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“Lifting as We Climb”: The Role of *The National Association Notes* in Furthering the Issues Agenda of the National Association of Colored Women, 1897–1920

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This article examines the role of *The National Association Notes*, the official publication of the national Association of Colored Women, in helping to build a sense of unity among members of the newly formed organization in 1897. The author analyzes stories that were published in the newsletter over a twenty-three-year period, beginning with its inception in 1897, and identifies six major themes present in the stories. The analysis indicates that the publication played a vital role in keeping members informed of the organization’s activities as well as helping black women identify with issues that were of concern to both black and white women during this time period. The publication also promoted a sense of inclusiveness with other women’s organizations and causes.

"Lifting as We Climb": The Role of *The National Association Notes* in Furthering the Issues Agenda of the National Association of Colored Women, 1897–1920

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"We, the Colored Women of the United States of America, feeling the need of united and sympathetic effort, and hoping to furnish evidence of the moral, mental and material progress made by our people, do hereby unite in a National Association."

***—Preamble,
Constitution of the National Association of Colored Women, 1897***

More than 100 black women met in Boston, Massachusetts, in late July 1896 to discuss the feasibility of forming a national organization for black women. All of the women in attendance were middle-class, well educated and active in their communities; some were members of local and regional organizations dedicated to advancing their race. The result of that July meeting was the formation of the National Association of Colored Women one year later. As Hamilton states, the unwritten goal of the organization was to complete the work of emancipation—"the right of black people to live lives of middle-class respectability."¹

The impetus for forming the NACW was twofold: The General Federation of Women's Clubs, which had formally organized in 1892, did not welcome black women into their organization.² Secondly, Mrs. Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin, a black woman and founder of the Woman's Era Club of Boston, called on black women to unite in response to a vicious attack by James W. Jacks, president of the Missouri Press Association. In an effort to discredit the work of Ida B. Wells, a black journalist and reformer active in trying to establish anti-lynching laws in the United States, Jacks published an article denouncing black people, but especially black women,

whom he called prostitutes, thieves and liars. His article caused an outcry in the press, particularly among the black community.

Mrs. Ruffin organized the Boston conference, in part to respond to Jacks' charges. In a letter that she sent to black women who were active in various organizations, Mrs. Ruffin said, "it is our right and our bounden duty to stand forth and declare ourselves and principles to teach an ignorant and suspicious world that our aims and interests are identical with those of all good aspiring women."³



Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin

Mrs. Ruffin's call to gather was answered by women from 10 states and more than 20 clubs. The conference of black women met in Boston on July 29, 30 and 31, 1896. In her keynote address to the gathering, Mrs. Ruffin stated: All over America there is to be found a large and growing class of earnest, intelligent, progressive colored women who, if not leading

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full, useful lives, are only waiting for the opportunity to do so...."⁴

Conferees at the three-day conference heard speeches, discussed papers and conferred on formally organizing an umbrella organization for existing black women's organizations. At the conference, the need for unity among individual groups was stressed, in order to have a strong parent organization. Conference speaker M. F. Pitts of St. Louis, who said that the aim of such a national organization was "race advancement," told conferees that "Women must stand by each other, trusting and believing not only in the honesty but the ability of their sisters, as never before.... We must try to bring about freedom for the women because it will elevate them politically, socially, financially and morally. For in the coming education of the masses she will need all her freedom to preserve her best interests and the best interests of the home and family."⁵

While some scholars have examined the role of the women's club movement in the United States, particularly during the Progressive Era, more recently, other researchers have studied the role of the NACW as part of that movement. As Beverly Jones notes, the NACW was similar to the General Federation of Women's Clubs in that "both organizations provided social services to the community and worked for the betterment of the situation of women," but the NACW also worked to make the lives of Black Americans better.⁶

In addition to the issue of racial betterment, other scholars have examined various factors that had an impact on the formation of the NACW and on the directions it took, including the role of the Black church in providing leadership experience for women, women's suffrage and temperance movements; the influence of the Victorian ideal of womanhood; and political issues of the day that related directly to Black Americans, such as the imposition of Jim Crow laws in a number of Southern states.⁷



National Association Notes, June 15, 1897

This study adds to previous work through an in-depth analysis of the first 23 years of *The National Association Notes*, the official publication of the NACW. This period covers its founding in 1897 until 1920, when women won the right to vote. The organization's newsletter is worthy of study because it can provide us with a clear picture of what issues were important to the NACW and how those issues helped bind together disparate members of local and regional organizations under one common umbrella. We will see that one of those issues was women's suffrage.

According to Donald L. Shaw and others, individuals join groups, also termed communities, because there are rewards "of belonging and sharing and because they remove the dissonance of living in an environment of

uninterpreted events.”⁸ Furthermore, groups organize around agendas, which “may represent ways of seeing things, ways of doing things, or other unique ways of relating to the world.” And all groups have agendas of issues, some formal, some more loosely structured. “If an individual decides to relate to an amorphous public group, such as belonging to the local ‘community’ or becoming an informed voter, then the individual is likely to choose a mass media pathway” to identify with and learn about that group. “But if the individual decides to join a public or private group not covered by the news media, then the pathway may involve other individuals, newsletters, or other specialized media.”⁹ Although there were some influential black newspapers during the time the NACW formed, many areas of the country were not served by media other than traditional, white-owned and operated newspapers. This was particularly true in rural America and the southern states. Many, if not most of white-run newspapers in these areas did not cover the black community.¹⁰ That made the need for such a publication as *The National Association Notes* even more important to its constituents.

Edward Bernays also wrote in 1928 about the importance of group formations and the increased influence formally organized groups can have on pushing for change. In America’s early years as a country, Bernays notes, “the unit of organization was the village community, which produced the greater part of its own necessary commodities and generated discussion among its citizens. But today, because ideas can be instantaneously transmitted to any distance and to any number of people, this geographical integration has been supplemented by many other kinds of grouping, so that persons having the same ideas and interests may be associated and regimented for common action even though they live thousands of miles apart.”¹¹

Little scholarly research has examined in depth the role of organization newsletters, or the history of their development. However,

there seems to be general agreement that the major functions of organization newsletters include educating members, both about the organization and its goals, or about issues that the organization addresses. Newsletters also serve to inform members about news and events of interest to the organization. Finally, a very important role of a newsletter is to build a sense of connection among members and to the organization itself.¹²

Some scholars have studied the role of specialized publications, similar to organization newsletters, in terms of their purpose. Alfred Cornebise analyzed the role of *Happy Days*, a newspaper published by the Civilian Conservation Corps. The CCC was created by Franklin Delano Roosevelt in 1933, and, over the next decade, more than three million men were enrolled in the program.¹³ An integral part of the CCC, *Happy Days* served to provide positive information to men in the CCC and to support the CCC’s goals. Additionally, more than 5,000 camp newspapers were published. As such, camp papers served as “public relations organs” in promoting the concept of the CCC program to supporters and detractors alike.¹⁴ Camp papers were written by men in the program, and although, as Cornebise notes, they varied in sophistication and execution, they provide an excellent account of issues that were important to participants in the CCC.

Mary Lamonica examined factory publications produced by female textile workers in New England from 1840 to 1850; the publications’ editors hoped that by focusing on work in the textile mills they could help improve working conditions there. These journals, such as *The Voice of Industry* and *The Lowell Offering*, provided workers with a way to “lobby for social, political, and economic goals,” and “to regularly publicize their agenda to broader audiences...”¹⁵

As the NACW’s official publication, *The National Association Notes* served as the organization’s primary mode of communication for members and potential members. As such,

it also represents the lens through which the organization's agenda of issues may be viewed. Specifically, this study examines the major issues, or themes, addressed by the organization through *The National Association Notes*, and how, or whether, those issues or themes changed over the years. The study also analyzes whether the issues addressed in the newsletter reflected or served to reinforce the stated goals of the NACW and whether the newsletter's topics were reflective of the thinking of the group's members, who, for the most part, represented the elite, educated segment of black women and therefore, "actively supported the major women's reform movements seeking moral purity, temperance, self improvement and suffrage."¹⁶

Methodology

The Library of Congress in Washington, D.C., has the largest, most complete collection of *The National Association Notes*, copies of which are available on microfilm. Hard copies were made of the available issues; they dated from 1897 to 1920.

The author examined each story in every available issue of the publication during the period under study, beginning with the second issue, published on May 15, 1897, and ending with the combined October-November-December 1920 issue. The inaugural issue of the publication is not part of Library of Congress collection.¹⁷ The study employed qualitative content analysis methods; each story was read for content and informal categories were created as stories with similar topics were found. All stories also were coded for date, issue number, headline and topic. As the author became familiar with the stories, six major themes emerged. These themes will be examined in greater detail later in the paper. A brief description of the founding of *The National Association Notes*, its stated purpose, physical description and general content areas will be provided first.

Founding *The National Association Notes*

When the NACW was formally organized in 1897, one of newly elected president Mary Church Terrell's first acts was to establish a publication for organization members. Terrell saw the publication as essential to helping create and strengthen the communication network among its members. Scholar Beverly Jones notes that the monthly publication was used "to channel information about the programs and objectives of the organization."¹⁸

The National Association Notes published its first issue in 1897, when it was adopted as the organization's official publication. For a brief time, it was called just the *Notes* and it was a one-page sheet of information. The *Notes* was edited by Margaret Murray Washington, wife of Booker T. Washington and chairman of the executive board of the NACW. Mrs. Washington was the publication's first editor—and she served as editor longer than any other person—until her election to president of the NACW in 1912. The publication, which was published at Tuskegee Institute, came out monthly, although it wasn't published on a regular basis during the summer months of some years. By its second year of publication, it had evolved into a four-page tabloid printed on newsprint. Association members paid 25 cents for a year's subscription.

In 1904 the publication's format changed to a bound, journal-size publication with a two-column page format; some issues also included photographs and drawings. In its journal form, it typically consisted of 16 pages, although a few issues were smaller than that. During the time period that this study examined, the publication had only three different editors; as noted earlier, the first and longest serving editor was Mrs. Washington. Some of the stories were written by the editor; other items were sent in by club members that detailed activities in their particular district, for example. News from various local and regional clubs became a standing column beginning in

1902, and it remained a publication staple throughout its existence. The publication also reprinted articles from a variety of newspapers and magazines. Many issues contained one or two poems or literary quotations. The publication also featured some small advertisements, beginning in 1904.

Generally, story topics ranged from discussions of social issues of the day, to reports of individual club activities, personal notes of interest to club members, and scholarly papers on a variety of topics, including women's suffrage, temperance, Jim Crow railroad car laws and public health. Also covered heavily were news stories about the organization's biennial conferences. In fact, some issues were devoted entirely to coverage of the conferences. These story topics will be discussed in greater detail, within the context of the major themes that appeared in the publication.

"Lifting as we climb" theme

One of the stated goals of the NACW was to help those less fortunate members of the race advance. The founding members of the national organization were all educated, middle-class women who, according to Lynda F. Dickson, accepted the "prevailing Victorian image of the proper role of women to uplift, purify and adorn."¹⁹ Tullia Hamilton's research into the organization included a close examination of 108 women who were active in the organization from its inception up until 1920. She found that 20 of the 108 had college degrees; 12 of the 20 had degrees from black colleges. Additionally, three were physicians and several were part of the "pioneer group" of social workers who went to work in black communities.

A significant number also were journalists and business women, most notably Madame C.J. Walker. Madame Walker, born Sarah Breedlove in 1867 in Louisiana to parents who had once been slaves, was a self-made

millionaire by the early 1900s. From her early jobs as a farm worker and laundress, Madame Walker started her own hair care business, selling her products door-to-door in the early years. Her business was a multi-million dollar enterprise in a few short years. She was an active supporter of a variety of causes, including the anti-lynching movement, and a proponent and NACW supporter.

More than half of those women who worked outside the home were teachers; some of them taught at the college level, such as Mary Terrell, first president of the NACW, who taught at Howard University. Finally, a number were "middle-class, middle-aged matrons."²⁰

The phrase "lifting as we climb" appeared regularly on *The National Association Notes* masthead; this phrase was taken from the organization's song. The chorus says: "Deeds not words shall be our motto, we're lifting as we climb." As Fannie B. Williams, one of the organization's founding members said, she was part of "a movement that reaches down into the sub-social condition of the entire race and has become the responsibility and effort of a few competent in behalf of the many incompetent."²¹

This aspect of the NACW was a recurring theme in stories throughout the first 23 years of the publication, but most particularly, in the first few years. For example, a story in the May 15, 1897, issue titled, "Home influences among the colored people," spoke to the importance of a wholesome family life to success in later life. The article stated that many black people had poor family homes. "This disadvantage, like



Madame C. J. Walker

many others, may be traced to disabilities growing out of past bondage. Slavery was a poor training place for the making of homes." The solution to this, according to the author, was to "send missionary teachers among them—earnest, whole-souled, self-sacrificing workers who will not be satisfied with simply teaching in their school rooms the learning of books, but who will go in and out among the families and teach the men and women how to better their homes, how to raise the tone of their domestic life."²²

A story in a later issue emphasized the importance of education to black people in helping them to succeed. Indeed, the establishment of kindergartens was one of the organization's recurring items on their organization's yearly platform. The story spoke of the need to establish kindergartens in communities and urged local clubs to get involved in sponsoring school programs: "If the National Association did nothing but arouse our sisters throughout the country to the necessity of providing for the education and civilization of the thousands of poor, neglected children, who, without our aid, will remain in ignorance and be reared in crime, it would more than justify its existence as an organization."²³

The story went on to suggest that individual clubs could start pilot programs in education, and then build on the success of the smaller programs. It suggested that "we should leave no stone unturned to make the men and women of the next generation, who are the children of to-day, as intelligent, as virtuous and as courageous as possible." Furthermore, the author of the story said, "All little folks, irrespective of conditions of race, need the training that the kindergarten affords, but none so imperatively as the children of our own despised and persecuted people."²⁴

The NACW formed departments within its organization in the early 1900s; one such department was titled Rescue Work. The department's name itself alludes to the members'

role in rescuing or lifting up of those less fortunate. Many issues of *The National Notes* reported on work that various local and regional clubs were doing to help improve the lives of black people. A report by the Rescue Work department about work done by various clubs across the country included information about the establishment of two kindergartens in Georgia, work with the prison systems in two southern states to improve sanitation there and to provide books for prisoners, and help with "those in the thralldom of the cocaine habit."²⁵

One aim of the NACW once it was more fully established was to involve more young women in the organization. A story in the May 1913 issue suggests that the NACW form a young women's department. The story reiterates the importance of imbuing young women with a sense of duty to those less fortunate. "Because when young girls are organized, their vision becomes wider; they discover in themselves new possibilities; new spiritual, moral and intellectual forces, and they lift others of their age, as they climb."²⁶ This emphasis on the importance of including young women was emphasized in the first year of the publication. In a story about the NACW's upcoming convention, the writer urged women to attend and to bring their daughters with them. "We have a great cause to fight, and for the cause of woman and home we need more of our younger women."²⁷

Inclusiveness theme

A major theme in several stories in the NACW publication over the years was that of inclusiveness, particularly as it related to joining together with women of other races. The December 1899 lead story considered the benefits of the NACW becoming a part of the National Council of Women, an organization whose members were almost all white. The National Council, founded in 1888, was dedicated to bringing together women of "all races, creeds and traditions," to help women

realize full participation in society, mainly through gaining the right to vote.²⁸ Adella Hunt Logan, the article's author, stated that the NACW should join, "because we are American women and the council exists to promote the welfare of all women of the country. We shall be better understood, and, we trust, more highly esteemed, by the people of other races and nations, if we are given opportunities to work in sympathy with them, rather than be left out of their plans altogether."²⁹ She concluded that by becoming a member of the council, the races would learn valuable lessons from each other. "Ignorance of each other is at the bottom of the prejudice existing between the races."



Mary Terrell

In 1901, the NACW joined the National Council of Women. The January 1901 issue of *The National Notes* contains a letter from Mary Terrell, president of the NACW, telling members about the importance of joining together with other women. "The National Association of Colored Women has been baptized into fellowship with the National Council of Women by the tears of our sisters of the more favored race, and feeling confident that the bond of union between the white women and the colored women of this country has been greatly strengthened thereby."³⁰

Later stories that appeared in the publication re-emphasized the symbolic importance of the NACW's inclusion in the National Council of Women. One story noted that their membership in the organization gave women of the NACW hope that working together would reduce racial prejudice. An article written by Fannie Williams in 1911 stated: "We seem to

be happily approaching the time when in the large and all-inclusive questions of human interests there will be no room for prejudice, and when we can so lose ourselves in the pursuit of service for all men, women and children as to forget the superficial lines of race."³¹

That optimistic note was somewhat tempered two years later, when some members of the National Council of Women objected to the organization's leaders opening its doors to black women. Delegates from the NACW who had attended the Council's annual meeting in Washington, D.C., heard that some members of the Council did not attend the meeting in protest over the NACW's inclusion. The executive committee of the Council held firm to their stand on extending membership to the NACW, however. A story in the June 1913 issue of *The National Notes* by Mrs. Josephine Bruce, president of the NACW and a speaker at the National Council's convention, said: "I made the delegates and audience understand that the colored women were responsive to the same ideals; that they see the needs of humanity with the same eyes, and that they are giving their strength—physical, moral and spiritual—toward solving the same problems that occupy the minds of our sister women throughout the land; and though laboring under many difficulties, colored women are fully abreast in the struggle to raise the level of life generally, and to open up opportunities of usefulness for our people."³²

The theme of inclusiveness also manifests itself in the NACW's recognition of, and support for, working together with churches to advance their cause. As Fannie Barrier Williams, a founding member and leader in the NACW, noted in 1900, "The training which first enabled colored women to organize and successfully carry on club work was originally obtained in church work."³³ There was concern among some community members and church leaders that, with the growth of women's organizations, women would turn away from

their church work. A number of stories in *The National Association Notes* speak to that issue. In fact, one story recommended that churches and women's clubs form an alliance of sorts, so that both could benefit.

In a story in one of the early issues in 1899, Mary Terrell, president of the NACW, urged women to attend the organization's biennial convention in Chicago and enlisted the aid of church ministers. "If our ministers, all over the country, would preach at least one sermon on the work the NACW has done and is trying to do, it would aid materially in making our convention a success." Noting that, "our women bear the heaviest burdens of the church work, it is especially fitting that the church, through the pastor, should come to our assistance, whenever it can consistently and conscientiously do so."³⁴ A later story titled, "How can we as women advance the standing of the race?" states that the two greatest agencies of human improvement are the church and the state. With the growth of women's clubs and organized charities, the article said, more could be done to aid humanity.³⁵

The first few issues of newsletter contain stories that indicate that the NACW wanted to reach out and include men in their work to improve life for black women and for black people in general. A story in the second issue of the publication that urges women to attend the first convention of the organization acknowledges the support of men. "We are grateful for the interest which many of our best men are showing in regard to the work being done by woman for woman. In all reforms, great or small, man and woman must stand together. This is not woman's battle alone."³⁶

Another story one year later was written in response to an article that had appeared in the *Ladies Home Journal*; the male author of the article criticized women's clubs in general. He said further that women's clubs were acceptable if they kept to their own sphere, such as homemaking and social services, but it was not right for women's clubs to get involved in

political issues. The *Notes* author said it was far more important to think about forming clubs that both sexes could join; that way men and women could work together to solve problems.

Later issues of the publication would spend less time discussing how men and women could work together and spend more time focusing on issues such as women's suffrage. This topic will be discussed below at length.

Righting social wrongs theme

The organization also was concerned with righting social and legal wrongs. Some of these social ills were related to issues of race, such as Jim Crow laws in a number of southern states; others had to do with gender. The organization, through *The National Association Notes*, took an active stance in both areas. The publication offered the opportunity for the organization to frame some of the day's social issues in a way designed to increase active participation in helping to solve problems.

One issue that was discussed in numerous articles had to do with Jim Crow laws relating to rail travel. Dorothy Salem and Willi Coleman, among other scholars, have said that the beginning of the 20th Century marked a time of worsening race relations and the imposition of laws in some states to segregate the races. And, as Coleman argues, "Resistance to segregated public transportation was one of the first legal battles black females chose to fight as free women."³⁷ This was an issue that many members of the NACW had to face every time they traveled to NACW conventions, for example.

The September 1898 issue told of South Carolina's successful effort to pass a law that required black and white travelers to sit in separate railroad cars. While second-class white and black travelers traveled together in the same car, white and black first-class passengers were separated. First-class black passengers had to pay higher ticket rates for inferior accommodations. The story urged members to boycott rail travel. The author said:

"The railroads in the Southern country should be patronized as little as possible by colored people. I met a lady formerly of Pennsylvania, who now lives in Jacksonville, Florida, and for seven years she has not been on a train. This should be our spirit."³⁸

A later story that appeared in the June 1899 issue, reached out to all women to work to have the law repealed: "We appeal to the Loyal Women of the United States to unite with us in urging the abolition of this oppressive measure from the statutes of the Southern States, and that the officers and directors of the railroads affected by Color Legislation, in justice to the self-respecting traveling class be urged to provide FIRST AND SECOND CLASS CARS. This so-called law is a blot most foul, not only on the section boasting of its chivalric treatment of women, but inhuman and unjust to the loyal, patriotic Negro women of the country, especially to the NACW, whose object is the development of Negro womanhood."³⁹

The Jim Crow rail laws were still a story topic in 1916. In the October issue of *The National Association Notes*, in an article titled, "Declaration of Principles Adopted at the Baltimore convention," one resolution reported on was that which called for the NACW to publicly denounce "all forms of discrimination in travel solely on account of color, as a disgrace to the American sense of justice and fair play."⁴⁰

The issue of women's suffrage was raised in nearly every issue of the publication, but the number of articles increased significantly after 1910, when the push for suffrage by numerous women's organizations grew more intense. One example of a story from an earlier issue that discussed woman's future position in the world, asks rhetorically what a woman wants. "She simply wants to be a human being, not a slave, not a toy, not a queen. She wants the equal personal liberty that every man demands in order to become a fully developed, well-balanced, happy and useful being. Only this and nothing more."⁴¹

A May 1901 article discussed in detail the issue of woman suffrage. Claiming that the time was ripe for passing legislation that would grant women suffrage, the article stated that suffrage "is one thing that will go a great way toward removing injustice and oppression."⁴²

As the push for women's suffrage grew more intense, more stories appeared that urged women to get more involved in the fight. A story in the October 1916 issue stated: "No Negro woman can afford to be an indifferent spectator of the social, moral, religious, economic and uplift problems that are agitated around us."⁴³ And a story titled "The Awakening of Women," which appeared in the January 1917 issue, told readers that women everywhere were fighting for suffrage. "Our interest in this fight is quite as vital as that of any other woman. Equal suffrage is woman's desire to see in all walks of life, the honor, the virtue, the justice, the genuine human sympathy which she interprets as the foundation of any permanent social structure."⁴⁴

Although there were relatively fewer stories about women's suffrage in 1917, as the country's attention was focused on its entrance into World War I, and into 1918 as the war dragged on, by 1919, a few stories were published that told of the progress of the move to achieve suffrage. And, in 1920, the *Notes* celebrated women's victory in gaining the right to vote. Stating that the issue was one that brought women of all colors together, an article noted that: "We stand at the open door of a new era. For the first time in the history of this country women have exercised the right of franchise. That right for which the pioneers of our race fought, but died without the sight. Woman's entrance into politics at this time seems most opportune."⁴⁶

Advancing the race:

Black Woman as role model theme

One prevalent theme throughout the twenty-three years of the publication examined in this

study was that of informing readers of the many strong and accomplished black women who were also members of the NACW. Indeed, Fannie Williams, an NACW leader, considered one of her vital roles in the organization to change the



Fannie Williams

perceptions of some black men and women alike that they were not relatives of slaves, but rather part of a "great nation and great civilization."⁴⁵ Each issue had at least one story about a prominent black woman. Many of these stories were short items that had been sent in by readers of the publication; others were reprints of articles that had appeared in other publications. Two examples of short items include a story of a "colored sculptress"—an American who lived in Rome and was visiting the United States. The story noted that she had been educated at Oberlin and Radcliff. Another short item concerned a wedding announcement; the bride, the story said, was the first female pension attorney in Washington, D.C.⁴⁶

The lead story in the July 1904 issue is a feature about Josephine Silone-Yates, the newly elected president of the NACW. The article, which is a reprint from the *Indianapolis World*, identifies Mrs. Yates as "one of the leading women of her race."⁴⁷

Other articles featured in-depth pieces on notable black women who were actively involved in the NACW. One such story, titled "Colored women in the reform movement," featured Julia Layton and Mrs. Booker T. Washington, among others. The reporter states: "As I review the work of the women of my race during the past 80 years, I see 'nobly done' written above their endeavor."⁴⁸

The Victorian ideal: Woman's self-improvement theme

Although much of the publication covered issues relevant to black women as members of the female sex, members of the African-American race, or as club members, there were a significant number of articles that dealt with personal self-improvement as well. As mentioned earlier, according to some scholars, the Victorian ideal of womanhood was a motivating factor for black middle-class women of the day. According to Wilson Moses, "The black women's club movement saw its primary work as encouraging the masses of peasant poor to adopt the Victorian morality of the middle classes."⁴⁹ Some of these articles concerned personal appearance, such as one called "The Morning Toilet," about how a woman should dress nicely in the morning so that her husband and children could see her at her best.⁵⁰ Other stories dealt with the importance of reading good literature, rather than "common books," the need for young girls to be modest in dress as well as actions, and the need to involve young daughters in decorating their rooms.⁵¹ Many issues also included poetry, sayings or quotations, and reprints of scholarly papers that club members had presented at conventions.

In unity there is strength theme

One very evident theme in *The National Association Notes*, particularly in the first few years of the NACW's existence, was that of unity. One issue the newly formed organization needed to address was the difference of opinion some leaders of the NACW had about what direction the organization should take. According to Moses, there was a "major division between those who favored agitation and a vigorous anti-lynching campaign, and those who emphasized racial uplift and domestic feminism."⁵² Mary Terrell, the first president of the organization, was, as Moses suggests,

committed to the "domestic feminist approach." However, she also wanted women to get involved politically.⁵³ Her approach for the first few years was to adopt a stance of inclusiveness for all points of view; *The National Association Notes* would help carry that message. As editor of the publication, Mrs. Margaret Washington had the opportunity to write and publish stories that supported Mrs. Terrell's agenda. Also, as Moses notes, Mrs. Washington was the organization's unofficial leader of the more conservative group, which leaned more toward her husband's accommodationist stance.

Although Moses states that Mrs. Washington's stance on a number of issues seemed to be in line with her husband's agenda, under her editorship, the publication did speak out on a number of issues such as working to end lynching, or publicly agitating to do away with Jim Crow laws, particularly as they related to rail travel. Furthermore, she publicly supported women's suffrage, an issue that some of the leading male black leaders hesitated to endorse. She was, however, a believer in working to build relationships among various individuals and groups.

In a number of articles that dealt with the theme of unity, *The National Association Notes* was noted in the articles as the major unifying force for the fledgling organization. For example, the February 1902 issue includes a letter from Josephine Yates, newly elected president of the NACW.



Josephine Yates

Mrs. Yates noted that the organization now had federations, which had the potential to help it reach greater heights in its work. "In union lies our greatest strength, hence with great interest we view the amount of effective organization that is

being done by our women, and the wonders it is working in all parts of our land," she said. Her letter went on to mention projects being carried out by a number of different organizations, now allied in regional federations. But she stressed the increased importance in keeping lines of communication open. "It is necessary that the women of the various states come in closer touch with each, that we know more of each other, understand more fully our common aims and purposes—and nothing can do this more effectively than a good, strong national organ; hence let us support *The Notes* with our subscription and patronage and in every other way possible."⁵⁴

While it was clear that the local clubs and regional federations were actually carrying out projects to benefit people in their locales, such as setting up local kindergarten programs, starting education programs for prisoners in the penal system and helping to develop and carry out local public health campaigns, *The Notes* helped to foster a sense of community and belonging that helped to put local good works in a larger context. Unity within the organization could also be achieved through dialogue between the national office and its member organizations. In the July 1904 issue of *The Notes*, the lead article stressed the importance of the national office to the success of all the member clubs. "The National stands as the teacher and helper of the local clubs, just as it expects to be taught and helped by the local clubs . . . between the two there is an interchange of strength and opinion which makes for a successful effort in both."⁵⁵

The number of member organizations had grown significantly over the years, which made communication among its member organizations and with the national office even more important. In 1901, the NACW had club members from eleven states. Within those states, Alabama had the largest contingent of individual clubs, with nine member organizations, followed by Illinois, with six and Georgia with five.⁵⁶

By 1917, 29 states were represented, with more than 10,000 member clubs. The focus of the women's clubs that were members varied as well. For example, The Tuskegee Women



Margaret Washington, wife of Booker T. Washington

Club, founded by Mrs. Booker T. Washington, had a small membership of educated women; Gerda Lerner states that the club "offered social and recreational programs, literary discussions, guest lecturers and self-study circles whose interests ranged from health and hygiene topics to Afro-American history."⁵⁷ The Kansas Federation of Women's Clubs did not get as involved in political issues as some member organizations did; instead, according to Marilyn Brady, the federation focused primarily on education, charitable works and "their emphasis on being good mothers."⁵⁸

Additionally, there were a number of letters to the editor over the years, stressing the importance of *The National Association Notes* in keeping members informed about what was happening outside their own clubs. One reader wrote: "I thank you for continuing my paper. It keeps alive the inspiration for unity in club work."⁵⁹ Although the vast majority of

articles over the years addressed unity from a positive standpoint, just two years after the newsletter was founded, the NACW leaders and the editor of the publication had to defend themselves for their role in the re-election of Mary Terrell as president. At the time of the organization's formation, members had decided that a president could not stand for re-election. However, at the organization's annual convention a year later, Mrs. Terrell was put forth for re-election and subsequently won. This disturbed some members of the organization who had supported the election of Mrs. Josephine Ruffin.

In the April 1900 issue of the newsletter, the editor ran a story that included quotes from Mrs. Josephine Ruffin, founder of the Woman's Era club and forerunner of the NACW, which harshly criticized the process used to re-elect Mrs. Terrell. The election had been a source of contention among a number of members. But one reader objected strongly to the newsletter's inclusion of accusations put forth by the Woman's Era contingent. In the

May 1900 issue, which included letters to the editor, one member said: "how in the name of all that is just, right and honorable, *The Notes*, the organ of the National Association and supported by it, could print such a tirade and multiplicity of untruths against its own officer and delegates, is beyond our comprehension." Stating that the officers had been elected legally, the writer went on to say that the organization should be careful not to let one club, or one individual "rule the whole national Association." If that is to be the case, the writer added, "We think it best to stop printing *The Notes* and disband the NACW."⁶⁰

Mrs. Washington was taken to task as editor of the publication. In the December 1900 issue later that year, she defended herself, stating that the editor had never been restricted in any way; furthermore, if she were to be restricted, she "would have nothing further to do with the publication of *The Notes*."

The three above mentioned articles are

examples of the relatively few news stories or commentary that criticized the organization or the newsletter. Other, later articles extolled the organization and the publication; most focused on the importance of the publication to the success of the NACW.

Discussion

The National Notes served as a unifying force in the expansion of the NACW, by keeping black women informed about what other individuals and groups were doing to advance the race, but, more importantly, giving black women a sense of belonging and pride in their accomplishments. The newsletter served as the primary vehicle to advance the issues agenda of the organization. By doing so, it increased the ties among black women from across the country who learned that women in Kansas were concerned about the same kinds of issues as women in South Carolina, or women in Maryland. The publication also gave hope to the idea that, with effort and by working together, racial prejudice could be reduced.

The major themes present in the publication over the years reflect to a great degree both the organization's goals and the concerns and issues of the day. For example, while unity within the organization was an important theme in early issues of the publication—and a necessity in order for the organization to grow and prosper—the unity theme grew less important as other issues arose and as the organization was able to achieve agreement among members about its role as both an activist organization and a social organization. Lerner asserts that the national club movement imbued women's clubs with a more businesslike attitude. Not only did the reporting of activities of the various local and regional chapters in women's publications such as *The National Notes* give those activities "dignity and a sense of direction," according to her, the growth of organizations like the NACW gave many women excellent leadership training.⁶¹

Similarly, the theme of righting social wrongs, while always present in the newsletter to some degree, became more prominent in the latter part of this study's span of time. This was particularly true in relation to women's suffrage. There was a greater frequency of articles about suffrage as the years passed, and further, the articles stressed the importance of the issue to all women, whether black or white.

Furthermore, articles that appeared from 1915 to 1920 were much more forceful in demanding equal rights for women. In a story that seems to foreshadow arguments in favor of the Equal Rights Amendment by feminists in the 1960s and 1970s in the United States, the author of one article stated: "Men ask where is woman's place now that she has moved into these spheres. I would say that woman's place is where good is to be accomplished; whether at home, in the school-room, in the halls of state, by the couch of the dying, on the battlefields, in the prison, anywhere and everywhere."⁶²

In the case of Jim Crow laws, while the publication increased the awareness of group members who might not have experienced directly the sting of discrimination in rail travel, its call to all women to fight to end the racist laws was not as successful. It did, however, keep the topic on the organization's issues agenda. Although other issues such as the fight for prohibition, primarily through the Women's Christian Temperance Union, and anti-war activities against the United States' entry into World War I by a number of women's organizations and individuals, including some NACW leaders, were mentioned in the newsletter, they took a back seat to fighting for women's rights and ending racist laws.

The publication also succeeded in giving members the opportunity to read about black women who had succeeded and continued to have a positive impact on the advancement of black women. By publishing success stories about black women, whether they were short items in the "Personal" section, or more in-

depth articles about the organization's leaders, black women, young and old, could take pride in their accomplishments and have hope for the future.

By 1920, the NACW had 17 different departments, 29 state federations, more than 10,000 member clubs under its umbrella and an individual membership of more than 200,000. It had achieved spectacular growth, along with recognition from other organizations and individuals. In that sense, *The National Association Notes* served a vital role in bringing together individual member organizations and their agendas and helping to set the issues agenda at the national level.

Hamilton states that by the mid-1920s, the NACW began to lose some of its power, due primarily to financial drain on the organization. Also, individual states or large philanthropic groups were beginning to devote resources and attention to some of the organization's project areas, particularly those involving health and social welfare.⁶³ Yet during its first 23 years as an organization, *The National Association Notes* helped the organization maintain its stated purpose: "In a word, it must be the purpose of us all to assist in lifting mankind to a higher plane by helping push humanity upward and forward in the march of civilization."⁶⁴

Notes

¹ Tullia Kay Brown Hamilton, "The National Association of Colored Women, 1896-1920," (unpublished dissertation, Emory University, 1978), 32.

² Ibid., 6.

³ Ibid., 30.

⁴ 1895 Conference proceedings, Mary Church Terrell collection, National Association of Colored Women's Clubs, Library of Congress, Microfilm collection, Reel 1.

⁵ 1895 Conference proceedings, LOC, Reel 1.

⁶ Beverly Washington Jones, "Quest for Equality: The Life and Writings of Mary Eliza Church Terrell, 1863-1954." In *Black Women in United States History*, Vol. 13, 19.

⁷ Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, "Righteous Discontent: The Coming of Age of the Black Baptist Sisterhood;" Wilson Jeremiah Moses, "Domestic Feminism Conservatism, Sex Roles, and Black Women's Clubs, 1893-1896," In *Black Women in United States History*, Vol. 3, 959-970; Ruby M. Kendrick, "They Also Serve: The National Association of Colored Women, Inc. In *Black Women in United States History*, Vol. 7, 817-824; Lynda F. Dickson, "Toward a Broader Angle of Vision in Uncovering Women's History: Black Women's Clubs Revisited." In *Black Women in United States History*, Vol. 9, 103-119; Willi Coleman, "Black Women and Segregated Public Transportation: Ninety Years of Resistance." In *Black Women in United States History*, Vol. 5, 295-302. Dorothy Salem, *To Better our World: Black Women in Organized Reform, 1890-1920*. 1990. Brooklyn, NY: Carlson Publishing.

⁸ Donald L. Shaw, Maxwell McCombs, David H. Weaver and Bradley J. Hamm, "Individuals, Groups and Agenda Melding: A Theory of Social Dissonance," *International Journal of Public Opinion Research*, Vol. 11, No. 1, p. 2-24.

⁹ Shaw, McCombs, Weaver and Hamm, "Individuals, Groups, and Agenda Melding," p. 11.

¹⁰ Marilyn Dell Brady, "Kansas Federation of Women's Clubs, 190-1930," *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains*, Vol. 9, No. 1, Spring 1986, 19-30. One area of the country that did have a number of Black newspapers in the late 1800s and early 1900s was Kansas. According to Brady, Black newspapers in the state regularly covered women's clubs activities.

¹¹ Edward Bernays, *Propaganda*. 1928, 13. New York: H. Liveright.

¹² Anonymous, "Resources for Volunteer Leaders of Community Organizations."

¹³ Alfred E. Cornebise, "Heralds in New Deal America: Camp Newspapers of the Civilian Conservation Corps," *Media History Monographs*, 1/3
[<http://www.scripps.ohio.edu/mediahistory/mhmjour2-1.htm>] (1998-99).

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Mary M. Lamonica, "Those who Toil and Spin": Female Textile Operatives' Publications in New England and the Response to Working Conditions, 1840-1850." Paper presented to the history division, AEJMC annual convention, Baltimore, Md., August 1998.

¹⁶ Dorothy Salem, "Black women in organized reform, 1890-1920," in *To better our world: National movements and issues: Women, race and the NACW*, Vol. 14.

¹⁷ The most complete collection of *The National Notes* is part of the Mary Church Terrell collection, NACW, Library of Congress. Some issues for the period under study were missing, including the very first issue; other issues had missing pages. None of the issues for 1903, 1905, 1906, or 1907 were available.

¹⁸ Jones, "The Quest for Equality," 22.

¹⁹ Dickson, "Toward a Broader Angle of Vision," 115.

²⁰ Hamilton, "The National Association of Colored Women," 47, 48, 49.

²¹ Fannie Williams, quoted in Hamilton, "The National Association of Colored Women," 31.

²² "Home influences among the colored people," *National Association Notes*, Vol. 1, No. 2, May 15, 1897, 2.

- ²³ "Why we need money," *National Association Notes*, Vol. 2, Jan. 1899, 1.
- ²⁴ Ibid.
- ²⁵ "NACW convention in St. Louis—fourth biennial convention," *National Association Notes*, Vol. 8, Oct. 1904, 1.
- ²⁶ "Young Women's Department," *National Association Notes*, Vol. 16, May 1913, 13.
- ²⁷ "Some of the convention speakers," *National Association Notes*, Vol. 1, No. 3, June 1897.
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- ⁴³ "The Vice-president's report," *National Association Notes*, Vol. 18, Oct. 1916, 3.
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- ⁶ "Club women greetings," *National Association Notes*, Vol. 23, 1,2,3,4.
- ⁴⁵ Moses, "Domestic Feminism Conservatism," 967.
- ⁴⁶ "Personal notes," *National Association Notes*, Vol. 2, Jan. 1899, 2.
- ⁴⁷ "Mrs. Josephine Silone Yates, A.M.," *National Association Notes*, Vol. 7, July 1904, 1
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- ⁵⁰ "The morning toilet," *National Association Notes*, Vol. 2, Jan. 1899, 4.
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- ⁵⁴ "Federation News," *National Association Notes*, Vol. 5, Feb. 1902, 1
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