two of the most successful papers. Robert Sengstacke Abbott of the *Chicago*

<sup>6</sup> Frederick G. Detweiler, "The Negro Press Today," *American Journal of Sociology* 44, no. 3 (1938). Detweiler quotes N.W. Ayer and Son's *Directory of Newspapers and Periodicals* for 1936. Drake and Cayton state that the *Chicago Defender's* circulation in Chicago was 40,000 at the start of the war: *Black Metropolis*, 399.

<sup>7</sup> "Negro Newspapers and Periodicals in the United States: 1939." April 1940. Box 118, Folder 16. Abbott-Sengstacke Family Papers; Finkle, *Forum for Protest*, 54.

*Defender* died in February 1940, and Robert Lee Vann of the *Pittsburgh Courier* died in November of that year. For most of the history of the black press, newspapers were successful because they were mouthpieces of strong owner/editors, but the deaths of Abbott and Vann showed that their papers were sustainable businesses that were able to endure change. In contrast, when *Cleveland Gazette* owner Harry C. Smith died in 1941, he was described as "the last of the Mohicans," and his newspaper described as "an example of the personal journalism that is passing off the picture."<sup>8</sup> Robert Abbott in particular had established a reputation as one of the most innovative and influential voices in the newspaper industry, but he was also one of the most successful black businessmen in the United States, and had implemented a succession plan which proved highly successful and enabled the paper to move from strength to strength after his death.

Abbott's heir apparent was his nephew, John Sengstacke, whom Abbott had primed over many years as his successor. The two corresponded frequently and with affection while Sengstacke was still in school at the Hampton Institute, and amid news of the family and school activities, the letters make clear that Sengstacke understood he was to join the paper and eventually take over.<sup>9</sup> Abbott was also frank in admitting that the paper was suffering financial difficulties during the Depression, writing in 1933: "I want you to be mighty careful in your spending because this is a trying time for me."<sup>10</sup> The letter finished with the wish that "you will come out of school with flying colors and with the expectation of trying to help me back on my feet. I need you." Sengstacke was realistic about his academic performance, having admitted previously that "I am an average student, I know," but he assured Abbott that he "was not flunking anything."<sup>11</sup> Before Sengstacke's graduation, Abbott wrote him a long letter of advice,

<sup>8</sup> "Prominents Pay Tribute at Bier of Harry Smith," *Cleveland Call and Post*, December 20 1941; "Negro Press Has Always Been in Forefront of Fight," *New York Amsterdam News*, July 6 1940.

<sup>9</sup> Correspondence between Robert Abbott and John Sengstacke, 1931-1934. Box 8, Folder 33. Abbott-Sengstacke Family Papers.

<sup>10</sup> Robert Abbott to John Sengstacke, October 6 1933. Box 8, Folder 33. Abbott-Sengstacke Family Papers.

<sup>11</sup> John Sengstacke to Robert Abbott, January 31 1932. Box 8, Folder 33. Abbott-Sengstacke Family Papers.



ranging from the need for initiative and the particular characteristics of the newspaper business, to instruction on personal conduct in private and business life.<sup>12</sup> Upon Sengstacke's graduation, he wrote: "I am as excited over your graduation as if I were graduating myself."<sup>13</sup>

John Sengstacke joined the *Defender* and was named Office Manager on October 1, 1934, and appointed to the Board of Directors in 1935.<sup>14</sup> His future role in the company was understood within the organization, and was supported by the paper's business manager, who indicated in a memorandum to Robert Abbott that by appointing Sengstacke to the position of office manager initially, "his progress will be materially faster than the present set-up." As office manager, Sengstacke was to be assigned to multiple duties to enable him to "become thoroughly acquainted with all phases of the business" and that "on all important matters he will be called into consultation."<sup>15</sup> When Abbott died in February 1940, Sengstacke was well established in his management capacity.

After just five years in the newspaper business, Sengstacke was already showing his initiative and ability to organize forces for the good of the industry. He also established a new newspaper organization, the National Newspaper Publishers Association, which coincidentally held its first meeting on the day of Abbott's death. It was a modern incarnation of the National Negro Press Association established by Booker T. Washington in 1909, and was designed to strengthen ties between publishers, address contemporary problems such as attracting advertising, and promote the interests of the industry.<sup>16</sup> Sengstacke's leadership would come to the fore as the black press stood its ground in reporting ongoing racial discrimination when the government was attempting to unite the country around the war effort.

<sup>12</sup> Robert Abbott to John Sengstacke, April 17 1934. Box 8, Folder 33. Abbott-Sengstacke Family Papers.

<sup>13</sup> Robert Abbott to John Sengstacke, May 4 1934. Box 8, Folder 33. Abbott-Sengstacke Family Papers.

<sup>14</sup> Memo to Department Heads, October 1 1934; Box 11, Folder 3; "Meeting of the Board of Directors, July 26 1935." Box 11, Folder 4. Abbott-Sengstacke Family Papers.

<sup>15</sup> Eneil F. Simpson to Robert Abbott, October 23 1934. Box 11, Folder 3. Abbott-Sengstacke Family Papers.

<sup>16</sup> National Newspaper Publishers Association Website. <https://nnpa.org/npa-history/>. Accessed August 7 2018.

## The black press and World War II

Through 1940, the major black newspapers did not devote much space to discussing the European war, and generally included just one or two articles about the war in each issue. The infrequent reporting suggests a degree of detachment from the protagonists, as the United States was not yet officially involved, but also public skepticism about the motives for the war. This skepticism had, for African Americans, a race component, and foregrounded the approach to race that John Sengstacke expressed. When the black papers reported the European war they presented it as a battle between two forms of imperialism – the imperialist powers engaged in the battle between democracy and fascism, and white imperialists against their "coloured" subjects. In an editorial on April 20, 1940 the *New York Amsterdam News* declared that the imperialism of England, Germany, and France had no moral justification "in spite of propaganda to the contrary."<sup>17</sup> While condemning Germany's invasion of Norway and Denmark, the paper did not support England, because of "England's attitude toward and treatment of her colored colonies." The article concluded by stating: "If there is any difference between German and English imperialism it is one of degree."

The papers also expressed concern for democratic principles. On May 18, the *Pittsburgh Courier* criticized both sides of the conflict, stating: "To the 'darker peoples' one side is no more democratic than the other."<sup>18</sup> It extended the analogy to the United States, because it too denied democracy to its "dark millions." On December 7, the *Afro-American* printed a "Letter to Churchill" in which the writer berated England's claim that it needed help from the United States, because, the writer stated, England was not a democracy.<sup>19</sup> The article was particularly critical of England's exploitation of India and its refusal to grant India independence: "Not even in a time of crisis will England let loose her stranglehold." The article declared that any aid intended for England should be spent at home.

<sup>17</sup> "Let's Keep Cool," *New York Amsterdam News*, April 20 1940.

<sup>18</sup> "The Total War," *Pittsburgh Courier*, May 18 1940.

<sup>19</sup> "Letter to Churchill," *Afro-American*, December 7 1940.

On the domestic front, war-related reporting more often focused on preparations for potential entry into the conflict. As President Roosevelt became more concerned about the need to build up armaments to defend the continental United States from Hitler's advance, African Americans sought to share in the job opportunities that were opening up, or, as loyal citizens, join one of the military services. They found, however, that they were not welcome. Articles in the black press about the war therefore turned a critical eye toward segregation in the military and discrimination in civilian employment, particularly in war-related manufacturing. The two issues were so entwined that histories of African Americans and World War II consider them in tandem.<sup>20</sup>

One black leader took it upon himself to force a resolution to the ongoing discrimination in civilian employment and increasing black frustration. In 1941 A. Philip Randolph, head of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters Union, planned a large-scale work stoppage and march to be held in Washington, DC. The threat of the disruption by "tens of thousands of militant black marchers" and obvious show of national disunity was enough for Roosevelt to negotiate a settlement with Randolph to avoid the march.<sup>21</sup> After discussions between the government and black leaders, and the promise of government action, Randolph agreed to call it off. President Roosevelt issued an executive order to establish the Committee on Fair Employment Practice (generally known as the Fair Employment Practices Committee and referred to with the initials FEPC), designed to review and address issues of racial discrimination in employment.<sup>22</sup> The FEPC achieved some successes, but fell far short of achieving broad-based improvements in

<sup>20</sup> Finkle, *Forum for Protest*; Daniel Kryder, *Divided Arsenal: Race and the American State During World War II* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); Neil A. Wynn, *The African American Experience During World War II* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2010); Christine Knauer, *Let Us Fight As Free Men: Black Soldiers and Civil Rights* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016). Each of these works discusses segregation in the military, the background and history of the Fair Employment Practices Committee, and the failure of the Roosevelt administration to take the initiative to address discrimination, in deference to the influence of Southern politicians in the Democratic party who opposed any change in the racial status quo.

<sup>21</sup> Kryder, *Divided Arsenal*, 61.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid. See pages 55-66 for a detailed discussion of the compromise with Randolph.

black employment prospects, and remained a bone of contention for the black community throughout the war years.<sup>23</sup>

The black press supported black leaders who were willing to take direct action and orchestrate mass movements, but they also enthusiastically reported even small gains in black appointments to senior positions. One widely reported item was the promotion of Colonel Benjamin O. Davis, veteran of World War I and commander of a coast artillery fleet in New York, to the rank of Brigadier General, the first African American to achieve this rank. The reporting was reminiscent of the press's positive response to appointments of African Americans to the census office in 1900. Now, however, it also appeared that the press understood that one or two appointments did not mean real change, and some articles expressed a skepticism that was not evident in 1900. The *Chicago Defender* suggested, when the appointment was still a rumour, that it was being made so that the War Department would be less vulnerable to attack on the grounds of racial discrimination.<sup>24</sup> After the appointment was announced, the *Philadelphia Tribune* gave it a political slant, opening its article with the claim: "Forced by the requirements of politics and the war situation, President Roosevelt appointed..."<sup>25</sup>

The papers also reported the appointments of Judge William H. Hastie, dean of Howard University law school, as aide to the Secretary of War, and the appointment of Major Campbell C. Johnson, instructor of military science at Howard University, as executive assistant to the national selective service director. The *Tribune* and the *Defender* both quoted Hastie as accepting the role in the hope that he could contribute to the integration of the armed services. They also noted that the appointments were made shortly after a meeting between Dr. Rayford Logan and Dr. Howard Long of Howard University and Dr. Frederick Patterson of the Tuskegee Institute with President Roosevelt to discuss African American participation in national defense.

<sup>23</sup> A number of articles in the Victory Edition address the limited success of the FEPC and ongoing frustrations of blacks seeking fair treatment in employment. See also Kryder, 131-2 for a discussion on the final report of the FEPC in 1946, which showed that complaints remained high in the North throughout the war years.

<sup>24</sup> "Col. Davis May Be Named Aide to U.S. Army Chief," *Chicago Defender*, August 17 1940.

<sup>25</sup> "Politics, War Force Naming of Negro General, 2 Draft Aides," *Philadelphia Tribune*, October 31 1940.

Whether this was a coincidence or a political move on the part of the government, the reporting implied that black leaders had exercised some influence over the decision.

The black press was not alone in criticizing the government's approach to eliminating discrimination in employment and in the military. The *Amsterdam News* reprinted an article from the *Chicago Daily Tribune*, a white newspaper, which supported full black participation in the services: "The Negro regiments have had honorable combat records in all the wars in which they have fought."<sup>26</sup> The article finished with a scathing critique: "The army's prejudice against colored troops is only one of its numerous stupidities that should be abandoned in the interest of sound national defense." This support was an exception, as the white press generally ignored news related to the black population. One white journalist, however, focused attention on the black press through a smear campaign. Nationally-syndicated journalist Westbrook Pegler was highly critical of the quality and the contents of the black press, and what he considered was the black press's role in inciting the racial violence that was perpetrated upon African Americans.<sup>27</sup> Described by one *Defender* editor as a "caustic, mossback columnist," Pegler's campaign annoyed the major papers for some months, but they managed to avoid serious damage to their reputations.<sup>28</sup>

The black press at this time was also under pressure from the government to curtail its critical reporting of the war. Accusations of poor production quality could be dismissed, but accusations of disloyalty could not. Historian Patrick Washburn suggests that various government agencies, including the FBI, were quite concerned about the black press's loyalty and its outspokenness, and were eager to exert some control over what the papers were publishing. John Sengstacke proved his mettle in defending the black press through a personal

<sup>26</sup> "Negroes in the Army," *New York Amsterdam News*, September 7 1940.

<sup>27</sup> Finkle, *Forum for Protest*, 66; James D. Williams, "The Black Press and the First Amendment." In *Issues and Trends in Afro-American Journalism*, eds. James S. Tinney and Justine J. Rector (Washington, DC: University Press of America, Inc., 1980), 48.

<sup>28</sup> Ben Burns, *Nitty Gritty: A White Editor in Black Journalism*. (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1996), 7. Burns, newly hired to the *Defender*, assisted Editor-in-Chief Dr. Metz Lochard in editing the Victory Edition.

appeal to Attorney General Francis Biddle, standing his ground to convince Biddle that the press was simply stating the facts of discrimination and was not engaging in sedition.<sup>29</sup> No action was ever taken to suppress the major papers inside the United States.<sup>30</sup>

The papers directed more attention to war reporting once black recruits began to be called up toward the end of 1940, and they greatly increased their war reporting once the United States entered the war following the attack on Pearl Harbor in December of 1941. By this stage the black newspapers had muted their criticism of European imperialism, and were emphasizing African Americans' loyalty and support for the United States and its allies in the fight against fascism. They refused, however, to overlook incidents of racial injustice, which became all too apparent when the draft was introduced. Reporting, therefore, was both positive and negative. Critical reporting focused on the Army and Navy for their refusal to enlist black volunteers initially, and then insisting on maintaining strict segregation once enlistments began. Reporting also focused on the difficulties of obtaining skilled industrial work despite the establishment of the FEPC. Positive reporting comprised features, usually with photographs, of black recruits and the training they were undergoing, or were items featuring individual promotions and appointments within the services. Critical and favourable reporting sometimes appeared on the same page.<sup>31</sup>

Roy Wilkins of the NAACP summarized this duality in war reporting in an opinion piece in one of his weekly columns in the *New York Amsterdam News*. Writing about the annual convention of the National Negro Publishers Association, the article discussed the criticism the

<sup>29</sup> Patrick S. Washburn, *A Question of Sedition: The Federal Government's Investigation of the Black Press During World War II* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986). See pages 88-91 for an account of the meeting between Sengstacke and Biddle, where Sengstacke made a strong case on behalf of the black press.

<sup>30</sup> It appeared that censorship was an issue outside the United States. John Sengstacke wrote to The Office of Censorship asking it to explain the redactions in a recent issue of the *Defender* that was for distribution in Cuba. The redactions were so extensive that the newspaper was unfit for sale. The letter claimed that censorship was also affecting the *Defender's* distribution in its markets in the Caribbean and South America, and asked what it could do to prevent future loss. John Sengstacke to Byron Price, The Office of Censorship, June 3 1942. Box 58, Folder 1. Abbott-Sengstacke Family Papers.

<sup>31</sup> For example, page 3 of the January 4 1941 edition of the *Defender* includes an article reporting the NAACP's "vigorous protest" against the Army's insistence on building segregated training camps, and a three-picture feature of black officers on an inspection tour with recruits training at Fort Sill, Oklahoma.

black press had received from Pegler and others, who suggested that "the American Negro shut his eyes and ears" to discrimination and segregation "and remain content with the status quo."<sup>32</sup> Wilkins stated that the editors were not content with the status quo, and would "continue to fight for the rights due their people – every single little right. They will support the war as Negroes have always supported every war, loyally to the death, but they want and intend to have some of the fruits of democracy here at home."

The *Pittsburgh Courier* framed this duality as a two-pronged victory campaign, which it labeled "Double V." The idea was broached by a reader, who suggested that "we colored Americans adopt the double VV for a double victory."<sup>33</sup> The double victory represented victory at home, in the achievement of equal rights for African Americans, and victory abroad against fascism. The paper launched a formal Double Victory campaign, with a large insignia of a double V on the front page, on February 7, 1942. The following week it proudly announced that the campaign had received nationwide support.<sup>34</sup> The Double V promotion was memorable and its presentation catchy. The rapid adoption of the visual image suggested that this resonated with the general public as a symbol of their hopes for the future more readily than had Roy Wilkins's editorial expression of the double victory idea.

The *Defender* was also balancing calls to end discrimination in enlistment and defense contract employment with promotions of patriotism to support the war effort. Early evidence of this was the way the paper advertised its annual Bud Billiken charity parade and picnic in Chicago in 1941, under the headline: "Plan Biggest Patriotic Display August 2. Bud's Picnic Will Stress Americanism."<sup>35</sup> The article described the upcoming event as promising to be "the

<sup>32</sup> Roy Wilkins, "The Watchtower," *New York Amsterdam News*, June 13 1942.

<sup>33</sup> "Should I Sacrifice to Live 'Half-American?'," *Pittsburgh Courier*, January 31 1942.

<sup>34</sup> Despite the attention the campaign has received in the historical literature, the *Courier* itself did not advertise the Double V logo on its pages beyond the first few weeks, and continued its war reporting without necessarily framing it in the Double V context. Washburn states that the campaign was "virtually dead" by the end of 1942. Washburn, *A Question of Sedition*, 132.

<sup>35</sup> "Plan Biggest Patriotic Display August 2," *Chicago Defender*, June 7 1941.

greatest patriotic demonstration ever staged by members of our race," where 500,000 people "are lining up behind President Franklin Delano Roosevelt in his drive for national unity."

In the spring of 1942 John Sengstacke again took the initiative to promote the interests of the black press. He visited Washington, DC to hold a series of meetings with government officials to discuss government and press relations, but also to promote the interests of the *Chicago Defender*.<sup>36</sup> The Washington trips were not merely to appease the government and declare the loyalty of the black press, but they had a deeper, political motivation that would benefit the *Chicago Defender* and solidify its position as a strong voice for the African American community. A confidential internal memo sheds light on the strategy the *Defender* employed around Sengstacke's approach to the government, and is a record of a meeting between Sengstacke and three senior editors of the *Defender* that was held over three days in February.<sup>37</sup> The group met "to discuss the general policy of the newspaper, with special emphasis on its role in politics, both national and local." The memo described "the splendid opportunity now confronting the *Defender* in becoming the most influential organization in the national picture if proper coordination is achieved." The memo expressed the opinion that opportunity existed because the *Defender* was unique in two areas: first, because of the paper's strength in Chicago, where African Americans enjoyed a degree of political power, its strength could be deployed nationally; and second, other newspapers such as the *Pittsburgh Courier*, *Afro-American*, or *New York Amsterdam News* either lacked a strong home base, their home base had no political influence, or they lacked circulation. These facts placed the *Defender* in an advantageous position, which was recognized by "top-flight officials in Washington." The memo expressed the

<sup>36</sup> The Abbott-Sengstacke archive includes copies of a number of letters that Sengstacke wrote to various government officials, but many are undated. The earliest dated letter is April 11, and indicates that some meetings had already taken place. The correspondence indicates that meetings continued until July 1942. See Box 58, Folders 1, 2. Abbott-Sengstacke Family Papers.

<sup>37</sup> "Confidential Memorandum." Box 58, Folder 2. Abbott-Sengstacke Family Papers. No year was indicated in the memo, dated February 13-14-15, but its contents suggest that it was 1942, before Sengstacke approached the government.



editors' confidence that these officials would deal with the *Defender* when they recognized that "it has maneuvered itself into a position to either help or hinder them."

Sengstacke's meetings in Washington indicate that the *Defender* was confident in its ability to influence the government, and this in itself is evidence of the growing voice of the black press in the 1940s. The meetings were cordial, with both parties agreeing on the need to present African Americans in the segregated armed forces in a favourable light. This put the black press in the clear against accusations of disloyalty, and served the government's objective of increasing black recruitment to the services. One of Sengstacke's gains from the meetings was permission to assign a correspondent to serve with troops in the field, to give the black press a more accurate picture of war service. This concession did not, however, prevent the government from reminding Sengstacke that it, too, wanted cooperation. A letter from the Bureau of Public Relations to Sengstacke enclosing forms for accreditation of a correspondent conveys the government's expectation of future stories, where accreditation "will spoil a lot of spectacular stories" and show that "practically all rumors of mistreatment prove unfounded."<sup>38</sup> The letter closed with the advice: "The patriotic course is also the prudent one." John Sengstacke appeared to concur with this last sentiment, and expressed the same in a letter to Secretary of the Navy Frank Knox on June 2, 1942: "The *Chicago Defender* is ready and willing to aid in building morale of the boys who are to become part of our navy."<sup>39</sup> This statement was true to the extent that the *Defender* included many positive reports about service in the Navy. At the same time, the *Defender* and the other major papers did not hesitate to maintain their coverage of segregationist policies and to push for change.

<sup>38</sup> Lt. Col. D.P. Page to John Sengstacke, May 6 1942. Box 58, Folder 1. Abbott-Sengstacke Family Papers.

<sup>39</sup> John Sengstacke to Frank Knox, June 2 1942. Box 58, Folder 1. Abbott-Sengstacke Family Papers.

### The Victory Edition

Sengstacke's interest in promoting patriotism and loyalty while also keeping the cause of African American rights to the fore, culminated in the *Chicago Defender's* decision to launch a special campaign to promote national unity. As the paper set out in a memorandum that outlined the background for a Victory Rally Week, of which the Victory Edition was to be the centerpiece, "[Pegler's] misrepresentations of the Negro Press" had generated suspicion and doubt that led to the questioning of African American loyalty.<sup>40</sup> To that end, the memorandum explained, the paper decided to direct white interest in the black press into positive channels. The Victory Edition would be the medium through which to "define truly the thinking and feeling of our black citizenry" which "will prove to be consistent with the aims and ideals of American democracy." The memorandum stated that the Victory Rally Week was to be conducted in cooperation with leading agencies and organizations. This exercise is also reminiscent of the approach to the 1900 census, in that it was an opportunity to use a national endeavor to promote the African American cause. In 1900 the objective was to use the census to demonstrate black progress to counter beliefs in black inferiority. This time, the national emergency of the war, and government support for the Victory exercise, was an opportunity to expose the white mainstream to "our black citizenry" in ways of which they may not have been aware, and persuade them to consider positive change.

Correspondence between Sengstacke and various government bodies indicates that the parties were cooperating. In a letter to Archibald MacLeish, Director of the Office of Facts and Figures, Sengstacke closed by saying, "We must get across to white Americans the necessity of understanding the present status of Negroes in American democracy."<sup>41</sup> In another letter to MacLeish in June 1942, following an apparently successful meeting, Sengstacke stated the importance of "conveying the 'affirmative' function your office has in our American Victory

<sup>40</sup> "Proposal for The *Chicago Defender* Victory Rally Week (nd)." Box 121, Folder 12. Abbott-Sengstacke Family Papers.

<sup>41</sup> John Sengstacke to Hon. Archibald MacLeish. (nd). Box 58, Folder 1. Abbott-Sengstacke Family Papers.

Effort."<sup>42</sup> Sengstacke later wrote to the Office of War Information requesting material for inclusion in the Victory Edition, such as photographs and articles tracing the history of African Americans in various military roles. It appears that the Office of War Information responded favourably, as much of the material he requested appeared in the Victory Edition.<sup>43</sup>

Preparations for the Victory Edition were well underway by mid 1942, with requests being made to individuals to contribute essays, and negotiations with the Advertising Council, Inc. to assist in making contact with "twenty top industrial firms for sponsorship advertising."<sup>44</sup> The Victory Rally Week memorandum indicated a publication date for the Victory Edition of August 15, but it did not appear until six weeks later, on September 26. In its September 5 edition, the *Defender* advertised the upcoming edition in its typical attention-grabbing style, with a four-column, half-page advertisement describing it as "history-making" and listing the "all-star line-up" of contributors. The September 12 edition included a full-page advertisement for the "100-page history-making Victory Edition."

Advertised at 100 pages and selling for 10 cents a copy, the Victory Edition was an impressive piece of newspaper publishing.<sup>45</sup> Overall, it used stories of exceptional African Americans to develop a broadly patriotic tone, to boost black morale, and to convince white America of black achievement. Nevertheless, while the Victory Edition was published with the support of the government, it included a full complement of articles critical of the government's failure to address racial discrimination in military and civilian life on the domestic front, and concern about the policies of the United States and its allies in relation to the postwar world, and how these would impact African Americans. These themes were discussed throughout the

<sup>42</sup> John Sengstacke to Hon. Archibald MacLeish, June 2 1942. Box 58, Folder 1. Abbott-Sengstacke Family Papers.

<sup>43</sup> "Material Wanted from the Office of War Information for Special 'Victory Edition' of the *Chicago Defender*." Box 121, Folder 12. Abbott-Sengstacke Family Papers.

<sup>44</sup> John Sengstacke to Dr. Miller McClintock, August 4 1942. Box 121, Folder 12. Abbott-Sengstacke Family Papers.

<sup>45</sup> The ProQuest Historical Newspapers™ – Black Newspapers database copy of the September 26 1942 *Chicago Defender* contains 94 pages. Page three, and five pages from the back of the third section, containing the second parts of several contributions, are missing.

Victory Edition, some by outside contributors, and others by *Defender* staff writers. The combination of themes served to boost morale in the short term, by showing that African Americans were making progress on some levels, but also helped to set in context the direction of the fight for equal rights after the war concluded.

### Layout and contents

The Victory Edition comprised two parts, the first set out in a standard newspaper format, and the second in a magazine format. The first part contained general news interspersed with editorial commentary, special-interest pages for sports, entertainment, women's interests, and the Bud Billiken children's page. There was also a page devoted to news of men and women in the services, a sort of society page for the military, which included news of individual servicemen and lists of promotions, and a full page of photographs of Navy men in training. Although in a newspaper format, the contents thematically emphasized victory and the war effort. The second part was a magazine, which was the centerpiece of the Victory Edition. Set out in three sections, it contained contributions from prominent people in government, business, the press, and entertainment, and articles about military service and editorial pieces by *Defender* writers. It concluded with a pictorial feature showing soldiers in training and in the field, and civilians involved in war production.

The cover page was designed for maximum visual impact. It featured a full-page illustration showing an American soldier standing tall, leading soldiers representing each of the Allied nations, Britain, the Soviet Union, India, and China, above a caption conveying unity: "All for One – One for All."



Figure 12: Chicago Defender, September 26 1942.

The second page was in the usual front-page format, with a headline and general news, but in the centre of the page was a letter from President Roosevelt to John Sengstacke praising his effort to strengthen unity and crush tyranny.<sup>46</sup> At the bottom of the page was a message from the *Defender* to its readers asking them to pass the Victory Edition to as many people as possible to advance national unity and healthy race relations: "This can be your own contribution to building healthy racial relations as part of the task of winning the war."

Rather surprisingly for an issue that was designed to foster unity and raise morale, the headline that launched the news section was less than unifying: "Britain Bows to Race Prejudice;

<sup>46</sup> Washburn, *A Question of Sedition*, 134. According to Washburn, Roosevelt's press secretary initially declined to provide a message to a specific paper, but was persuaded by the Office of War Information that the *Defender* was very influential and that the message would be useful.

Newsman Blames U.S. Pressure." The Victory Edition followed the pattern of war reporting established in the black press that included both critical and positive articles, and two such articles with London datelines appeared under this headline. The first reflected the headline's message, revealed initially in the British press, that the lack of a colour bar in Britain had "surprised and annoyed Americans, especially those from the prejudiced South." While many black soldiers had been warmly received by the British people, discrimination was seeping in, and British officials had been persuaded to place restrictions on black soldiers' access to bars and dancehalls. The second article was a report out of London by African American war correspondent George Padmore, who had just completed a tour of "a vast Negro camp." This report was positive and upbeat, and included human interest stories of the daily lives and activities of the soldiers, who were well and happy, and had complete confidence in their white officers.

Most of the articles in the general news section followed the pattern seen in a standard issue, but there was a definite focus on portraying people in terms of their participation in the war effort. Women were no exception, and were featured as a group who were delivering telegrams for Western Union, taking over from men who were in the services.<sup>47</sup> Not all content was related to the war, but carried on the press tradition of including "uplift" pieces, especially relating to education, such as a full page of photographs of young women returning to college – "a bevy of beauties" who would soon be completing their education and going out into the world "as doctors, lawyers, and teachers."<sup>48</sup>

There were a few noteworthy omissions from the Victory Edition, which suggests that, as it was intended to be read widely by white and black audiences, the editors were careful to avoid images of blacks and the black press that would play to stereotype. Therefore, in contrast to the usual newspaper fare, there was no crime news. Another item that was conspicuous by its

<sup>47</sup> "Take a Message, Please," *Chicago Defender*, September 26 1942.

<sup>48</sup> "It's School Days as Co-Eds Begin Trek to Classrooms," *Chicago Defender*, September 26 1942.

absence was questionable advertising. When preparing for the Victory Edition, the *Defender's* advertising manager wrote to John Sengstacke suggesting that they "drop all luck ads and fortune telling" (which had been one of the criticisms of the black press raised by Westbrook Pegler).<sup>49</sup> Overall, there were few advertisements, and these were mainly for personal care or medicinal products, and there was no advertising in the magazine section.<sup>50</sup>

The society pages were also geared to the war effort, with a heavy focus on patriotism. They described a number of different organizations that were engaged in fundraising to provide care packages for servicemen and setting up service men's centres, which were expected to be "the scene of many gay activities."<sup>51</sup> Young women at the Joe Louis chapter of the Women's Defense Corps of America in Chicago were engaged in fund-raising and preparing gift boxes, and were also participating in drill exercises "to keep strong and healthy for Uncle Sam." The women "get an honest-to-goodness kick out of doing their bit to help win the war in the sincere hope that true democracy for all races will become a reality."<sup>52</sup> As was typical of a normal society page, the issue included a photograph of a young woman who was taking up a position in the Treasury Department. The caption described her education and sorority affiliations, but also noted that her brother, Sgt. James Allen Jr., was serving in Australia.<sup>53</sup> This section also included the usual articles on food and fashion, but emphasized wartime rationing. Dresses were "designed to save material but add allure" and "hats and shoes are practical, all the while beautiful."<sup>54</sup> There were no descriptions of the extravagant use of fur and jewels that had appeared in the society pages in the 1930s. Instead, luxury was dismissed: "Formality is

<sup>49</sup> Clarence A. Taylor to John Sengstacke, July 28 1942. Box 121, Folder 12. Abbott-Sengstacke Family Papers.

<sup>50</sup> One or two questionable ads did appear. While the archives indicate that Sengstacke was interested in approaching national advertisers to purchase space in the Victory Edition, there were no advertisements from any national brand except one small advertisement for Pepsi Cola.

<sup>51</sup> "Typovision," *Chicago Defender*, September 26 1942.

<sup>52</sup> "Joe Louis Unit of WDCA Offers A Helping Hand," *Chicago Defender*, September 26, 1942.

<sup>53</sup> "Leaves for Capital," *Chicago Defender*, September 26 1942.

<sup>54</sup> "'Goody, Goody' Is Cry From Dame Fashion," *Chicago Defender*, September 26 1942.

something that a costume can assume or brush aside at a moment's notice – anything else is 'dated' for the duration."<sup>55</sup>

This section also included serious editorial comment on the subject of unity, contributed by Rebecca Styles Taylor, *Defender* columnist and Vice President of the Women's National Organization.<sup>56</sup> Her article questioned the existence of true unity, reflecting on calls for national unity from Vice President Henry Wallace and presidential aide Sumner Welles, who compared the current battle with the Civil War and urged the American people "to utterly and finally crush the evil men and the iniquitous system which they have advised." Taylor questioned whether "the Negro" was included among "the American people," when they were "subject to discrimination, segregation, exploitation, and intimidation; when Southern governors are still fighting the civil war; the federal government is but a reflection of the 'medieval southland;' and northern and southern capitalists are defying the President's executive orders." She looked to the white women's groups and their national and international councils formed in the name of peace to take a stand for right, and answer the question: "To whom do white speakers refer when they say 'OUR PEOPLE' and 'WE?'" Her cmmall to white women's groups suggests that she wrote the piece in the knowledge that the Victory Edition was intended to circulate in the white community as well as in the black community.

The society news and the Taylor piece reflected the rest of the news section, which combined both serious and lighter content. The entertainment section was typical of a regular week, but the sports section brought the focus back to the war effort with a large feature on champion boxer Joe Louis. Louis's huge popularity made him an excellent morale-booster and model of patriotism. Louis was pictured in his sergeant's uniform, on furlough to prepare to defend his title. An accompanying piece by sports writer Fay Young noted that Louis was

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> "Activities of Women's National Organizations," *Chicago Defender*, September 26 1942; Enoch P. Waters, *American Diary: A Personal History of the Black Press* (Chicago: Path Press, Inc., 1987), 127. Waters, also a *Defender* columnist, recalls her as "a militant feminist ... determined to make the female voice heard in every discourse dealing with national or racial issues."



contributing the profits from his matches to the Army Relief Fund.<sup>57</sup> At the top of the page was Louis's victory message calling for support for the war effort: "I'm in the army now. Anything the army tells me to do is okay with me. Uncle Sam needs everybody's help now. This country has done a lot for me, and I'm more than willing to pay it back."

Per the usual newspaper layout, the editorial pages came next, and here the Victory Edition displayed its intention to reinforce national unity. It achieved this objective through the inclusion of articles and photographs which John Sengstacke had requested from the Office of War Information. One of these was a piece by the Secretary of Agriculture Claude R. Wickard, who relied heavily on agricultural metaphor to emphasize the importance of unity: "Any farm boy knows he can do a better and a faster job of plowing when he has a team that pulls together." "Today we have a job of plowing to do. We've got to plow under the Axis and cultivate the Four Freedoms everywhere in the world."<sup>58</sup> The article outlined the importance of food production and the contribution that both black and white farmers were making, and gave statistics on the amount of production necessary to feed the nation each week. A second contribution from the Office of War Information was also a positive piece, with photographs, featuring its four black staff members who were playing "a big part in maintaining Negro morale throughout the nation."<sup>59</sup>

The editorial pages also included opinion pieces on domestic issues, specifically the activities of the FEPC, the defeat of "fascist" governor Talmadge of Georgia, and opinions on international issues such as the Allies' intentions regarding extending freedom to all people after the war. This section also included nine Letters to the Editor, which expressed common themes of patriotism and unity. The tone of the letters suggests that the Victory Edition was not bringing new ideas to the African American public, but was, rather, expressing and expanding on the views it held. Letters noted that race prejudice "has not taken a holiday" but that now was the

<sup>57</sup> "Negro Athletes Giving Their All for Victory," *Chicago Defender*, September 26 1942.

<sup>58</sup> "Teaming Up To Win," *Chicago Defender*, September 26 1942.

<sup>59</sup> "Negro 'Big Four' in War Info Office," *Chicago Defender*, September 26 1942.

time to unite to fight for democracy. One stressed the importance of the vote in achieving equality, and another called for stronger African American leadership and the promotion of uplift ideals: "Let us raise our heads and present ourselves before other races as examples of honest living, Christianity and high moral standards."

### Contributions to the Victory Edition

The three-part magazine, which formed the main body of the Victory Edition, was designed to inspire unity between all Americans, but the message that a united country should also deliver deserved equality following the war is evident throughout. The first section began with a full-page illustration of two servicemen, one black and one white, blowing bugles "Calling America," against a backdrop of the American flag. The caption was "Victory through Unity." The page also listed the names of the sixty-five contributors, almost all American, from many walks of life, and a message from John Sengstacke, entitled "A Dedication." The piece outlined the purpose of the Victory Edition: "to make a contribution to the thinking of the nation and at the same time heighten the morale of America's 15 million Negro citizens." Sengstacke expressed the view that true freedom was the key to victory, and that victory in the current war would be "momentous not only for the Negro people alone but for humanity at large, for the solution of problems that have been too long neglected." He stressed the "dual" aspect of the fight in closing: "To win the peace [is] an objective which must not be separated from the legitimate rights of the people whose blood is being spilled upon the altar of freedom."

The magazine section revealed a difference in tone between the contributions of whites and those of black leaders and black newspaper columnists. By virtue of their agreeing to become involved in the Victory Edition, white contributors could be considered supportive of its ideals and purpose, and sympathetic to the black cause. While many of their pieces acknowledged and deplored racial discrimination, they were moderate in their criticism, and

expressed optimism for the future. Black leaders and intellectuals were more strident in their articles, and appeared to see the Victory Edition as an opportunity to promote their individual crusades. Many, while no doubt justified in their opinions, ignored the Victory Edition's objective to foster national unity to boost morale. That said, the potential for the Victory Edition to attract a much wider and more diverse readership than a typical edition of a black newspaper was a unique opportunity for black contributors to reveal the true state of affairs for African Americans.

The order of the contributions placed brief greetings before longer, more analytical pieces. The first were greetings from the senior commanders on the overseas fronts, General Douglas MacArthur, Commander-in-Chief of Allied Forces, Australian Theater of Operations, and General Dwight Eisenhower, Commander of American Forces, European Theater of Operations.<sup>60</sup> The brief greetings provide some insight into each leader's personality. MacArthur's message was forceful and full of praise for the black soldier, and expressed his pride in leading them in Australia: "Only those like you who at one time were denied personal liberty can fully appreciate its value. Your heroic struggle for freedom has given you a sense of patriotism, which is one of your finest characteristics."<sup>61</sup> General Eisenhower's greeting was passive, and almost boilerplate: "An opportunity to pay tribute to the part the Negroes are playing in the war effort of the country is afforded on this special occasion. Negro troops stand ready to fight for the preservation of individual liberty and for our country." Perhaps unusually, as the President of the United States is referred to as the Commander in Chief, Roosevelt's contribution was placed after these greetings, but they set the stage for his broader message on national unity. He began by stating that America's security did not lie with the armed forces alone, but depended on the country uniting to defeat tyrannical forces seeking to divide and

<sup>60</sup> "From Overseas," *Chicago Defender*, September 26 1942.

<sup>61</sup> Despite MacArthur's praise of the black soldier, he seemed unable to prevent his white soldiers from also attempting to impose Jim Crow in Australia. See Sean Brawley and Chris Dixon, "Jim Crow Downunder? African American Encounters with White Australia, 1942-1945," *Pacific Historical Review* 71, no. 4 (November 2002).

conquer, which had brought Europe to a state of war. Unity of will and purpose among the American people was essential "to keep ablaze the flames of human liberty, of reason, of democracy" for the "better world that is to come."<sup>62</sup>

President Roosevelt's message led on to more controversial and thought-provoking pieces following the unity theme, and it is possible to trace an editorial line through these first few contributions, which were less about the domestic situation and more focused on the broader cause of freedom. It was probably to the *Defender's* advantage, when appealing to a wider American audience, to introduce the contributions that had an international perspective first, rather than immediately presenting readers with the more controversial pieces that dealt with the domestic race situation. The first contribution was by W.E.B. Du Bois, introduced by the *Defender* as "one of the most outstanding men of letters in America." He framed his piece around the broader international fight for racial equality rather than the conflict between democracy and fascism.<sup>63</sup> He did, however, link race and fascism by declaring, "Nothing gives us greater pain than seeing colored Japan cast its lot with Hitler." His main point was that America was "fighting for a free world and against all race hate and caste, whether in America, England, Japan, or Germany." The full-page article did not single out India, apart from expressing support for Mahatma Gandhi, but it was bordered at the top and left by photographs of people representing the different ethnic groups on the Indian subcontinent, clearly creating a visual link between the fight for a free world with the fight for a free India. Du Bois was followed by contributions by 1940 Republican presidential candidate Wendell Willkie, who called for the elimination of race imperialism, and by Eleanor Roosevelt, who suggested that the war was not about colour, but about freedom. Other contributions in this section appeared in a less easily identifiable order, but can be examined as groups of like contributors, and as individuals writing on common themes.

<sup>62</sup> "On National Unity," *Chicago Defender*, September 26 1942.

<sup>63</sup> "We Fight for a Free World ... THIS OR NOTHING!" *Chicago Defender*, September 26 1942.

*Contributions from the military services*

The black press had, in the lead up to America's involvement in the war, criticized each branch of the military for refusing to integrate their companies, and for the apparent barriers they put in place against black soldiers advancing to officer grades. The Navy was particularly egregious in its attitude to black sailors, in limiting recruitment and then assigning recruits to non-combatant roles as orderlies or kitchen staff. However, the Navy's contribution to the Victory Edition showed a marked change in attitude. In a long and almost apologetic article, it was frank in acknowledging its slowness to enlist black sailors, although stating "this is not the moment in history to ponder and debate reasons for the lag in utilizing Negro manpower."<sup>64</sup> The article showed that the Navy had senior personnel who were sympathetic to the African American position. The contributor was Lieutenant Commander Daniel W. Armstrong, commander of a black battalion. He was from a distinguished Southern white family which had a long connection with African Americans in military and civilian contexts, in leading black troops in the Civil War, and in establishing the Hampton Institute. A naval officer who was assigned to Armstrong's command described him as "a fair man with a genuine interest in the concerns of the black sailors."<sup>65</sup> Armstrong explained the Navy's change of policy: "The desire to round out the democratic way of life ... propelled the Navy to adopt a policy of enlisting Negroes for general service instead of in a limited capacity." The article listed opportunities for African American servicemen, gave an explanation of induction training, and the requirements for entering one of the Navy Service schools for advanced technical training. The article offered a clear invitation: "The plans are laid, the program is in effect, the opportunities are waiting – the Navy needs the best of young Negro manhood," who would "demonstrate to the people of America that within this service a responsibility is shared and shared well – in order to further an interracial unity unparalleled."

<sup>64</sup> "The Navy Needs Men... Yes, Negro Men," *Chicago Defender*, September 26 1942.

<sup>65</sup> John F. Dille Jr., "The Golden Thirteen Plus One." In *The Golden Thirteen: Recollections of the First Black Naval Officers*, ed. Paul Stillwell (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1993), 106-7.

The services were keen to stress their openness to black enlistment, and this also applied to women, as shown in a contribution by Colonel Oveta Culp Hobby, director of the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps.<sup>66</sup> A brief background note on Colonel Hobby at the bottom of the page indicated that "although she comes from Texas, her work in the WAACs has stamped her as entirely democratic in the treatment of Negro women." The article stressed the need for unity of purpose, and the key role that women were playing in the war effort: "Women have long realized that a nation which fights with its man power alone, utilized but half its force. They know that woman power is an integral part of man power." The article noted the keen interest of educator and civil rights activist Mary McLeod Bethune, who served as a special consultant in selecting the first African American women candidates for Officer Training. The article described the Corps as "open to all women, regardless of race, creed or color, married or single," and a photo showed an apparently fully integrated group of white and black women officers who had recently graduated from the "stiff course" at the WAAC center in Des Moines.

#### *Contributions from the white press*

Inclusion of contributions from the white press, which normally ignored the black community, or negatively stereotyped it, was an important part of achieving one of the key objectives of the Victory Edition, which was to be read as widely as possible in the white community. The white press that contributed to the Victory Edition acted as a bridge between the black and white media, by presenting to their white readers the thoughts and aspirations of the black community, about which they were probably unaware. Contributions from the white press came from newspapers and magazines that supported the African American press's "double victory" position, that the war should be waged against discrimination at home and against fascism abroad, and this basic agreement was enough to ensure that these particular papers and

<sup>66</sup> "WACC's At Work," *Chicago Defender*, September 26 1942. Although Mary McLeod Bethune is referred to as "Dr." in some articles, this article refers to her as "Mrs.".

magazines were able to publicize the Victory Edition without compromising their own political perspectives.

Two publishers of Chicago daily newspapers contributed, as did a journalist with one of the dailies, and writers from nationally-distributed *Fortune* and *The Nation* magazines. The contributions from the newspaper publishers were arranged across a double page, above an explanatory note stating that although they were on opposite sides of politics (one supporting and one opposing the Roosevelt administration), they were "two expressions on a problem that faces all the nation."<sup>67</sup> Having contributions from both Republican- and Democratic-leaning papers was also beneficial in securing coverage of the broadest possible political base in the white community. The first contribution was by Marshall Field, publisher of "two of the most liberal daily newspapers in the nation – *PM* and the *Chicago Sun*." The second was by Col. Robert R. McCormick, editor and publisher of the *Chicago Tribune*, which the *Defender* noted had the second largest circulation in America. The explanatory note also stated that the *Tribune* "has always displayed friendliness and a sympathetic understanding toward the problems of the Negro." This was the paper that had spoken out against discrimination against African American troops in the services. It was also, along with the black press, investigated for potential sedition, so it was unsurprising that it contributed to the Victory Edition.<sup>68</sup>

Marshall Field, publisher of *PM* and the *Chicago Sun*, addressed the importance of a united front to prevent America's enemies from appealing to prejudice and playing off one group against another.<sup>69</sup> The piece highlighted the dual fight: "How well we learn during the war to solve the problems of equality and democracy for our own 13,000,000 American Negroes is going to determine how well we are prepared to meet the problem of world peace affecting more

<sup>67</sup> "America Speaking," *Chicago Defender*, September 26 1942.

<sup>68</sup> Washburn, *A Question of Sedition*, 70, 79. Washburn describes the *Tribune* as an anti-administration organ which Roosevelt unsuccessfully attempted to silence for sedition.

<sup>69</sup> "Make The Atlantic Charter Live Today To Guarantee Negro Rights at Peace Table," *Chicago Defender*, September 26 1942.

than a billion colored citizens of the world." "Now is the time we have to do something about the racial and religious prejudices that impair our democratic progress."

The *Tribune's* contribution by Col. McCormick also considered postwar democracy at home and abroad, and raised the colonial issue.<sup>70</sup> It stated that "the freedoms and charters which statesmen enunciate cannot be used simply as slogans." This was a reference to the Four Freedoms and Atlantic Charter around which the allies were planning the postwar world. The Four Freedoms were: freedom of speech and expression; freedom of worship; freedom from want; and freedom from fear. The Atlantic Charter, designed by Roosevelt and Churchill, was a commitment to national self-determination and free trade.<sup>71</sup> In her study of mid-century U.S. foreign policy, Brenda Gayle Plummer states that, in fact, Churchill did not intend to apply the Atlantic Charter to Britain's colonial subjects, confirming the black press's skepticism about the Charter as ideals that applied only to the nations of Europe.<sup>72</sup> In his article, McCormick insisted that the Freedoms and Charter must be universal: "The freedoms must be extended and the charters have a real application if they are to command the faith of colonial peoples." The Freedoms must also be fully implemented within the United States: "We cannot tolerate even the semblance of a colonial system among our own people." In a separate article, the *Chicago Tribune's* war correspondent George Seldes framed the victory in terms of uniting to fight fascism abroad, then at home. He urged readers to look at recent gains rather than ongoing problems, and suggested that the postwar outlook would be one of action, not of empty promises.<sup>73</sup> In a tone that reflected the outspoken culture of the *Tribune*, he urged the defeat of "the Ku Kluxers, the poll-tax politicians, and the Jim Crow corporations" which he described as "home fascists."

<sup>70</sup> "Thirteen Million Black Americans: A Bulwark of Our Country's Might," *Chicago Defender*, September 26 1942.

<sup>71</sup> Earnest L. Perry Jr., "It's Time to Force a Change," *Journalism History* 28, no. 2 (2002).

<sup>72</sup> Brenda Gayle Plummer, *Rising Wind: Black Americans and U.S. Foreign Affairs, 1935-1960* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 84, 90.

<sup>73</sup> "This is a War of Action," *Chicago Defender*, September 26 1942.



Contributions from the two magazines focused on the status of the African American at home, and both emphasized African Americans as loyal citizens. The first, by Freda Kirchwey, writing for *The Nation*, appeared under the heading, "America Needs the Negro ... The Negro Needs America." Kirchwey declared that "unity in America will not be achieved until we clear out the poison of racial prejudice." The second piece, from the editors of *Fortune* magazine, also emphasized the African American as citizen.<sup>74</sup> It considered Japanese propaganda directed toward "the American Negro," which was attempting to "divide and conquer." The propaganda declared that "democracy as practiced by Anglo-Americans is stained with the bloody guilt of racial persecution and exploitation." The article emphasized that no such propaganda would influence its target, as "the Negro wants more – but of America." He was an American, but race took "an irrational toil on his, and America's, rational way of life – an ever-present irritation the steady denial of a normal American existence."

One press contributor notable for his absence was Westbrook Pegler. Pegler had made a name for himself through articles that were highly critical of what he believed were the low standards of journalism and presentation in the black press. The *Defender* nevertheless invited him to contribute, doubtless aware of his influence with his white readers. It printed its letter to Pegler asking for his contribution to the Victory Edition, and Pegler's disdainful reply.<sup>75</sup> Perhaps Pegler perceived sarcasm in Sengstacke's letter of invitation, which, after describing the purpose of the Victory Edition, opened its final paragraph as follows: "Knowing of your splendid efforts to encourage and advance the program of national unity, we are asking you to to be gracious enough to join us in this attempt by contributing some appropriate comments bearing on the issue of democracy and the need for high morale..." Pegler's response opened with a letter to Dr. Metz Lochard, the *Defender's* Editor in Chief: "Dear Mr. Lochard: I have your telegram following a letter from some official of your paper, which I have mislaid."

<sup>74</sup> "This is the Negro's War," *Chicago Defender*, September 26 1942.

<sup>75</sup> "Westbrook Pegler Sends Us A Mash Note!," *Chicago Defender*, September 26 1942.

*Contributions from government representatives*

Sengstacke was more successful inviting contributions from government officials, such as the piece from the Department of Agriculture. He was also able to obtain contributions from senior government officials such as Attorney General Francis Biddle, Paul McNutt, head of the War Manpower Commission, and Malcolm S. MacLean, Chairman of the FEPC. In contrast to the press contributions, these pieces preferred to avoid highlighting the domestic situation, and were clearly designed to reassure African Americans that the government was behind them and was working to address their concerns. At the same time, these government representatives were also careful to express these concerns in general terms, so as not to upset the political balance that Roosevelt was trying to maintain in gaining the confidence of African Americans against his need for the support of Southern Democrats. Attorney General Biddle protected both interests by writing from a broad perspective, that the war was being fought for the rights of the "common man."<sup>76</sup> Those who believed that the "common man" was a white man were becoming fewer, but that belief, and prejudice and race hatred, were divisive and an "act of indirect aid and comfort to the enemy."

The other contributions addressed the labour shortage in the domestic economy – a controversial issue when many corporations were refusing to place qualified African Americans in appropriate jobs, or to hire them at all. This was of most direct concern to African Americans outside the military, and was a source of poor morale, which the government was attempting to address. The short profile of Paul McNutt of the War Manpower Commission that was included below his article noted that he had been high commissioner of the Philippines, and that his experience in the Far East had given him insight into racial minority issues. He was described as "one of the nation's most outspoken leaders in the fight for real democracy for all races." McNutt began by stating the importance of the battle for democracy at home and abroad, which he

<sup>76</sup> "Who is the Common Man?," *Chicago Defender*, September 26 1942.

framed in terms of equality of opportunity for all, the security of livelihood, and freedom from fear and force.<sup>77</sup> The key battleground was the American industrial front, as "we cannot contribute our full strength to the war effort if we permit preconceived prejudices and artificial hiring standards to hamper production." He described the organization of two services, the Negro Manpower Service and the Minority Groups Service, which were to address complaints about "discrimination or failure to utilize, to the fullest extent, all available local labor." He acknowledged the difficulty of overcoming "deep-seated and blind prejudice," but affirmed that each successful hire, promotion, or training opportunity offered to an African American worker was "a step nearer to victory."

The Fair Employment Practices Committee that was set up by the President to address discrimination was controversial in terms of its impact and effectiveness, and FEPC Chairman Malcolm S. MacLean acknowledged this in the Victory Edition. He described the two-fold function of the FEPC, which was to ensure that discrimination did not hinder the full use of American manpower, and to promote national unity by removing such hindrances. While the FEPC had achieved some successes, he acknowledged that there was much to do, as "we are struggling against one of the deepest, blindest, emotional traditions and strongest vested interests in our American life – prejudice." This conclusion, while true, helped shift the emphasis away from the need to give "teeth" to the FEPC, by bowing to a status quo that the FEPC appeared to see as having the upper hand.

Elected officials also contributed messages around the employment situation, and all put a positive spin on their own efforts, or spoke in more general but positive terms. Governors of eleven states – none from the Deep South – and the mayors of six major Northern cities and Los Angeles were represented. The Governor of Michigan admitted that his state faced a severe labour shortage. He discussed the work of the FEPC – "limited but effective" – and his own

<sup>77</sup> "Steps Nearer to Victory," *Chicago Defender*, September 26 1942.

efforts in Michigan to ensure that employment opportunities were opened up to African Americans.<sup>78</sup> He also expressed pride in the work the *Defender* was doing to foster understanding that all "loyal and employable persons in America should be given a chance to do the type of work they are qualified for, regardless of race." Other contributions were less specific, and focused on the importance of tolerance and understanding to maintain a united front in the fight for democracy. The mayor of Boston also expressed his support for the Victory Week campaign and praised the *Chicago Defender* for its patriotism.

### *Contributions around the Colonial Question*

The Victory Edition offered insight into African American thought on the relationship between the Allies and race in the fight against fascism, and this question attracted the most candid opinions. The articles were less about generating domestic unity to support the war effort than about shedding light on what the contributors saw as the inconsistencies of the international situation, where the Allies were fighting for democracy but denying true democracy to large segments of their populations under colonial control. The contributors' forthrightness indicated that they were not bound to pander to the political climate or to the constraints of their positions, as government or military contributors appeared to be. Twelve articles in the Victory Edition touched on India, colonialism and race, and the postwar world order. Some were written by *Defender* columnists, and others by intellectuals and leaders such as W.E.B. Du Bois, discussed above, A. Philip Randolph, and NAACP leader Walter White.<sup>79</sup> While the contributors were fully behind the war effort, they were concerned with the way in which the war was being conducted, and were the most outspoken in relation to India, the prized possession of the largest colonial power. A number of articles openly urged independence for India, equating "the policy

<sup>78</sup> "Education: The Path To Jobs For Negroes," *Chicago Defender*, September 26 1942.

<sup>79</sup> Plummer, *Rising Wind*, 89-92. See this section for a discussion on African American intellectuals' engagement with India.

of enslaving India" as "giving direct aid to fascism," and accused Churchill of playing into Japan's hands by refusing to negotiate with India for its independence.<sup>80</sup>

These contributions fall broadly into two types: those that linked the condition of African Americans in the United States with international colonialism, and those that considered the domestic and colonial situations in terms of the postwar world. All reflected the comments expressed by John Sengstacke in the opening to the chapter, that discrimination and freedom were international issues. A. Philip Randolph, who was behind the March on Washington movement, linked colonialism and the status of African Americans at home.<sup>81</sup> He pulled no punches, asking, "What basic difference is there between the problems of the Indian people under British rule and the Negro people under American rule?" and answering, "None." He described the Allies as "proud, pretentious and powerful leaders of the empire systems resting upon the slavery squalor and suffering of the colonial masses." These imperial powers were guilty of bringing the world to destruction, and "are hardly fit to lead it to freedom, peace, and plenty." In a similar vein, Max Yergan, President of the National Negro Congress, stressed the need for "all submerged peoples" to support India in the fight against fascism, and stated that many in the United States were failing to see "that Adolph Hitler and Governor Eugene Talmadge are respectively, general and lieutenant in the same camp."<sup>82</sup>

The postwar peace process was of particular concern to Walter White and Dr. Rayford Logan, who framed their contributions around the type of racial uplift that was articulated in the war years that encouraged African Americans to think beyond their own domestic situation to the part they would play in supporting the United States in addressing international problems after the war was concluded.<sup>83</sup> White stated: "Evils of segregation and discrimination and the menace of the Talmadges and Rankins must be fought bitterly and uncompromisingly. But we

<sup>80</sup> "Churchill and India," *Chicago Defender*, September 26 1942.

<sup>81</sup> "Freedom on Two Fronts," *Chicago Defender*, September 26 1942.

<sup>82</sup> "Negro Sees His Future Linked to Independence For 400 Million," *Chicago Defender*, September 26 1942.

<sup>83</sup> "Negroes in the Peace," *Chicago Defender*, September 26 1942.

would be shortsighted indeed as a race if we did not look ahead to the years after the war is over." African Americans were in a unique position to influence the peace process: "Being more advanced than any other group of Negroes in the world, and fired by determination to refuse all appeasement ... the American Negro has in his hands a weapon with which he can help to forge a better world." Dr. Rayford Logan also stressed the importance of educating oneself to prepare for the postwar world. Very few of the organizations engaged in postwar planning were concerned with "the problems of Negro peoples," and there was a danger of repeating the mistakes of 1918, when African Americans lacked a strong enough voice to influence the peace process. African Americans' knowledge of India and Africa "will have a direct bearing upon the two hundred millions of Negroes in all parts of the world." Clearly, Logan was confident that African Americans had, since World War I, made great strides and developed their own voice and potential to influence.

The second part of the magazine section continued the format of outside contributions and press editorials. It was introduced with another full-page illustration, this time of a black soldier saluting in front of an American flag, over the caption "My Country, 'Tis of Thee," implying that this section was primarily designed to boost morale and patriotism. The first articles supported the impression, as they were uplifting accounts of the contributions of African Americans to the armed services through history. However, for every positive article there was one that was highly critical, of both the services and the government. The section appeared, instead, to be a "warts and all" depiction of the state of the nation in 1942. A page featuring "Negroes in the Navy, 1776 to 1942" contained a positive piece, likely supplied by the Navy at Sengstacke's request.<sup>84</sup> Alongside it was an article describing in some detail the Navy and its efforts to change the policy of excluding black sailors from all but the most menial roles.<sup>85</sup> The

<sup>84</sup> "From John Paul Jones Up To Pearl Harbor, Black Gobs Fought on High Seas," *Chicago Defender*, September 26 1942.

<sup>85</sup> "New Naval Policy Needed To Put Negro Sailors on Equal Footing on Warships," *Chicago Defender*, September 26 1942.

article was, however, in stark contrast to the contribution by Lieutenant Commander Daniel W. Armstrong, commander of the black unit described above, and argued that the recent moves to offer training paths to promotion were nothing more than "a weak compromise with prejudice" that offered less opportunity to black sailors than the Army's current Jim Crow policy. The following article, entitled "Colored Cadets On Parade," with accompanying photograph, was a telling account of the blatant discrimination and bullying encountered by the first black students at the Army's West Point Academy, until Colonel Davis succeeded against very difficult odds to achieve his position.

A number of positive profiles of African Americans in different fields of endeavor, usually framed around the war effort, provided a refreshing counterpoint to the articles decrying discrimination and the negative effect of prejudice on national unity. As was typical of the black press, it was important to show, alongside negative news stories, that African Americans were making progress and advancing individually and collectively. The Victory Edition reinforced ideas of racial uplift, as the articles were positive, morale-boosting pieces that highlighted African American determination and achievement against difficult odds. One article featured pioneers in flight, many of whom were women, and another the role of African American artists in producing positive propaganda illustrations – although, according to the article, only one poster from among the hundreds issued by the government featured an African American. There were also profiles of the late biologist Ernest Everett Just, who had made world-renowned discoveries in cell biology, and a photograph of scientist George Washington Carver, who made an important contribution to peanut cultivation in the South. The latter features were not directly related to the war effort, but their stories would have conveyed to black and white America that African Americans were making valuable contributions to national life.<sup>86</sup>

<sup>86</sup> "Black Wings Over America;" "Negro War Posters;" "Ernest Everett Just: Great Scientist and Great Man," *Chicago Defender*, September 26 1942.

The final part of the magazine section was a twelve-page pictorial feature, introduced, not with an illustration, but with a full-page photograph of Pearl Harbor hero Dorie Miller, a black seaman who had endangered his own life under heavy fire to move his mortally wounded captain to safety, and then manned a machine gun to fire at Japanese aircraft. His bravery went unacknowledged by the Navy until the *Pittsburgh Courier* launched a campaign to have his service recognized, belatedly, with a Navy Cross. He became a popular figure of heroism within the black community, although he was killed in action in a later operation.<sup>87</sup>

The pictorial feature completed the Victory Edition on a positive, morale-boosting note that presented uplifting portraits of black achievement in an easily accessible visual format. It was a collection of photographs and captions designed to show African American contributions to the war effort in a variety of settings. The photographs emphasized operations in both the services and in war production and showcased African Americans' skill and technical prowess. One photograph featured craftsmen engaged in the manufacture of aircraft propellers: "Accuracy and speed are the watchwords of these 'home front' heroes."<sup>88</sup> Another page featured women engaged in parachute production, another area where skill and attention to detail were paramount.<sup>89</sup> This parachute factory in San Diego highlighted another level of African American contribution to the war effort, as the factory was owned by African American screen and radio actor Eddie "Rochester" Anderson, most famous for his role as comedian Jack Benny's butler, a personality immediately recognizable to blacks and whites.

### Aftermath

The Victory Edition was a great success, from both circulation and public response perspectives. A large advertisement appeared in the following week's *Chicago Defender* announcing that it was publishing extra copies of the Victory Edition "in response to the great

<sup>87</sup> Washburn, *A Question of Sedition*, 53-54.

<sup>88</sup> "Propellers," *Chicago Defender*, September 26 1942.

<sup>89</sup> "Parachutes," *Chicago Defender*, September 26 1942.



public demand."<sup>90</sup> The accompanying text repeated the request to "get the Victory Edition to as many white people as possible" as one's contribution to the war effort. One seller wrote from Georgia to say that he had quickly sold out, and could have sold copies to more than a few white people, but didn't have enough to meet the demand. He kept a copy for himself "for reference as to the progress of the race."<sup>91</sup>

Throughout October 1942 the *Defender* carried numerous articles on the favourable public response to the Victory Edition. The October 3 issue announced the success in a headline: "Victory Edition Pleases Nation: *Chicago Defender* Strikes High Water Mark in American Journalism." This was not simply an editorial boast, but repeated a comment in a letter to the paper from a Chicago public school teacher, signed Mr. Lemoyne Watson and wife, who stated: "It superbly serves the needed purpose in these critical times. This is journalism at its monumental best."

In the following week the *Defender* included a page of letters expressing praise, including praise from the white press.<sup>92</sup> Acknowledgement from the white press was important as an affirmation of the quality of the Victory Edition's contents, and confirmation that it was reaching the desired white audience. A reader described an editorial in the white *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* which "urged every white person to read this most outstanding issue." The *Chicago Sun* (whose publisher had contributed to the Victory Edition) printed an overview of the Victory Edition, noting that it described African Americans' contribution to the war effort, and their objective to win "not only the war but the peace as well." *Editor and Publisher* magazine praised the technical production: "From the standpoint of writing and editing, composition, makeup, and printing, it is I think in keeping with the best traditions of the craft." Several of the letters commended the morale-boosting value of the Victory Edition. Attorney General Francis Biddle

<sup>90</sup> "In Response to the Great Public Demand..." *Chicago Defender*, October 3 1942.

<sup>91</sup> "From Far Off Georgia," *Chicago Defender*, October 3 1942.

<sup>92</sup> "More Praise For Victory Edition: Chicago Defender Hailed For Great Contribution Against Hate; For Unity," *Chicago Defender*, October 10 1942.

praised it as "a definite contribution to the war effort and a splendid job of journalism." The Director of the Negro Division War Savings Staff of the Treasury Department stated, "I believe it to be one of the finest morale building jobs and a great contribution to our war effort." Another reader considered it "a very real and very vital contribution to war time morale." Representing the black press, the *Afro-American* and *Norfolk Journal and Guide* sent letters expressing praise and congratulations.

The October 17 edition provided evidence that in some respects the Victory Edition had exceeded expectations. The paper included an introductory piece above another page of complimentary letters that shed light on reader response. Based on the consistently favourable comments appearing each week, it could be assumed that the *Defender* was excluding negative responses. While this may have been so, the introductory piece stated that the editors "were keenly aware that Negro morale was at a low ebb" and that they expected criticism from those "who might not understand the purpose of this effort." They were, instead, "pleasantly surprised with the unanimity of opinion from people of all races and shades of political opinion who did comment," and that "public approval of this effort far exceeds the fondest expectations of the editors."<sup>93</sup> This suggests that the Victory Edition was welcomed, and was read widely enough to justify the additional print run advertised in the October 3 issue.

The government also requested extra copies. In November 1942 the Office of War Information wrote to John Sengstacke notifying him of its decision to "purchase and distribute 50,000 copies of the magazine section of the September 26 Victory Edition of the *Chicago Defender*," which they intended to use for promotion purposes.<sup>94</sup> The Victory Edition appeared to have fulfilled its morale-boosting objective, and the request was both a vindication of the black press generally and the Victory Edition itself, and a testament to its success. The government, however, did not appear to be in full agreement with the entire contents, as the

<sup>93</sup> "Vice President Wallace Lauds Unity Issue: Dr. Mordecai Johnson Also Impressed With Vigor Of Opinions," *Chicago Defender*, October 17 1942.

<sup>94</sup> George A. Barnes to John Sengstacke, November 5 1942. Box 58, Folder 3. Abbott-Sengstacke Family Papers.

letter to Sengstacke requested that certain material "not suitable for the purposes of the Office of War Information" be deleted. This material included the articles by A. Philip Randolph, Max Yergan, and V.V. Oak that were critical of British colonial policy in India, and articles by George Padmore, who wrote about the Atlantic Charter, and by John P. Davis of the National Negro Congress urging freedom for India and the creation of a second front.<sup>95</sup> It appeared, whatever the motive for requesting the additional copies, that the government was keen to emphasize the "national unity" objective of the Victory Edition. It was not clear from the letter where the Victory Edition magazine section was to be distributed, but the request to remove articles related to colonial policy and in particular India, suggested that the government was sensitive to British interests and wished to avoid potential embarrassment to itself and its main ally.

## Conclusion

The 100-page Victory Edition was an outstanding effort on the part of a black newspaper to state the case for patriotism and civil rights within the broader context of achieving victory over fascism. It was a unique collection of articles and opinion from a variety of sources that brought together government leaders and personnel, politicians, intellectuals, writers, and artists, as well as *Defender* columnists, to present an overview of the international situation, the rationale for fighting the war, and the contributions that were being made by African Americans. It also encouraged readers to consider the postwar world and the part that they might play in ensuring a democratic future. While its frank discussion of prejudice and discrimination experienced by African Americans in various circumstances may not have had the desired morale-boosting effect, it served a purpose. The discussion was necessary to educate white readers, to whom the Victory Edition was also targeted, who may have had little understanding

<sup>95</sup> "Beware the Hate Vendors," *Chicago Defender*, September 26 1942.

of the African American experience. For African Americans, highlighting prejudice and discrimination as well as the positive advances that were made despite these barriers, reaffirmed the potential of racial uplift. Success following determined effort was a traditional racial uplift theme in the black press, and the Victory Edition appealed to African Americans in the same way in a wartime context by highlighting their contribution to the war effort through their ability to overcome barriers of discrimination to serve their country. It also showcased black economic advancement through technical skills gained through war service training and through increased union membership (although both were achieved under pressure from the government and black leadership to support the war effort), and the political leverage gained as a result of the need to unite the population to fight the war.<sup>96</sup> Despite heavy odds against them being able to contribute to their fullest capacity, African Americans were capable of, and had made, progress.

The Victory Edition represents a milestone in racial uplift by broadening the scope of African American influence beyond U.S. borders, through the vehicle of an influential newspaper. In addition to showcasing domestic achievements, the Victory Edition established a clear link between personal achievement and the collective goal of achieving political equality that extended beyond the United States. The opinion pieces supported this goal. When white contributors extended the "race problem" beyond national borders, they may have been attempting to direct attention away from blatant domestic discrimination and the government's inability to address it, but in doing so they highlighted a broader issue, which black contributors expressed more directly. The war itself highlighted the tension between race and imperialism, and the complexities of race – in fighting the Japanese enemy, who was "coloured," and in fighting fascism, which meant supporting allies who subjugated "coloured" people in their colonies in Africa and Asia – and, by extension, placed race at the centre of the postwar order. The contributors drew African American attention to populations in other countries who were

<sup>96</sup> "Labor and the Negro," *Chicago Defender*, September 26 1942.

subject to their own forms of Jim Crow and racism under colonial rule, and helped forge a sense of unity with these peoples, with some contributors proposing that African Americans were well positioned to influence the postwar peace process.

Historians have overlooked the Victory Edition amidst the attention given to the *Pittsburgh Courier's* Double V campaign, and the little that they did say about it does not do it justice. The Victory Edition went beyond a slogan, and was an effort to explain to the American public, not just to African Americans, what was meant by the two victories; that white America also had to address the "victory at home" issue, especially now that it had been taken beyond "America's house." The Victory Edition applied a wide-ranging and analytical lens to the concept of the Double Victory, through detailed coverage of the current situation, and what double victory should mean in specific terms. It was a vehicle for consolidating and presenting African American thought on issues facing the nation in wartime, and for raising black political consciousness by confirming loyalty to the nation, the expectation of progress in achieving legal rights, and the potential for engagement with the postwar order to achieve racial equality internationally.

The black press also benefitted. The Victory Edition was an expression of the power accumulated by the black press that enabled one of their number to dedicate a whole edition to one objective – to reaffirm the African American as a loyal American citizen, but one who faced constant challenges in contributing fully to the nation. The Victory Edition symbolized a new era of influence for the black press, where the challenges were expressed clearly and to a wide audience, and heralded the possibility for change in the postwar world. This unique piece of newspaper publishing showed African Americans that their press was influential and strong, and able to present their case to the government. It showed them that the press had become a medium that was capable of attracting people from all walks of life to speak for African Americans, to present them in a strong and positive light to white America, and to show African Americans

that they had a contribution to make. It showed them that, through their new voice, their individual efforts would have positive political consequences. Finally, the Victory Edition was a milestone for the black press in that publisher John Sengstacke was able to work effectively with the government to coordinate contributions and garner support across racial lines, and demonstrate that the black press had evolved to be able to wield this level of national influence.

## CHAPTER SIX: The black press and racial uplift through the consumer marketplace

*Television sets are no longer considered luxury items in homes, but a necessity. If you are among the unfortunates who don't own a set, VIM's fantastic sales this week offer you a wonderful opportunity to get your set.<sup>1</sup>*

For African Americans, the 1950s saw a convergence of positive economic developments, government policy, and changing public attitudes that enabled them to make great progress in improving their condition. These improvements were, however, seen in their economic circumstances rather than in civil rights. Despite the expectations of civil rights gains following World War II, African Americans were again disappointed, as gains were few and infrequent, and were often met with violent resistance. As historian Steven Tuck described it, the decade was a time of three steps forward, two steps back.<sup>2</sup> However, while the NAACP intensified the struggle to achieve legal equality through the courts, many African Americans were able to take advantage of a parallel "soft power" route to democracy and equality in the form of participation in the consumer economy, expressed by Stephanie Capparell as "the democratization of commerce itself."<sup>3</sup>

Postwar government policy supported the development of the consumer marketplace to secure "a better tomorrow for everybody," whereby domestic consumption would contribute, not only to economic growth, but to social and political equality.<sup>4</sup> Postwar economic growth, coupled with better access to higher education and job opportunities for African Americans, increased their incomes and their ability to participate in the consumer economy as patriotic

<sup>1</sup> "Shopping Corner," *New York Amsterdam News*, February 2 1952. VIM was a home appliance retail chain operating over 40 stores in the New York area. It advertised regularly in the *Amsterdam News*, but in this case the newspaper was promoting the stores.

<sup>2</sup> Stephen Tuck, *We Ain't What We Ought to Be: The Black Freedom Struggle from Emancipation to Obama* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2010), 239.

<sup>3</sup> Stephanie Capparell, *The Real Pepsi Challenge: The Inspirational Story of Breaking the Color Barrier in American Business* (New York: Wall Street Journal Books, 2007), x.

<sup>4</sup> Lizabeth Cohen, *A Consumers' Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America* (New York: Vintage Books, 2004), 101, 109.

citizens playing their part in achieving the government's objective. African Americans had been participating in the consumer economy since they first established large urban communities, but business success and wealth remained hidden behind the walls of segregation and white disinterest. Now, however, national manufacturers and advertisers recognized the economic power that a growing number of African Americans were accumulating, and were keen to tap into the market and adapt to and serve its unique needs. African Americans' confidence in their new purchasing power, of which the black press constantly reminded them, encouraged them to embrace the material offerings of the richest nation in the world. The black press supported the consumption initiative, and encouraged African Americans to exercise ingenuity and determination in negotiating the constraints of prejudice and discrimination to fully embrace the enhanced quality of life and improved personal status that consumption promised.

The chapter examines major black newspapers catering to the largest urban African American communities to argue that mass produced, attractively marketed consumer products advertised and promoted in the black press became the means by which to set the standards for a respectable or aspirational lifestyle. The press now saw its role as directing racial uplift efforts, not through advice to get an education or develop a strong work ethic as had been customary in past decades, but through a more subjective appeal to the sensibilities of an increasingly educated and sophisticated readership. While newspapers continued to regularly feature people who had achieved individual business or educational success, conspicuous consumption became the modern way to promote racial uplift in this decade. Conspicuous consumption was a readily accessible means of creating the appearance of economic success, which in turn was evidence of racial uplift, as African Americans were demonstrating their ability to participate in American economic life just like other Americans. African American urban dwellers understood the mood of the nation that supported advancement for all through consumption, and were ready participants. The chapter will first examine what the so-called Negro market represented to



national advertisers, what set it apart from the broader consumer market, and the way that African Americans, particularly those working in the print media, guided advertisers to take advantage of black purchasing power. It will then examine the type of advertising seen in the black press, and other newspaper content that was directed toward promoting "respectable" consumption.

While much historical attention has been paid to the African American consumer market, little attention has been directed toward the role of black newspapers in defining consumption as a respectable way of living in the postwar era. In his book, *Desegregating the Dollar*, Robert E. Weems, Jr. uses the lens of the black press and radio to focus on the way in which African Americans exercised their power as consumers through economic activism – in the 1950s most notably to end Jim Crow through the Montgomery Bus Boycott.<sup>5</sup> I will approach black economic empowerment from a different direction, using the black press to show that African Americans were exercising their economic power through consumption rather than through consumer activism to force change, to integrate more completely into American life.

Historians have examined the idea of establishing "citizenship through consumption" in the print media – not through newspapers, but through *Ebony* magazine, a popular black lifestyle magazine that was established in 1945. Andrew Wiese looks at articles in *Ebony* to show how African Americans achieved equality as citizens from the perspective of home purchases and suburban living, where they were able to express "equality in their tastes and acquisitions as consumers."<sup>6</sup> Adam Green's *Selling the Race* argues that promotion of leisure in *Ebony* replaced uplift and activism as "a point of articulation for black existence and identity."<sup>7</sup> I will argue in this chapter that, in the black press, promotion of leisure and conspicuous consumption did not

<sup>5</sup> Robert E. Weems Jr., *Desegregating the Dollar: African American Consumerism in the Twentieth Century* (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 56.

<sup>6</sup> Andrew Wiese, "'The House I Live In': Race, Class, and African American Suburban Dreams in the Postwar United States." In *African American Urban History since World War II*, ed. Kenneth L. Kusmer and Joe W. Trotter (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 167.

<sup>7</sup> Adam Green, *Selling the Race: Culture, Community, and Black Chicago, 1940-1955* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 154.

replace uplift as an articulation of identity, but that consumption was uplift presented in a new form. Consumption was the means to a high standard of living, and the respectability so attained would lead to acceptance. As sociologist E. Franklin Frazier stated in 1957, respectability came from "the external marks of a high standard of living."<sup>8</sup> Racial uplift rhetoric in the black press was subtler than in previous decades, but consumption activity was still often couched in traditional prescriptive uplift language, and it was clear that consumption was to be enjoyed for the benefit of all African Americans.<sup>9</sup> At the same time, frequent mentions in the black press of African Americans' purchasing power and their importance as a consumer market became another means of expressing black achievement.

#### Promoting the "Negro market"

For African Americans, achieving and enjoying standards of living that were equal to those enjoyed by the majority of the white population would go a long way to overcoming perceptions of African Americans as being a lower status "other." While legal equality was denied, consumption enabled African Americans to establish status and citizenship by exercising their rights through product and service choices, the pursuit of quality and respectability from being able to afford the best, and making their own decisions on what to buy. Newspapers promoted the consumer lifestyle through advertising, but more importantly through features on new products, and columns offering shopping advice to appeal to the growing middle class. The prominence of articles related to homes and home furnishings suggest that African Americans were participating in the national trend toward home ownership and suburban living. The number of articles related to fashion, domestic and overseas travel, and the automobile also

<sup>8</sup> E. Franklin Frazier, *Black Bourgeoisie: The Rise of a New Middle Class* (New York: Free Press, 1957), 80-81.

<sup>9</sup> Direct uplift messages criticizing bad public behaviour died a somewhat slow death, however, as the *Cleveland Call and Post* still carried the occasional "Do's and Don'ts" cartoon with messages such as not playing radios too loudly, or taking up unnecessary space on public transport.

suggest the availability of a degree of disposable income for non-essential purchases and leisure pursuits.

After World War II the United States government turned its attention to supporting the domestic economy by shifting war production capacity to the production of consumer goods. As described by Lizabeth Cohen, historian of the postwar U.S. consumer economy, the government was supported in its efforts by business leaders, labor unions, advertising agencies, and the mass media to persuade the American people that consumption was a civic responsibility that promised political as well as economic democracy for all. The government's claim that "you are helping to build greater security for the industries of this country" set the stage for African Americans to once again demonstrate patriotism as well as directly benefit themselves by supporting the promotion of social improvement through consumption.<sup>10</sup>

Consumption also had a political use in the postwar international struggle for hearts and minds in the developing world in the Cold War era. The availability and consumption of a vast array of goods and services showed the world that the United States was both superior to the Soviet Union economically, and a more desirable place to live.<sup>11</sup> During World War II, the plight of colonial territories held by Allied nations in Africa and Asia had been of great concern to African Americans as they equated the lack of civil rights in these territories with their own lack of civil rights at home. After the war, this affinity evolved into a concern to achieve independence and preserve democracy in these nations. As loyal citizens, African Americans and the black press supported the United States government's position when it was vying with the Soviet Union for control of the political direction of the former colonies. The black press framed this concern in consumption terms, for example by encouraging women to purchase in the name of international development, that is, to promote U.S. interests in developing countries. An article in the *Afro-American* asked women to consider the pot of tea they served to their families

<sup>10</sup> Cohen, *A Consumers' Republic*, 119.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 124.

as part of a greater venture known as "partnership marketing," in which the United States' tea industry partnered with growers in India, Ceylon, Pakistan, and other nations to purchase tea. The more tea the "conscientious housewife" purchased, the more dollars would go to "these friendly democratic countries."<sup>12</sup>

Through the 1950s the black newspapers certainly devoted much attention to civil and legal actions to gain equality in work, in housing, and in education – most importantly the landmark *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* decision in 1954 that abolished legal segregation in schools – but gains were small, and barriers persistent. The newspapers were also key agents in promoting consumption as a "quick win" in terms of racial uplift, and here the gains were more tangible. As Cohen argues, conspicuous consumption promised "social equality without requiring politically progressive means of redistributing existing wealth."<sup>13</sup> While Cohen was expressing this promise in terms of American society in general, it was particularly relevant for African Americans who were struggling against the slow pace of legal and social reform.

As postwar America focused on promoting consumption that stimulated economic growth and contributed to national wealth, so the black press recognized consumption as a vital part of its own survival. Promoting consumption represented a number of advantages for the black press, in its role in the community, and in its economic viability. The press was able to construct ideals of racial uplift by directing African American aspiration toward the improved lifestyles and respectability to be gained through the purchase of goods and services. African American participation in the consumer economy in turn encouraged advertisers to recognize this consumer segment as worthy of their attention. This created a virtuous circle of benefit for readers, who would consume newspapers to access information about new products and services, and the newspapers, who would benefit from an expanding audience and increasing advertising income.

<sup>12</sup> "You Are Helping the Government When You Shop at the Market," *Afro-American*, February 2 1952.

<sup>13</sup> Cohen, *A Consumers' Republic*, 127.

In the immediate postwar years, the purchasing power of African Americans was an unrecognized and untapped resource that needed to be exposed to encourage consumption. After decades of effort within the African American community to establish black-owned businesses, even those that had achieved great success were still limited to targeting the African American market. The white community did not patronize African American businesses, nor were African Americans invited to operate businesses targeting white consumers. This invisibility in the broader market and lack of awareness of African American habits and consumption patterns translated into a failure among national corporations to consider African Americans as potential purchasers of their products. To the extent that corporations did consider African American consumers, they assumed that they would respond to national advertising in the same way as the typical white consumer would respond, and they did not see the need to advertise in the black press.<sup>14</sup>

The time was ripe to launch a major effort to tap into this unrecognized market. African Americans acknowledged that they needed to make themselves known to national advertisers as educated, sophisticated, and wanting to enjoy a standard of living that reflected their rising incomes. By the mid 1950s, according to *Fortune* magazine, African Americans had tripled their pre-war earnings and had narrowed the black-white income gap by twenty percent. African Americans holding upper-level jobs increased by 145 percent between 1940 and 1950, and the percentage of professional or management positions held by African American men had risen from 3.5 percent in 1950 to 4.8 percent by 1956.<sup>15</sup> This figure is low considering the fact that

<sup>14</sup> "Selling the Negro Market," *Chemical Week*, September 21 1957. Box 17, Folder: Advertising Articles – Negro Market. Ben Burns Papers Series III, Sub-Series A Reaching the Negro Market - African American Consumerism (Chicago Public Library, Woodson Regional Library, Vivian G. Harsh Research Collection of Afro-American History and Literature). [Hereafter Ben Burns Papers.] Many of the articles appearing in the trade press in the 1950s, such as this one, were based on market research produced by the Johnson Publishing Co. and published in *Ebony* magazine. Article titles were often identical, but content and focus differed by publication. The *Chemical Week* article focused on the cosmetics industry.

<sup>15</sup> "Negro Market Survey," *Premium Practice*, May 1957." Folder: Advertising Articles – Negro Market. Ben Burns Papers. Stephen Tuck offers a more optimistic figure for a broader category of "middle class occupations," which he notes increased from fewer than one in six in 1950 to one in four in 1960. Tuck. *We Ain't What We Ought to Be*, 254.

African Americans constituted around ten percent of the population, but in terms of the prevalence of discrimination in hiring and general lack of opportunity, even small gains in management positions were significant and were applauded. Better educational and employment opportunities meant more African Americans had the economic wherewithal to enjoy the trappings of a conventional American lifestyle, which they embraced enthusiastically with the support of the black press. Before the 1950s there had been some interest in exploring the potential of the "Negro market." Claude Barnett had tried to promote it in the 1920s, with limited success. William B. Ziff, a businessman who established an advertising agency specializing in advertising in black newspapers, was the first white person to recognize its potential, and in 1932 he had prepared a booklet which instructed potential white advertisers on the scale and value of the market.<sup>16</sup> In the 1930s the *Afro-American* had also begun to investigate and promote the African American consumer market, and by 1945 promoters were already comparing it favourably against Canada in terms of size and value.<sup>17</sup> Early efforts to recognize the market had little impact, however, and many advertisers were unaware of its potential.

In the postwar era, much credit for advancing the African American consumer market should arguably go to John H. Johnson, founder of the Johnson Publishing Company and its flagship publication, *Ebony*, which was launched in 1945. In its early years, *Ebony* lacked both a sizeable subscriber base and stable advertising income, but Johnson devised a number of initiatives that were successful in attracting national advertisers to the magazine. This boosted *Ebony's* revenues, and did much to position the African American market as one that corporations could not afford to overlook.<sup>18</sup> In 1951, *Tide*, an advertising trade magazine, carried a cover story entitled "Selling the Negro Market," which described "the striking change that has taken place in advertisers' and agencies' attitudes toward Negro media since our last story

<sup>16</sup> Pride and Wilson, *A History of the Black Press*, 240.

<sup>17</sup> Capparell, *The Real Pepsi Challenge*, 10; Walker, *Style and Status*, 89.

<sup>18</sup> John H. Johnson, *Succeeding Against the Odds* (New York: Warner Books, Inc., 1989). See chapter 21, pp 178-182, for the approach Johnson took to advertising in the late 1940s and chapter 22, pp 183-191, for a detailed account of how Johnson attracted his first national advertiser.

(March 25, 1947)," a timeframe which coincided with Johnson's efforts.<sup>19</sup> Johnson's success as publisher of *Ebony* and his work to obtain advertising for the publication from national advertisers, as well as the considerable market research conducted by the Johnson Publishing Company, positioned him as an expert in the African American consumer market. The March 22, 1952 edition of *Business Week* also recognized Johnson's contribution to increasing the visibility of African American consumers.<sup>20</sup>

The black press highlighted these efforts to promote African American consumption capacity, framing them in terms of their benefit to the black community. The *Pittsburgh Courier* introduced the *Tide* research in an article in 1951, noting that *Courier* readers were unlikely to have read the trade publication.<sup>21</sup> It fully supported taking advantage of advertisers' new interest in the market, and encouraged readers to support those manufacturers who favoured them as consumers. "Negro consumers can do the race a tremendous service when they make the purchasing choice of name-brand goods advertised with colored publications. They want your money, pay Negroes' salaries when advertising, and have also begun to reach out for colored salesmen and demonstrators, and are lowering employment racial barriers."

Despite great enthusiasm for tapping this "new" market, not all was smooth sailing for potential advertisers. *Tide* indicated that, despite increased interest, advertisers still sometimes missed the mark, with insensitive stereotypes of African Americans, either in physical representation, in servant roles, or as comic figures. It highlighted the Amos 'n' Andy television show which was sponsored by the Blatz Brewing Co. A comic routine, Amos 'n' Andy were originally radio personalities performed by white actors who stereotyped blacks in their

<sup>19</sup> "Changing Views on the Market," *Tide*, July 20 1951. Folder: Advertising Articles – Negro Market. Ben Burns Papers.

<sup>20</sup> "Ebony: Making a New Market Pay Off," *Business Week*, March 22 1952. Box 17, Folder: Ebony Ads. Ben Burns Papers.

<sup>21</sup> Theodore W. Graham, "Who's Who in Labor: Negro Wage Earners' Purchasing Power," *Pittsburgh Courier*, August 11 1951.

routines.<sup>22</sup> The show was very popular and eventually moved to a Blatz-sponsored television slot, the white duo being replaced by black actors. The NAACP protested to Blatz, urging it to drop its sponsorship of a show that was "a gross libel on the Negro and distortion of the truth." Blatz's intention was to attract this trade, "believing, as it does, that the pursuit of the Negro as a consumer is sound business thinking." Quaker Oats had also attracted negative attention due to stereotypical promotional products such as cookie jars and salt and pepper shakers in the "mammy" image of "Aunt Jemima," its pancake mix brand, but it gradually altered the appearance of Aunt Jemima on its packaging to a more acceptable neutral persona.<sup>23</sup> Elspeth H. Brown describes the efforts of agencies supplying African American models to stop stereotypical representations of blacks. She describes an agency owner who refused to supply models for roles of "an 'Aunt Jemima' or 'Uncle Tom' type because we believe this is not a true picture of the colored people."<sup>24</sup> A 1958 article on the African American market noted that advertisers were more sensitive to the market's needs than previously: "Advertisements depicting the Negro as a dignified citizen capable of buying the best ... help garner a large share of the Negro market. The alienating old-time stereotypes are now carefully avoided."<sup>25</sup>

Once the existence of the market was recognized, advertisers needed to understand the subtle nuances of class and respectability that drove consumption in the African American community. On the nature of the market itself, the *Tide* article quoted the African American head of an advertising agency marketing department, whose comments mirrored the position taken by the black press for decades: "Occupation, education, income, standard of living and public behavior make up the standing in the community, not family background or heritage as is often

<sup>22</sup> "What Was It About Amos 'n' Andy?," *New York Times*, July 7, 1991:

<https://www.nytimes.com/1991/07/07/books/what-was-it-about-amos-n-andy.html>, accessed October 26 2018.

<sup>23</sup> "Negro Market Survey," *Premium Practice*, May 1957." Folder: Advertising Articles – Negro Market. Ben Burns Papers.

<sup>24</sup> Elspeth H. Brown, "Black Models and the Invention of the US 'Negro Market,' 1945-1960," chap. 8 in Detlev Zwick and Julien Cayla, *Inside Marketing: Practices, Ideologies, Devices*, Oxford Scholarship Online, DOI: 10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199576746.001.0001.

<sup>25</sup> Robert S. Lavine, "The Negro Market: A \$16 Billion Sales Challenge," *Dun's Review and Modern Industry*, October 1958. Box 18, Folder: Negro Market Miscellany. Ben Burns Papers.



the case in white communities." Still facing discrimination in housing purchases, black consumers were "voraciously jealous of their rights to pick and choose other products, now that they can afford the best. They 'shop' much more assiduously than do whites." This is an indication of the role that consumption played for African Americans. Consumption of visible indicators of wealth and taste was the way to present an image of respectability and an inherent understanding of quality and style. This personal representation went hand in hand with maintaining standards of decorum in public and private behavior as an indicator of class.

By the late 1950s the African American consumer market was fully established and well understood. It was, however, important to remind manufacturers that African Americans, although they had specific preferences as consumers, were no different, as citizens, from white Americans. A "Negro Market Survey" published in *Premium Practice* magazine in May 1957 described a market "of approximately 17 million English-speaking, native-born American citizens whose wants, needs and desires exactly parallel the other 90 percent of the nation's population – except for two things. It is willing to pay top prices to get top quality; it wants its business welcomed."<sup>26</sup> The article continued, "This is a proud and highly sensitive people whose prime aim is to be completely assimilated into the main stream of American life." *Premium Practice* noted the vast amount of market research that had been done by different entities, including *Ebony*, *Fortune*, African American radio stations and newspapers, African American marketing experts, and the NAACP. The article quoted John H. Johnson, who confirmed the market's importance, stating that there were fourteen U.S. cities "where it is impossible for a product to be tops in its field without Negro support."

<sup>26</sup> "Negro Market Survey," *Premium Practice*, May 1957, reprinted in *Ebony* magazine (nd). Folder: Advertising Articles – Negro Market. Ben Burns Papers.

### Advertising in the major black newspapers

Advertising content was the main distinguishing feature between newspapers in the 1950s. Newspapers were little changed from the 1940s, and featured crime, human interest, and political news, sports and social news, as well as syndicated items provided by the Associated Negro Press or the National Negro Publishers Association. Most papers also incorporated magazine sections that included photographs and in-depth feature articles on a variety of topics. Despite similarities across cities and regions, newspapers differed widely in their advertising content, sometimes in unexpected ways. These differences were identified through a comparative survey of the advertising carried in eight newspapers serving cities with large concentrations of African Americans.<sup>27</sup>

The first major difference in advertising content was found between national and city editions of the large papers such as the *Chicago Defender* and the *Pittsburgh Courier*, where there was less advertising in the national editions than in the city editions.<sup>28</sup> National circulations would suggest that the national editions would be ideal vehicles for advertising recognized consumer brands that were intended to be marketed throughout the country, but this did not appear to be the case. Through most of the 1950s, advertising in the national editions was of three main types: single-column, one- or two-inch advertisements for patent medicines or personal care items such as skin or hair preparations; slightly larger advertisements for national brands such as Vaseline petroleum jelly or Colgate toothpaste; and larger advertisements for cigarettes, liquor, and Carnation Milk, or its competitor Pet Milk. There were many pages that did not carry any advertising at all.

<sup>27</sup> Newspapers included the *Norfolk Journal and Guide*, *Afro-American*, *Pittsburgh Courier* (city and national editions), *Philadelphia Tribune*, *New York Amsterdam News*, *Cleveland Call and Post*, *Chicago Defender*, and *Los Angeles Sentinel*. Four editions per year for each year between 1950 and 1959 were examined and advertisement type noted. The ads were segmented by type and cross-compared. This was not an exhaustive, quantitative survey but a review that provided sufficient information to support the opinions expressed.

<sup>28</sup> The ProQuest Historical Newspapers™ – Black Newspapers database provides the city edition of the *Pittsburgh Courier*, and the Newspapers.com archive provides the national edition, which enabled a comparison to be made. The *Chicago Defender's* Big Weekend Edition, the only edition in the ProQuest database covering the 1950s, was the national edition, and, like the national edition of the *Pittsburgh Courier*, it too carried few advertisements.

The small volume of advertising by national brands in the national editions of the black newspapers belied claims in the marketing industry that the African American market was being fully captured by manufacturers. In 1951, *Tide* boasted that "the roster of companies now promoting to the Negro market covers just about everything that people eat, wear, or use – and it's still growing."<sup>29</sup> This was a highly optimistic claim when considered against the actual advertising appearing in black newspapers through the decade, even in the city editions that carried the highest volume of advertising.<sup>30</sup> Newspapers with strong local presences in large cities, such as the *New York Amsterdam News* and the city edition of the *Pittsburgh Courier*, carried the most advertising, but much of it was from local retail businesses. This suggests that, despite efforts to promote the black press as a vehicle for national advertisers, advertising was highly targeted to specific local markets. Local markets were, however, important for newspapers. Advertising by local retailers represented a considerable financial benefit for the newspapers, as readers were able to learn what was available in their neighbourhoods, and bought newspapers to access this information. Newspapers were also able to establish themselves as part of the local community through their identification with local businesses.

The tendency to carry advertising from local businesses was also seen in mainstream newspapers. For example, the *New York Times*, *Baltimore Sun*, and the *Los Angeles Times*, although daily newspapers, carried a similar volume and type of advertising as the black weeklies in New York, Baltimore, and Los Angeles, that is, the majority of advertising was placed by local businesses. In both black and white newspapers in New York and Baltimore, a large proportion of advertising was by fashion retailers, and in Los Angeles there was a greater volume of advertising of home appliances and groceries. One notable difference between the

<sup>29</sup> "Selling the Negro Market," *Tide*, July 20 1951. Folder: Advertising Articles – Negro Market. Ben Burns Papers.

<sup>30</sup> The *Tide* article was not incorrect, but as much of the market investigation was conducted by the Johnson Publishing Company, it is likely that the national advertising surveyed was based on that appearing in *Ebony*.

black and white newspapers overall was the much greater volume of cigarette advertising in the black newspapers.<sup>31</sup>

With the exceptions of the national editions of the *Defender* and *Courier*, there was quite a variation in advertising content among the African American newspapers, which otherwise could be expected to have a similar reader demographic, that is, literate urban populations with a degree of disposable income. While each paper carried about the same volume of advertising for patent medicines and personal care items such as hair and skin preparations, the similarities end there. The most unique paper in terms of advertising content was the *Norfolk Journal and Guide*, which differed considerably from the other papers, including its Mid-Atlantic competitor, the *Afro-American*. The *Journal and Guide* carried a moderate amount of advertising, that is, somewhere between the low volume of the national editions and the high volume of the city papers in New York and Pittsburgh. The most prevalent of the national advertisers in the *Journal and Guide* fell into two types: cigarettes and liquor, and these two products far outweighed any other product advertised in the paper. Every issue carried multiple advertisements for each of these products, sometimes, for example, two or three whiskey or bourbon advertisements on the same page. The popularity of the *Journal and Guide* with cigarette advertisers may be explained by the location of the newspaper in the main tobacco-growing region of the United States, but it does not explain the popularity of liquor advertising, and why these advertisers preferred the *Journal and Guide* over, say, the *Afro-American*, which also carried quite a few cigarette ads, but very little liquor advertising.

Advertising in the *New York Amsterdam News*, a paper which served a black population of well over one million by mid-decade, provided insight into the social classes within the African American community in the New York area. This large and varied African American population attracted a different type of advertising than that appearing in other newspapers. The

<sup>31</sup> A survey of advertising in the *New York Times*, the *Baltimore Sun*, and the *Los Angeles Times* on randomly selected dates in each year of the decade was reviewed for purposes of comparison with black newspapers in New York, Baltimore, and Los Angeles.

*Amsterdam News* carried comparatively few cigarette and liquor advertisements, but it reflected the existence of a wealthy demographic among its readers, as it included ads for the BOAC airline promoting flights to the Bahamas and the West Indies, and direct flights on TWA and United Airlines to U.S. destinations, as well as ads for services such as fur storage, cosmetic surgery, and "slenderizing salons."<sup>32</sup> Advertising also appealed to less wealthy readers, with many ads peppered with inducements such as "convenient payment plan," "no money down," "buy now, pay next year," to encourage purchases of furniture, TV sets, and jewelry. The payment plans showed that the drive to consume was well established among the less affluent. An article in *Printers' Ink* magazine in 1958 pointed out differences in conspicuous consumption among "the lower class," which it defined as "the large mass of unskilled and semi-skilled workers, most of whom are the more recent migrants from rural areas and small towns in the south."<sup>33</sup> While the article was intended as an objective description of the "Negro market" and described class distinctions within African American society for the benefit of marketers, it also revealed a nuanced view of African American values built around respectability. The article distinguished between respectable and less respectable consumption patterns, declaring that, while conspicuous consumption was more common in this lower class than others, "energetic and hard-working families rise above [low levels of education and earning capacity] to prepare their children for moving into the middle class." Those who were not "energetic and hard-working" were described as "splurging" and likely to "conform more to the traits associated with Negroes."

<sup>32</sup> Population statistics from "Negro Market Survey," *Premium Practice*, May 1957." Folder: Advertising Articles – Negro Market. Ben Burns Papers.

<sup>33</sup> Clarence L. Holte, "The Negro Market: To Profit from It, Recognize It and Service Its Needs," *Printers' Ink*, April 4 1958. Folder: Advertising Articles – Negro Market. Ben Burns Papers.



A feature of advertising in the city newspapers was the number of local retailers that advertised in each issue. In the *New York Amsterdam News*, the most prominent were Blumstein's department store and VIM electronics stores, which placed several ads in each issue. Both retailers operated multiple branches across the New York area. As this chapter's introductory quote from the press shows, the shopping column promoting television sets sold at VIM stores was an example of the virtuous circle completed by the large amount of advertising that VIM placed in the *Amsterdam News*. The papers catering to smaller African American communities in Cleveland, Philadelphia, and Los Angeles were similar in that they also carried advertisements for local businesses, but the emphasis differed between cities. The *Los Angeles Sentinel* featured several ads in each issue placed by Gold's department store.<sup>34</sup> These ads covered a range of products, but generally featured furniture and appliances, and other businesses also advertised furniture, floor coverings, and homewares. This suggests that home ownership was higher in Los Angeles than in other cities, a conclusion that is supported by the six or seven pages of real estate advertising, for both existing houses and apartments and new housing estates, in each issue. The *Sentinel* did not carry ads for women's fashion, even on the women's pages, in contrast with the white *Los Angeles Times*, which carried a great deal of fashion advertising. It is possible to speculate that this was due to a lack of desire among white fashion retailers to encourage African American customers to their businesses. That said, the *Sentinel* included ads for men's fashion (business suits), which almost never appeared in other papers. The *Sentinel* also carried quite a few liquor ads, but almost no cigarette advertising. In any case, it appeared that specific regional characteristics and the nature of local business influenced the type of advertising that appeared in the black newspapers, even while there was little regional difference in other content.

<sup>34</sup> "Are You Overlooking the Growing Negro Market?" *Electrical Merchandising*, May 1951. Folder: Advertising Articles – Negro Market. Ben Burns Papers. The article named Gold's department store in Chicago as a store that employed black salesmen "to attract Negro trade."







Advertisements for local supermarkets and grocery stores were common in the black press, and these advertisements represented a considerable financial benefit for the newspapers.<sup>35</sup> Each of the city papers carried supermarket advertisements, but these were especially prominent in the *Cleveland Call and Post*, which carried full-page ads from the Savmor store in almost every edition, as well ads placed by other grocers. The *Call and Post* also included a large proportion of advertising for furniture and household appliances, and real estate ads, suggesting that home ownership was high in the Cleveland area. The *Call and Post* included fewer cigarette or liquor ads than the *Journal and Guide* and *Afro-American*, but it carried a higher ratio of "spiritual readings" and "luck" advertising than the other papers. Possibly it had to rely on these traditional mainstays of the black press as the paper appeared to attract less advertising from the national cigarette and liquor brands.

This overview of advertising content reveals that through the 1950s there was still little regular advertising by national brands other than cigarettes and whiskey, and the brands such as Colgate and Carnation Milk mentioned above. Much of the advertising for nationally-known TV and home appliance brands such as G.E., Westinghouse, or Admiral, were placed in the context of local retailers who were offering these products. While Chevrolet, Ford, and Dodge placed large ads in some of the papers, many of the car advertisements were placed by local dealers offering these models. A full range of consumer products was available for purchase, but it appeared that national brands did not consider the black press a key outlet for advertising, despite efforts to convey the importance and value of the African American market and the wide circulations the newspapers enjoyed. In an article announcing the progress of its daily edition, launched in 1956, the *Chicago Defender* explained that many advertisers had told the *Defender* that they would advertise in the paper if it were a daily paper, as it was "a matter of policy" not

<sup>35</sup> Joseph D. Bibb, "Potential Market," *Pittsburgh Courier*, May 27 1950. The article quoted Grocery Manufacturers Sales Executives, who recognized newspapers as "the number one medium of advertisement."

to advertise in weekly papers.<sup>36</sup> Once the daily paper was launched, the *Defender* again struggled to attract advertisers, who this time claimed a policy of not advertising in papers with less than a five-year publishing history. The *Defender* put it down to "the same discrimination that victimizes Negroes in general."

Appealing to the African American consumer meant, for the advertiser, designing advertising that acknowledged African American ideals of affluence, status, and respectability. Visual images in advertisements fell into several broad categories: those that featured illustrations of the products themselves; advertisements that featured people in cartoon form; "real" people; and models. The first two categories were the easiest for advertisers to navigate, as they were generic and could be used without concern for racial or class classification. Cigarette advertisements used all forms of advertising, from illustrations of the pack to those by the Lucky Strike brand that presented well-known black personalities, or sometimes ordinary African Americans in regular (white collar) jobs, who favoured the Lucky Strike brand over others.

Advertisements that showed real African American families in their home environments invited affinity with the product by affirming ideals of respectable family life. This method was adopted by Carnation Milk, which featured African American "healthy babies" raised on Carnation, and Pet Milk, whose advertisements tended to depict middle-class African American families. A 1951 ad for Pet Milk appearing in the *Afro-American* featured a family in Memphis. The product itself was less important in the advertisement than the subtle (and not so subtle) indications of class and status that were included in the description of Mr. and Mrs. R. Earl Williams and their three children. A former Navy photographer, Mr. Williams was now a photography instructor. Mrs. Williams was "the daughter of the head of the Musical Department at Moyne College." The family was pictured in their living room, with the father seated and the mother leaning over the chair as their daughter read to them and her two brothers. The family

<sup>36</sup> "New Daily Meets Challenge," *Chicago Defender*, May 10 1958.

was dressed formally, and even the boys wore shirts and ties. Another picture showed the children enjoying an after-school snack, and the caption noted that they had spent their day at Emmanuel Episcopal Kindergarten and the Porter School.<sup>37</sup>

Advertisements featuring African Americans also depicted them as sophisticated and affluent, and enjoying their leisure time. Knickerbocker Beer ads, for example, consistently showed African American couples or groups enjoying beer in luxurious surroundings such as at parties in well-appointed homes, or in more casual situations such as barbecuing on a spacious deck. In all cases the men wore suits and ties, and the women wore dresses. It was difficult to find any ads where women were not wearing pearls, or the men suits and ties, no matter what the product. As Malia McAndrew argues in her study of African American modeling agencies in the postwar era, use of African American models in advertising "reinforced, rather than challenged" middle-class ideals of proper behaviour.<sup>38</sup>

Modeling agencies and advertisers also contributed to developing a public perception of African American women as sophisticated, elegant, and at home in affluent surroundings. The agencies took up the work of the women's club movement in previous decades in establishing an aura of respectability around black womanhood. Barbara Watson, African American owner of the Barbara Watson Model Agency, the largest agency employing African American models, stated that she had "worked hard to bring out the finest in womanhood and lend complete dignity to the [modelling] profession."<sup>39</sup>

It appeared that advertisers acknowledged a connection between status and skin colour in their choice of African American models, especially when placing products in aspirational surroundings. African American models, both men and women, were often light-skinned,

<sup>37</sup> It was customary in the press to name schools as indications of status. In this case the ad appears to indicate that the children were attending socially acceptable institutions. While there is no information available about the Porter School, membership in the Episcopal church was an upper-class indicator, so naming the associated kindergarten would convey social cachet.

<sup>38</sup> Malia McAndrew, "Selling Black Beauty: African American Modeling Agencies and Charm Schools in Postwar America." *OA Magazine of History* 24, no. 1 (2010).

<sup>39</sup> "Judge's Daughter Has Idea, Makes It Work," *Chicago Defender*, February 20 1954.

sometimes to the point where it was difficult to determine their race. As discussed in previous chapters, the relationship between status and skin colour and hair type had historical precedent that was embedded in African American consciousness, but was also influenced by mainstream culture. The apparent preference for light-skinned models is confirmed by Barbara Watson. In an article in the *New York Amsterdam News*, Watson explained that after World War II beauty trends were influenced by movies and, for African Americans, stars such as Lena Horne and Dorothy Dandridge (both light skinned) as well as make-up and hairstyling trends coming out of Hollywood. The trends in fashion, hairstyles, and personal adornment that African Americans adopted through the first six decades of the twentieth century referenced mainstream culture, but also a unique *American-African* ideal which was neither African nor white, but was based on what was considered attractive within their own society.<sup>40</sup> African Americans were race-conscious and proud, and resented accusations of "trying to be white," but while they had long held a strong historical and cultural interest in Ethiopia and Africa, this did not translate into the adoption of African cultural symbols such as dress and hairstyles until the mid-1960s.<sup>41</sup> It is in this context that we can understand the idealized images that were meant to convey status, affluence, and respectability in advertising directed to the African American consumer through the 1950s.

### Promoting the consumer market in newspapers

Newspapers continued to be the main source of information that concerned African Americans, and as such were in a position to influence their readers through content that

<sup>40</sup> Barbara M. Watson, "Three Eras of Beauty: Forty-Five Year Metamorphosis of Negro Beauties Undergoes a Change of Charm and Color Standards," *New York Amsterdam News*, June 19 1954.

<sup>41</sup> As discussed in Chapter 3, the Madam C.J. Walker and Poro cosmetics companies, while manufacturing products that lightened the skin and straightened the hair, were never advertised as such, but were promoted for their benefits in improving appearance for the sake of health and well-being. See also Robert E. Weems Jr., "Consumerism and the Construction of Black Female Identity," in *The Gender and Consumer Culture Reader*, ed. Jennifer Scanlon (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 169. Weems summarizes literature exploring the use of products to lighten the skin and straighten the hair, to argue that such use did not represent an attempt to "pass as white" but to embrace what was considered attractive in African American terms.

complemented the advertisements. While national advertisers were not directing a great deal of advertising toward the black newspapers, the papers themselves were enthusiastic promoters of the consumer lifestyle through feature articles. Direct promotion of particular products through features and regular columns enabled the newspapers to construct an ideal of upward mobility and success by guiding the way people consumed. The newspapers offered advice on shopping, products, and household finance to ensure that "correct" consumption would lead to both improved standards of living and quality of life. For the newspapers, active promotion of consumption, and the demonstration of their ability to influence their audience, brought the additional potential benefit of attracting advertisers.

The *Chicago Defender* was heavily involved in the promotion of consumption that extended beyond its pages. As the sponsor of a large and well-attended annual three-day Home Services Exposition in Chicago, it effectively combined the promotion of the African American market to advertisers and the promotion of consumption to visitors. The paper promoted the Exposition and advocated consumption as a means of racial uplift. In announcing the 1950 Exposition, it expressed its role in hosting the event as one of its public service activities.<sup>42</sup> It stated that the "duty and function of a newspaper is to devote itself to a broad program whose objective is community improvement." The event would bring in seventy-five advertisers to host exhibits "displaying all types and kinds of food, merchandise, furniture, labor-saving devices and other equipment designed for better, more comfortable living." Prizes worth \$1,500 were to be offered to visitors, who were expected to number sixty thousand. The article reminded readers that African Americans spent over six billion dollars annually on consumer goods and services, and urged them to "make YOUR IMPACT on this market."

Newspapers also took advantage of these public consumption events to reinforce class distinctions, images of respectability, and the notion of doing the right thing to get ahead. An

<sup>42</sup> Albert Barnett, "Defender Ready for Annual Home Service Exposition," *Chicago Defender*, September 30 1950. The article listed five public service events the paper hosted each year, among which was the annual Bud Billiken charity parade and picnic.

article on the 48th Annual Chicago Automobile Show in 1956 included information on the popularity of the show and the twenty new-car models on display.<sup>43</sup> As well as noting progress in employment opportunities that enabled car purchases, the article gave subtle indications of class, respectability, and correct purchasing behaviour. The reporter described a number of potential customers at the show, and implied that they were buying the cars that they could afford. One customer was "a well-mannered, conservatively dressed" mechanic who worked at a Ford assembly plant. The man "had saved his money so he could trade in his 1954 Ford for a 1956 model." Another purchaser who was considering a \$10,000 Continental was "a wealthy insurance executive." When describing a woman purchaser, the article reverted to gender stereotype, for although the article noted that the customer was "an attractive woman beauty shop owner," her purchase appeared to be determined by her love of the "two-tone orchid coloring in a Custom Royal."

African American women were an important segment of the overall black consumer market, and their consumption patterns needed to be taken into consideration. A 1959 survey by the Johnson Publishing Company found that African American women were more likely to be involved in family economic decisions than white women in the equivalent income bracket. These decisions extended to housing, vacations, and to insurance purchases.<sup>44</sup> The survey noted that 42 percent of married African American women worked, a figure that was one-and-a-half times that of white women in the equivalent income group. The survey claimed that women worked, not out of economic necessity, but to supplement family income to achieve higher living standards. The Johnson Publishing Company survey, and statistics presented in other publications, found that African American per capita consumption of many products was higher than that of the white population, particularly for clothing, food, and furnishings.<sup>45</sup> African

<sup>43</sup> "A Reporter Visits the 48th Annual Chicago Automobile Show," *Chicago Defender*, January 21 1956.

<sup>44</sup> Johnson Publishing Co., "Differential Factors in the Negro Market, November 5 1959." Box 17, Folder: Ebony Ads. Ben Burns Papers.

<sup>45</sup> "Selling the Negro Market: A Manual for Salesmen." Folder: Ebony Ads. Ben Burns Papers.

American spending on home furnishings exceeded that of whites at the same income level by up to 236 percent.<sup>46</sup> These statistics are most likely a reflection of the traditional importance of personal presentation and a comfortably furnished home as indicators of affluence and respectability in the black community. As to women being more directly involved in purchase decisions, the various surveys did not speculate on the reasons why this was so, but the fact that many women were contributing to family finances based on the desire to improve living standards suggests that they were, as a result, more likely to decide where their income was directed. An opinion piece in the *Pittsburgh Courier* in 1952 confirmed women's role in purchasing.<sup>47</sup> The article declared that women "are the controlling factors when simple purchases are to be made and they are the 'courts of last resorts' when final opinion is to be reached on capital expenditures. The women are the buyers."

African American consumers were highly sensitive to being considered targets of poor merchandise, and refused apparently cheap or shoddy products in favour of quality and well-known brands. Market surveys throughout the decade emphasized to potential advertisers African Americans' desire for quality and their firm rejection of any attempt to offer them products that appeared to be poor quality.<sup>48</sup> The *Pittsburgh Courier* article quoted above touched on the reason for this, as women were well aware that poor quality, overpriced goods were often "palmed off on them in their home districts." The writer's point was to urge women to organize as a group to fight discrimination in the form of "shoddy merchandise [that] is imposed on colored people at extortionate prices because the housewives lacked the strength of unity." In addition to the objection to being sold poor quality products, many African Americans were

<sup>46</sup> "How the Rate of Spending by Negro Families For Furniture Exceeds That of the General Market." Box 17, Folder: Advertising Articles – Negro Market. Ben Burns Papers.

<sup>47</sup> Joseph D. Bibb, "The Women Buy: Organized Groups of Women Buyers Would Stimulate Business," *Pittsburgh Courier*, January 5 1952. Bibb, a former editor of the *Chicago Whip*, which promoted consumer activism, led the "Don't buy where you can't work" campaign in Chicago in 1929. See finding aid of the Black Metropolis Research Consortium, Library of the University of Chicago website:

<https://www.lib.uchicago.edu/bmrc/view.php?eadid=BMRC.CHM.BIBB.SURVEY>, accessed October 4 2018.

<sup>48</sup> See the previous note for examples of different market surveys that offered this advice.

familiar with and appreciated high quality products through their work in service jobs that catered to wealthy whites, as they were required to purchase, serve, or otherwise handle these products in their daily lives.<sup>49</sup>

Advertising in newspapers appeared on most pages, with the exception of the front page and editorial pages, but there tended to be fewer advertisements on the women's pages, which seems counterintuitive in light of the importance of appealing to women readers that was revealed in the Johnson Publishing Company survey. The women's pages were, however, the main source of information on new products and trends, in the form of dedicated shopping columns, or feature articles on home decoration, fashion, or new products and services. The articles also subtly defined fashion and a form of consumption that was directed toward a comfortable home environment and well-cared-for families – in other words, they conveyed implicit standards of respectability. Between 1948 and 1956, the *New York Amsterdam News* carried a weekly Shopping Corner column by Gwendolyn Barclay. The columns were written in a familiar, conversational style, and featured products and services available in the New York area. Products ranged from groceries at Safeway supermarket to aspirational items such as home movie projectors and fur coats. Featured home furnishings included ten-piece living room sets, hand-cut, imported crystal chandeliers, and Wilton broadloom carpets. The columns included the stores offering the items, and the prices. Many of the columns emphasized sale items. Acknowledging the desire to purchase quality, sale price details always included reassurances that the products were "the very best for less money." National brand names were emphasized in the case of television sets and refrigerators, and fashion items included information that the garments were made from French or Italian fabrics.

The women's pages were important in racial uplift terms, through their effort to guide readers toward responsible consumption and a desire for the best quality, but the shopping

<sup>49</sup> "Negro Family is Better Market for Luxuries Than White with Same Income, Says Study," *Advertising Age*, March 16 1959. Box 19, Folder 19:8. Ben Burns Papers.



information also provided a service by including more practical information. This ranged from information on insurance policies to advice on personal appearance and grooming: "the knowledge that your hair looks perfectly groomed gives you poise and confidence."<sup>50</sup> Other opportunities for self-improvement included courses at language schools, as knowledge of a foreign language was "one of the signs of a high level of culture and intelligence."<sup>51</sup> Advice also included opportunities for job training, such as a four-week course in operating IBM electric accounting machines, which could lead to a job paying between \$50 and \$75 a week.<sup>52</sup> This was valuable information where women's incomes were important for maintaining family lifestyles.

Newspaper features reflected the role of women as the main purchasers for the family, even their influence in the purchase of cars. A "Women Behind the Wheel" column appeared in the women's section of the *Pittsburgh Courier* between October 1954 and March 1956, to specifically appeal to women's interest in driving and cars. The columnist, Mary Lou Chapman, was introduced as a native of Detroit who had worked with automobile stylists, designers, and engineers at the Chrysler Corporation. The first column stressed the relationship between women and the automobile, noting that women's fashion was influencing car design, resulting in interiors that were becoming more colorful and glamorous.<sup>53</sup> Women's desire for convenience and effortless operation of "mechanical gadgets" was also behind the introduction of features such as power steering, adjustable seating, and power windows. Women had very definite ideas on colour and design, but now "everyone [has] an equally wide choice when we go to pick out our favorite means of transportation."<sup>54</sup> A later column discussed changes in shopping habits due to the greater reliance on the automobile, where downtown stores were patronized less in favour of new suburban shopping centres with plenty of parking.<sup>55</sup> The article quoted an architect in the

<sup>50</sup> "Shopping Corner," *New York Amsterdam News*, September 19 1953.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> "Shopping Corner," *New York Amsterdam News*, September 20 1952.

<sup>53</sup> "Women Behind the Wheel," *Pittsburgh Courier*, October 2 1954.

<sup>54</sup> "Women Behind the Wheel," *Pittsburgh Courier*, January 8 1955.

<sup>55</sup> "Women Behind the Wheel," *Pittsburgh Courier*, January 28 1956.

field, who stated: "The modern shopping center will become a social, cultural and recreational center in addition to shopping." The article noted that there were more than 200 shopping centres under construction across the country, and "the planned shopping area is here to stay."

Home ownership, and the accompanying growth of new suburban developments, was one of the government's main means of encouraging Americans to participate in expanding the postwar economy, and African Americans were keen to acquire this symbol of middle-class success. Lizabeth Cohen describes housing as "the bedrock of the postwar consumption economy."<sup>56</sup> A new home was the focus of consumer spending, as it needed to be filled with furniture and appliances, was generally located in a suburban area that required a car, and was in itself a huge investment for the purchaser. So successful was this push that one quarter of homes existing in 1960 had been built in the 1950s.<sup>57</sup>

For African Americans, the ideal of home ownership expressed by Booker T. Washington at the turn of the twentieth century was still an essential part of racial uplift in the 1950s. The black press promoted home ownership in its material form, through advertisements of attractive new apartment complexes and housing estates, but the ultimate uplift objective was sometimes expressed directly. In an article in the *Chicago Defender* in October 1950, Mary McLeod Bethune praised the opening of the new Parkway Gardens housing complex in Chicago, where less affluent householders "would be buying as they rent."<sup>58</sup> She reiterated the importance of home ownership as an example of racial uplift: "We have learned to recognize the mutual ownership of housing as an important forward step – much more important, possibly, as a measure of group advancement, than the occasional acquisition of princely mansions by individuals."

<sup>56</sup> Cohen, *A Consumers' Republic*, 122.

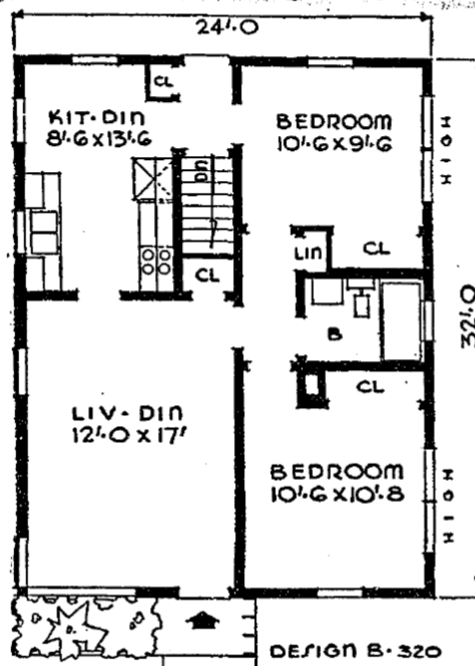
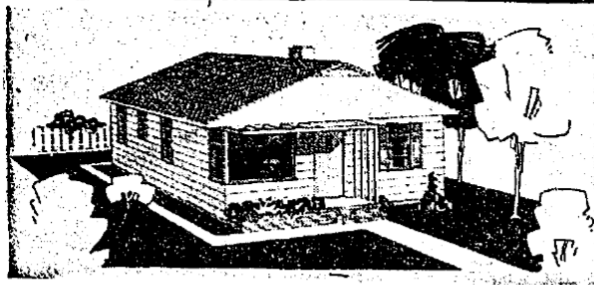
<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 122-3.

<sup>58</sup> "Chicago's Parkway Gardens Symbol of Growing Economic Unity and Strength," *Chicago Defender*, October 28 1950.

Newspapers expressed regional differences in the emphasis given to real estate in each paper, as they did with other advertising content. The volume of real estate advertising in each newspaper would have reflected both the housing stock in each region, and the degree of discrimination applied in being able to purchase a home. As stated above, the *Los Angeles Sentinel* carried a large volume of real estate advertising, including classified ads, but also pages of listings by individual real estate agents, suggesting a thriving market. The *New York Amsterdam News* carried some advertisements for housing estates in New Jersey and on Long Island, with illustrations of new homes, but most of the real estate was advertised in the classified ads pages. The *Norfolk Journal and Guide* was the most unusual in that it included real estate information as part of its regular content, as more of a public service than as advertising. Throughout the paper's history, owner-editor P.B. Young took a strong interest in housing, particularly in slum clearance and in improving housing conditions, testified by the many articles on the subject that appeared in the paper.<sup>59</sup> Many editions of the *Journal and Guide* through the 1950s carried features on new homes, showing the front elevation, the floorplan, and detailed descriptions of the layout and features. As the decade progressed, the featured houses grew from modest two-bedroom plans to three-bedroom and sometimes four-bedroom homes with larger floor areas and more elaborate external designs, suggesting rising incomes among Norfolk's African American population, as well as an environment in which home purchase was relatively free from discriminatory practices.

<sup>59</sup> Suggs, *P.B. Young Newspaperman*, 126-28. This section refers to Young's efforts to improve housing during the war years, but Suggs notes Young's strong personal interest and involvement in improving housing in the Norfolk area throughout his career with the paper.

## A HOME TO LIVE IN



DESIGN B-320

An ideal plan for a small lot where space does not permit a front drive-in and where deliveries are made from the rear.

There is a full basement, living room, combination kitchen-dinette, two bedrooms and bath. Closet space consists of two coat closets, linen cabinet in the hall, and wardrobe closets in the bedrooms.

A connecting door between kitchen and bedroom is convenient when using the room as workroom or nursery.

Floor area is 768 square feet and cubage is 14,592 cubic feet. Exterior finish is siding with planter, picture window and covered entrance.

For free detailed information about type of construction, blueprints, room and closet sizes, etc., address the home editor of this newspaper and refer to Design B-320.

Home Editor, Journal & Guide  
Norfolk, Va., P. O. Box 209

Please send me more information without obligation, about the plan features and the type of construction used in Design No. \_\_\_\_\_ as pictured in the Journal and Guide.

NAME \_\_\_\_\_

ADDRESS \_\_\_\_\_

CITY \_\_\_\_\_ State \_\_\_\_\_

(Paste on Postal Card)

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Figure 15: A home featured in the Norfolk Journal and Guide, February 27, 1954.

The increased availability of homes and their greater affordability for African Americans signaled an improvement and greater choice for people of all social classes who were keen to own their own homes, and for those who wished to adopt a suburban lifestyle. As African American incomes rose through the 1950s, more people were in a position to afford to purchase a home, and this trend was evident early in the decade. Statistics in the July 1951 edition of *Tide* indicated that 34 percent of black city dwellers owned their own homes, and in the first two months of 1950 the Federal Housing Authority approved \$85 million in mortgages for African American home buyers.<sup>60</sup> This promising situation was, however, not without its impediments to upward mobility. Middle-class home buyers often faced opposition from white residents when trying to buy in predominantly white suburbs, and many were unable to obtain home loans through inherent discriminatory practices in FHA policy. Lizabeth Cohen describes structural impediments to borrowing that were implemented by the FHA, which assigned scores to neighbourhoods to determine the amount of mortgage lending offered to applicants. Mixed-race neighbourhoods scored lower than all-white, wealthier neighbourhoods, and thus encouraged de facto segregation, as the system effectively disqualified potential buyers from obtaining mortgages on properties in the latter areas.<sup>61</sup> In 1948 the government had abolished restrictive covenants that allowed the exclusion of non-whites and Jews from certain neighbourhoods, but local communities and compliant real estate agents found ways around the law to prevent integration, for fear that property values would decline.<sup>62</sup>

Despite these impediments, and reports in the black press of individual acts of violence directed at African American families attempting to integrate white neighbourhoods, the press

<sup>60</sup> Wiese, "The House I Live In," 162-3. Wiese quotes surveys in the late 1940s that showed that up to fifty percent of veterans in major cities in the North and South hoped to buy or build their own home within the next twelve months. A survey in 1948 showed that three quarters of middle-income families in New York wanted to move to suburban areas.

<sup>61</sup> Cohen, *A Consumers' Republic*, 214.

<sup>62</sup> E. Franklin Frazier, *The Negro in the United States* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1957), 261. Frazier expressed some optimism that the situation would improve when more housing became available.

was keen to acknowledge positive developments in housing.<sup>63</sup> Their reporting also reflected differences in degrees of acceptance of spatial integration between cities, with the Mid-Atlantic cities appearing to be less restrictive. In 1953 the *Pittsburgh Courier* reported both increases in home ownership and the expansion of the "middle income group of Negroes" that had created a new market for private housing.<sup>64</sup> Builders were becoming more interested in "satisfying the desire of ambitious and thrifty Negroes for first-class homes." The article also noted a positive trickle-down effect: "The successful experience of investors in homes for middle-income colored folk has made it easier to break down barriers for the less well-circumstanced." In 1957 the *Philadelphia Tribune* noted the impact of increased job opportunities in encouraging home purchases, and "an increase of 350 percent in Negro home ownership during a ten-year period."<sup>65</sup> It praised Philadelphians in general, saying that "the residents have exemplified the true spirit of democracy, through their acceptance of equal housing opportunities." The paper also noted that the areas in which African Americans had purchased homes "had retained or increased in economic and social value."

Newspapers promoted travel as another area where African Americans were able to spend their accumulated wealth, and, like housing, travel was an area where African Americans were determined to take full advantage of their economic power. The Johnson Publishing Company continued to conduct research and publish its findings on African American consumption throughout the decade, and a 1961 survey confirmed an established desire to travel, and noted that when additional income was received, the second-top priority, after spending on home furnishings, was a trip abroad.<sup>66</sup> As advertising in the *New York Amsterdam News* showed, there was a market for air travel. The *Afro-American* confirmed the popularity of overseas travel

<sup>63</sup> One widely reported event concerned attempts in 1951 to integrate the all-white Cicero area of Chicago, and subsequent riots.

<sup>64</sup> "Untapped Housing Market," *Pittsburgh Courier*, January 3 1953.

<sup>65</sup> "Better Jobs Result in Increase in Negro Home Owners," *Philadelphia Tribune*, October 29 1957.

<sup>66</sup> Johnson Publishing Co., "Patterns of Negro Expenditures in Big City Markets." Box 17, Folder: Ebony Ads. Ben Burns Papers.

in an article in early 1951, stating that European travel was now "a common thing."<sup>67</sup> Most of the 1,200 African American visitors to Europe in 1950 were tourists who spent an average of five days in Paris, and visited two other countries, one of which was usually England. The *Amsterdam News* focused on the great increase in visitors to Canada and the West Indies.<sup>68</sup> Interest in the latter destination was the result of increased publicity, and "the knowledge that first class accommodations, lack of racial discrimination, and ease of accessibility are sure fire guarantees of a perfect vacation."

Newspapers had always carried advertising for hotels, and many advertised train, and later, bus travel options, but by the 1950s travel had become such an important recreational activity that newspapers began to include dedicated travel columns offering a wealth of information on destinations. They also offered advice in dealing with Jim Crow when away from home. The *Chicago Defender* carried regular Tips for Travelers, and Travel Guide columns by Fred Avendorph.<sup>69</sup> Avendorph did "much missionary work" among travel companies to have them to commit to the African American travel market. His columns included overviews of domestic destinations such as Yellowstone national park, international destinations such as the Caribbean, South America, and Canada, as well as detailed information on international cruises, including shipping lines, ports of call, destinations, and costs. He also described his own travel experience in Haiti, providing points of interest, hotel recommendations, and available activities. In other columns he provided education and advice, such as the benefits of group travel and of using a travel agent. Advice to use a travel agent inferred that, as his own travel agency had good

<sup>67</sup> Ollie Stewart, "Trip to Europe Became a Common Thing in 1950," *Baltimore Afro-American*, January 6 1951; "France Holds Own as Chief Tourist Spot," *New York Amsterdam News*, February 3 1951.

<sup>68</sup> Sherman M. Kendall, "Prospects Good for '51 Travel," *New York Amsterdam News*, January 6 1951.

<sup>69</sup> "Roi Ottley Says: Travel Agency," *Chicago Defender*, January 21 1956. Fred W. Avendorph was the son of Julius Avendorph, the *Defender's* first society editor. Formerly assistant road manager for Duke Ellington, he was an experienced traveler who opened his own travel agency in 1956.

relationships with booking managers at the major hotels, it was unlikely that a "confirmed" reservation would be denied upon arrival of the guest.<sup>70</sup>

Road travel in the United States was problematic for African Americans, who were likely to face prejudice and discrimination that they were not accustomed to in their home regions. Avendorph introduced the *Travel Guide*, a booklet prepared by a Chicago insurance broker and president of the Tourist Motor Club to mitigate these problems.<sup>71</sup> Travel by car offered freedom of movement unavailable through bus or train travel, but "for the Negro tourist, the fun of touring the country can result in pleasure becoming misery before 500 miles have been covered." The *Travel Guide* was prepared to "avoid unpleasant situations." Acknowledging that "racial discrimination is yet a characteristic feature of the American scene," it helped avoid "personal discomfort by listing scrupulously the public places of accommodations where members of our minority groups may be received with dignity, courtesy and warmth." Possibly with the expectation of encountering discrimination on the road, the *Guide* also contained information on the civil rights codes of various states, and the recourse open to those who experienced discrimination.

The *Travel Guide* was not the only publication available to the motorist. Cotten Seiler's study of road travel in the United States in the twentieth century discusses several travel guides that were published in the 1940s and 1950s for the benefit of the African American traveler. One of the most popular was *The Negro Motorist Green Book*, which was sponsored by, among others, the *Cleveland Call and Post*. Road travel was an important part of vacation activity, which Seiler described as "an escape from Jim Crow: upward through socioeconomic strata and outward across geographical space."<sup>72</sup> Mirroring trends in advertising directed at African

<sup>70</sup> There is much anecdotal evidence in the recollections of African American travelers, where hotel clerks were unable to locate reservations, or hotels were "fully booked" when an African American guest arrived with a prior reservation.

<sup>71</sup> Fred Avendorph, "Travel Guide Adds Fun to Trip by Automobile," *Chicago Defender*, July 12 1958.

<sup>72</sup> Cotten Seiler, "'So That We as a Race Might Have Something Authentic to Travel By:' African American Automobility and Cold-War Liberalism," *American Quarterly* 58, no. 4 (2006).



Americans, Seiler noted that the cover illustrations on the *Green Book* and *Travel Guide* depicted African Americans as upwardly mobile, enthusiastic travelers. The covers of the *Travel Guide* in particular featured obviously affluent leisure travelers – almost always light-skinned women – posing with props such as golf clubs, projecting "images of the good life through consumption."<sup>73</sup>



Figure 16: Front cover of *Travel Guide* magazine, 1952; [nypl.digitalcollections](http://nypl.digitalcollections.org).

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

### The *Black Bourgeoisie* backlash

Newspapers and their reading public had enthusiastically embraced consumption in the postwar era, and while many people were enjoying unprecedentedly high standards of living as a result, this new marker of success raised concerns within some quarters of African American society. One notable African American touched a nerve within the black community when he questioned the value to society of conspicuous consumption. In 1957, sociologist E. Franklin Frazier published *Black Bourgeoisie: The Rise of a New Middle Class*, a book that combined a social history of the African American and a strong critique of the modern "middle class" lifestyle built around conspicuous consumption. Tracing the history of black urbanization, he noted the gradual change in marks of status within black society following migration to the North, where the money one was able to earn replaced white ancestry and genteel behaviour as class indicators. He acknowledged that this new middle class was a reflection of American modes of behavior and American values, but that these values had caused the black middle class to distance itself from the "Negro world" even when it was not accepted within the white world.<sup>74</sup> He concluded that middle- and upper-class African Americans bore an inferiority complex because of this lack of acceptance, and had created a shallow social scene based on a "world of make believe" to compensate.<sup>75</sup>

<sup>74</sup> Frazier, *Black Bourgeoisie: The Rise of a New Middle Class*, 223-4.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid, 24-5.



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Figure 17: Afro-American, June 7 1952.

This cartoon from 1952 showed that African Americans were able to laugh at themselves and their supposed obsession with consumption, but Frazier's commentary could not be dismissed so easily. The book attracted much attention and controversy, for while middle-class African Americans were accustomed to criticism and negativity from the white community, or from individuals with a particular agenda, such as Marcus Garvey, they were less accustomed to unrestrained criticism from a middle-class intellectual who was ostensibly one of their own.

*Black Bourgeoisie* sent waves of indignation through the black community that were relayed and amplified in the black press. Newspapers reacted to the controversy the book generated with opinions ranging from the flippant aside to the serious analysis. One writer summed up the book's main point: "*Black Bourgeoisie* manhandles Negro society, its press and

business world for its lack of culture and deep-seated inferiority complex."<sup>76</sup> Another noted the "shellacking" of Negro society, and the anger at Frazier that the book had stirred, and reminded "our belabored middle class folks that murder is still illegal."<sup>77</sup> An article by Louis Martin in the *Chicago Defender* included many quotations from the book, without editorial comment except to say that the book deserved a wide audience but it was not as "scientific" as might be expected.<sup>78</sup> He did, however, defend the black press against Frazier's criticism of it as pandering to black society's sense of self-importance and its "make believe" lives. Martin did not deny Frazier's accusations of exaggerations about black society in the press, but justified them as typical of a special-interest medium writing "for those whose interests are ignored in the general press."

One article stood out from the rest as a dispassionate analysis that considered the motive behind the book.<sup>79</sup> Lester Granger, writing in the *New York Amsterdam News*, acknowledged that Frazier "has a considerable reputation as a social scientist," but that he also had a "saturnine sense of humor" that he directed at students and lecture audiences, whom he enjoyed watching "squirm under the acid of his caustic remarks." Granger concluded that Frazier "must have decided to indulge his sense of humor instead of employing his scientist's training." He concluded that, although the book was presented as a serious study, it was a satire on prevalent attitudes and of a particular group. He criticized the book for making assumptions without verification, and drawing scientific conclusions from hearsay. Frazier, the scientist, "committed the unforgiveable crime of dealing in stereotypes."

The discussion of the book continued over several weeks in the *Pittsburgh Courier*. In his column, "Behind the Headlines!" Managing Editor Robert M. Ratcliffe encouraged people to read the book "if you don't mind being cussed out, belittled, ridiculed and lambasted all at the same time." He suggested that the first impression from reading the book was a desire to "tear

<sup>76</sup> Dan Bisley, "Dan Bisley's Back Door Stuff," *New York Amsterdam News*, April 13 1957.

<sup>77</sup> Jesse H. Walker, "About People and Things," *New York Amsterdam News*, April 13 1957.

<sup>78</sup> Louis Martin, "Dope and Data," *Chicago Defender*, June 29 1957.

<sup>79</sup> Lester Granger, "Manhattan and Beyond," *New York Amsterdam News*, July 27 1957.

into Frazier and give him a verbal drubbing" but "the more you read, the more you realize that his facts are pretty straight." He also pointed out that most readers probably would not think that Frazier was talking about them, but about "those other Negroes who live down the street." Letters received from readers in response to the column expressed exactly these sentiments. One wrote, "What's the matter with the guy? Does he have a chip on his shoulder? Doesn't he like being a Negro?" Another wrote: "He really knows Negroes and I agree with everything he wrote in that book. You should see my neighbors. Just like the folks Dr. Frazier wrote about."

Despite Frazier's accusations that "middle class" lives had no content or significance, the newspapers' society columns continued to include news of activities that had intellectual content and showed a concern for racial uplift. The *Cleveland Call and Post* listed a number of Greek society conventions being held around the country over the summer of 1958, including one for the Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, to be held in Washington, DC.<sup>80</sup> Some of the convention events were no doubt those that Frazier would have considered frivolous, such as a fashion luncheon, but others included a concert recital, a panel discussion on "Democracy and the College Community," a symposium on "Womanpower," and a luncheon discussion on the "Responsibilities of the Black Bourgeoisie." These themes attested to women's interest in intellectual discussion and the future of the African American community. The luncheon discussion event was in fact an address to the Sorority by Dr. Frazier. The address was reported widely in the black press, which relayed some of his remarks, including that it was the responsibility of African Americans to lay an intellectual foundation now that "white America is beginning to take Negroes seriously." Frazier also acknowledged that "the saving grace of the upper class was its genuine respect for knowledge."<sup>81</sup> His attendance at the event and his desire

<sup>80</sup> Marion H. Mims, "August Means Packing for Convention-Vacation Trip," *Cleveland Call and Post*, August 2 1958.

<sup>81</sup> "Frazier Scores Negroes for Immature Behavior," *New York Amsterdam News*, August 23 1958; "Our Middle Class 'Must Face Reality'," *Afro-American*, August 30 1958; "Educator Urges Negroes to Stop Being Frivolous, Act Mature," *Philadelphia Tribune*, September 2 1958.

to speak seriously to representatives of the disparaged "middle class" suggest that, in writing *Black Bourgeoisie*, Frazier was quite possibly indulging his sense of humour.

If Frazier's book was intended as satire, it was clear from the controversy it aroused that it contained enough truth for the criticism to sting. Frazier was correct in stating that African Americans had adopted American modes of behaviour and American values, but this was natural because they were Americans. Assimilation into the mainstream had always been a part of racial uplift dialogue, but the problem was that modern ideas of racial uplift had become those of modern America, whose social aspirations in the postwar era were built around consumption. Middle-class African Americans were just now seeing real economic gains that encouraged them to feel that they were closer to equality than at any other time, but *Black Bourgeoisie*'s message played to their insecurities, and accusations about the shallowness of affluent modern lifestyles touched them at their most vulnerable, by suggesting that they had abandoned respectable uplift principles for leisure pursuits that were as unsound as their position in American society.

## Conclusion

In the 1950s the black press had shown that it was an enthusiastic promoter of consumption with the objective of raising standards of living, expanding the respectable middle class, and, by extension, helping the race gain acceptance – in other words, achieving racial uplift in the modern age. The press expressed uplift in the context of achieving a respectable lifestyle through consumption, which was depicted in advertising showing adults and stable families enjoying the fruits of their labors in affluent, tasteful surroundings. Employment rates, wages, and home purchases increased throughout the decade, and surveys showed that African Americans were benefiting from the group uplift that consumption generated.

The newspapers may have taken the lead in promoting conspicuous consumption as a means of achieving racial uplift, and succeeded according to empirical data, but they were also

aware – the Frazier polemic aside – of the dangers to society that unthinking consumption brought. Marjorie McKenzie, a regular columnist in the *Pittsburgh Courier*, questioned the role of conspicuous consumption in the teaching of values to children.<sup>82</sup> Writing about the "Christmas spending orgy," she highlighted the way that television influenced children to want certain items, and that parents were "motivated by success and happiness symbols" to satisfy them. Materialism was a "false god" that could not offer any form of satisfaction "when the sky is the limit." While it was a good thing that American parents were less authoritarian than in previous generations, there was a danger that materialism would "leave our children without moorings." Mary McLeod Bethune also warned of the dangers of uncontrolled demand that would increase prices and harm the working classes.<sup>83</sup> She stressed the need to take care of necessities first, plan for financial emergencies, and resist invitations of "No money down!"

Economic progress and participation in the consumer economy had raised standards of living for many and created a growing middle class that was able to participate on a more equal footing in economic life, but the gap between those who had succeeded and those remaining behind became wider. This heightened tension within the black community about the extent to which the middle class was responsible for ameliorating the condition of the lower class, in other words, its role in racial uplift. By moving up economically, the middle class was setting an example of what was possible for African Americans to achieve through education and well-paying jobs. While this was effective in material terms, the slow pace of political and civil rights gains called black leadership into question. In a 1959 conference address, Dr. Nannie Burroughs, a highly respected national women's leader, expressed the tension surrounding responsibility.<sup>84</sup> While firmly criticizing "the masses" for their ignorance, lethargy and indifference, such a state

<sup>82</sup> Marjorie McKenzie, "Pursuit of Democracy," *Pittsburgh Courier*, January 9 1954.

<sup>83</sup> Mary McLeod Bethune, "By Exercising Self-Control at Home, the People Can Slash Prices," *Chicago Defender*, July 21 1951.

<sup>84</sup> "Leaders Blamed for Poor Conditions among Masses," *Norfolk Journal and Guide*, September 26 1959.

was, she believed, the result of the indifference of the upper classes. She called on leaders to "assume the full responsibility to prove what a democracy can do."

The success of the consumption push in the 1950s seemed to make little difference in closing class gaps, and the closer that African Americans moved in the direction of the mainstream, the less responsibility the more successful classes seemed to feel for those less fortunate. Black leadership in the 1950s was focused on changing laws and building structural equality to benefit African Americans of all classes, and efforts were being directed toward proving "what a democracy can do." Nannie Burroughs was expressing traditional uplift rhetoric in her calls for change, but in the 1950s disparaging "ignorance, lethargy and indifference" and urging the masses to pull themselves up belonged to a bygone era. Expressing such sentiments to a middle-class organization would achieve little beyond validating audience assumptions about the faults of those below them.

As middle-class institutions, the newspapers were key influencers of African American uplift efforts, which they expressed in class-based terms. Racial uplift was adopted for the ultimate benefit of all African Americans, but class divisions were emphasized because an advancement in class status was evidence of "uplift." At the same time, class divisions were deployed to maintain distance from "the masses" and avoid potential damage to group reputation. When newspaper readers expressed doubts about the extent to which the middle class was responsible for raising up those below them, they called into question issues of group, or class, responsibility. An article from the *Norfolk Journal and Guide* in 1950 asked readers to comment on "Negro society," which it recognized as having deep divisions, in an attempt to establish a common definition.<sup>85</sup> The article preceded Nannie Burroughs' remarks by almost a decade, but her criticism revealed that the issue of responsibility had not been resolved. Perhaps, as African American society moved closer to the mainstream, it could not be resolved. The

<sup>85</sup> "Negro Society - What Is It? How Do You Feel About It? See What's Being Said:," *Norfolk Journal and Guide*, June 3 1950.



responses received by the *Journal and Guide* covered a broad range of opinion, but they also expressed values that could have come from any community within the United States, and in fact said more about American society than "Negro society." Comments indicated identification with conventional American attitudes, suggesting that newspapers' efforts to encourage uplift for the sake of assimilation had succeeded. One reader criticized conspicuous consumption and the fact that society "follows the lead of the man with the biggest car, the woman with the most expensive fur coat, and the couple with the best stocked bar." Another wrote, "What if our set-up is based on money and position? Isn't the dollar almighty in America?" Another reader questioned class responsibility: "Am I my brother's keeper? Other races have their slum districts and their society; their criminals and their 'cream of the crop.' Why should we be different?"

Black newspapers in the 1950s responded enthusiastically to the United States' promotion of consumption for the national benefit. Consumption provided an excellent pathway for African Americans to express their patriotism as citizens by participating in this "national uplift" effort. While it is likely that those African Americans who had the financial means to do so would have participated in the consumer economy anyway, the newspapers played a role in gaining recognition for the broader African American community as a valuable part of the consumer economy. Newspapers also played their more traditional role of adapting racial uplift ideals to contemporary social conditions. By framing consumption around ideals of respectable family life and middle-class aspiration, they supported the national economy, guided their readers in the most appropriate ways to raise their standards of living, and at the same time benefited financially from advertising and product promotion. The ability to remain profitable and provide a public service by constructing forms of racial uplift that were appropriate for each decade ensured their unique place in African American society.

## CONCLUSION

The thesis has shifted the historiographic focus on the black press from its role as an advocate for civil rights to its role as an integral player in African American social development, and has identified racial uplift as a means for achieving it. Racial uplift in the black press has been overlooked, but this thesis has shown that it was a core component of black press content that was evident in all eras and locations, and for all levels of newspaper circulation. The thesis has traced the history of the black press over six decades in the twentieth century, and has used that history to show that racial uplift was not a static concept confined to a single area of African American activity, but was constructed, adapted, and applied to a number of different social conditions and circumstances that kept uplift relevant as black society changed and evolved. The black press's key role in constructing racial uplift narratives, and drawing lessons and implications for progress from them, is clear.

The reader's question in the conclusion to chapter six – "Why should we be different?" – speaks to the African American belief that they should not be differentiated from any other Americans, and the focus of racial uplift was to ensure that they were not. From its earliest history, the black press considered one of its functions to be to educate its readers and mould their attitudes toward adopting middle-class ideals and aspirations that conformed to those of the general population. The newspapers constructed racial uplift narratives around middle-class attitudes that they expected would be adopted by those aspiring to join the middle class, or that the less fortunate would, at the very least, embrace respectability in their daily lives.

The core message of uplift was to encourage the desire to better one's own circumstances and create opportunities for African Americans generally, toward assimilation and equality. This thesis has shown that racial uplift efforts were, early in the century, promoted to demonstrate to white America that African Americans were capable of economic and social advancement and

that they were making demonstrable progress. Thereafter, uplift efforts were adapted to social changes resulting from the Great Migration and urbanization. After World War II in particular, uplift efforts followed a similar path to other groups of Americans attempting to raise their economic and social status. Economic progress was faster for African Americans in the postwar era than in any previous era, but social and structural impediments meant that increases in living standards and rates of white-collar employment lagged behind rates of growth experienced in the wider American community. All progress, however slow, was celebrated, as it represented moving closer to the mainstream.

Newspapers constructed racial uplift narratives and applied them to all aspects of black life, which helped boost group confidence, pride, and a sense of purpose. Uplift was always presented in positive language that praised those who had achieved acceptable heights of wealth, education, or other definable measures of success, and who embodied the respectability that was expected to accompany this success. The objects of press attention were therefore the successful few rather than the many who were struggling against poverty and ignorance that plagued much of black society. The constant positive projection of racial uplift was to encourage and boost morale in spite of structural barriers of which the press was keenly aware and also fighting. Racial uplift was for the eventual benefit of all, and the success of the few made the effort worthwhile. The thesis has not, therefore, focused on the limitations of racial uplift as a means of addressing the social problems created by the legal system in the South, or general discrimination and segregation that existed nationwide; its focus is on the way it was applied by the black press despite these limitations.

The thesis has traced the growth of the black press in the twentieth century from small papers serving local communities to large enterprises with national circulations in the hundreds of thousands. The newspaper business grew and evolved, but newspapers were always the most important means of communication within their communities, whether small country towns or

the entire nation, and never wavered in their objective to educate and improve. At the turn of the twentieth century newspapers were small operations often led by a single individual with a message, who was supported by a small number of printing staff. These early papers relied on the white press and overseas publications for much of their contents, which the owner/publishers used to supplement their editorial opinions. Within a span of around twenty years, however, newspapers had adopted new technologies, gained national circulations, and were expressing opinions and exerting influence that affected social movements. They had also organized themselves into business associations for their mutual advantage, and African American news services were beginning to provide content to multiple newspapers, eventually exposing readers across the nation to syndicated columns and opinion pieces by nationally-recognized journalists of all political persuasions to add to the standard news and entertainment fare.

Racial uplift was a common denominator among newspapers that were, in the early years of the century, otherwise divided regionally and politically, or had opinions that varied greatly on some issues. No newspaper, in any era, diverted from the basic premise that uplift was necessary, nor from the desire to include racial uplift content. The ability of the newspapers to overcome their ideological differences for the greater good is evident in chapter one, which showed the way that many small, local newspapers of different political persuasions were able to unite around a common objective of encouraging participation in the 1900 census. The 1900 census was considered an important means of reassuring African Americans that they were gaining in all numerical indicators, and black leaders and the press were confident that this would prove to be the case. Empirical evidence of progress was essential to contesting ideas developed in the nineteenth century around Social Darwinism that ranked "races" according to arbitrary physical features, and classed African Americans as an "inferior" or "weaker" group. The black press was united in the desire to prove such theories wrong, to build community confidence, and ensure continued advancement.

The census also spoke to concerns about classifications within black society. The 1890 census that had sought to count the mulatto population highlighted the difficulties of racial identification, but the reduction of racial identification to a binary category in 1900 to improve accuracy served to obscure class and colour lines that segmented African American society. This was of no small concern to African Americans, as these differences were the source of identity and status within the community. Articles on the census in the black press that discussed classification based on race revealed attitudes to skin colour and to class and status within the African American community that were unacknowledged by white society, but which influenced the racial uplift narratives constructed in the press over subsequent decades.

These subtleties of class and status, and the accompanying ethos of respectability, were the contested subtexts of racial uplift, and are manifested in various forms in each chapter. Class-based conflict was initially apparent in the approaches to racial uplift taken by W.E.B. DuBois and Booker T. Washington in the years prior to World War I, as described in chapter two. DuBois favoured the development of an intellectual class to form a leadership cohort, whereas Washington favoured the development of an acquiescent agricultural proletariat who would gain their civil rights through reputation and patience. Newspapers were in agreement with the basic concept of racial uplift as beneficial to society, and agreed over the need to participate in the census for that purpose. While some differences in the way individual newspapers constructed and conveyed uplift messages can be seen in the early years of the twentieth century, the conflict between DuBois and Washington polarized the black press to an extent that was not repeated in later decades. The polarization continued until Washington's death in 1916, when his political influence ended. The press was also divided over the issue of black migration from the agricultural South to the urban North in the World War I years, with the newspapers who favoured Booker T. Washington's approach to uplift generally opposing migration. Washington's influence in business, however, was less polarizing and longer lasting, and is evident in the

following decades as the institutions he established, such as the National Negro Business League and the National Negro Press Association, helped to unite formerly opposing factions for the greater cause of group prosperity.

Newspapers also concerned themselves with new approaches to racial uplift that resulted from the increasing urbanization of black populations following World War I, turning away from the agricultural ideal to promote success through business. Chapter three focused on business development, which was considered the key to wealth creation and economic self-sufficiency that would better position African Americans to participate in national life. There was some debate in the newspapers about the pros and cons of business self-sufficiency within the black community, but debate on this issue never reached the biting commentary that was evident in the DuBois-Washington conflict. The newspapers expressed the uplifting purpose of business development by featuring people who had succeeded in business, but also in describing the physical representations of black advancement such as modern buildings and the use of new technology. Respectability was a part of business success, and uplift efforts emphasized appropriate business conduct and the need to maintain high standards of service and efficiency while building wealth.

Business success in the black community also meant the increasing division of black society along class lines defined by wealth, marking a shift away from family background and skin colour as class indicators. Identifying wealth with class (but not negating respectability) was considered evidence that black society was conforming to the existing norms of white society, and was therefore an indication of "race progress." The newspapers' belief in wealth creation as a path toward integration was underscored by their eventual uniform disparagement of Marcus Garvey's black nationalist movement, which, although it was supported by a belief in business success as a means of uplift, favoured separation from mainstream America.

Urbanization expanded the parameters of racial uplift beyond class and status to incorporate gender issues. The press debated the conflict between preserving old-fashioned ideas of modesty and respectability against women's desire to use cosmetics and enjoy fashion as evidence of a modernity that represented race progress, but it also benefited from the rise of a consumer culture that was fanned through advertising. Modern women, encouraged by articles and advertising in the press, engaged in their own uplift by taking advantage of new employment opportunities that opened up in the cosmetics industry in particular. While women were encouraged to marry and have children to conform to ideals of respectable black family life, they were not discouraged from entering business themselves, and some of the most successful new enterprises were launched and run by women.

Chapter four reviewed the fertile ground that the society pages and women's pages provided for constructing racial uplift narratives. Increasing wealth in the African American community through success in business enabled greater conspicuous consumption, and the press was also able to harness this development to construct ideas of racial uplift that were tied to images of urban modernity and progress through affluence. Although the images of wealth and luxurious lifestyles presented in the press conformed to mainstream ideals, discrimination forced the activities of high society to be conducted in large part in private homes. Forced seclusion kept the lavish entertainments enjoyed by the upper class hidden, particularly from the white community. The newspapers, however, reported these activities widely and in detail, for the benefit of the upper class and the rest of the black community. Newspapers used racial uplift narratives to describe the activities of the upper classes of black society as examples to be emulated, and again to reinforce the close relationship between racial uplift and class and respectability.

Chapter five described the World War II years, when the newspapers shifted their focus away from uplift presented through the lens of class and affluence to uplift narratives that were

built around citizenship and patriotism, and extended beyond the United States in the context of achieving equality in the postwar international order. War reporting meant, however, that each newspaper was faced with a conundrum that forced it to represent two opposing sides. This dilemma resulted from the desire to promote uplift through positive reporting of the achievements of black soldiers and servicemen on the battlefield, while acknowledging – and protesting – that they were patriots fighting for democratic ideals overseas that they did not enjoy at home. The *Chicago Defender's* Victory Edition is an example of the intricate balance that the black press achieved while meeting both objectives. Its ability to attract white and black contributions in support of its presentation of the African American experience in wartime is also an example of the influence that the *Chicago Defender*, and the black press in general, had established in the United States by this time.

The black press presented a construction of racial uplift in the 1950s that promoted consumption as a path to a middle-class lifestyle. Chapter six reviewed this uplift narrative that aligned with a trend in the broader community, promoted by government and industry, to encourage consumption for the good of the nation. By the 1950s many African Americans were enjoying unprecedented opportunities in education and employment that enabled them to participate in this national trend and advance into the middle class. The purchase of home appliances, cars, and other material goods would enable African Americans to achieve a higher standard of living and narrow the economic gap. The black press also helped generate understanding in the white business community that the African American consumer market was big, valuable, and deserved its attention.

Class and respectability were also a part of this new construction of racial uplift. The black press played its part in promoting consumption through advertising that depicted affluent African Americans in settings that equated material success with class status. In contrast to chapter four, which looked at high society and its particular form of conspicuous consumption, this chapter



discussed the expansion of the black middle class and a more accessible consumption that supported black participation in national life. At the same time, newspapers promoted consumption in a way that conformed to notions of respectability and good taste, although these were usually implied rather than explicit. Some black leaders were, however, more inclined to spell out the need for class-appropriate consumption, and used the press to convey prescriptive uplift messages targeting the less affluent who took advantage of offers of easy credit to purchase the trappings of middle-class life. Others questioned the effect of materialism on black social values. Overall, however, the increase in standards of living and access to a wide range of consumer goods contributed to a new sense of confidence in the African American community which was still stymied by discrimination and the slow pace of political change, but was content for a short while to enjoy a level of equality with mainstream society through shared lifestyles, if not lives.

The thesis concludes its investigation on the cusp of the 1960s, when the civil rights movement gained sufficient momentum to become newsworthy to the white media, and significant legal change was at last achieved. This study has shown the important role of the press in guiding community aspirations through the racial uplift ideology, and has shown that uplift remained a valid and useful concept up to this point. The 1960s, however, mark a turning point in African American society where the middle-class agenda of racial uplift and assumptions about middle-class assimilation began to be broken down and redefined. A younger generation of black leaders adopted a new and more confrontational approach to gaining civil rights that was combined with an Afrocentric cultural agenda that rejected middle-class aspiration and identification with the white majority as the unquestioned means of achieving political and social goals. The validity of racial uplift in social development and its promotion in the black press beyond the period of the study is, therefore, less certain.

This study opens up opportunities to continue the story of the black press into the 1960s, to see how this middle-class medium approached the new black nationalist and Afrocentric cultural trends. The history of the black press up to this time suggests, however, that it would have adapted and constructed narratives of racial uplift around black nationalism and "black pride" as it had adapted racial uplift narratives to previous social changes. Alternatively, perhaps the black press, like the black middle class, would have adopted what was fashionable from the new direction of black self-assertiveness, reported it and eventually returned to the message that was most acceptable to the widest group of its readers, for the sake of its survival as a business as much as for its role in providing a public service. The fact that the black press is thriving today in the Internet age, and is still reporting educational achievement and business success, and promoting a middle-class lifestyle, is proof that it weathered any potential storms of identity and has remained relevant to its community and true to its purpose.

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