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“THAT CHARM OF ALL GIRLHOOD”: BLACK GIRLHOOD AND GIRLS IN  
WASHINGTON, D.C., 1930-1965

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## ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

“That charm of all girlhood”: Black Girl and Girls in Washington, D.C., 1930-1965

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This dissertation looks at black girlhood in the nation’s capital in the twentieth century and argues that black girls and women living in Washington, D.C. used organizational and social spaces as a platform to imagine the possibilities of black girlhood. The Phyllis Wheatley YWCA, the Girl Scout Council of the Nation’s Capital, and the ritual of the debutante ball, which have not been compared together in one text, are the social spaces at the core of this study. Sources such as organizational papers, local and school newspapers, published oral histories, social scientific studies, and photographs show that these spaces functioned simultaneously at critical sites of uplift and civil rights work, education, pleasure, and leisure. Black girls and women used their participation in girls’ organizations to assert black girls’ right to a happy and healthy childhood.

Viewing black girlhood through the lens of organizations reveals both what black women thought about and desired for black girls, as well how girls used these spaces to for their own joys and pleasures. Rather than treating ideas about and representations of black girls separately from black girls’ lived experiences, as previous histories of black girlhood have done, this dissertation bridges both perspectives. Taking this two-pronged

approach shows how girls' organizations were mutually beneficial to black girls and women.

Although there were overlaps in membership and participation between the Phyllis Wheatley YWCA, the Girl Scout Council of the Nation's Capital, and the debutante ball, each took a unique approach in catering to black girls' needs and shaping the narrative of black girlhood. Organizational leaders used offered services and programming such as residences, camps, charm and beauty clinics, and etiquette lessons to develop girls and young women who participated in their program spiritually, morally, emotionally, and physically. At the same time, black girls contended with a desire to build friendships and romantic relationships, navigated the development of their personal values and physical bodies, and asserted themselves as citizens of Washington and the United States more broadly. At times, organizational leaders and young participants had the same vision of girlhood, and at other times did not. But for both parties, the YWCA, the Girl Scouts, and debutante ball served were spaces where they could develop this vision.

This project contributes to what we know about black girls with its discussion of friendships, interpersonal relationships, and girls' relationships with their physical bodies. Whether these relationships brought joy and sense of belonging, or were anxiety-ridden, organizations played an important role in fostering them. "That charm of all girlhood" also expands how we view middle-class black women's leadership in social organizations. They were not solely concerned about social status, but were committed to cultivating black girls into successful black women. Looking at black girls' social organizations frames the construction of black girlhood as an intergenerational project.

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## Introduction

Three adolescent girls entered a streetcar wearing “boys’ hats” and brightly colored and patterned clothing accessorized with brass belts and buttons. During their thirty-minute journey, the girls shared a box of bonbons, which spilled on the floor of the streetcar. At the supposed dismay of other passengers and the driver, they laughed and chatted loudly with each other. This scene appeared in a story titled, “The Loud Girl,” in Silas X. Floyd’s *Short Stories for Colored People both Old and Young*, published in 1920. He believed that his stories would enlighten the minds of young people and aid them in their development into “good men and good women.”<sup>1</sup> In “The Loud Girl,” he cautioned young female readers against loud dress, behavior, and speech. In his description of the “Loud Girl” he wrote, “She often cherishes the illusions that the attention such manners attract is combined with admiration, when the truth is that those who witness her strange conduct are simply wondering how it is possible for her to throw to the winds that charm of all girlhood—modesty.”<sup>2</sup> Floyd framed his story as a cautionary tale and a critique of what he deemed garish behavior, but the scene could be read differently. Rather than about girls behaving badly, young readers could have imagined the story could as a depiction of friendship and camaraderie among black girls. While Floyd considered modesty and reserved behavior to be hallmarks of girlhood, the girls in the story likely viewed belonging to a friend group and the pursuit of pleasure as important markers of black girlhood.

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<sup>1</sup> Silas X. Floyd, *Short Stories for Colored People both Old and Young* in Edward S. Green, *The National Capital Code of Etiquette Combined with Silas X. Floyd’s Short Stories* (Washington, D.C.: Austin Jenkins Co., 1920), 6.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid 55

In the early decades of the twentieth century, writers like Floyd published *Short Stories for Colored People both Old and Young* and other conduct manuals to instruct and socialize black youth on social etiquette and personal care and comportment.<sup>3</sup>

However, storybooks and conduct manuals were only one space where black girls learned how to navigate girlhood and develop into black women. Organizations and social spaces for youth, which also emerged at the turn of the century in the United States, were also important sites for these lessons. Still, black girl-centered social spaces did much more than just tell girls how they should behave.

"That charm of all girlhood," is an organizational and social history that examines black girlhood through the lens of girls' organizations and rituals from the 1930s-1960s. I argue that black girls and women used these social spaces, namely, The Phyllis Wheatley YWCA (PW YWCA), the Girl Scout Council of the Nation's Capital (GSCNC), and the tradition of the debutante ball, as a platform to construct and experience the possibilities of black girlhood. An analysis of both the perspectives of organizations and their members reveals that these organizations and rituals functioned simultaneously as critical sites of race work, education, and the pursuit of leisure and pleasure.

By utilizing these spaces for uplift and civil rights work, education, and leisure, black women organizational leaders and their girl and young women participants challenged the idea that black girls were incapable or unworthy of the status of girlhood. Instead, they asserted that black girls were entitled to the same rights and joys of girlhood

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<sup>3</sup> For a sustained discussion of Floyd's *Short Stories* and other conduct manuals from the late 19<sup>th</sup>- early 20<sup>th</sup> century, see Michele Mitchell, "The Righteous Propagation of the Nation: Conduct, Conflict, and Sexuality," *Righteous Propagation: African Americans and the Politics of Racial Destiny after Reconstruction* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 108-140.

that their white counterparts possessed. Claims for black girlhood were embedded within, and essential to, larger claims for black citizenship and demands for America to live up to its democratic ideals. For black girls and women living in the nation's capital, this argument had a symbolic importance unique to African Americans living in Washington. As the seat of the United States government, D.C. was meant to be the symbolic beacon of the American ethos of democracy. And as such, black activists and community leaders fought to make D.C. mean "democracy's capital."<sup>4</sup> Girls' organizational leaders, who were mostly black women, and black Girl Scouts, YWCA members, and debutantes were also included in this struggle.

In 1938, Julia West Hamilton, then President of the PW YWCA penned a letter to Oklahoma Senator Elmer Thomas, chairman of the Senate Subcommittee on District Appropriations, in response to the proposed closing of the National Training School for Girls (not to be confused with Nannie Helen Burroughs' National Training School for Women and Girls), an institution for white and black delinquent and abandoned girls. She wrote, "The Negro girls of the District of Columbia have been seriously discriminated against for years..."<sup>5</sup> Hamilton's letter positioned black girls as citizens of the District

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<sup>4</sup> Gregory M. Borchardt, "Making D.C. Democracy's Capital: Local Activism, the 'Federal State,' and the Struggle for Civil Rights in Washington, D.C.," Ph.D. Dissertation, The George Washington University (2013).

<sup>5</sup> "Letter from Mrs. Julia West Hamilton to Senator Elmer Thomas," Undated, PW YWCA Collection, Box: 392-1719, Folder: Mrs. Hamilton, MSRC. Hamilton was elected President of the PW YWCA in 1930 and served in this position until her death in 1955. In 1938, the District of Columbia House Appropriations Committee proposed a plan to close the National Training School for Girls. At the time of the proposal, the school had a reputation for rioting, overcrowding, and incompetent leadership. The superintendent of the school, Dr. Carrie Smith Weaver, was swiftly removed from her position without explanation in 1937. The plan was to remove the black girls to Blue Plains, a facility for delinquent black boys. Representative Ross Alexander Collins of Mississippi, a Democrat and chairman of the House Subcommittee on District Appropriations, led the charge in closing the school. This is the same congressman, introduced in the first chapter, that when asked to help come up with a plan to aid the influx of black migrant teenage girls, said that he could not help the situation because his constituents 'wouldn't stand for spending all that money on niggers.' Representative Arthur Wergs Mitchell of Illinois, the first African American Democrat elected to Congress, expressed similar sentiments as Hamilton in the *Washington Post*. He argued that moving the

whom the government and community failed and who deserved equal treatment. Each of the girls and women discussed in this study may not have joined picket lines or participated in political organizing (though many of them did), but by insisting on inclusion, and eventually integration, safe housing, a healthy girlhood, the beauty of black girls, and a space to build friendships and socialize with peers, black girls and women in Washington affirmed that black girls could and should have a girlhood.

## **Literature Review**

### *Black Girlhood in the United States*

This dissertation shows how community leaders and black girls imagined black girlhood. In this study, black girlhood encompasses both ideas and experiences. Histories of black girlhood in the United States have examined what adult African Americans thought about black girls and what they sought to provide for them, as well as black girls' inner worlds. Nazera Sadiq Wright's *Black Girlhood in the Nineteenth Century* traces the representations and cultural significance of black girls within black literary production: slave narratives, newspapers, short stories, novels, and conduct manuals. She argues that African American writers employed the figure of the black girl across these various texts to advocate for social and political causes like abolition and argue for full citizenship

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black girls to Blue Plains would result in 'rioting and other behavior which might well become a scandal in the eyes of the community and Nation.' Women of the Association of American University Women and the League of Women Voters also disapproved the closing of the school. For Mitchell quote see "Mitchell Urges House to Save Girl's School: Colored Representative Opposes Sending Inmates to Boys' Home," *The Washington Post*, March 19, 1938, X3. For more on the National Training School for Girls controversy, see James D. Secrest, "Report Urges Closing Girls' Prison School: House Group Seeks Savings by Transfer of Delinquents," *The Washington Post*, January 26, 1938, 1; "Costs Cut 60 Pct. At Reform School," *The Washington Post*, January 16, 1938, 5; "False Economy," *The Washington Post*, March 3, 1938, X8; James D. Secrest, "Senate Slated to Keep Girls' Home in Bill: No Other Place for Them to Go, in Opinion of Chairman Thomas," *The Washington Post*, February 10, 1938, X17; See Jessie Ash Arndt, "Women Voters Oppose 'Shacks' at Blue Plains: Further Study of Children's Institutions is Urged; A.A.U.W. Speaker Assails Curtailment of School Board Power," *The Washington Post*, April 5, 1938, X11; "Women Voters Hear Program for Children: Report Asks Training School Kept Where it is Another Year," *The Washington Post*, December 14, 1938, 2.

rights. While black girls sometimes served as cautionary tales, at other times they represented the hopes and aspirations of the progress of the race. Gender, age, and race worked together to shape representations of black girls and their processes of coming of age.<sup>6</sup>

Black girls embodied the hopes of race progress in the nineteenth century black literary tradition, and they continued to be emblematic of this through the twentieth century. In *South Side Girls: Growing up in the Great Migration*, Marcia Chatelain views the Great Migration through the lens of black girlhood. She argues that, “As African American parents and community leaders experienced major changes in their economic, social, and cultural lives during the Migration, their outreach to girls led them to define black girlhood in relationship to their anxieties about urbanization, as well as their greatest hopes for the era.”<sup>7</sup> Chatelain’s book centers on community institutions like churches, industrial and public schools, commercialized leisure spaces, and camp. Although *South Side Girls* includes excerpts of black girls’ voices, mostly from interviews conducted for sociologist E. Franklin Frazier’s *The Negro Family in Chicago*, Chatelain’s study, like Wright’s, is ultimately about discourses and representations of black girlhood.<sup>8</sup>

While Wright and Chatelain offer fresh perspectives on African American literary production and the Great Migration, respectively, LaKisha Simmons’ *Crescent City Girls: The Lives of Young Black Women in Segregated New Orleans* offers a fresh

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<sup>6</sup> Nazera Sadiq Wright, *Black Girlhood in the Nineteenth Century* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2016).

<sup>7</sup> Marcia Chatelain, *South Side Girls: Growing Up in the Great Migration* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), 2.

<sup>8</sup> E. Franklin Frazier, *The Negro Family in Chicago* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1932).

interpretation of life and coming-of-age in the Jim Crow South. Using the tools of cultural geography, the history of sexuality, and affect studies, Simmons explores the various ways in which black girls living in New Orleans navigated life and shaped their subjectivities within the double bind: the oppressiveness of segregation and racialized violence on one hand, and the constraints of African American middle-class notions of respectability on the other. Simmons's work is very much grounded in black girls' inner worlds and lived experiences.<sup>9</sup>

Rather than looking at the perspectives of black girls and women as separate realms, as previous works have done, this work bridges both perspectives. Looking at the perspectives of adults and youth in tandem, rather than as two separate ways of understanding black girlhood, challenges the assumption that the desires of adults and youth were oppositional. To be sure, both parties at times had different desires or motivations, but they mutually benefitted from these same social sites, using them to construct what black girlhood could or should be. Social spaces such as the Girl Scouts, the YWCA, and the debutante ball are the ideal sites to study this because they illustrate the interplay between adult leaders and their young participants.

Still, “That charm of all girlhood” is indebted to the work of historians of black girlhood. One of the claims of this dissertation is that organizations functioned simultaneously as sites of work for the uplift and progress for the race *and* pleasure and leisure for the girls who participated. Marcia Chatelain's concept of the “politics of play,” a term that she introduces in the final chapter of *South Side Girls*, deeply influences this argument. The politics of play describes how:

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<sup>9</sup> LaKisha Michelle Simmons, *Crescent City Girls: The Lives of Young Black Women in Segregated New Orleans* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015).



Black leaders and civic organizations used advocacy for black girls' participation in children's organizations to make claims about blacks' fitness for citizenship and social equality. Adults not only promoted black children's participation in the Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts, and Camp Fire Girls to signal their right to full citizenship, but also did so to argue a case for a protected black childhood.<sup>10</sup>

I use Chatelain's politics of play as a theoretical framework for understanding the ways in which the leaders of the organizations at the core of my study envisioned the function of girls' organizations beyond leisure or socialization. For example, African American women in Washington's scouting movement insisted that black girls should be included in the organization because they deserved access to the same character-building opportunities that white scouts enjoyed.

In the final chapter of *Crescent City Girls*, Simmons discusses black girls' pleasure cultures, which included play at the local black branch of the YWCA and Mardi Gras. The historical project of locating pleasure in black girls' lives is important because otherwise, their "lives are narrated only by the trauma of Jim Crow."<sup>11</sup> I would also add that locating pleasure in their lives helps to move the discussion beyond the meanings that African American adults placed on black girlhood and black girls' lives. Simmons argues that sites of pleasure allowed girls to escape the traumas of Jim Crow, and that the friendships that girls built in these spaces were necessary for healing from these traumas.

While this argument is certainly true, this dissertation pushes past the race-specific motivations behind black girls' pursuits of pleasure, to their age-specific needs.

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<sup>10</sup> Marcia Chatelain, *South Side Girls: Growing Up in the Great Migration* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), 130.

<sup>11</sup> Simmons 175. For a discussion of the need for black women's historians to think more about pleasure see Evelyn Hammonds, "Black (W)holes and the Geometry of Black Female Sexuality," *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 6:2+3 (1994), 126-145; and Hammonds, "Toward a Genealogy of Black Female Sexuality: The Problematic of Silence," in M. Jacqui Alexander and Chandra Talpade Mohante, eds., *Feminist Genealogies, Colonial Legacies, Democratic Futures* (New York: Routledge, 1997); Brittney C. Cooper, *Beyond Respectability: The Intellectual Thought of Race Women* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2017), 74-75.

For example, a young African American domestic worker in D.C. could socialize with other young women at the PW YWCA to escape the drudgery of her employment. However, at the same time, a working- or middle-class teenager could spend time at the PW YWCA, simply because she wanted to make friends or find a space to continue socializing with her current friends outside of the home. Exploring social spaces like the Girl Scouts, YWCA, and debutante ball, and the relationships that members and participants forged there, offers insight into black girls' everyday lives, not just their racialized experiences, but their age-specific needs and desires to socialize.

### *D.C. History*

Historians have undertaken regional and local studies of black girlhood. While Susan K. Cahn's *Sexual Reckonings: Southern Girls in a Troubling Age* is a regional study of white and black girls, Chatelain and Simmons' texts are situated in Chicago and New Orleans, respectively.<sup>12</sup> These previous studies have provided insight on black girlhood in the twentieth-century urban North and South, but Washington D.C., "a corridor city...[where] Northern and Southern roots converged," is missing in this body of literature.<sup>13</sup> In fact, childhood in the nation's capital is a topic of historical inquiry that has not been adequately examined. A collection of published oral histories titled *Growing up in Washington* features excerpts of oral histories of adults from various racial, ethnic, and class backgrounds who grew up in the nation's capital throughout the twentieth century.<sup>14</sup> This edited volume provides anecdotal evidence of the various ways that

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<sup>12</sup> Susan K. Cahn, *Sexual Reckonings: Southern Girls in a Troubling Age* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007).

<sup>13</sup> Treva B. Lindsey, *Colored No More: Reinventing Black Womanhood in Washington, D.C.* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2017), 137.

<sup>14</sup> Historical Society of Washington, D.C. and Jill Connors, ed. *Growing Up in Washington, D.C.: An Oral History*. Charleston: Arcadia, 2001.

gender, race, class, and ethnicity shaped childhood experiences, but, apart from a brief foreword and introduction, the oral history snippets are not grounded in any historical analysis. As the first study of girlhood in Washington, D.C., this dissertation opens a window into understanding what it meant to grow up black and female in the nation's capital and shows how claims for black girlhood were embedded within and essential to larger claims for black citizenship in the nation's capital and beyond.

Between 1920 and 1930, Washington's African American population grew from 110,00 to 132,000, a twenty percent increase. In 1930, there were 69,843 black women who lived in the city. This meant that over half of black Washingtonians living in Washington were women.<sup>15</sup> Historians have traced the professional, organizational, activist, and everyday lives of black women in D.C. in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Sharon Harley examines the social uplift work of black female teachers in the nation's capital between 1890 and 1930, while Treva Lindsey explores the ways black women in Washington pursued a New Negro Womanhood to fight against gender and racial oppression.<sup>16</sup> Harley and Lindsey's histories focus mostly on professional and elite black women, but Elizabeth Clark-Lewis's *Living In, Living Out: African American Domestics in Washington, D.C., 1910-1940*, centers the lives of black domestics who migrated from the rural South. She uses oral histories to trace their experiences as

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<sup>15</sup> The 1920 and 1930 census figures appear in Spencer R. Crew, "Melding the Old and the New: The Modern African American Community, 1930-1960," in Francine Curro Cary, ed., *Washington Odyssey: A Multicultural History of the Nation's Capital*, (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Books, 1996), 208 and Sharon Harley, "Beyond the Classroom: The Organizational Lives of Black Female Educators in the District of Columbia, 1890-1930," *The Journal of Negro Education* 51:3, The Impact of Black Women in Education: An Historical Overview (Summer 1982), 254.

<sup>16</sup> Sharon Harley, "Beyond the Classroom: The Organizational Lives of Black Female Educators in the District of Columbia, 1890-1930," *Journal of Negro Education* 51:3 (1982), 254-265 and Treva B. Lindsey, *Colored No More: Reinventing Black Womanhood in Washington, D.C.* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2017).

migrants and their fight to transition from domestic workers that lived-in their employers' homes to the increased freedom and dignity of living-out.<sup>17</sup> Looking much later in the twentieth century, Ann M. Valk examines grassroots feminist organizing in Washington in the 1960s and 1970s. *Radical Sisters: Second-Wave Feminism and Black Liberation in Washington, D.C.* traces intersections between second wave feminism, the Black Power movement, and other social movements in Washington, D.C. such as anti-poverty and welfare rights activism. She shows how each of these movements overlapped in black women's work to advance feminist policies in the nation's capital.<sup>18</sup>

These texts highlight the diverse experiences of black women living in the nation's capital, but there are questions that remain unanswered. In what kind of world did the women at the center of these narratives come of age? How did class and color shape black girlhood and their coming-of-age processes? What were their needs and desires? The chapters that follow show how black girls and young women who lived in Washington cultivated relationships with their peers, prepared for womanhood, developed a sense of self both internally and physically, and how they used organizations to facilitate these developments.

### *Girls' Organizations/Rituals*

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<sup>17</sup> Elizabeth Clark-Lewis, *Living In, Living Out: African American Domestic Workers in Washington, D.C., 1910-1940* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1994). For more on the ways in which race and gender shaped black women's paid labor in the District see Sharon Harley, "Black Women in a Southern City: Washington, D.C. 1890-1920" in Joanne V. Hawks and Sheila L. Skemp, eds., *Sex, Race, and the Role of Women in the South* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1983), 59-74.

<sup>18</sup> Ann M. Valk, *Radical Sisters: Second-Wave Feminism and Black Liberation in Washington, D.C.* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2010). For more on black women's activism in D.C. in earlier periods see Brittney C. Cooper, "'Proper, Dignified Agitation': The Evolution of Mary Church Terrell, *Beyond Respectability: The Intellectual Thought of Race Women* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2017) and Mary-Elizabeth Murphy, "'The Servant Campaigns': African American Women and the Politics of Economic Citizenship in Washington, D.C. in the 1930s," *Journal of Urban History* 44:2 (2018), 187-202.

“‘That charm of all girlhood’” centers the experiences of African Americans, and the uniqueness of these experiences for black Washingtonians, in national organizations and rituals. Histories of U.S. girls’ organizations focus mainly on prominent groups such as the Girl Scouts, the Camp Fire Girls, and the YWCA, and most of these histories are national in scope.<sup>19</sup> Often, these national stories are dominated by the voices of the largely white leadership and membership. Lillian Williams’ *A Bridge to the Future: The History of Diversity in Girl Scouting* is an institutional history of the Girl Scouts of the United States of America’s (GSUSA) evolving policies regarding race and inclusion. In “‘The Very Best Influence’: Josephine Holloway and Girl Scouting in Nashville’s African-American Community,” Elisabeth Israels Perry tells the story of Josephine Holloway and her quest to bring Girl Scouting to African American girls in Nashville. Beginning in the late 1920s, Holloway led the formation of several informal Girl Scout troops formed throughout Nashville until the local Girl Scout Council finally approved the creation of African American troops in the early 1940s. Holloway’s leadership not only provided a space for African American girls, but she also inspired other black women leaders within the community.<sup>20</sup> Looking at these organizations at the local level shapes the way that we view them in ways that national studies do not allow.

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<sup>19</sup> For examples of national studies of U.S. girls’ organizations see Wendy C. Sterne, “The Formation of the Scouting Movement and the Gendering of Citizenship,” Ph.D. Dissertation, The University of Wisconsin (1993); Lillian S. Williams, *A Bridge to the Future: The History of Diversity in Girl Scouting* (New York: Girl Scouts of the U.S.A.), 1996; Lauren Ann Tedesco, “A Nostalgia for Home: Daring and Domesticity in Girl Scouting and Girls’ Fiction, 1913-1933,” Ph.D. Dissertation, Texas A&M University (1999); Susan Miller, *Growing Girls: The Natural Origins of Girls’ Organization in America*, (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2007); Jessica Foley, “‘Meeting the Needs of Today’s Girl’: Youth Organizations and the Making of Modern Girlhood, 1945-1980,” PhD Dissertation, Brown University (2010); Jennifer Helgren, *American Girls and Global Responsibility: A New Relation to the World during the Early Cold War* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2017).

<sup>20</sup> Elisabeth Israels Perry, “‘The Very Best Influence’: Josephine Holloway and Girl Scouting in Nashville’s African-American Community,” *Tennessee Historical Quarterly* 52 (Summer 1993), 73-85.

Taking a local approach in an analysis of the Girl Scouts is particularly important, specifically when examining race, because of the decentralized structure of the organization. This meant that while the Girl Scouts of the United States of America (GSUSA) could declare that scouting was “for all girls,” local councils ultimately determined how inclusive it would be. In short, each local council has the potential to offer its own unique history of black involvement in scouting. Taking a local approach to the study of the YWCA also offers a different perspective of the organization. The black YWCA movement in Washington was unique compared to the experiences of black women in the organization in other cities. The YWCA operated under a branch system, with black “branches” that came under the control of white YWCA associations.<sup>21</sup> However, Washington’s PW YWCA preceded and maintained its independence from D.C.’s white YWCA.

The debate about what is gained and lost by a national study versus a local study is not as important with the debutante ball. The actual ritual did not vary greatly from city to city or region to region. The primary difference was that in some cities, certain cotillions were more prominent or well-known than others. In Washington, D.C., the all-male Bachelor-Benedicts sponsored arguably the most prominent cotillion in Washington. Karal Ann Marling’s *Debutantes: Rites and Regalia of American Debdom* is the most comprehensive historical study of the place of the debutante ball in American culture. She traces the ritual from early America’s elite circles through the 1990s with

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<sup>21</sup> Judith Weisenfeld, *African American Women and Christian Activism: New York’s Black YWCA, 1905-1945* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 9; Nancy Marie Robertson, *Christian Sisterhood, Race Relations, and the YWCA, 1960-46* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2007).

high school proms.<sup>22</sup> In *Relative Intimacy: Fathers, Daughters, and Postwar American Culture*, Rachel Devlin discusses the cultural currency of debutantes in postwar African American culture.<sup>23</sup> Lawrence Otis Graham's *Our Kind of People* provides an insider's look at the institutions and customs of America's black upper class. His discussion of debutante balls consists of anecdotes from past participants and sponsors, however, much like the oral history excerpts in *Growing up in Washington*, much of Graham's book lacks historical analysis.<sup>24</sup> Katrina Hazzard-Donald's *Jookin'* is a history of social dance in the African-American community. Here, she discusses the cotillion as a black elite tradition that rejected black culture and embraced Euro-American cultural aesthetics.<sup>25</sup>

Each of these works centers on one aspect of the cotillion. Marling and Graham's works are largely about class identity, while Devlin characterizes debutantes as representatives of the race. Hazzard-Donald's take on the debutante ball is also about class identity, but specifically, the performative nature of it. This dissertation draws from each of these perspectives in order to provide a comprehensive narrative of the black cotillion.

While there have been separate studies on the Girl Scouts, the YWCA, and the ritual of the debutante ball, no one has compared all three together in one text. There have, however, been comparative studies of the Girl Scouts and YWCA, such as Jessica Foley's "Meeting the Needs of Today's Girl': Youth Organizations and the Making of Modern Girlhood, 1945-1980," and Jennifer Helgren's comparison of the Girl Scouts and

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<sup>22</sup> Karal Ann Marling, "A Different Kind of Debut," *Debutantes: Rites and Regalia of American Debdom* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2001), 152-172.

<sup>23</sup> Rachel Devlin: *Relative Intimacy: Fathers, Daughters, and Postwar American Culture* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 122-135.

<sup>24</sup> Lawrence Otis Graham, *Our Kind of People: Inside America's Black Upper-Class* (New York: HarperCollins, 1999), 45-52.

<sup>25</sup> Katrina Hazzard-Donald, *Jookin'* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1999), 162-171.

YWCA Y-Teens in *American Girls and Global Responsibility: A New Relation to the World during the Early Cold War*.<sup>26</sup> The Girl Scouts and the YWCA lend themselves more naturally to comparison because they began around the same time and had similar missions. In addition to this, the debutante ball was not sponsored by a singular organization. Various social clubs sponsored them. Finally, a young woman had to be selected to debut, she could not just sign up or join, as was the case with the Girl Scouts or the YWCA. However, a comparison of these three groups is fruitful. One reason being that it provides the opportunity to discuss a broader range of black girls' experiences.

The Phyllis Wheatley YWCA, the Girl Scout Council of the Nation's Capital, and the ritual of the debutante ball were alike in that they each were girl-centered spaces dedicated to crafting an idealized image and experience of black girlhood. However, each catered to different segments of the population. While the PW YWCA and GSCNC enlisted black girls from a range of socioeconomic backgrounds, the debutante ball, sponsored by elite private clubs, were available to black girls only in middle- and upper-class families. Collectively, this grouping of organizations produces a wider range of class experiences and shows the ways that class shaped aspirations and expressions of black girlhood. Furthermore, this comparative approach reveals the limitations of girls' organizations as sites for the conceptualization of black girlhood. If leaders and members

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<sup>26</sup> Some notable comparative studies of girls' organizations include Jessica Foley's comparison of the Girl Scouts and the YWCA in "Meeting the Needs of Today's Girl': Youth Organizations and the Making of Modern Girlhood, 1945-1980," PhD Dissertation, Brown University (2010); Jennifer Helgren's study of the Girl Scouts, Campfire Girls, and YWCA Y-Teens in *American Girls and Global Responsibility: A New Relation to the World during the Early Cold War* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2017); Another example is Susan A. Miller's comparison of the Girl Scouts and Campfire Girls in *Growing Girls: The Natural Origins of Girls' Organizations* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2007).



used participation in these organizations to make a claim about black girlhood as a protected status and black girls as equal with their white counterparts, then what about girls who could not participate or were excluded from participation?

## **Methodology**

### *Organizational and Social History*

““That charm of all girlhood”” is both an organizational and social history. While I am interested in what organizations thought about black girls, and how their expectations for black girls shaped their programming, I take seriously how black girls thought about themselves, their desires, and how they were agents. This two-pronged approach reveals the interplay between black girls and women in the construction and experiences of black girlhoods and highlights the multiple functions of girls’ organizations in black communities.

This dissertation uses organizational manuscripts, newspapers, oral histories, and photographs, to trace the missions and evolving functions of girls’ organizations, as well as their ideas about black girlhood and the programs and activities that they sponsored to execute these ideas. The PW YWCA’s collection is housed at the Moorland-Spingarn Research Center at Howard University and the GSCNC’s records are housed at the Council’s history center in Frederick, Maryland. Capturing the debutante ball in the archive is more difficult. Most of these events were sponsored by private elite clubs. Some, like the Bachelor-Benedicts, did not leave much behind in the archive. With the debutante ball, newspapers, photographs, and cotillion souvenir programs allow for a discursive analysis of the significance of the ritual. Still, PW YWCA and Girl Scout archives have their own set of limits. The first twenty-five years of the PW YWCA’s existence are not well-documented in the archive, which has also shaped the

chronological parameters of this study. Similarly, the GSCNC's collection, particularly its material related to the first five years of African American involvement, is thinner than material from the 1940s and beyond. Despite these limitations, the organizations and ritual that are the focus of this study are overall well-documented.

Archival evidence shows how black women organizational leaders used their social clubs to make claims about black citizenship, transmit values of black womanhood, and to offer black girls a safe and supervised space to be girls. However, focusing solely on the organizations runs the risk of creating “a perfectly serviceable text about black women’s work with girls, rather than an actual book about girls,” as Marcia Chatelain explains about developing her study of black girls in Great Migration-era Chicago.<sup>27</sup> The voices and experiences of black girls appear in snippets of organizational reports, newspaper clippings, and oral histories, but ultimately, these sources reveal more about what organizational leaders thought about black girls and how they desired to mold them.

While it is possible that a young woman joined the PW YWCA or became a Girl Scout or debutante because of parental coercion, this oversimplifies the relationship between organizations and the girls that joined them. In her study of the YWCA and white working-class girlhood in Detroit from 1900-1930, Rebecca Poyourow cautions historians to not oversimplify the relationship between organizations and their members as one of coercion and resistance. She writes, “Clubs were indeed efforts of reformers, philanthropists, and fledgling social service professionals hoping to shape young workers’ use of leisure time, but that project was neither ineffectual or unwelcome in

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<sup>27</sup> Corinne T. Field, Tammy-Charelle Owens, Marcia Chatelain, LaKisha Simmons, Abosede George, and Rhian Keyse, “The History of Black Girlhood: Recent Innovations and Future Directions,” *Journal of the History of Childhood and Youth* 9:3 (Fall 2016), 388.

club members' experience."<sup>28</sup> By thinking about black girls' decisions to join an organization, we can begin to think about the inner worlds of black girls and their interpersonal relationships. These peer relationships have received little historical attention, but thinking about these relationships expands how we think about black girls' everyday lives.

Published oral histories, sociological studies, newspaper accounts that feature girls' voices, yearbooks, and school newspapers amplifies the desires of black girls, their involvement in girls' organizations, and black girl culture in the nation's capital. Whenever possible, this dissertation uses the voices of PW YWCA members, scouts, and debutantes to show the ways in which adolescent girls aligned with or diverged from their organizations' goals and visions of black girlhood. Where the voices of the members are not present, I include the voices of adolescent girls who grew up in Washington in this period, but were not involved with the YWCA, Girl Scouts, or cotillion tradition. The voices of the non-members are still instructive, because they point to how organizations could have been appealing to black girls growing up in the nation's capital, or the challenges that they may have faced in recruiting them. The voices of participants and non-participants are woven into each section.

One of the richest sources of girls' voices comes from Howard University sociologist E. Franklin Frazier's Negro Youth Study, conducted between 1937 and 1939. The aim of this study was to understand what it meant to grow up black in Washington. The findings of the study were published in Frazier's *Negro Youth at the Crossways*:

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<sup>28</sup> Rebecca Poyourow, "From Working Girl to Adolescent: The Detroit YWCA and the Transformation of Sociability Among Working-Class Young Women, 1900-1930," PhD Dissertation, University of Michigan (2003), 11.

*Their Personality Development in the Middle States*. The book was part of the five book American Youth Commission (AYC) series published by the American Council of Education. Frazier's team interviewed both boys and girls. The girls interviewed for Frazier's study were residents of Washington, D.C., came from various socio-economic backgrounds, and ranged in age from twelve through eighteen. Interviewers for the study asked adolescent girls various questions about their blackness and prejudice, as well as their sexual and social lives. Out of the twenty interviews located for this dissertation, nearly half of the girls discussed social clubs that they and their peers started on their own or pre-existing organizations that they joined, like the PW YWCA.

I join other scholars of black girlhood and sexuality who are engaged in the historical project of re-reading the studies of Frazier, as well as youth studies conducted by other black sociologists during the same period.<sup>29</sup> As Marcia Chatelain and LaKisha Simmons have argued elsewhere, Frazier and his contemporaries often used black girls' responses, particularly regarding their sexual behavior and ideas about sexuality, as a tool for identifying pathology. However, this dissertation uses the Frazier interviews as a window into thinking about how black girls constructed and negotiated personal relationships and relationships with the organizations that they joined. This critical re-reading of Frazier is important because it offers a corrective to the narrative of pathology that Frazier presented.

This dissertation also pushes back against Frazier's conceptualization of black clubwomen. In *Black Bourgeoisie*, Frazier railed against Washington's black elite and

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<sup>29</sup> LaKisha Michelle Simmons, *Crescent City Girls: The Lives of Young Black Women in Segregated New Orleans* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015); Susan K. Cahn, *Sexual Reckonings: Southern Girls in a Troubling Age* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007); Marcia Chatelain, *South Side Girls: Growing Up in the Great Migration* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015).

middle class. He pointed out what he characterized as their frivolous behavior and argued that they lived in a fantasy world. Black clubwomen in particular were a target of his ire. However, looking at these women's leadership in social organizations as this dissertation does, presents a different image of middle-class black women.<sup>30</sup> Instead of the status-obsessed and snobbish women that Frazier presented in *Black Bourgeoisie*, this study shows how black women used their leadership in girls' social organizations as a way to improve the well-being of Washington's black girls. For example, as Chapter Three of this dissertation shows, debutante ball organizers used an extravagant, and some would argue frivolous, event like the cotillion to challenge the racist narrative that black girls and women were unattractive and undesirable, a radical notion in the early to mid-twentieth century.

Juxtaposing the perspectives of the organizational leaders and young members shows the ways each viewed the purpose of girls' organizations, at times similarly and differently, and opens the question of how effective and relevant organizations were and could be. It also demonstrates the ways that adults and girls worked together to make meaning out of black girlhood through their involvement in organizations. This challenges the idea that youth organizations were spaces solely for social control. Finally, juxtaposing both positions shows that ultimately, organizational leaders adapted to changes in black girl culture and their needs to remain relevant in the lives of their members.

### *Terminology and Stages of Girlhood*

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<sup>30</sup> E. Franklin Frazier, *Black Bourgeoisie* (New York: Free Press), 1957.

This dissertation uses the boundaries and definitions of “girl” and “girlhood” that the PW YWCA, GSCNC, and debutante tradition put in place. “Girl” is a contested term, and no one solid definition exists. Historians of childhood have concluded that age and the stages of childhood and adolescence are not merely biological markers. For black girls in particular, it is important to think about who exactly counts as a girl. Historian Corinne T. Field writes,

Historians have noted how the word girl and its global translations have functioned to mark out an ambiguous status between childhood and womanhood. Others have emphasized that racial distinctions are fundamental to the concepts of childhood and adulthood.<sup>31</sup>

For example, Tammy-Cherelle Owens contends that white people “stripped” black girls of ‘time privileges’ through their “refusal to recognize [them] as either children or adults.”<sup>32</sup> Additionally, the term girl has also historically been used as a derogatory way of addressing adult black women, and a way to deny black womanhood.

The girls and young women in this study are between the ages of ten and nineteen. This is a broad range, but the organizations under examination here, however, used chronological age to demarcate and acknowledge the various stages of girlhood. First, the national Young Women’s Christian Association (YWCA USA) created its Girl Reserve program in 1918, and the PW YWCA adopted the program in the same year. Girl Reserves were between the ages of twelve and eighteen. The program itself was relatively broad, but because Girl Reserve clubs were typically formed in schools, girls who were close in age grouped themselves together.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Corinne T. Field, quoted in “The History of Black Girlhood: Recent Innovations and Future Directions,” 384-385.

<sup>32</sup> Field 385.

<sup>33</sup> YWCA USA, *The Girl Reserve Movement: A Manual for Advisers*, (National Board, Young Women’s Christian Associations: New York, 1921).

When Juliette Gordon Low began the Girl Scouts in 1912, girls between the ages of ten and seventeen were eligible for membership, and everyone entered at the same level. Scouts moved through the ranks based on experience, rather than age.<sup>34</sup> However, by the mid-1920s, the organization began to recognize the age-specific needs of girls. Additionally, Girl Scout scholar Ann Robertson argues that scouts “rejected this structure” because they “wanted to be with girls their own age.”<sup>35</sup> By 1938, there were three levels of girl scouting: Brownies (aged seven through nine), Intermediates (aged ten through thirteen), and Seniors (aged fourteen through seventeen). In 1963, the Girl Scouts updated the age levels. This update included the creation of the Cadette level, which included girls between the ages of eleven and fourteen.<sup>36</sup> Scouting activities were, and still are, based on age. In her discussion of scouting’s past and present, Robertson writes, “Activities are planned around the principle of progression. As girls grow, they take on increasingly more complex tasks.”<sup>37</sup> For example, African American Senior scouts in Washington travelled across Europe in the 1960s.<sup>38</sup> The most that younger scouts could expect to travel was to camp in another state.

Age was one of the criteria that cotillion organizers used to select debutantes. Debutantes were typically between the ages of sixteen and nineteen—near or at the end of high school or in their early years of college. The debutante ball differed from the Girl Reserves and the Girl Scouts in that it was a coming-of-age ritual where adolescent girls were ushered into womanhood. After taking their formal bow to society, debutantes were

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<sup>34</sup> Ann E. Robertson, *Girl Scout Council of the Nation’s Capital* (Charleston: Arcadia Publishing, 2013), 29

<sup>35</sup> Ibid 25

<sup>36</sup> Ibid 29

<sup>37</sup> Ibid 25

<sup>38</sup> “Itinerary for the Senior Girl Scout Troop 1302,” Girl Scout Council of the Nation’s Capital History Center, Frederick, Maryland. Herein GSCNC.

expected to take on “an adult role” within her community.<sup>39</sup> But more than a recognition of a young woman’s responsibility to lead in her community, the debutante ball also acknowledged her sexual maturity. Art historian Karal Ann Marling writes, “These are puberty-linked, female ceremonials certifying that a girl has become a woman ready for marriage.”<sup>40</sup> Here, cotillion organizers not only viewed age as a marker of capability to lead, but employed age as a biological category.

Throughout the dissertation, I use the terms “girl,” “teenager,” “adolescent,” or “young woman” to reference organizational members and participants. Here, the term “girl” functions as an umbrella term, based on how organizations used the term. The latter three terms specifically reference young people who are aged thirteen and older, or have reached puberty. For example, because the cotillion celebrated a debutantes’ entrance into womanhood, I typically use the term “young woman” to reference debutantes. Additionally, when I discuss dating culture in Chapter Four, I typically use the terms “adolescent” or “teenager.”

#### *Why D.C.*

This is the first study that examines social, political, and cultural life among African Americans in the nation’s capital through the lens of black girlhood. Just as importantly, situating this study in Washington presents a fresh narrative about how historians think about black girls’ lived experiences and black women’s leadership.

Marcia Chatelain’s and LaKisha Simmons’ works show how the social landscapes of Chicago and New Orleans, respectively, shaped experiences of black girlhood in

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<sup>39</sup> Karal Ann Marling, *Debutante: Rights and Regalia of American Debdom* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2004), 3.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid



distinct ways. First, New Orleans' black population consisted of both black Creoles and American blacks. Simmons illustrates how this distinction, in many ways, shaped where black girls lived, as well as how they viewed themselves and each other. Second, black New Orleanians lived in a city in the Deep South. Here, black girls experienced both the everyday microaggressions and more overt forms of Jim Crow violence daily. This profoundly impacted black girls' psyche and feelings of safety.<sup>41</sup> Chicago was also a segregated city, though not in the same way as New Orleans. African American migrant girls viewed Chicago as a "promised land" of sorts, that offered better educational and economic opportunities and a shield from the racial violence of the Jim Crow South. However, when they arrived, they soon realized housing and employment discrimination were rampant in the industrial northern city.<sup>42</sup>

Washington's status as a "corridor city—a city through which distinctly Northern and Southern roots converged," made it a unique place for African American girls to come of age.<sup>43</sup> Like New Orleans and Chicago, the nation's capital was also segregated. Although it was a Southern city, its culture of segregation was much more fluid than its southern neighbors. In *Colored No More*, historian Treva Lindsey argues that living in the nation's capital presented a unique set of possibilities for black women that was not available in other cities. As a "black intellectual and cultural capital since the mid-nineteenth century" and its designation as the federal city, Washington offered a sense of hope to African American women looking to improve their lives and shape their

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<sup>41</sup> Simmons

<sup>42</sup> Chatelain

<sup>43</sup> Lindsey 137

subjectivities. I argue that this had a profound effect on black girls' coming of age process.

As the home of Howard University and the federal government, which provided federal jobs, the city drew a significant number of educated, professional blacks. In addition to this class of upwardly-mobile black professionals, there were several elite "old families" that descended from free blacks, blacks who purchased their freedom "at least one or two generations before slavery ended," or mixed-race parentage.<sup>44</sup> Additionally, the symbolic importance of D.C. as the seat of American democracy, offered black Washingtonians a sense of hope and "a particular power to challenge the federal government to live up to America's stated national ideals."<sup>45</sup> To see such a significant concentration of education, middle-class African Americans likely shaped what girls and young women deemed possible for their own lives' trajectories.

The YWCA and Girl Scouts were both national organizations, and black debutante balls occurred in various cities throughout the United States such as New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles. With D.C. as the focal point, this dissertation adds local nuance to national histories of girls' social spaces and traces the ways in which these spaces in Washington were either representative or exceptional.

The YWCA, Girl Scouts, and debutante ball each had a unique history in Washington. The PW YWCA, founded in 1905, preceded the white YWCA in the city. It was independent from, rather than a branch of the white YWCA. This was not the case

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<sup>44</sup> Graham 223; See also Willard B. Gatewood, "Washington: Capital of the Colored Aristocracy," *Aristocrats of Color: The Black Elite, 1880-1920* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 39-68.

<sup>45</sup> Gregory M. Borchardt, "Making D.C. Democracy's Capital: Local Activism, the 'Federal State,' and the Struggle for Civil Rights in Washington, D.C.," Ph.D. Dissertation, The George Washington University (2013), 5.

for black YWCAs in other cities.<sup>46</sup> In 1946, the national body of the YWCA (YWCA USA), passed its Interracial Charter, which desegregated the YWCA and committed it to ‘pioneer in an interracial experience that shall be increasingly democratic and Christian.’<sup>47</sup> Prior to the passage of the charter, the organization operated under a branch system. African American “branches” were part of the larger (white) central associations. Although branches had some autonomy over day-to-day operations, they were often “financially dependent upon and administratively subordinate to” the central associations.<sup>48</sup> The independence of the PW YWCA, and its battle to remain so, made it unique among other African American YWCAs.

The Girl Scouts began in Savannah in 1912, but founder Juliette Gordon Low established its first national headquarters in Washington, D.C. in 1913, where it remained until 1915. Low began the scouting movement in the United States as a movement “for all girls,” yet in many councils, black girls were not part of the all, including in Washington. It would remain that way until the 1930s. D.C. was one of many examples of the limitations of the Girl Scouts’ inclusive rhetoric. In the same way that the federal government and some residents of the nation’s capital characterized the city as a “model” for American democracy, even though it was segregated, the national Girl Scout headquarters, which made its home in the city early in the movement, fell short of its promises of opportunity for any girls who were interested.

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<sup>46</sup> Another example of a black YWCA that preceded a city’s white YWCA is the New York YWCA. Black women in New York City established a YWCA in 1905. However, by 1912, it operated as a branch of the New York YWCA. See Judith Weisenfeld, *African American Women and Christian Activism: New York’s Black YWCA, 1905-1945* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press), 27, 34.

<sup>47</sup> Nancy Marie Robertson, *Christian Sisterhood, Race Relations, and the YWCA, 1906-46* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2007), 163.

<sup>48</sup> Robertson 7

Washington, D.C. is an ideal site to study the black elite and their traditions, such as the debutante ball, because of the concentration of elite and middle-class blacks throughout most of the twentieth century. This segment of the population formed the strong social, professional, and political networks necessary for the development and maintenance of black girl-centered spaces. Take for example, Virginia Richardson McGuire, who served as the director of the Phyllis Wheatley YWCA from 1927-1937 and was appointed by the GSCNC in 1934 to organize black scouting in the nation's capital. Richardson's father was one of the first graduates of Howard University medical school and eventually went on to graduate from the institution's law school. Her mother was the first African American attendance officer in D.C. public schools. Richardson married John Grayson McGuire, a Dartmouth graduate who founded McGuire Funeral Home, "one of the city's oldest and most prestigious funeral businesses" that continues to exist today.<sup>49</sup> Outside of her work with these girls' organizations, she also served as President of the Washington chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). In December 1934, the same year that she led the movement for black scouting in Washington, McGuire organized an NAACP anti-lynching demonstration. In fact, the seventy picketers gathered at the PW YWCA. McGuire served on numerous civic and government committees, and she also helped found the Women's Civic Guild.<sup>50</sup> Virginia McGuire's status and civic involvement in the District illustrated the close-knit relationship between the city's black social and political institutions.

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<sup>49</sup> Sandra R. Gregg, "The McGuire Family Legacy: Tending the Business of Death and Earning a City's Respect," *Washington Post*, January 14, 1982, DC1. For more on the legacy of the McGuire family see Pat Lewis, "A Family Saga, A Capital History," *The Washington Star*, May 25, 1980, C-2.

<sup>50</sup> "Virginia G. McGuire, Leader in Civil Rights Here," *The Washington Post, Times Herald*, February 4, 1967, B4. For more on McGuire's involvement in D.C. scouting see Robertson, 48, 51. For more on McGuire's anti-lynching activism see Mary Jane Brown, *Eradicating this Evil: Women in the American*

## Chapter Summaries

Chapters are organized chronologically and move from segregation in turn-of-the-twentieth-century-D.C. to calls for integration in the nation's capital in the 1950s and 1960s. Chapter One, "Segregation and the Origins of Organizations for Black Girls in Washington, 1905-1935," traces the origins of the PW YWCA, black involvement in the GSCNC, and the black debutante ball. I argue that segregation fostered the development of a black girl organizational culture in the nation's capital. Black organizational leaders were part of a larger movement in the United States to establish youth organizations, but they also responded to race- and racialized gender-specific issues and changes that impacted black girls in Washington. Specifically, these organizations grew out of demographic changes brought on by migration as well as the segregated nature of recreation and social life in the District. Organizational leaders created and brought girl-centered spaces to black Washingtonians as acts of uplift and civil rights work. Girls who joined these activities cited desires to build and maintain friendships as their chief motivation for wanting to participate. Many of these young women were migrants. In a segregated city like Washington, spaces like the PW YWCA offered an additional space to socialize with peers.

Chapter Two, "'We have aimed to meet the rising tide of juvenile delinquency': Character-Building and Morality from the Great Depression through World War II," looks at anxieties about idleness and juvenile delinquency among black girls in the 1930s and 1940s. Reports from and programming at this study's core organizations as well as black youth groups in Washington more broadly and E. Franklin Frazier's *Negro Youth*

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*Anti-Lynching Movement, 1892-1940* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 235; Andor Skotnes, *A New Deal for All?: Race and Class Struggles in Depression-Era Baltimore*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), 132.

Study, show how community and institutional leaders in D.C. had concerns, founded or not, about idleness and delinquent behavior among black girls. Girls' organizations turned to character-building initiatives, such as camp, to remove their members from the threat of delinquency and idleness and encourage good behavior. Christian education, chastity, and service were at the heart of these programs. While spaces like camp or the debutante ball allowed for black girls to be surveilled, in many instances, girls valued Christianity, chastity, and service in the same ways as their leaders. And in other cases, they did not. This chapter illuminates how organizations' attempts to build character and present black girls as moral subjects were not just about attacking delinquency and idleness, but also about changing larger racist narratives about black girls' inherent immorality. Black girls and leaders used character-building programs to present themselves as upstanding, moral citizens. This chapter also illuminates the processes that black girls engaged in to develop their personal values.

While Chapter Two explores black girls' relationships with their inner selves, Chapter Three showcases their relationships with their outer selves. “‘She is attractive...And very well-groomed too’: The Politics and Pleasures of Health, Beauty, and Dress,” reveals the centrality of the physical body in the ways in which black girls and women envisioned and experienced black girlhood. This chapter uses camping to illustrate how organizational leaders framed a healthy girlhood as a right. Simultaneously, campers viewed the journey to and physical experiences of camping as a source of joy and pleasure. Of course, girls could also experience the pleasures of physical movement in the city. Dance was a central component in both the PW YWCA athletic program and the black debutante ball. Dancing was not the only aspect of the

cotillion that drew attention to the physical body. The beauty and physical features of the debutante also proved to be very important. Cotillion organizers, coupled with the black press, presented debutantes as shining examples of the beauty of the black race. This challenged the notion that black girls and women were unattractive, a challenge that was meant to instill racial pride. However, this approach had the potential to reinforce European standards of beauty and damage the self-esteem of young women who did not fit this aesthetic. Finally, teenagers and organizational leaders used self-presentation through dress to make a statement about black girls' identities and citizenship.

The final two chapters center on moments of transition in the history of U.S. girls' organizations: the institutionalization of a heterosexual youth culture after World War II and the Civil Rights Movement. Chapter Four, "Canteens and Cotillions: Learning and Performing Courtship in the Postwar Phyllis Wheatley YWCA and Black Debutante Ball," chronicles the emergence of a more heterosocial-oriented youth culture in the postwar period, and the participation of black girls and the organizations that catered to them in this cultural shift. What was the fate of single-sex organizations in this shift? How did they remain relevant? The organizations in this study, particularly the PW YWCA, created co-ed programming and workshops that taught girls the basics of charm, beauty, and dating to adapt to this change through. This programming not only kept the PW YWCA relevant, but it allowed them to surveil and cultivate the heterosexual relationships that their members pursued. Similarly, the debutante ball was a space where exclusive social organizations and the parents of children of the black elite could control with whom their daughters interacted. In the black press, the debutante ball represented a model of ideal courtship. Even though adults controlled these heterosocial spaces, the PW

YWCA's co-ed programming and the debutante ball allowed black girls to pursue pleasure and romance.

Chapter Five, ““*Integration* was the watchword’: Debating the Promises and Perils of Civil Rights and Integration in D.C.’s Girls’ Organizations,” examines how D.C.’s girls’ organizations pursued or resisted integration and interracialism during the era of civil rights. African Americans in the GSCNC heartily embraced integration in the local council, and black scouts participated in the integration of Girl Scout camps both in the Washington metropolitan area and in other regions of the United States. Camp desegregation offered a platform for black girls to take leading roles in the civil rights movement. On the other hand, while never opposed to interracial work, the women of the PW YWCA, when asked to form a federation with the city’s white YWCA, were skeptical about becoming more intimately intertwined with the white organization. PW YWCA leaders claimed that doing so would not best serve the needs of D.C.’s black girls. Looking at Washington’s black girls’ organizations in this period opens alternative spaces for uncovering civil rights work and challenges the popular narrative that national girls’ organizations, or at least their progressive members, embraced integration as the ultimate goal.

While the PW YWCA, GSCNC, and the debutante ball often served different girls, ultimately their goals were similar. The women of the PW YWCA desired to develop girls and young women who participated in their program spiritually, morally, emotionally, and physically. Similarly, the mission of the Girl Scouts was the “development of the girl along physical, emotional, mental, moral, and social lines, to the end that there may result not only a personally enriched individual, but also an



intelligently participating citizen in a democratic social order.”<sup>51</sup> The black debutante ball sought to cultivate poise and social graces within debutantes to prepare them for entrance into black society. At the same time, black girls coming of age in the nation’s capital contended with a desire to build friendships and romantic relationships, navigated the development of their personal values and physical bodies, and asserted themselves as citizens of Washington and the United States more broadly. At times, organizational leaders and young participants had the same vision of girlhood, and at other times did not. But for both parties, the YWCA, the Girl Scouts, and debutante ball served were spaces where they could develop this vision.

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<sup>51</sup> Ann E. Robertson, *Girl Scout Council of the Nation’s Capital* (Charleston, S.C.: Arcadia Publishing, 2013): 8 and 11; “Girl Scout Camping Objectives,” Meetings-National Board: Camp Committee, 1937-1938, GSCHP.

## **Chapter One: Segregation and the Origins of Organizations for Black Girls in Washington, 1905-1935**

In 1939, Elwood Street, Director of Public Welfare of the District of Columbia, met with Democratic Congressman Ross Alexander Collins of Mississippi, chairman of the House Subcommittee on District Appropriations. Street approached him to ask for his help with a local issue. According to Street, African American girls, mostly between the ages of fourteen and sixteen, had been pouring into Washington for the past several years. These teenage women migrated to the nation's capital from the South unaccompanied by parents or any other kin. Some did not have confirmed living arrangements, and as a result, many were sent to the National Training School for Girls.<sup>1</sup> This institution was not only segregated by law, but was overcrowded, understaffed, and in need of better skilled supervisors. Representative Collins looked Street squarely in his face and said, 'If I went along with your ideas, Mr. Street, I'd never keep my seat in Congress. My constituents wouldn't stand for spending all that money on niggers.'<sup>2</sup>

Even though these were teenagers that were migrating alone and were negatively impacted by segregation and overcrowding, their status as adolescent girls did not raise any concern or curry any sympathy in the mind of Representative Collins. In fact, he simply addressed them as 'niggers.' Because Washington lacked its own representation, congressmen who had white supremacist leanings and were not from Washington shaped institutional and social policies in the District, negatively impacting black citizens. In Constance McLaughlin Green's *The Secret City: A History of Race Relations in the*

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<sup>1</sup> The National Training School referenced here was a reformatory institution, not to be confused with Nannie Helen Burroughs' National Training School for Women and Girls, also in Washington.

<sup>2</sup> Elwood Street, quoted in Constance McLaughlin Green, *The Secret City: A History of Race Relations in the Nation's Capital* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967), 247.

*Nation's Capital*, she writes, "Mississippi's racial views...controlled correctional work in the nation's capital."<sup>3</sup> The conversation between Street and Representative Collins illustrates the precarious position of young black women in the nation's capital throughout the twentieth century, and their need for support from community institutions.

The development of organizations and rituals for black girls in the nation's capital did not occur in a vacuum. The meaning of childhood underwent major changes beginning in the late nineteenth century. Children went from being characterized as miniature versions of adults and contributors to the household economy, to a group with age-specific concerns in need of special nurturing. Childhood came to be understood as a distinct developmental stage separate from adulthood. This cultural shift, known as the sentimentalization of childhood, impacted familial relationships, community institutions, and local, state, and national policy. Debates about child labor laws, schooling, and reform in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries reflected the notion of the "priceless" child, which sociologist Viviana Zelizer defined as reformers' idea that economic value should not be attached to children, and that they were invaluable beings.<sup>4</sup>

Gender and race ideologies shaped the sentimentalization of childhood and defined the boundaries of which children were sentimentalized and which were not. While reformers pushed for stricter child labor laws and compulsory formal education, they also worked to protect girls from early sexual experiences. Urbanization and the emergence of a commercialized leisure culture at the turn of the century led to greater independence among adolescent girls, which worried parents and reformers alike. For

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<sup>3</sup> Green 247

<sup>4</sup> Viviana Zelizer, *Pricing the Priceless Child: The Changing Social Value of Children* (New York: Basic Books, 1985).

many adolescents, this increased independence led to more heterosexual interactions. In addition to organizations like the YWCA and Girl Scouts that provided “wholesome” recreation for girls, state-sponsored spaces such as the juvenile courts and homes for wayward girls policed girls’ sexual behavior, often viewed as delinquent.<sup>5</sup> However, while white proponents of juvenile courts and industrial homes pointed to the ability for white girls to be reformed and corrected, these same people often assumed that black girls were inherently immoral, and therefore incapable of reform.<sup>6</sup>

This larger shift in cultural attitudes towards children fostered the proliferation of youth organizations in the early decades of the twentieth century. For example, the Boy Scouts of America began in 1910 in Chicago, the Girl Scouts of the USA began in Savannah in 1912, and the Camp Fire Girls began informally in 1910 and was officially established in 1912. In the case of the Girl Scouts, the larger objectives of the organization were the “development of the girl along physical, emotional, mental, moral, and social lines, to the end that there may result not only a personally enriched individual, but also an intelligently participating citizen in a democratic social order.”<sup>7</sup> Here, Juliette Gordon Low, the founder of the Girl Scouts, framed girlhood as a stage that required nurturing in all areas of life in order to develop women who would contribute to society.

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<sup>5</sup> “Introduction,” Miriam Forman-Brunell and Leslie Paris, eds., *The Girls’ History and Culture Reader: The Twentieth Century* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2011), 2. See also Mary E. Odem, *Delinquent Daughters: Protecting and Policing Adolescent Female Sexuality in the United States, 1885-1920* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995); Kathy Peiss, *Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn-of-the-Century New York* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986).

<sup>6</sup> Susan K. Cahn, *Sexual Reckonings: Southern Girls in a Troubling Age* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), 70.

<sup>7</sup> “Girl Scout Camping Objectives,” Meetings-National Board: Camp Committee, 1937-1938, Girl Scout Center for Historic Preservation, herein GSCHP.

Yet, because these organizations were often segregated, or shut out black children from participation, organizational leaders made the claim that nonwhite children were not worthy or in need of the same benefits of participation that their white counterparts received. Still, in the case of Washington, D.C. and other cities across the United States, black organizational leaders and their members countered the claim that black girls were not worthy of the same benefits of organizational life that their white counterparts possessed. They did this through creating their own institutions and social spaces such as the PW YWCA and the ritual of the debutante ball. Or, they fought for inclusion in segregated organizations like the GSCNC.

This chapter weaves the origin stories of the Phyllis Wheatley Y, official black involvement in the D.C. Girl Scouts, and the ritual of the debutante ball within larger social developments in the District. Collectively, these stories demonstrate that segregation within Washington framed the development of a vibrant web of institutions and social spaces that catered to black girls. Using organizational papers, social scientific studies, and newspapers I show how and why black leaders established organizations and organizational activities, namely, the Phyllis Wheatley Young Women's Christian Association (PW YWCA), the Girl Scout Council of the Nation's Capital (GSCNC), and the ritual of the black debutante ball, and why girls and young women sought to participate.

In the early decades of the twentieth century, young African American women and girls participated in the exodus from the rural South to Washington, D.C. in search of greater economic and social opportunities. Rosetta Lawson and the members of her Booklovers club established the Colored Women's YWCA, which would become the

Phyllis Wheatley YWCA in 1920, as a response to the influx of black girls and women into the nation's capital. They offered lodging and a "wholesome" space for recreation for young black women, who often arrived alone, were shut out of housing or relegated to poor living conditions because of segregation. While the founders of the PW YWCA cast themselves as protectors, young migrant women sought out the PW YWCA for not only a place to stay, but a place to make friends in an unfamiliar city.

While the PW YWCA was independently black, girl scouting, which came to the District in 1913, was not officially available to black Washingtonians until the 1930s. Black women who pushed for the GSCNC to include black girls did so at a moment when agitation for civil rights in the nation's capital took a more militant approach. While black scout leaders were not militant, the assertion that black girls should be scouts was a bold one. At this time, scouting was viewed largely as a white activity. Virginia McGuire, who would become one of the first African American leaders in the GSCNC, said that the purpose of bringing scouting to black girls was to give them "a program in which they could develop morally, physically and spiritually as young women."<sup>8</sup> This mission was very similar to that of the Phyllis Wheatley Y. Also similar to the Y is the reason girls chose to join. Most black girls who became Girl Scouts did so to build and maintain friendships.

The debutante ball, or cotillion, offers a very different picture from the YWCA and the Girl Scouts. One major difference is that anyone could become a member of the PW YWCA or Girl Scouts, but not everyone could become a debutante. One had to be selected. Because Girl Scout troops and clubs under the umbrella of the YWCA formed

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<sup>8</sup> Art Peters, "800 Girls Active in District," *Pittsburgh Courier-Washington Edition*, March 12, 1948.

in schools, churches, settlement houses, and community centers, there was a broader range of socioeconomic backgrounds not seen with the debutante ball, that pulled girls exclusively from middle-class and elite families. This exclusivity, coupled with the opulence of the debutante ball tradition contributes to the notion that this ritual is devoid of all larger societal meaning. However, what connected the cotillion to the PW YWCA and the GSCNC was the recognition of girlhood as a developmental stage that required a unique type of nurturing based on gender, age, and in this case, race. Part of the mission of the YWCA and the Girl Scouts was to prepare girls for womanhood, and the debutante ball illustrated and acknowledged this transition from girlhood to womanhood.

Citizenship also connected these three social spaces. Leaders within the PW YWCA, Girl Scouts, and exclusive social clubs imagined black girls as citizens in ways that D.C. society, and those that held power within it, did not. The PW YWCA asserted that as citizens, black girls and young women were entitled to a safe place to live and commune with other girls and women. African American women in scouting made the case that as citizens, black girls were entitled to the same access to recreation and character-building initiatives as white girls. The black debutante tradition prepared young women to be citizens of the black middle-class. For example, cotillion proceeds often went to charitable causes, which illustrated to debutantes their obligation to give back to their community through philanthropy. They also learned the social graces they needed to assume to take their place in elite black society life.

The chapter begins with the founding of the Phyllis Wheatley YWCA, originally known as the Colored Women's YWCA, in 1905 against the backdrop of migration at the turn of the twentieth century, and a discussion of young migrant women's interactions

with the organization through the 1930s. Less than a decade after the founding of the PW YWCA, the first Girl Scout troops formed in Washington. In this next section of the chapter, I trace the push for black scouting and place this struggle within the larger struggle for civil rights in Depression-era Washington. The final section of the chapter looks at the emergence of a vibrant society life among black Washingtonians, and where the ritual of the debutante ball fits within it.

### **Migration and the Founding of the PW YWCA**

Washington's African American population swelled from the late nineteenth through the first half of the twentieth century. Between 1860 and 1870, Washington's black population tripled, reaching over 43,000, or one third of the city's nearly 132,000 residents. By 1890, 75,000 of the District's 230,000 residents were black.<sup>9</sup> WWI spurred the creation of federal jobs and new federal agencies. This led to a migration boom, but most of these migrants were white and from the Deep South. Unlike the Civil War and industrial centers during the Great Migration, black migration to DC slowed because Wilson's policy impact on federal hiring practices meant that very few black migrants "could expect more than a menial position in the burgeoning bureaucracy."<sup>10</sup> Black people made up twenty-five percent of Washington's population by 1920, which was the lowest percentage since before the Civil War.<sup>11</sup> At the same time, 110,000 blacks lived in Washington, making it the largest black population in a U.S. city. The stream of African American migration into the District continued, and by 1930, the black

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<sup>9</sup> Lois E. Horton, "The Day of Jubilee: Black Migration during the Civil War and Reconstruction," *Washington Odyssey: A Multicultural History of the Nation's Capital*, Francine Curro Cary, ed. (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Books, 1996), 71.

<sup>10</sup> Chris Myers Asch and George Derek Musgrove, *Chocolate City: A History of Race and Democracy in the Nation's Capital* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017), 227.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid 226



population increased by another twenty percent, bringing it to a total of 132,000.<sup>12</sup> The expansion of New Deal programs and the growth of the federal government during the Great Depression stimulated migration of whites and blacks into the District, which resulted in a thirty percent increase in the city's population. While the white population grew by thirty four percent, the black population experienced a forty-two-percent increase. By 1932, thirty three percent of D.C.'s student population was black. Many families migrated to the city because it offered better educational opportunities for children.<sup>13</sup>

Young African American women and girls were active participants in the exodus from the rural South to Washington, D.C. Between 1860 and 1870, the black female population increased by three hundred percent. By 1890, the black female population numbered 41,581, and by 1930, it rose to 69, 843.<sup>14</sup> These girls and young women migrated throughout the twentieth century hoping to find greater economic and social opportunities. Elizabeth Clark-Lewis documents the experiences of black women who migrated to D.C. for domestic service work at the turn of the twentieth century in *Living In, Living Out: African American Domesticity in Washington, D.C., 1910-1940*. However,

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<sup>12</sup> Spencer Crew, "Melding the Old and the New: The Modern African American Community, 1930-1960," *Washington Odyssey: A Multicultural History of the Nation's Capital*, Francine Curro Cary, ed. (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Books, 1996), 208. The black population continued to increase throughout the twentieth century. By 1957, Washington, D.C. became a majority black city.

<sup>13</sup> Green 228 and Crew 208-227. D.C.'s segregated public school system was often regarded as a model of segregated education. The academic performances of D.C.'s public schools were often on-par or better than white schools in the city. Dunbar High School is perhaps the most well-known of D.C.'s black schools. Students were required to pass an entrance examination in order to attend, and many of the school's graduates went on to attend prestigious colleges and universities and became prominent leaders in black communities. Some of Dunbar's notable graduates include Eleanor Holmes Norton and Nannie Helen Burroughs. For the history of Dunbar High School see Alison Stewart, *First Class: The Legacy of Dunbar, America's First Black Public High School* (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 2013).

<sup>14</sup> These Census figures appear in Sharon Harley, "Beyond the Classroom: The Organizational Lives of Black Female Educators in the District of Columbia, 1890-1930," *The Journal of Negro Education* 51:3, The Impact of Black Women in Education: An Historical Overview (Summer 1982), 254.

not all young black women who migrated to Washington worked in domestic service. During World War II, some came for government work as typists or clerks.<sup>15</sup> Throughout each wave of migration, the PW YWCA sought to offer shelter and what they viewed as wholesome recreation for young women and girls.

### *The Founding of the PW YWCA*

Rosetta Conkley Lawson, a teacher and clerk in District schools, had dropped her daughter off at Oberlin College to register for her classes.<sup>16</sup> On her way back to Washington, she stopped at a YWCA, where she attended a lecture from a Chicago organizer of the YWCA. In addition to writing a letter to her daughter, imploring her to join a YWCA immediately, Lawson “was so impressed with its program and services, she became imbued with the idea that such an organization was necessary” in D.C.<sup>17</sup> At the time of Lawson’s visit to Chicago, The YWCA of the United States of America (YWCA USA) had not been incorporated.

The YWCA USA first organized in 1858 in New York City as the Ladies Christian Association. From 1858 through the organization’s incorporation in 1906 women and students in industrial centers such as New York, Boston, Philadelphia, and Chicago provided shelter, employment support, and healthcare services to a growing population of unmarried working women and girls.<sup>18</sup> The YWCA Metropolitan Chicago began in 1876 in response to the increasing migration of single young white women to

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<sup>15</sup> Interview with Janet M. Vernon, interviewed by Patricia L. Plummer, in The Board of Directors, Phyllis Wheatley Young Women’s Christian Association, Inc., *Meet me at the Y* (2016).

<sup>16</sup> “Out-of-town trip shaped ideas for District ‘Y,’” *Washington Afro-American*, July 4, 1959.

<sup>17</sup> “Out-of-town trip shaped ideas for District ‘Y,’” and Florence J. Radcliffe, *A Simple Matter of Justice: The Phyllis Wheatley YWCA Story* (Pompano Beach: Exposition Press of Florida, 1985), 1.

<sup>18</sup> “History,” Young Women’s Christian Association, <http://www.ywca.org/site/c.cuIRJ7NTKrLaG/b.7515891/k.C524/History.htm>, Accessed September 17, 2015.

the city during the industrial boom. Even though Chicago's YWCA forbade black women to join, Lawson felt inspired to bring the YWCA movement to Washington.<sup>19</sup> The Colored Women's YWCA holds the distinction of being the first YWCA to open in the nation's capital, as well as the only independent black YWCA.<sup>20</sup>

Nearly thirty-five years prior to the exchange between Street and Collins, On May 5, 1905, Lawson and the women of the Booklovers Club established the Colored Women's YWCA at 4 ½ Street and Maryland Avenue SW, the former Miner Institute Building. Attendees elected Mrs. Bettie Francis as the first president. In this first home, the Y occupied two rooms, and they had no equipment.<sup>21</sup> At the turn of the century, clusters of black working-class and poor families lived in Southwest D.C. Sixty eight percent of the women Clark-Lewis interviewed lived in Southwest D.C. near the Foggy Bottom neighborhood. Fifty-six of the women interviewed lived in one of the many alleys that housed the District's poorest residents.<sup>22</sup> An article on the history of the Y

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<sup>19</sup> Young black women in Chicago gained access to the YWCA in Chicago in 1915. Like other cities, black YWCAs were known as "branches." The YWCA Indiana Branch was an African American branch in Chicago. "YWCA History," YWCA Metropolitan Chicago, [http://www.ywchicago.org/site/c.fmJWKcOZJKI6G/b.8243061/k.AE4E/YWCA\\_History.htm](http://www.ywchicago.org/site/c.fmJWKcOZJKI6G/b.8243061/k.AE4E/YWCA_History.htm), Accessed September 17, 2015. For more on the YWCA movement in Chicago see Marcia Chatelain, *Southside Girls: Growing Up in the Great Migration* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), 12, 100, 107, 135-136, 144, 171. For more on race and the YWCA movement see Judith Weisenfeld, *African American Women and Christian Activism: New York's Black YWCA, 1905-1945* (1997), Nancy Marie Robertson, *Christian Sisterhood, Race Relations, and the YWCA, 1906-46* (2007), Abigail Sara Lewis, "'The Barrier Breaking Love of God': The Multiracial Activism of The Young Women's Christian Association, 1940s to 1970s," PhD Dissertation, Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey (2008).

<sup>20</sup> Florence J. Radcliffe, *A Simple Matter of Justice: The Phyllis Wheatley YWCA Story* (Pompano Beach: Exposition Press of Florida, 1985); "About Us," Phyllis Wheatley YWCA, <http://www.pwywca.org/about-us/>. Accessed October 8, 2014. In addition to the Booklovers Club and the National Association of Colored Women, Rosetta Lawson founded Frelinghuysen University with her husband Jesse Lawson in 1906. For more on Lawson see: Helena Carney Lambeth, "Rosetta Lawson," in Jessie Carney Smith, ed., *Notable Black American Women, Book 2*, 398-400. The Colored YWCA became affiliated with the YWCA of the U.S.A in 1918. The D.C. Central YWCA believed that merging the two D.C. Y's would drain finances, and therefore decided to remain independent. As a result, Washington became the only city with two independent YWCAs.; Radcliffe 6.

<sup>21</sup> Martha McAdoo, "Phyllis Wheatley Y.W.C.A. Passes a Milestone: The Twentieth Anniversary of Washington's Colored Association," *The Woman's Press*, May 1925, p. 360.

<sup>22</sup> Clark-Lewis 69.

says, “Since going to this section ‘below the Avenue’ was not the proper thing to do [at that time], some of the men objected to their wives and sisters going into this area even for the YWCA.” Still, “the women continued to go in groups with a leader who took a police whistle for protection to and from the meetings at night.”<sup>23</sup> The Colored Women’s YWCA established itself in a location where the city’s neediest black residents resided. However, its home in Southwest Washington was temporary.

The founding of the Colored Women’s YWCA occurred during the Progressive movement that swept urban America. Black and white reformers sought to attack urban blight through temperance campaigns and crusades against unsanitary housing and workplace conditions. During this era of reform, women’s voluntary reform organizations proliferated across both sides of the color line. Women gained a greater foothold in the public arena, where they “brought to the public domain the domestic instincts and virtues traditionally deemed so important to the home.”<sup>24</sup> Historians have argued that educated black women believed that they had a special duty to uplift blacks of a lower status. They believed that it was a responsibility that only they could perform.<sup>25</sup> In Washington, the Colored Women’s YWCA existed within a larger network of industrial and settlement homes that catered to poor and orphaned black women and girls that were founded in the final decades of the nineteenth century. The Home for Friendless Girls housed orphaned

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<sup>23</sup> “Out-of-town trip shaped ideas for District ‘Y’”

<sup>24</sup> Harley, “Beyond the Classroom,” 256.

<sup>25</sup> For discussions on black women’s organizing in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries see Harley; Deborah Gray White, *Too Heavy a Load: Black Women in Defense of Themselves, 1894-1994* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1999); Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women’s Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993); Paula Giddings, *When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America* (New York: W. Morrow, 1984); Brittney C. Cooper, *Beyond Respectability: The Intellectual Thought of Race Women* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2017); Mia Bay, *To Tell the Truth Freely: The Life of Ida B. Wells* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2009).

girls while the Sojourner Truth Home housed domestic workers who could not afford housing, and would otherwise be “compelled to seek rest in an uncomfortable room in some alley” or sent to a workhouse.<sup>26</sup> One of the major goals of both homes was to “protect [girls and women] against the pernicious influences of an idle street life.”<sup>27</sup> This was also a concern of the women of the Y, but what distinguished it from the Home for Friendless Girls and the Sojourner Truth Home, was that the latter two were strictly residences. While the YWCA had residences for young women and girls, the Y also offered recreation, meeting spaces, and a cafeteria that was open to the public.

Lawson and the founding members of the YWCA were primarily concerned about the welfare of Washington’s African American female migrants, and they believed that it was their Christian duty to aid these women and girls who were faced with unfamiliar surroundings and limited economic opportunities.<sup>28</sup> In *A Colored Woman in a White World*, clubwoman and prominent D.C. resident Mary Church Terrell shared her frustration with segregation in the District, particularly regarding its impact on finding suitable lodging. She wrote, “As a colored woman, I might enter Washington any night, a stranger in a strange land, and walk miles without finding a place to lay my head. Unless I happened to know colored women who lived here or ran across a colored man or woman who could recommend a colored boarding house or hotel to me, I should be obliged to spend the night wandering around...The colored man or woman is the only one thrust out of the hotels of the national Capital like a leper.”<sup>29</sup> The girls and young

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<sup>26</sup> “The Sojourners Home,” *Evening Star*, July 8, 1896, p. 5.

<sup>27</sup> “Free Will Offering,” *The Washington Bee*, March 5, 1887, p. 3.

<sup>28</sup> Radcliffe, x-xi, 2. See also: “About Us,” Phyllis Wheatley YWCA, <http://www.pwywca.org/about-us/>, Accessed October 8, 2014.

<sup>29</sup> Mary Church Terrell quoted in Holloway, 44. Originally appeared in Mary Church Terrell, *A Colored Woman in a White World* (Washington: Ransdell, 1940). The first hotel available to African Americans in Washington, D.C., the Whitelaw Hotel, did not open until 1919. It was an apartment hotel that served

women that the PW YWCA sought to help were from humbler backgrounds than Terrell, but her experiences are still instructive. They highlight the limited availability of lodging for blacks, and how this was particularly difficult for young, unmarried black women who were vulnerable to physical and sexual violence. The women of the PW YWCA recognized the limited resources available to single black women and established itself as a space for these young women.

On December 19, 1920 the organization moved to its permanent home on the corner of Ninth and Rhode Island Avenue, Northwest. The PW YWCA's new building was in the Shaw neighborhood, the heart of black D.C. social life. Three years later, leaders within the Colored YWCA renamed the organization the Phyllis Wheatley Young Women's Christian Association (PW YWCA). It was incorporated under that name in the same year. The four-story brick building contained dormitories for girls and recreational and meeting spaces, as well as a gymnasium and cafeteria. The PW YWCA was more than just a residence for young women and girls new to the city, but a communal space for black Washingtonians.<sup>30</sup>

### *Migration Experiences and Why Girls Joined*

Girls and young women who joined or used PW YWCA programming and services did so primarily through its Girl Reserve program and residential service. By 1921, the PW YWCA claimed 3,155 members. The Girl Reserve Program catered to girls

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prominent entertainers performing in the city, people in town for meetings of national black organizations, and also migrants, particularly single ones, who wanted an upscale alternative to boarding houses. The Whitelaw became an important social space in Washington's U Street. With the end of legal segregation in public accommodations in the 1950s, the hotel began to deteriorate, and by the end of the 1960s, the building was in serious disrepair. It closed in 1977, and reopened in 1992 as a private apartment building. "Whitelaw Hotel, African American Heritage Trail," <https://www.culturaltourismdc.org/portal/whitelaw-hotel-african-american-heritage-trail>, Accessed November 24, 2015.

<sup>30</sup> Anne H. Oman, "New Honors for Black Landmarks," *Washington Post*, February 7, 1980, p. 3.

and young women between the ages of twelve and eighteen. According to the Girl Reserve manual for advisors, the purpose of the movement was to raise up responsible Christian women who would “help make America more true to its best hopes and traditions.”<sup>31</sup> Leaders of black YWCAs, sought to develop young Christian women who would uplift the race. The PW YWCA instilled these values within its young members through various activities that emphasized character-building, the arts, domesticity, health and hygiene. It took up the Girl Reserve Program in 1918. Girl Reserve clubs formed in the city’s junior and senior high schools, the Southeast Welfare House, and churches of different denominations, including: Union Wesley African Methodist Episcopal Zion (AMEZ), Metropolitan African Methodist Episcopal (AME), St. Paul AME, Zion Baptist, and Trinity Baptist. By 1921, the PW YWCA claimed to have 618 Girl Reserve members.<sup>32</sup> The Girl Reserve Program was broad, and specific activities varied from club to club.

Students and women of employable age stayed in the PW YWCA residences. Length of stay varied anywhere between overnight to a period of several months or years. According to a document from 1938 that listed the PW YWCA’s current residents showed that while one resident had only been there for one month, another resident had lived there for thirteen and one half years. However, this long-term resident was an employee of the YWCA, and worked as a night matron. Another woman, Hattie Slater,

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<sup>31</sup> YWCA USA, *The Girl Reserve Movement: A Manual for Advisers*, (National Board, Young Women’s Christian Associations: New York, 1921), 42.

<sup>32</sup> “Re: Phyllis Wheatley Y.W.C.A.,” April 7, 1938, Folder: Social Organizations, Institutions, E. Franklin Frazier Papers, Research Projects Negro Youth Study, Washington, D.C., Box 131-132, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University, Washington, D.C., herein MSRC.

had by 1938 lived at the PW YWCA for eleven years. She was a government employee at the Bureau of Engraving. Rooms ranged from \$10-\$16 per month.<sup>33</sup>

Margaret Gibson was nineteen years old when she boarded a train from Meridian, Mississippi, headed to Washington, D.C. to begin work at the United States Treasury Department. The American Red Cross met her at Union Station and dropped her off at her new place of employment, located at 15<sup>th</sup> Street and Pennsylvania Avenue, NW. Gibson traveled alone and did not have any friends or family in the “big city.”<sup>34</sup> One of her first stops after arriving to the District was the PW YWCA. Gibson resided there for two weeks. She slept in a “small” but “comfortable” room, and made friends with the other residents, with whom she shared a kitchen.<sup>35</sup> Coming from Meridian, Gibson felt “afraid of the big city,” but the friends that she made at the PW YWCA helped her acclimate to her new surroundings. Gibson’s stay at the PW YWCA was brief, but she considered it her “home away from home.”<sup>36</sup>

Gibson migrated to Washington in 1944, but her story reflects the experiences of the young women and girls who migrated decades earlier. Her story also illustrates what migrants who interacted with the PW YWCA could expect, and the broader mission of the institution: being a home to young women migrants. Accounts from members and residents of the PW YWCA, as well as accounts from Clark-Lewis’s text, reveal why girls sought out the PW YWCA and present a picture of what their interactions with the institution were or could have been.

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<sup>33</sup> “Data Concerning Y.W.C.A. Residents—June 1, 1938,” Folder: Residence, Box: 392-1719, Phyllis Wheatley YWCA Collection, MSRC.

<sup>34</sup> Interview with Margaret Gibson, Interviewed by Joanna Thurston-Watson, in The Board of Directors, Phyllis Wheatley Young Women’s Christian Association, Inc., *Meet me at the Y* (2016), 29.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid

<sup>36</sup> Ibid 30



Many of the young women who migrated to Washington for domestic work were under the age of 16, and often traveled alone. Once they arrived at Union Station or at the docks in Southwest Washington, they were usually met by family members. For those who did not have family members waiting to greet them, it was possible that women from the PW YWCA or the Travelers Aid Committee were there to welcome them to their new homes in the District. The *Washington Post* published accounts of white female migrants who were greeted at Union Station by churchwomen, but black female migrants were not present in any of these accounts. Unlike Gibson's experience decades later, when Mamie Richardson arrived on a boat in Southwest Washington, "There was no 'sweet-faced deaconess' there to meet her."<sup>37</sup>

As described in Gibson's account, getting accustomed to life in Washington was a major transition for southern migrants. Esther Lawson migrated to Washington from Alabama. She recalled:

It was lots different from down where I come from. Mostly, well, the peoples were different. Our people from home, they didn't mingle with a lot a people. You just didn't up here. Now, when we was in Alabama, we just mingle with everybody 'round 'near. Everybody knows everybody. But see here you didn't know everybody. You didn't run into a lot of people outside the building. Just like you live in a 'partment here, you might not know people in the houses next door until you been here for a while...people just wanna be to theyselves.<sup>38</sup>

In addition to getting used to urban life, migrants also faced isolation. Etherine

Underwood reflected on her feelings of loneliness when she first arrived in the District.

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<sup>37</sup> Clark-Lewis 70. Very little evidence from the first decades of the PW YWCA exists, which makes it difficult to determine if or how often women from the organization greeted newly arrived girls from the rural south. Therefore, it is difficult to determine whether Mamie Richardson's experience was typical or an exception. Perhaps the women of the PW YWCA only met migrants who arrived by train, rather than by boat. An article in the *Washington Post* about the history of the PW YWCA notes that by the onset of World War I, women of the Wheatley Y met black travelers at Union station to aid them in finding lodging. See Oman. The opening of the PW YWCA preceded the years that Clark-Lewis discusses, so it is still possible that the women Clark-Lewis interviewed had contact with the PW YWCA either when they first arrived in the District or as they settled into their new lives.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid 75

She said, ‘...there was nobody to help me or even to talk to...I cried a lot till I got to meet more people. But that...was months later.’<sup>39</sup> Lawson and Underwood’s comments demonstrate the extreme feelings of loneliness and isolation that young migrants experienced in their new homes. This made networks of support among family and community vital for migrants. Kinship networks and community institutions such as the church and the PW YWCA were crucial in facilitating the transition from rural to urban life, particularly in helping them to foster connections with other Washingtonians.

The expansion of the federal government in the New Deal era created more jobs, which pulled more people into the capital city. Within this cycle of migration, youth transiency became a national issue. Historians have written about this phenomenon, but young black women and girls are marginal in this literature.<sup>40</sup> Black transient girls’ absence in the literature may reflect the fact that they were often overlooked by government and academic studies of the time.<sup>41</sup> However, historian Michele Mitchell has addressed this erasure and contends, “Young black women were, then, part of the nationwide body of youthful transients...”<sup>42</sup> Indeed, one such young woman made it to the PW YWCA during the Depression. On January 27, 1938, a Mrs. Johns of the PW YWCA noted the arrival of Alma Hughes in the "Problem and Emergency Cases File". According to Johns, Hughes arrived in Washington in a "box car, from the race track of New Orleans," and was "dressed as a boy."<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Clark-Lewis 78

<sup>40</sup> See Minehan, *Boy and Girl Tramps of America*; Lindley and Lindley, *New Deal for Youth*

<sup>41</sup> Michele Mitchell, “A ‘Corrupting Influence’: Idleness and Sexuality during the Great Depression,” in Alison M. Parker and Carol Faulkner, eds., *Interconnections: Gender and Race in American History* (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2012), 198-199.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid 200

<sup>43</sup> "Problems and Emergency Cases Jan. 1, to June 30, 1938," Folder: Mrs. Johns Reports, Box: 392-1719, Phyllis Wheatley YWCA Collection, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University, Washington, DC.

Hughes's story was not unlike other young women who rode the rails during the Depression. In 1931, Pauli Murray was living in California when she learned that her Aunt Pauline, who raised her, was ill and urged Pauli to return to her home in Durham, North Carolina. Murray had little money for the return trip and could not depend on her family for financial support. So, she hopped on a train in Oakland, dressed in "androgynous clothing that 'made [her] appear to be a small teenaged boy.'"<sup>44</sup> The note in the file does not reveal why Hughes traveled to Washington, but the economic instability of the Great Depression caused youths across the United States to ride freight trains or to hitchhike in search of employment, adventure, or an escape from an unsafe home life.

According to D.C. black newspapers and organizational records, the PW YWCA was a stop for young women transients and migrants during the Great Depression. A 1933 article in the *Washington Afro-American* reported on the PW YWCA's dedication to maintain its "open door policy" in the midst of financial woes brought on by the Great Depression. A staff member told the reporter that throughout the month of February, the institution had to convert meeting rooms into bedrooms to support the influx of people looking for shelter. The staff member also recounted a story of a seventeen-year-old girl who had just given birth. She had no money and no place to go, so the PW YWCA took her in.<sup>45</sup>

In early 1938, seventeen-year-old Christine migrated to Washington, D.C. from her hometown of Philadelphia. Christine graduated from high school in Philadelphia, so

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<sup>44</sup> Mitchell 188

<sup>45</sup> Ira V. Pollard, "Despite the Depression, the Y.W.C.A. Sticks to Its Policy of 'The Open Door,'" *Washington Afro-American*, March 25, 1933, 7.

she probably moved to Washington to continue her education or find employment. She moved in with her aunt who “didn’t have time” to introduce her to other people her age. Christine was “quiet and well-mannered.” Two months after arriving to the new city, she ventured to the PW YWCA and joined the Les Bonnes Soeurs, a Girl Reserve Club, because she believed it was “the best way to meet young people.” For Christine, and probably other adolescent migrants, joining a club was a way to make new friends in an unfamiliar place and aid in the transition to their new homes.<sup>46</sup>

Seventeen-year-old Beulah Hines was also a member of Les Bonnes Soeurs. She migrated from Atlantic City in September 1937. However, unlike Christine she did not live with a relative. She lived at the PW YWCA and attended Dunbar High School. For Beulah, the PW YWCA was not only a space to socialize, but it was also a home. According to an interview with Beulah, her father was deceased, and her mother worked in a real estate office in Atlantic City. She had two sisters, both living in Pennsylvania, and a brother in New York City.<sup>47</sup> The exact reason why Beulah’s mother chose to send her to Washington, D.C., is unclear, but perhaps it was so Beulah could attend the highly regarded Dunbar High School. Historian Spencer Crew has shown that this was a chief motivating factor behind black migration to Washington, D.C. in the 1930s.<sup>48</sup>

Making friends was not only important to migrants in a new city, but for native Washingtonians too. Dunbar student Beverly Goodloe confessed, “I want to get out among children my age and see if I can’t gain some confidence in myself. I usually feel

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<sup>46</sup> “Christine,” Incomplete Interviews, E. Franklin Frazier Papers, Research Projects Negro Youth Study, Washington, D.C., Box 131-113, Moorland Spingarn Research Center, Howard University, Washington, D.C. (Herein MSRC); R.J.B. “Re: Meeting of Girl Reserve Club at Phyllis Wheatley Y.W.C.A., E. Franklin Frazier Papers, Research Projects Negro Youth Study, Washington, D.C., Box 131-113, MSRC.

<sup>47</sup> “Beulah,” Incomplete Interviews, E. Franklin Frazier Papers, Research Projects Negro Youth Study, Washington, D.C., Box 131-113, MSRC.

<sup>48</sup> Crew 211

that I am not saying or doing the right thing. I want friends, but I just guess that I don't know how to make them.”<sup>49</sup> Beverly joined the PW YWCA to make friends, but it was also a way to become socialized. By the 1930s, public high school attendance was almost universal, creating a space for more young people to socialize freely without parental supervision.<sup>50</sup> For young women like Beverly, the high school environment could have brought up feelings of awkwardness and shyness. Furthermore, she saw membership in the PW YWCA as an avenue to gain confidence and improve herself. Christine, Beulah, and Beverly's experiences demonstrate the PW YWCA's ongoing commitment to young migrant women. Whether migrants utilized the institution as a social space or a living space, they saw the institution as a place that would meet their needs.

Girls joined the PW YWCA to make friends, but at times, they were unsuccessful. On April 7, 1938, an interviewer, identified as R.J.B., observed a Girl Reserve meeting at the PW YWCA as part of E. Franklin Frazier's Negro Youth Study.<sup>51</sup> Frazier commissioned his study in 1937 in an effort to understand what it meant to grow up black in Washington, D.C. His research team conducted interviews with teenage girls between 1937 and 1938. The interviewees spoke extensively about their participation in social

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<sup>49</sup> “Beverly Goodloe,” Interview by L.J. Wallace, August 20, 1938, Incomplete Interviews, E. Franklin Frazier Papers, Research Projects Negro Youth Study, Washington, D.C., Box 131-113, MSRC.

<sup>50</sup> Kelly Schrum, *Some Work Bobby Sox: The Emergence of Teenage Girls' Culture, 1920-1945* (New York: Palgrave, 2004), 12.

<sup>51</sup> Very little is known about the identity of the R.J.B., but the evidence suggests that he or she was white. In the interviewer's notes with the Girl Reserve secretary at the PW YWCA, the interviewer wrote, “Mrs. Dehaven evidently would have talked more to someone else. I believe she felt I was an outsider probing into personal affairs of the Negro. I attempted to get her to talk by showing class differences among ‘my group.’ This didn't help.” The interviewer's comments suggest that Mrs. Dehaven may have been hesitant to talk to the interviewer because he or she was not black. Perhaps Mrs. Dehaven was skeptical about how the information from the interviews and observations would have been interpreted. Interview with Mrs. DeHaven, by R.J.B., April 13, 1938, Folder 3: Interviews, Box: 131-113, E. Franklin Frazier Papers, Research Projects Negro Youth Study, Washington, D.C., MSRC.

clubs, and many interviews took place at the PW YWCA. At the time of the study, the Girl Reserves claimed a membership of seven hundred girls.<sup>52</sup>

The nine girls in attendance were all Dunbar High School students. At that time, Dunbar was among the most prestigious high schools in the United States, white or black.<sup>53</sup> Out of the three black high schools in the nation's capital, which included Cardozo and Armstrong, Dunbar was the college preparatory high school. Cardozo offered a business and technical education, while Armstrong was the vocational high school. Dunbar had a strong alignment with Washington's black middle-class and elite population, and most of its students went on to college to pursue middle-class professions. According to the observer, the girls in the club came from middle-class backgrounds. R.J.B.'s conversation with Mrs. Dehaven revealed that students at Dunbar typically came from a more privileged socioeconomic background than those at Armstrong, D.C.'s vocational high school, and Cardozo, the city's business high school.<sup>54</sup> Both Armstrong and Cardozo High Schools had chapters of the Girl Reserves, and the clubs met separately. When the interviewer asked Mrs. Dehaven why this was the case, she recounted her experience of a club that consisted of girls from both Dunbar and Armstrong. Mrs. Dehaven claimed that the club had to break apart because of constant fighting between the girls. The interviewer wrote, "Because of friction between the girls no further attempt has been made to have the girls form clubs together. The girls who attend Dunbar come from a higher economic plane..."<sup>55</sup> The conversation between the

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<sup>52</sup> "Interview with Mrs. DeHaven," by R.J.B., April 13, 1938, Folder 3: Interviews, Box: 131-113, E. Franklin Frazier Papers, Research Projects Negro Youth Study, Washington, D.C., MSRC.

<sup>53</sup> See Allison Stewart, *First Class: The Legacy of Dunbar: America's First Black Public High School* (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2013).

<sup>54</sup> "Meeting of Girl Reserve Club at Phyllis Wheatley Y.W.C.A.," R.J.B., April 7, 1938, MSRC.

<sup>55</sup> "Interview with Mrs. Dehaven"

interviewer and Mrs. Dehaven illustrates the ways in which class shaped interpersonal relationships between black girls.

It is important to think about the nature of black girls' interactions with each other, but what about the relationship between the PW YWCA staff members and leaders, and their members? The papers of the PW YWCA do not provide any explicit evidence that describes the interactions between the founders of the organization and its members, however, historians have examined the relationships between migrants, old settlers, and reformers in Washington and in other cities. For example, Clark-Lewis's discussion of the black church and press in Washington, D.C. shows that there was an antagonistic relationship between migrants and the established community of black Washingtonians, which increased each decade beginning at the end of the Civil War.

Clothing and lack of education often exasperated the class differences between migrant and established black Washingtonians. In Washington, D.C., and cities such as Philadelphia and New Orleans, migrants of a darker complexion may also have felt out of place because of colorism. In her study of colorism and complexion lore in the nation's capital, Audrey Elisa Kerr talks about color divisions in Washington's black churches. Certain denominations, such as the Episcopal church, were known as "blue vein" churches, where most of the parishioners were fair-skinned and elite.<sup>56</sup> Migrants' emotional displays during service and their doctrinal beliefs conflicted with the spiritual values of urban elites. Overall, migrants found the northern urban churches to be more

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<sup>56</sup> Audrey Elisa Kerr, *The Paper Bag Principle: Class, Colorism, and Rumor and the Case of Black Washington, D.C.* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 2006), 107. For other examples of colorism in urban churches see Kerr 33.

impersonal than their churches in the rural south. As a result, some migrants chose to join smaller churches founded by other migrants.<sup>57</sup>

Tension between migrants and old settlers can be seen in other northern cities. For example, in 1918, the Detroit Urban League (DUL) published a pamphlet that provided “Helpful Hints” to southern migrants. The pamphlet was composed of sixteen “do’s and don’ts” as well as photographs for visual reference. The DUL provided migrants with tips, albeit in a condescending manner, regarding dress, behavior, housekeeping, employment, and finances. The “Helpful Hints” pamphlet demonstrates the DUL’s belief that southern migrants were completely ignorant of how to dress or carry themselves. For example, they were instructed to not “carry on loud conversations or use vulgar or obscene language on street cars, streets, or in public places,” because this behavior “hurts us as a race.”<sup>58</sup> Publications such as this reveal the antagonistic relationship between urban reformers and southern migrants.

The leaders of the PW YWCA were mostly middle-class professional women who occupied prominent positions in their community. Reformers in the PW YWCA and other black women’s organizations believed that it was their responsibility to take care of poor and working-class young women and girls who may not have had a strong support system in Washington. Their desire to help was oftentimes condescending, but they believed that they were performing their civic duty. The PW YWCA positioned itself as a

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<sup>57</sup> Kerr 87. In *Remaking Respectability: African American Women in Interwar Detroit*, Victoria Wolcott discusses tensions between migrants and established residents in Detroit’s churches. Like Washington, this tension often led to the creation of storefront churches that were more welcoming to migrants. Wolcott calls this the “diversification of religion.” See Victoria Wolcott, *Remaking Respectability: African American Women in Interwar Detroit* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 113-121, 183-192.

<sup>58</sup> “Helpful Hints” leaflet, Detroit Urban League Papers, Box 1, Folder 9, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan, reprinted in *Major Problems in African-American History, Volume II: From Freedom to “Freedom Now,” 1865-1990s*, Thomas C. Holt and Elsa Barkley Brown, eds. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2000), 132.



shelter and space for young black migrant women to build their life in a new city.

Segregation in Washington meant that for African Americans, the PW YWCA was a much-needed resource. The founding of the PW YWCA responded to this.

### **District VII of the GSCNC and Depression-Era Civil Rights Protest in Washington**

Sandra King-Shaw joined the Brownie troop at her church, Asbury United Methodist Church at the corner of 11<sup>th</sup> and K Streets, NW, sometime in the 1940s and remained a scout through high school. In an oral history interview she remarked, “We did things...that young black girls didn’t do...People hadn’t thought about having black girls do anything, except church stuff and some school things, but girl scouting was perceived by everybody to be white.”<sup>59</sup> King-Shaw remembered being asked, “You have black girls who are girl scouts? [...]Well what do y’all do?” She responded, “Same thing you do. I use the same handbook you do. Make the same pledge you make.” King-Shaw’s recollections illustrate the gravity of African American women’s push for inclusion in scouting in the nation’s capital. Black Girl Scouts denied the very notion that black girls were unfit for scouting.

African American women’s push for black scouting in the 1930s occurred during a shift within the larger movement for civil rights within the nation’s capital towards a younger, more militant mode of black activism in the city. While activists in the District engaged in “don’t buy where you can’t work” campaigns, black women advocated for the extension of scouting to black Washingtonians. While the founders of the PW YWCA turned to institution-building to support young women and girls, black women saw

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<sup>59</sup> Interview with Sandra King-Shaw, Adelle Banks, Oral History Interviewer, Asbury United Methodist Church, Washington, D.C., April 19, 2017.

inclusion in girl scouting as a way to assert black girls' equality. In doing so, they were part of a larger movement for civil rights in the nation's capital.

*The Founding of the Girl Scouts of the USA and the GSCNC*

Juliette Gordon Low, a white, widowed socialite from Savannah, Georgia, established the Girl Scouts in that city in 1912. She met Sir Robert Baden-Powell, founder of the Boy Scouts, and his sister Agnes, founder of the Girl Guides, while in England the previous year. Inspired by their work with boys and girls, Low first organized a troop of Girl Guides near her Scotland summer home in 1911. She returned to Savannah in February 1912, and one month later, organized a troop of Girl Guides. By the spring of 1913, the one troop in Savannah grew to six troops. In July 1913, the organization officially changed its name to the Girl Scouts of the United States of America (GSUSA).<sup>60</sup>

Low traveled to Washington, D.C. in June 1913 to establish the national headquarters of the girl scouting movement in the nation's capital. She found a space in the Munsey Building, located at 1327 E Street NW. Edith Johnston, the executive secretary of the organization relocated to Washington from Savannah to run the headquarters, and six months later, the District established a local Girl Scout troop. Giles Scott Rafter, then second vice-president of the Mothers Congress and future president of the Parent Teachers' Associations of the District of Columbia, led the first Girl Scout troop in Washington in December 1913.<sup>61</sup> By June 1914, there were 10 troops in

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<sup>60</sup> Robertson, 8, 11. For more on Juliette Gordon Low and a national history of the Girl Scouts see Stacy A. Cordery, *Juliette Gordon Low: The Remarkable Founder of the Girl Scouts* (New York: Viking, 2012).

<sup>61</sup> By the 1920s, Rafter was also president of the Mothers' Congress. As a member of the executive boards of the Mothers' Congress and the D.C. PTA, Rafter was vocal about issues related to D.C.'s youth. A June 8, 1913 *Washington Post* article discusses Rafter's staunch criticism of girls who wore short, low-necked, and fancy dresses, silk stockings, and makeup. She also argued that flirting with boys and young men cheapened girls. The article quoted a statement from her address to the students of Strong John Thomson

Washington, D.C., and in 1917 the local council became the Girl Scout Association of the District of Columbia.<sup>62</sup> The GSCNC underwent a series of name changes throughout its over one-hundred-year history. For the sake of clarity and consistency, this dissertation refers to the Council by its current name, the Girl Scout Council of the Nation's Capital, which the Council adopted in 1963.<sup>63</sup>

The founding constitution of the Girl Scouts stated: "We affirm that the Girl Scout movement shall be open to all girls and adults who accept the Girl Scout Promise and Law."<sup>64</sup> At the organization's inception in 1912, Protestants, Catholics, and Jewish girls were members of the same troops in Savannah. Although this religious diversity suggests that Low was extremely progressive for her time, there were limits to the organization's inclusiveness. Low's main concern in the early years of the organization was growth. She believed that rapid racial inclusion would have a negative impact on the organization's development and success.<sup>65</sup> Still, there were a handful of interracial troops, but, prior to the 1960s, interracial troops were rare. Low's stance (or lack thereof)

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School. Rafter said, 'A plain girl, simply and neatly dressed, has every advantage over her sister who is dressed in a flashy manner, and the plain girl commands the respect of men and women alike. Be just a girl and you will be a woman soon enough.' Mrs. Giles Scott Rafter quoted in "Girls Who Flight and Paint Condemned by Mrs. Rafter: Silk Hose Out of Place With Short Dresses, National Home and School Worker Tells Pupils—Flashy Clothes a Disadvantage, She Says," *The Washington Post*, June 8, 1913, p. 4. In 1922, Rafter spoke out against *Ghost*, a humor magazine published by students at George Washington University. She criticized the magazine for its "risqué" content. A cover from a 1920s issue of *Ghost* shows Santa delivering a pair of silk stockings to a flapper in bed. The young woman is posed with her pajamas on and her hand on her hip. See "Student Publications: The Ghost, 1920s," *The GW and Foggy Bottom Historical Encyclopedia*, [http://encyclopedia.gwu.edu/index.php?title=Student\\_Publications:\\_The\\_Ghost,\\_1920s](http://encyclopedia.gwu.edu/index.php?title=Student_Publications:_The_Ghost,_1920s), Accessed September 17, 2015. Rafter's vocal criticism against sexually suggestive behavior among girls and young women made her an ideal candidate for leading a Girl Scout troop. Her dedication to promoting wholesome behavior and maintaining childhood innocence lined up with the values of the Girl Scouts of the U.S.A.

<sup>62</sup> Robertson 11-12

<sup>63</sup> Ibid 9-10. Timeline of name changes of the GSCNC: 1917: Girl Scout Association of the District of Columbia; 1924: Girl Scouts of the District of Columbia Inc.; 1940: Girl Scouts of the District of Columbia and Montgomery County. This was the informal Council name, but this was never an official name; 1958: National Capital Girl Scout Council; 1963: Girl Scout Council of the Nation's Capital.

<sup>64</sup> Juliette Gordon Low quoted in Cordery, 248.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid 250

on racial inclusion set the tone for how the organization would handle issues related to African American membership, including camping, through the middle of the twentieth century.

There is no evidence to suggest that the “all” in the constitution included African Americans. The question of whether African American girls could become scouts emerged by 1917. Montague Gammon, the third national secretary of the Girl Scouts, approached Low with the question of whether African American troops could be admitted. Low decided that it should be up to the councils to decide if they would allow African American troops to form. The Girl Scouts was organized into national regions. The regions were further broken down into local councils. Each council was comprised of troops, which could be based in churches, schools, or neighborhood centers. The organizational structure allowed for a great sense of autonomy among the local councils, with troops under the authority of their respective council. Low believed that a northern state such as New York could allow black troops to form, ‘but they should not make a precedent.’<sup>66</sup> She feared that southern parents would withdraw their daughters from the organization and would object to integrated activities. The GSUSA voted to allow black troops to officially register at the 1929 National Council Session in New Orleans, but, due to the decentralized structure of the organization, councils ultimately decided whether to allow black troops to form.<sup>67</sup> Councils usually followed local laws and social custom regarding segregation within their policies.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Juliette Gordon Low quoted in, Cordery 249.

<sup>67</sup> Robertson 47.

<sup>68</sup> Although certain councils did not allow the formation of black troops, many African American troops organized informally across the country, and it is possible that informal troops were present in Washington, D.C. One example of informal organizing is Josephine Groves Holloway and her Nashville troop. Holloway led the formation of several informal Girl Scout troops in Nashville from the late 1920s through the early 1940s, when the Nashville Girl Scout Council approved the creation of black troops. For more on

### *Changing Modes of Activism*

The push for inclusion in the GSCNC in the 1930s did not occur in a vacuum. It occurred at the same time black Washingtonians embraced a more militant activist stance. African Americans at the turn of the century used tactics such as mass meetings, testimony at congressional hearings, petitions, editorials in the black press, and neighborhood associations to protests discriminatory practices and racial violence in the capital and the region as a whole. In 1912, the D.C. chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) was founded. When Archibald Grimké assumed the presidency in 1914, the organization zeroed in on discriminatory hiring practices in the federal government. The 1930s, however, marked a turning point in Washington's black organizing tradition. Asch and Musgrove write, "As the city boomed during the New Deal and World War II, a new generation of black activists and their allies arose to challenge Jim Crow, find decent housing, and fight for economic survival... They used new forms of protest, including boycotts, union organizing, and sit-ins, and they formed interracial alliances with a growing number of white people..."<sup>69</sup> One of the most well-known protests of this historical moment was the New Negro Alliance's "Don't Buy Where You Can't Work" campaign, led by John Aubrey Davis, a native Washingtonian and recent graduate of Williams College. The youth-led grassroots movement "represented... the frustration felt by the younger generation of blacks and black intellectuals" who were dissatisfied with old guard African American organizations like the NAACP, who Davis described as a "fashionable organization" controlled by

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Holloway see Elisabeth Israel Perry, "'The Very Best Influence': Josephine Holloway and Girl Scouting in Nashville's African American Community," *Tennessee Historical Quarterly*, Vol. 52:2 (June 1993), 73-85.

<sup>69</sup> Asch and Musgrove 251

“stuffed shirts.”<sup>70</sup> While the grassroots organization was not embraced by all, the NNA and the “Don’t Buy Where You Can’t Work Campaigns” gained a following among black Washingtonians from various socioeconomic backgrounds. Mary McLeod Bethune, then head of the Negro Division of the National Youth Administration (NYA) even joined in on the protests.<sup>71</sup>

Davis, McGuire, and other early black leaders in the GSCNC may not have run in the same political circles. And black scouting advocates certainly did not turn to boycotting or picketing as a strategy to gain access to the organization. Still, these women made the same claims that other D.C. activists in this period made: African Americans, in this case girls, were entitled to inclusion in the organization because they should be seen as equals who were deserving of the same opportunities as their white counterparts.

### *The Push for Black Scouting*

One of the earliest black troops in Washington dates to 1929, when Carrie Knox, the head of Burrville Community Center in Northeast and the Dunbar Community Center in Northwest, organized a troop. It disbanded two or three years later. Alyce Christopher Ballard, who later became one of the first black staff members at the GSCNC,

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<sup>70</sup> Jonathan Holloway, *Confronting the Veil: Abram Harris, Jr., E. Franklin Frazier, and Ralph Bunche, 1919-1941* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 51. On August 28, 1933, Joseph Dacons, James McArthur, and Alfonso Bradley were fired from their jobs at the white-owned Hamburger Grill located on 1211 U Street. The three young men were black, and Dacons and McArthur were Howard University students. U Street was also the commercial center of black Washington. The owner of the Hamburger Grill promptly hired three white replacements. African American customers of the restaurant gathered at the establishment to protest the firing of the three young men, demanding that they receive their jobs back. When William Flintjer, owner of the grill, resisted the demands of the protestors, a picket line formed. This led to a dramatic decrease in business, which forced Flintjer to shut down the restaurant on August 29. One day later, on August 30, Flintjer reinstated the young black men. The protest at the Hamburger Grill launched the grassroots NNA and its “Don’t Buy Where You Can’t Work” campaigns. After the firing of Dacons, McArthur, and Bradley, John Aubrey Davis approached the Washington chapter of the National Association of Colored People (NAACP) about launching a wave of boycotts, but it declined. He launched the idea on his own.

<sup>71</sup> Holloway 51-52

remembered that although Knox formed this troop, “She was informed that [she] could use the program but would have no contact with Girl Scout headquarters.”<sup>72</sup> Gladys Ward organized troops in multiple African American community institutions such as the Southwest House, and in 1933, she led nearly fifty girls on a hike in Maryland. On this hike, the girls cooked dinner, roasted marshmallows, played games, and sang songs. According to the *Washington Afro-American*, Ward was “working very hard to register with national headquarters in the near future.”<sup>73</sup>

One of the earliest pieces of evidence outlining the push for black scouting within the staff of the GSCNC can be found in a 1933 report of the Committee on Colored Troops. The report noted that there had been several calls about organizing black Girl Scout troops in Washington. May Cheatham, the GSCNC Council Commissioner at the time, appointed a committee, chaired by Jessie Dashiell, to investigate who was making calls about organizing black troops and how other organizations handled black groups. The committee also collected “all information possible that might assist in carrying out the policy of the Council toward colored troops in Washington.”<sup>74</sup>

Dashiell reported on a meeting between black leaders in Maryland that took place on January 12, 1933. Many of the leaders in Maryland asked why black Girl Scout troops could be formed in Maryland and not in Washington. Here it is important to reiterate the decentralized structure of the Girl Scouts. This structure not only meant that local councils had great autonomy, but that even within these larger councils, policies were not

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<sup>72</sup> Barbara Laskin, “A Discussion of Black Women’s Contributions to Girl Scouting in the Nation’s Capital,” *CapiTalk* (June/July 1978), 2; Miya Carey, “‘Becoming a force for desegregation’: The Girl Scouts and Civil Rights in the Nation’s Capital,” *Washington History* 29:2 (Fall 2017), 55.

<sup>73</sup> *Washington Afro-American*, April 15, 1933. See also Carey 54-55.

<sup>74</sup> “Report of Committee on Colored Troops, March 7, 1933,” 1, Civil Rights-General Correspondence-1928-1933, Girl Scout Center for Historic Preservation, New York, New York. Herein GSCHP.

always uniform from city to city. Brentwood's Nellie P. Moss, captain of the first black troop in Maryland, felt that Girl Scouting had to be adjusted to accommodate the specific needs of black children. Additionally, the Maryland leaders suggested that a group of "capable colored women" be formed to deal with colored troops.<sup>75</sup> Like the Phyllis Wheatley Y, the leaders within the Girl Scouts, black and white, largely came from middle-class and elite backgrounds, and were deeply involved in the social and civic life of the nation's capital.

The report also detailed a visit to the PW YWCA on January 24. Members of the Committee on Colored Troops went there to see how the Girl Reserves were handled. They found that the "Girl Reserves are handled entirely under the colored Y.W.C.A. set-up."<sup>76</sup> Committee member Rebecca "May" Flather joined Dashiell and visited the Southeast House, a community center for black children in Southeast D.C. According to the report, "The worker in charge, Miss Conover, stated that the impression was that colored troops were not wanted in Washington."<sup>77</sup> Conover further stated that "she did not favor colored Girl Scout troops unless they could have more advantages than are granted colored Scouts at the present time."<sup>78</sup> Finally, Conover was open to having separate training classes for leaders, but she felt that colored Scouts should have the privilege of visiting headquarters and should be able to participate in any city-wide rallies or meetings. She also believed that there should be a black representative on staff.<sup>79</sup> Conover's statements highlight the feeling of hostility toward the formation of black

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<sup>75</sup> "Report of Committee on Colored Troops, March 7, 1933," 1.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid

<sup>77</sup> Ibid

<sup>78</sup> Ibid

<sup>79</sup> Ibid



troops. Furthermore, she felt that if there were to be black Girl Scout troops, they had to be offered the same advantages and opportunities as white scouts. She did not go as far to advocate for integrated troops, but rather a level playing field. She was even willing to support segregated training classes. In sum, Conover advocated for access. This would be the strategy that other leaders in D.C.'s early black scouting movement would implement.

Black leaders' argument for access to the GSCNC, rather than integration of the council, was not surprising for that time. Take for example, the dual public school system in Washington. For the first half of the twentieth century, D.C. public schools in many ways demonstrated how segregation could work successfully. According to Constance McLaughlin Green, in the New Deal era, "Only a very small, unvociferous minority of Washington Negroes saw any advantage in school integration. The rest...aimed at full recognition of the accomplishments of the colored schools and a larger, juster share of funds with which to better past records."<sup>80</sup> In short, education activists pushed for equal resources, rather than mixed-race schools.

Scouting became officially available to blacks in D.C. in the 1930s. Henrietta Green and Lelia Thomas formed the first Brownie troop in Washington in 1934 at the Dunbar Recreation Center. Three additional troops formed between 1934 and 1936, but the growth of black troops was stunted because of financial difficulties and a shortage of volunteers.<sup>81</sup> Although the Nation's Capital Council began to allow black troops to form, all of these troops were shuttled under "District VII." There were different districts within the city of Washington, and all black troops, regardless of their location in the city, were

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<sup>80</sup> Green 246. See also Gregory M. Borchardt, "Making D.C. Democracy's Capital: Local Activism, the 'Federal State,' and the Struggle for Civil Rights in Washington, D.C.," Ph.D. Dissertation, The George Washington University (2013), 57; Asch and Musgrove 216.

<sup>81</sup> "Funds Needed to Expand Plans for Girl Scouts," *The Afro-American*, October 10, 1936.

grouped into this District. Mrs. Anson Phelps Stokes, commissioner of the D.C. Girl Scouts asked Virginia McGuire, then director of the PW YWCA (1927-1937) and a prominent member of the D.C. branch of the NAACP, to organize scouting among blacks in the city. The Council appointed her to lead District VII in 1934.<sup>82</sup> McGuire accepted the position only after the Council assured her that the program for black girls would be identical to the program for white scouts. Although McGuire and other African Americans involved in the D.C. scouting movement accepted the segregated structure of the local council, they recognized a need among blacks. The *Afro-American* quoted McGuire who said, 'The reorganization of the Scouts should meet a long-standing need to provide recreation for our Washington children, after school hours...and it is the desire of the committee to place the emphasis in this project on young girls of school age.'<sup>83</sup> By 1937, District VII was fully developed under the auspices of the local council, and scouting in Washington was segregated, but available all girls in the city.<sup>84</sup>

### *Why Scouting?*

In a 1987 interview, Evelyn Burton Tuckson reflected on her experiences as a Girl Scout and fondly remembered her role models. Tuckson joined the Girl Scouts in the 1930s as a member of Troop 101.<sup>85</sup> She said, "One thing about Girl Scouting was that we

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<sup>82</sup> Robertson, 47-48; Art Peters, "800 Girls Active in District," *Pittsburgh Courier-Washington Edition*, March 12, 1948. In 1929, McGuire led the D.C. NAACP's fundraising campaign to raise money to retain Charles Darrow's legal counsel in the case against restrictive covenants. She became president of the Washington chapter of the NAACP by 1935. In 1938, McGuire was appointed to the D.C. Board of Education. The Council named the administration building at Camp May Flather, a Washington-area camp, after McGuire in 1959. McGuire served on numerous civic and government committees, and she also helped to found the Women's Civic Guild. McGuire died in 1967. "Virginia G. McGuire, Leader in Civil Rights Here," *The Washington Post, Times Herald*, February 4, 1967, B4; "More Representation for Colored Sought," *Washington Post*, January 27, 1935, 5.

<sup>83</sup> "Funds Needed to Expand Plans for Girl Scouts."

<sup>84</sup> "Continuity Script for Colored Scout Radio Broadcast Station WINX," May 3, 1941.

<sup>85</sup> She does not say whether or not this troop was based in her church, school, or neighborhood.

met many women who were successful in the community, and it was a good role model for those of us who were growing up. I'm sure it helped us to strive and improve our status in life."<sup>86</sup> It is unclear whether or not she joined scouting because of the role models, or if this was her belief in hindsight. Troop leaders were often professional women, and students from Howard also had the opportunity to lead Girl Scout Troops.<sup>87</sup> As in white troops, black troop leaders had to be considered upstanding citizens by the local Council. Tuckson's discussion of role models and their impact on her development are also reminiscent of Beverly Goodloe's reasons for joining the PW YWCA. Goodloe viewed the PW YWCA as a route to self-improvement. For Tuckson, perhaps interacting with successful women in the community would aid her self-improvement and development into womanhood.

Like the girls who resided at the PW YWCA or took part in its programs, scouts cited building and maintaining friendships as the factor that motivated them to join the Girl Scouts. Barbara Blackshear, who joined scouting in the 1940s, was on her way to becoming a Camp Fire Girl when her friend informed her, "Oh no, (you don't want to be a Camp Fire Girl), you should come and join the Girl Scouts." Blackshear maintained her relationship with the organization for at least another forty years after her friend

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<sup>86</sup> Evelyn Burton Tuckson quoted in Laskin 1.

<sup>87</sup> Although it is unclear when Howard students had the opportunity to become troop leaders, they were offered the chance by 1946. See Letter from Florence S. Sartoris to E. Franklin Frazier, July 16, 1946, E. Franklin Frazier Papers, Subject Files: Ford Foundation to Inquiries, Box 131-33, Folder 7: Girl Scouts, MSRC. Evidence from the E. Franklin Frazier papers suggests that the ties between the GSCNC and Howard University, and Frazier in particular, extended beyond providing volunteers to lead troops. In 1947, Frazier was appointed to the Girl Scout Public Schools Advisory Committee at the National Executive Committee meeting. In 1948, he agreed to attend the Regional Girl Scout conference. The exact nature of the relationship between Frazier and the Girl Scouts is not completely clear. See Letter from Mrs. Dudley H. Mills to E. Franklin Frazier, July 3, 1947 and Letter from Miss Elenore L. Hoover to E. Franklin Frazier, October 13, 1948, E. Franklin Frazier Papers, Subject Files: Ford Foundation to Inquiries, Box 131-33, Folder 7: Girl Scouts, MSRC.

persuaded her to join.<sup>88</sup> Blackshear's motivation to join was purely social. Her friend simply persuaded her to join, and she did. According to historian Jennifer Helgren, the largest membership of the Camp Fire Girls resided in the Midwest, the Pacific Coast, New York, and Massachusetts. It remained the most popular girls' organization until 1930, when membership in the Girl Scouts exceeded that of Camp Fire.<sup>89</sup> Taking this into consideration, joining the Camp Fire Girls may have been an unpopular choice in 1940s Washington, where the Girl Scouts ranked higher on the hierarchy of girls' organizations. Blackshear's choice to join the Girl Scouts not only allowed her to spend more time with her friend, but it also prevented her from making a potentially unpopular choice.

Sandra King-Shaw's experience with scouting also illustrates how the desire to build relationships motivated girls to join scouting. King-Shaw was the youngest of four daughters and described herself as a "latch key kid."<sup>90</sup> Additionally, she did not consider herself pretty or bubbly and claimed that she "was not popular in school, ever."<sup>91</sup> Given King-Shaw's familial background and how she viewed herself in relation to her peers, the Girl Scouts likely served as an important social outlet for her. She remembered her troop as "a big troop," where they "made things...went on local trips, ...[and] went camping."<sup>92</sup> Being a Girl Scout allowed King-Shaw to build relationships that may have been difficult for her to build at school or with her older sisters.

Black girls joined the GSCNC for many of the same reasons that girls sought to become a part of the PW YWCA. Class was another similarity that linked black girl

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<sup>88</sup> Laskin 1

<sup>89</sup> Jennifer Hillman Helgren, "Inventing American Girlhood: Gender and Citizenship in the Twentieth-Century Camp Fire Girls," unpublished dissertation (Claremont Graduate University, 2006), 2.

<sup>90</sup> Sandra King-Shaw Interview

<sup>91</sup> Ibid

<sup>92</sup> Ibid

scouts and their peers at the PW YWCA. Participants in both organizations would have come from relatively diverse socio-economic backgrounds. For example, King-Shaw joined the troop started at Asbury United Methodist Church. Although Asbury was known as a “hincty,” or bourgeois, church, King-Shaw was born into a working-class family.<sup>93</sup> Furthermore, troops formed not only in churches, but in community centers, settlement homes, and schools. Because of this, black girls from a wider range of socioeconomic backgrounds took part in scouting.

### **Black Society in Washington and the Ritual of the Debutante Ball**

A young woman, somewhere between the ages of sixteen and nineteen, dressed in a white ballgown and elbow-length gloves, enters a grand ballroom. Arches and columns decorated with flowers and vines add luxuriousness to the already grand room. Crystal chandeliers hang from the ornate ceiling. In the audience, she sees her mother smiling proudly. Also in the audience are the most prominent and well-known members of her community. After the young woman is announced she moves to the center of the ballroom floor. Surrounding her in a semicircle is a group of young men in tuxedos. Now at the center of the semicircle, the young woman bows low into a grand curtsy. For months, she has been practicing this curtsy, because it must be flawless and graceful. Her father meets her at the center of the floor and takes her by the hand. After he takes her hand, he leads her to one of the young men standing in the semicircle. This is her escort. The young woman leaves her father and moves to another place on the ballroom floor

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<sup>93</sup> Sandra King-Shaw Interview

with her escort, ready to waltz. This young woman, a debutante, has just made her social debut.<sup>94</sup>

The broader socioeconomic diversity of members of the GSCNC and Girl Reserves was not present in the cotillion tradition. Anyone could be a Girl Reserve or Girl Scout, but not just anyone could be a debutante. Debutante balls were sponsored by elite social clubs, and girls had to be selected or sponsored by a member of the club hosting the event, or an affiliate of that organization. Class and social status set the debutantes apart from members of the PW YWCA and scouts, but like the other organizations, segregation shaped the development of the cotillion in Washington's black communities. As a coming-of-age ritual, ball organizers marked black girlhood as a set apart life stage. This countered historical claims that black girls were not entitled to a girlhood. Debutante balls also prepared young women for citizenship in the black elite. Namely, attaining an education and joining a social network that would collectively uplift the race. Elite black citizenship was not only about the community, but the individual self. Young women learned the proper social graces, such as etiquette and ballroom dancing, that they needed to function in elite social circles. This section traces the evolution of elite black social life in D.C. and the types of organizations that sponsored debutante balls. While debutante balls did not become prominent in the black press, both locally and nationally, until the 1940s, this section shows the development of the social landscape in which the ritual thrived.

### *The History of the Debutante Ball*

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<sup>94</sup> For a description of the format of the black cotillion see Katrina Hazzard-Donald, *Jookin'* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990).

The practice of the debutante ball emerged in America in the late nineteenth century. The white “old money” families of New York used the balls as a way to sustain class divisions between themselves and the “nouveau riche” who were attempting to assimilate into the established elite class. There is not a consensus on when the debutante ball began among African Americans. While Annette Lynch argues that the cotillion tradition began in urban African American communities on the East coast shortly after the ritual began among whites, Katrina Hazzard-Donald traces it to the South in the decade before emancipation.<sup>95</sup> She points to Montgomery, Alabama where “elite slaves” gave an annual ball at Christmastime “at which formal attire was required.”<sup>96</sup> Hazzard-Donald asserts that these affairs were “modeled on those of their well-to-do masters” and “rivalled white affairs in the degree of elaborate preparation.”<sup>97</sup> Elite blacks continued the ball tradition after emancipation.

Hazzard-Donald links the beginning of the black cotillion to the uplift movement and argues that it was a response to racial inequalities. Voluntary associations that sponsored the early debutante balls used the event to ‘demonstrate that blacks were worthy of the American dream.’<sup>98</sup> They also used the event to raise money for charitable purposes, such as hospitals and settlement homes. Cotillions sponsored by white organizations did not allow young black women to debut, so black organizations created their own to give their daughters and young women an introduction to society.<sup>99</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> Annette Lynch, *Dress, Gender and Cultural Change: Asian American and African American Rites of Passage* (Oxford: Berg Press, 1999), 87. For more on the debutante ball in American culture see Karal Ann Marling, *Debutante: Rights and Regalia of American Debdom* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2004).

<sup>96</sup> Hazzard-Donald 163

<sup>97</sup> Ibid

<sup>98</sup> Katrina Hazzard-Donald, quoted in Lynch 87

<sup>99</sup> Lynch 87. See also Katrina Hazzard-Donald, *Jookin’: The Rise of Social Dance Formations in African-American Culture* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992), pp. 162-172.

Black newspapers like the *Colored American* and the *Washington Bee* reported on debuts and debutantes in the nation's capital as early as 1892, but most of these brief reports were not about black debuts.<sup>100</sup> One of the earliest references to a black debutante in Washington's black press appeared in the *Colored American* in 1903. The newspaper reported on Gertrude Elise Johnson of New York. The daughter of Dr. P.A. Johnson was "a very beautiful and talented girl...an accomplished musician, and an adept French scholar. It is expected that she will be a debutante this winter."<sup>101</sup> Evidence suggests that the presentation of debutantes among blacks in Washington began as small coming out parties that were held in the home of the young woman making her entrance into society. A 1930 article in the *Washington Tribune* reported that Edna Mae Hawkins, "young daughter of Mrs. Sadie G. Hawkins," hosted a small group of sub-debs and their escorts in her home.<sup>102</sup>

During the 1930s, white debutantes attained a certain level of celebrity. Karal Ann Marling writes, "public figures, fodder for glamorous magazine layouts. 'Debs of the Year' were designated by New York gossip columnists. Debs stayed up late, smoked incessantly, and occasionally appeared in Broadway musicals."<sup>103</sup> The same year that Edna Mae Hawkins made her social debut, Helen Lee Eames Doherty, stepdaughter of an oil tycoon, made her debut at the Mayflower Hotel in D.C. She gifted eleven of her

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<sup>100</sup> "Fashion Notes," *Washington Bee*, April 16, 1892, 3; "Ohio in the Senate," *Washington Bee*, November 30, 1895; "A Pointer on the Side," *Washington Bee*, December 25, 1896, 7; "The Society World: At This Moment It Is Dominated by the Fair Debutante," *Washington Bee*, December 7, 1901, 1; "A Charming Debut," *The Colored American*, December 28, 1901, 11; "Now the Flower Sandwich: Dainty Morsels Which Are Served at Debutante Luncheons and Teas," January 18, 1908, 7; "Only Daughter of Taft: Miss Helen Now a Sophomore in Bryn Mawr College," *Washington Bee*, May 2, 1908, 3

<sup>101</sup> "The Color A Mark," *The Colored American*, July 18, 1903, 2.

<sup>102</sup> "Sub-Debs Dance During Holidays," *Washington Tribune*, January 10, 1930.

<sup>103</sup> Karal Ann Marling, *Debutante: Rites and Regalia of American Debdom* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2004), 4.



closest friends Ford cars, which featured hunting scenes, which she painted, on the side of the car. She also sent a Ford to the King of Spain, via ship, who was invited to the debut but could not attend. Marling writes, “Pundits who noticed breadlines forming up the block from the Mayflower were put in mind of Marie Antoinette (and her fatal cake).”<sup>104</sup>

Hawkins and Doherty debuted in the same year, but their comings out could not have been more different. While African American debutantes came from prominent families, the wealth for most of the black elite often did not match that of elite white families. It is not clear what type of careers Hawkins’ parents had, and if this was why they opted for a smaller coming out party. Furthermore, the mainstream white press did not highlight this aspect of black life until *Life* magazine published a photographic spread of a Harlem cotillion in 1950.<sup>105</sup> This meant that while black debutantes may have been featured on the society pages of the black press, they did not attain the celebrity of white debutantes in the 1930s.

In her description of debutante balls, Marling writes, “These are puberty-linked, female ceremonials certifying that a girl has become a woman ready for marriage, perhaps, or for an adult role in whatever quadrant of the social spectrum she may find herself.”<sup>106</sup> As discussed earlier in this chapter, the idea of childhood as a life stage distinct from adulthood emerged in the nineteenth century. Yet, because ideas about childhood were racialized, black children were largely excluded from these parameters of, and larger ideas about, American childhood. African American girls in particular,

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<sup>104</sup> Marling 83

<sup>105</sup> Ibid 153

<sup>106</sup> Ibid 3

upon the onset of puberty, “moved instantly from child status to an image of a sexually promiscuous, enticing woman or the older, rotund, asexual ‘Mammy.’”<sup>107</sup> The state of sexual maturity is something that I will discuss further in Chapter Two, but despite mainstream cultural images of black girls, cotillion organizers affirmed the idea that like their white counterparts, black girls too had different life stages, and the transition between those life stages deserved to be recognized and celebrated.

*Washington’s Black Elite and Society Life*

Black D.C. was deeply stratified along class lines throughout the twentieth century. The race riot of July 1919 resulted in greater intra-racial solidarity, but this moment of unity was short-lived.<sup>108</sup> In the midst of hardening racial discrimination and the attrition of civil rights in turn-of-the-century Washington, elite blacks sought to distinguish themselves from blacks of lower socio-economic status. Historian Willard Gatewood writes, “For the colored aristocrats of Washington, nothing was more absurd than the idea that all blacks were social equals. They viewed such a notion as utter fiction, based largely on the white man’s ignorance of the black community and positively detrimental to racial progress.”<sup>109</sup>

Cities throughout the United States had small concentrations of elite African Americans, but Washington, D.C. had arguably the largest concentration. Gatewood writes, “No other city possessed such a concentration of ‘old families,’ not merely from the District and nearby Maryland and Virginia but from throughout the United

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<sup>107</sup> Susan K. Cahn, *Sexual Reckonings: Southern Girls in a Troubling Age* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), 4.

<sup>108</sup> Miller 226. See also Sterling A. Brown, *The Negro in Washington, Prepared by the Federal Writers Project* (New York: Arno Press and the New York Times), pp. 81-82.

<sup>109</sup> Willard B. Gatewood, *Aristocrats of Color: The Black Elite, 1880-1920* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), 46. See also Green, *The Secret City*, pp. 206, 208.

States...”<sup>110</sup> This was due to the fact that the District is home to Howard University and had a large professional and government employment sector. Langston Hughes wrote “Our Wonderful Society: Washington” in 1927 for *Opportunity*, the publication of the National Urban League. Of Washington’s elite he wrote, “Negro society in Washington, they assured me, was the finest in the country, the richest, the most cultured, the most worthy. In no other city were there so many splendid homes, so many cars, so many A.B. degrees, or so many persons with ‘family backgrounds.’”<sup>111</sup> He continued, “I have heard of Washington society...Some nice mulatto friends of ours spoke of the wonderful society life among Negroes in Washington...And some darker friends of ours hinted at...the color line that was drawn there.”<sup>112</sup> To be sure, Hughes’s description of black society in the District was not laudatory, but was a critique of the class and color divide among African American Washingtonians.

The social life of elite blacks in the nation’s capital drew attention from African Americans in other areas of the nation. The black press reported on Washington’s private dinners and card parties, and annual balls. The most prominent clubs, which were populated by the District’s black elite, dominated the society pages of the local black press. Some of these more prominent groups included the Bachelor-Benedicts, the Gay Northeasterners, and the Girl Friends. The Bachelor-Benedicts, a club comprised of men from Washington’s professional ranks, including doctors, lawyers, educators, business men and federal workers began in 1910. Bismarck R. Pinchback, son of P.B.S.

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<sup>110</sup> Gatewood 38.

<sup>111</sup> Langston Hughes, quoted in, Kerr, 38.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid.

Pinchback, the first African American governor of Louisiana, was a founding member.<sup>113</sup>

Agatha Scott, the wife of Brigadier General Benjamin O. Davis, Jr., founded the Gay Northeasterners in New York City in 1930. She started the group as a way to maintain a social network with other young women that she met throughout the Northeast.<sup>114</sup> In the words of Agatha Scott, ‘After spending weekends in various cities in the Northeast during the fall and winter of 1928, visiting friends and meeting many charitable debutantes, I became convinced that it would be an excellent idea to form a club whose purpose would be the development of the feeling of sisterhood among daughters of the socially prominent Easterners.’<sup>115</sup> Two years later, Scott invited her friends on the East coast to come together to form an official social network, the Gay Northeasterners.

Washington, D.C. was one of the charter chapters. The Girl Friends, a social club comprised of professional black women very similar to the Gay Northeasterners, began in Harlem in 1927. The Washington, D.C. chapter was established in 1936.<sup>116</sup> While these clubs were social in nature, they also raised money for scholarships and donated to political organizations such as the NAACP and local charities. These clubs, particularly the Bachelor-Benedicts and the Girl Friends, sponsored well-known debutante balls in Washington throughout the twentieth century.

As evidenced by the Bachelor-Benedicts, the Gay Northeasterners, and Girl Friends, Inc., Washington society life was in full swing by the 1930s. Interestingly, in the midst of the financial woes of the Great Depression, and the visibility of more militant

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<sup>113</sup> Bachelor-Benedict Club, Inc., “About Us,” <http://bachelor-benedict.org/about/history/>, Accessed March 5, 2018.

<sup>114</sup> Northeasterners Inc., “History of the Organization,” [http://northeasternersinc.com/history\\_of\\_the\\_organization](http://northeasternersinc.com/history_of_the_organization). Accessed August 26, 2015.

<sup>115</sup> Boston Northeasterners, “Our History,” <http://www.bostonnortheasterners.org/our-history/>. Accessed August 26, 2015.

<sup>116</sup> The Girl Friends, Inc., <http://thegfinc.org/>. Accessed August 26, 2015.

strands of political activism that it created, black Washington's social scene exploded. Much of this is due to segregation in the nation's capital, which was entrenched by the early twentieth century. U Street was the hub of black social, commercial, and intellectual life in Washington. Theaters, barber shops, and dancehalls lined the street. "Home to Howard professors, federal employees, teachers, and other successful black professionals, the area epitomized black striving and economic achievement."<sup>117</sup> The PW YWCA, located at 9<sup>th</sup> Street and Rhode Island Avenue NW, was near this bustling corridor. A resident of Washington reflected on the U Street corridor saying, "U Street between the world wars was a place where simply 'being there meant being somebody.'"<sup>118</sup>

Historians have shown how the Depression heightened not only economic hardship, but anxieties about unemployed and idle bodies. Social workers and leisure professionals were concerned about how unemployed adults and youth used their free time. However, according to Marya McQuirter, the greater attention to bodily activity was not just a ploy to police bodies. Rather, the "added emphasis on individual bodies also made public presentation a new arena of identity formation" among Washington's men, women, and youth."<sup>119</sup> *Washington Gaily*, *Flash!*, and *Nite Life*, local periodicals dedicated to leisure life in Washington, made their debuts in the 1930s. Social clubs first became popular in D.C. in the 1920s, but most were for elites and "promoted intellectual and artistic pursuit."<sup>120</sup> According to McQuirter, as clubs became more social in nature, promoting style, dancing, and sociability, they became central to the lives of non-elites.

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<sup>117</sup> Asch and Musgrove, 239; See also Blair A. Ruble, *Washington's U Street: A Biography* (Washington, D.C.: Woodrow Wilson Center Press and Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Center Press, 2010).

<sup>118</sup> Juan Williams quoted in, Blair A. Ruble, *Washington's U Street: A Biography* (Washington, D.C.: Woodrow Wilson Center Press and Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Center Press, 2010), 133.

<sup>119</sup> Marya McQuirter, "Claiming the City: African Americans, Urbanization, and Leisure in Washington, D.C., 1902-1957" (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Michigan, 2000), 179.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid 190

However, the tradition of the debutante ball, at least until the 1960s, remained a social tradition planted firmly in the world of elite blacks.

### *Becoming a Debutante*

The cotillion tradition did not differ much from city to city, and neither did the process of becoming a debutante. Exclusive black social clubs such as the Bachelor-Benedicts and the Girl Friends did not have a standardized, documented set of criteria for selecting debutantes, but there appears to be a basic set of traits that debutantes possessed. An examination of the particular traits of debutantes that the black press, photographs, and cotillion souvenir booklets emphasized illustrates what sponsoring organizations looked for in young women. Firstly, she had to be well-connected to the black elite community or part of a family with a good reputation. Either ball organizers, members of the club, or members of affiliated organizations suggested young women whom they believed were “worthy” of the title of debutante. In the case of the Bachelor-Benedicts, the men in the organization picked the debutantes.<sup>121</sup> A young woman might also be invited to participate if she or her parents were affiliated with one of the ball’s organizers.<sup>122</sup>

Audrey Elisa Kerr notes that at the Bachelor-Benedict cotillion in the 1940s, out of the forty or fifty young women who debuted, about half were Dunbar students. This is unsurprising considering that attendance at Dunbar often meant that one was in the middle- or upper-class. The exclusivity often associated with Dunbar reflected the highly stratified nature of Washington’s black society. The neighborhoods in which Dunbar’s

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<sup>121</sup> “Bachelor and Benedicts Plan Dance for Debs May 7,” *The Chicago Defender*, April 24, 1948, p. 17; Frances Lanahan, “24 Make Bows in Capital at Girl Friends’ Cotillion,” *New York Times*, December 28, 1965, p. 18.

<sup>122</sup> Kerr 86

students resided, as well as their social memberships highlight the association between the school and D.C.'s black elite. A woman who grew up in the city noted the tightly-knit social network fostered within the school. She recalled that her aunts who attended the school in the 1930s lived in the LeDroit Park neighborhood of the city, worshipped at Fifteenth Street Presbyterian Church, and "their social circle was completed by membership in the 'Smart Set' [social club] with fellow LeDroit Park classmates."<sup>123</sup> LeDroit Park was home to many prominent African Americans including Robert and Mary Church Terrell, and continued to be an enclave for Washington's black professionals throughout the twentieth century.<sup>124</sup> Fifteenth Street Presbyterian Church was also associated with the elite and light-complexed blacks in the city.<sup>125</sup>

Secondly, debutantes had to demonstrate scholastic achievement. The emphasis on high achievement reflected the larger historical value of education among African Americans as a vehicle for social mobility, citizenship, and uplift, and the leading role of young women within this historical project.<sup>126</sup> Black debutantes represented the promise of black achievement, and the reproduction of these values within the next generation of the black elite. The attention paid to education and academic achievement was a facet of the debutante ball throughout the first half of the twentieth century.

Most of the debutantes planned to go to college and pursue a career. A 1948 article boasted that former debutantes went on to attend prestigious institutions such as Smith, NYU, Mt. Holyoke, the University of Chicago and Oberlin.<sup>127</sup> The President of

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<sup>123</sup> Kerr 84

<sup>124</sup> National Park Service, "LeDroit Park Historic District," <https://www.nps.gov/nr/travel/wash/dc65.htm>, Accessed December 19, 2016.

<sup>125</sup> Kerr 106-111

<sup>126</sup> See Stephanie J. Shaw, *What a Woman Ought to be and to Do: Black Professional Women Workers During the Jim Crow Era*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

<sup>127</sup> "Bachelor and Benedicts Plan Dance for Debs May"

the Washington, D.C. Chapter of the Girl Friends, a professional black women's social club, told the press that four of the twenty-four girls who debuted in 1965 were National Merit Scholars.<sup>128</sup> *Afro-American* columnist Lillie Wiggins wrote, "The debutante ball...is sponsored to promote, develop and motivate girls culturally and educationally who are high school seniors or college students between the ages of 17-19, chosen for their scholastic ability, character, and talent."<sup>129</sup>

Through an analysis of *Ebony* and *Jet* magazines, historian Rachel Devlin demonstrates the cultural importance of girls' academic success in the postwar black press. Devlin found that in 1959, eighty percent of *Jet* magazine covers chronicled the accomplishments of young women. Furthermore, none of the covers of *Jet* between January 1959 and June 1960 featured a black male of any age.<sup>130</sup> Representations of girls in the black press were relatively narrow in this period. Devlin writes, "With the exception of a few stories on the student sit-ins in the early 1960s, depictions of girls [in *Ebony* and *Jet*] were of two varieties: a celebration of her accomplishments or an announcement of her debut."<sup>131</sup> Articles and covers featured girls as "serious student[s]" who attended prestigious colleges, and excelled in their classes and extracurricular activities.<sup>132</sup> *Ebony* frequently featured photographs of fathers reading or discussing books with their daughters.<sup>133</sup>

### *Why Become a Debutante?*

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<sup>128</sup> Lanahan 18

<sup>129</sup> Lillian Wiggins, "33 Debutantes Bow to Society at Tau Gamma Delta's Cotillion," *Washington Afro-American*, May 7, 1966, 11.

<sup>130</sup> Rachel Devlin, *Relative Intimacy: Fathers, Adolescent Daughters, and Postwar American Culture* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 129.

<sup>131</sup> Devlin

<sup>132</sup> Ibid 129-131

<sup>133</sup> Ibid 130



Social recognition and networking are two possible reasons for young women to debut. In a short story penned in 1939, Harlem Renaissance writer Dorothy West described a scene at a cocktail party: “We listened to live conversation around us. A tall unattractive girl on our right had assumed an affected pose. She languished on the divan and blew puffs of smoke through a cigarette holder. Her large foot pivoted on its ankle. She surveyed it dreamily. Her father was a man of importance, and although she had neither beauty nor charm, she had constituted herself the year’s number one Negro debutante.”<sup>134</sup> West’s description satirized society life, but it illustrated the social currency, real or perceived, that came with the distinction of being a debutante. Because one had to be selected to participate, being a debutante meant being a member of an exclusive group of young women. Furthermore, sponsoring organizations restricted the number of young women who would debut each year, which limited the amount of people who could participate, and increased the selectivity of the event. An organization’s annual debutante ball was not only featured in black newspapers, but many of the community’s most prominent members attended these events. The young women at the center of the ritual, no doubt, drew much attention. Girls could have used the ball as a time to forge social connections with influential blacks in the community. Most debutantes planned to attend college, and if they intended to go to Howard specifically, they could have networked with future professors and administrators who frequently attended such events.

## Conclusion

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<sup>134</sup> Dorothy West, “The Cocktail Party,” *The Last Leaf of Harlem: Selected and Newly Discovered Fiction by the Author of The Wedding*, Lionel C. Bascom, ed. (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2008), 114.

By the 1930s, African American girls in Washington could become a member of the YWCA or the Girl Scouts through their church, school, or neighborhood community center. Daughters of Washington's black elite could be selected as debutantes and make their introduction to society in the presence of the District's black elite. Whatever their interests, and in some cases socioeconomic backgrounds, black girls in Washington had options. Culturally, the nation's capital was very much a southern city, and as a result, faced discrimination and exclusion on a daily basis. The black girls' organization was one place where, in many (though not all) cases, black girls were included.

In the next chapter I explore morality and character-building programs in the 1930s and 1940s. During the Great Depression, policy makers, reformers, clergy, and public health officials were concerned about idleness. They argued that idle behavior led to a life of crime and sexual deviance. In the discourse about idleness, the idle person was often gendered male, but historians Ian Kimball and Michele Mitchell show that young women and girls were not considered immune to idle behavior. Histories of idleness and the Great Depression focus overwhelmingly on white young men. In this chapter I build upon Mitchell's work on New Deal-era camps for women, but with a sole focus on black girls' organizations. This chapter also looks at the increase in juvenile delinquency among all girls in Washington, D.C. during World War II and how organizations responded to it. Organizations' focus on morality and character-building responded directly to Great Depression anxieties, discriminatory practices in the nation's capital, and the rise in juvenile delinquencies during World War II. But organizations also believed that character building strengthened the race.

## **Chapter 2: “We have aimed to meet the rising tide of juvenile delinquency”: Character-Building and Morality from the Great Depression through World War II**

Fifteen-year-old Blanche Nicholas, one of the adolescent girls interviewed for Frazier’s Negro Youth Study in 1938, commented that she enjoyed frequenting the Phyllis Wheatley YWCA because she didn’t “have any place to go.”<sup>1</sup> The eighth grader at Garnett Patterson Junior High School and member of the Les Bonnes Soeurs Girl Reserves had been brought to the PW YWCA by Mrs. Swann, a worker at the juvenile court. Nicholas had not been convicted of any crime, but her parents approached the juvenile court because they were concerned about Nicholas staying out too late. Her mother worried that she “would bring back something she would have to rock.”<sup>2</sup> Yet, Swann did not place blame squarely on Nicholas. She claimed that Nicholas was having problems at home, and that “her mother and father seemed to go without realizing that [she] existed.”<sup>3</sup> Nicholas’s story exemplifies the social anxieties about idleness, delinquency and the morality of girls, of all races, in the first half of the twentieth century.

Girls and young women gained greater independence at the turn of the century with the expansion of an urban commercialized leisure culture. Debates about the moral impact of these spaces on the young and working-class saturated American discourse and popular culture. Some reformers believed that dancehalls, nickelodeons, and theaters that working-class patrons frequented were demoralizing. Parents were also not too keen on the independence and heterosexual socializing that these spaces offered to young

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<sup>1</sup> “Blanche Nicholas,” Incomplete Interviews, E. Franklin Frazier Papers, Research Projects Negro Youth Study, Washington, D.C., Box 131-113, Folder 15, MSRC.

<sup>2</sup> “Blanche,” Incomplete Interviews, E. Franklin Frazier Papers, Research Projects Negro Youth Study, Washington, D.C., Box 131-113, Folder 12, MSRC.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid

women.<sup>4</sup>As their independence grew, so too did parents' and community leaders' concerns about girls engaging in illicit sex. Beginning in the Progressive Era, reformers expanded the surveillance and policing of working-class girls' sexual behavior through the creation and expansion of state apparatuses such as the juvenile court, detention centers, reformatories, and special police forces. And as Nicholas's story shows, parents used these state institutions, such as the court, as an avenue to discipline their children.<sup>5</sup>

Along with the relationship between girls' independence and delinquency, parents and community leaders linked idleness and juvenile delinquency. The concern about idleness and delinquency intensified during the Great Depression and World War II. Youth leaders, parents, policy makers, and social scientists of all races were concerned about how these national crises would impact adolescents. Being out of work provided the unemployed with a larger block of free time. Richard Ian Kimball defines this as "enforced leisure," or the "unwitting expansion of free time created by the unwanted loss of employment."<sup>6</sup> For students, the summertime was also a period of enforced leisure. Reformers, public health professionals, clergy, educators, and policy makers all grappled with the question of how this time should be spent. They believed that unstructured free time would ultimately lead to delinquent and immoral behavior in adults and youth, and "if the use of leisure time was not properly organized, the likely result would be socially malevolent juvenile delinquents and drunken men."<sup>7</sup> They rallied around the issue of

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<sup>4</sup> See Kathy Peiss, *Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn-of-the-Century New York* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986) and Ruth M. Alexander, *The "Girl Problem": Female Sexual Delinquency in New York, 1900-1930* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995), 2.

<sup>5</sup> Mary E. Odem, *Delinquent Daughters: Protecting and Policing Adolescent Female Sexuality in the United States, 1885-1920* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995); Susan K. Cahn, *Sexual Reckonings: Southern Girls in a Troubling Age* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), 16-128.

<sup>6</sup> Richard Ian Kimball, "Enforced Leisure: New Deal Recreation in Indiana," *Mid-America: An Historical Review* 79:1 (Winter 1997), 49.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid 50

idleness at the national and local levels, and saw organized recreation, such as Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts, and athletic teams, as a method to curtail delinquent behavior.

Ideas about idleness and delinquency were gendered. Concerns about idle and delinquent girls were often about their sexual behavior. For example, The Indiana State Board of Health Bureau of Venereal Diseases distributed a series of pamphlets to boys, girls, and parents between 1933 and 1937.<sup>8</sup> One pamphlet encouraged girls to participate in sports such as hockey, golf, and basketball. The Indiana State Board of Health did not want to shape girls' athletic skills, but rather, argued that physical activity would make girls too tired to engage in any sexual activity. Kimball writes, "Sports and other athletic activities were proposed as a safety valve that provided a proper release for adolescent sexual appetites. Through recreation activities, youthful bodies were to be kept so busy that their minds (and their hands) could never wander too far from wholesome activities. Recreation, then, was one answer to the 'sex question.'"<sup>9</sup> There was no standard definition of sexual delinquency between states, and the language on state lawbooks regarding sexual delinquency often lacked the nuance to adequately describe girls' behavior. For example, Elsa Castendyck and Sophia Robison of the Children's Bureau

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<sup>8</sup> Kimball 56-57 and Mitchell 193. Even though there was some focus on girls in conversations about idleness and delinquency, the target of most commentators was on men. This can be traced to the idea that idleness was often linked with unemployment, and that New Deal programs prioritized men. An example of this is the creation of the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC), which was restricted to adolescent and young men. The idea of creating a version of the CCC for young women received considerable backlash, which "underscored that dangers associated with idleness were more strongly associated with unbridled masculinity."<sup>8</sup> Even within public debate among African Americans, there seemed to be greater focus on men and youth in general. In 1930, Nannie Helen Burroughs, clubwoman and founder of the National Training School for Women and Girls, wrote in an essay that later appeared in the *Baltimore Afro-American*, 'The homes of the masses are packed with idle men who are resorting to every kind of vice to fill up their idle hours and satiate their lower passions...No people can live in enforced idleness without succumbing to the vile, lustful, imbruting all-destroying power of it.' Nannie Helen Burroughs, "What Negro Leaders Can Do about Idleness," quoted in Michele Mitchell, "A 'Corrupting Influence,'" 190-191.

<sup>9</sup> Kimball 57

wrote in the findings of their study on juvenile delinquency among girls in the early 1940s,

We need to be more aware of the fact that words do not merely express ideas—they also create ideas and attitudes. An excellent example of this is the language of some of our laws relating to sex misconduct. The words ‘lewd and lascivious conduct,’ which are included in the laws of some states, are used indiscriminately to describe the behavior of the youthful and unsophisticated delinquent and of the hardened prostitute alike. Such terminology is associated with degradation and has a demoralizing effect both upon the girls and upon those who administer the laws.<sup>10</sup>

Discussions about delinquency took on a greater sense of urgency during World War II, when juvenile delinquency rose. Rachel Devlin argues that in this period, reformers, policy makers, and the media were not only focused on sexual deviancy among girls, but also sensationalized stories about girls stealing cars, committing robberies, and joining gangs, crimes typically gendered male. Much of the panic revolved around the increase in delinquency among middle-class white girls, and their increasingly violent offenses.<sup>11</sup> It is unclear whether the spike in girls’ delinquency was real, perceived, or simply a result of more reporting.

Nicholas’s interactions with her parents, the court, and the PW YWCA encapsulate the gendered nature of discussions about idleness and delinquency. Mrs. Swann did not mention that Nicholas’s parents were concerned about her committing theft or some other sort of crime. Rather, her mother was worried that she would become pregnant. Nicholas’s parents believed that because she was staying out with friends, she was either engaging in premarital sex, or was on the path to making that decision because she was staying out with friends without adult supervision.

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<sup>10</sup> Elsa Castendyck and Sophia Robison, “Juvenile Delinquency Among Girls,” *The Social Service Review*, Vol. XVII, No. 3 (September 1943), 263.

<sup>11</sup> Devlin 55

Blanche Nicholas's story also illustrates how girls' organizations, and the communities they served, believed that they had a role in stemming the tide of juvenile delinquency and were responsible for developing their members into moral beings. For example, when Juliette Gordon Low founded the Girl Scouts in 1912, one of the stated objectives of the organization was to develop girls along "moral lines."<sup>12</sup> Rather than simply sending Nicholas home with a warning, Mrs. Swann sent her to the PW YWCA. This suggests that she believed that Nicholas's involvement in the organization would curtail any current or potential delinquent behaviors.

In many ways, Nicholas's story illustrates the multi-functional nature of girls' organizations. For her, the Girl Reserves gave her something to occupy her leisure time. The study noted that Nicholas's socioeconomic background was "domestic and [personal service]." In an interview, she divulged how she had spent the day washing and ironing fifteen dresses, blouses, and other articles of clothing.<sup>13</sup> It is unclear whether Nicholas did this for her family or if it was paid labor. Judging by the fact that she was fifteen years old and only in eighth grade, it is possible that at one point, she had to work to help support her family. Being a part of a club such as the Girl Reserves would have provided her a break from the drudgery of work, and despite her responsibilities, given her the opportunity to have typical teenage recreational experiences. Furthermore, if Nicholas had issues with her parents, then going to the PW YWCA offered her an escape from her stressful home life. On the other hand, the juvenile court and her parents viewed

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<sup>12</sup> "Girl Scout Camping Objectives," Meetings-National Board: Camp Committee, 1937-1938, GSCHP.

<sup>13</sup> "Blanche Nicholas, 7/15/38," Incomplete Interviews, E. Franklin Frazier Papers, Research Projects Negro Youth Study, Washington, D.C., Box 131-113, Folder 15, MSRC.

involvement at the PW YWCA as a corrective, or rather, preventive measure against her perceived behavior.

This chapter traces organizational leaders' mission to curb idleness and juvenile delinquency among young Washingtonians and build character within their girl members from the Great Depression through World War II. I argue that organizations developed girls' character and presented them as moral subjects by placing Christian education, service, and chastity at the center of their programs. At the same time, girls participated in these programs and bought into leaders' notions of morality to demonstrate their identities as black and American citizens, to build leadership skills, and to measure their self-worth and the worth of their peers.

The first section of this chapter traces discussions about and quantitative analyses of idleness and juvenile delinquency among black and white Washingtonians in the 1930s and 1940s. Then, the chapter turns to programming and traditions within the PW YWCA, GSCNC, and the debutante ball. The women of the YWCA desired to cultivate Christian women who, guided by their beliefs, would uplift their communities. The PW YWCA used their Girl Reserve and camping programs to implement this objective. The discussion then turns to an example of how Christianity shaped one girl's view of herself as a moral subject.

The next part of the chapter looks at the idealization of chastity within the PW YWCA and the cotillion. Leaders in both spaces may not have been explicit about sexual purity, but the language and symbolism that they employed demonstrates the value that they placed on chastity. On one hand, the valuation of sexual purity would have been restrictive or a source of shame for girls who chose to engage in premarital sex or other



sexual activities. On the other hand, adolescent black girls used their personal views about which sexual behaviors were permissive to police their peers and assert their own self-worth.

Finally, the chapter examines volunteer work among girls in the Y and the Girl Scouts during World War II, and the philanthropic aspect of the debutante ball. Leaders in the PW YWCA and the GSCNC believed that engaging in war work would keep girls busy and deter delinquent behavior. However, through this work, Girl Reserves and Girl Scouts asserted themselves as American citizens. In the case of the debutante ball, young women and the event's coordinators asserted themselves as citizens of Washington's black elite. They did this through philanthropic giving to services and institutions within D.C.'s black community. Collectively, this section illuminates the ways in which service took different forms among black Washingtonians, and how they used these forms of service to craft local and national identities.

Histories of girls' delinquency typically centers on young women as offenders.<sup>14</sup> For example, from the turn of the twentieth century through the 1920s, African American clubwomen in the South fought to open industrial homes for wayward black girls. Other southern states opened institutions for white and black boys, as well as white girls. The neglect of black girls assumed that "black girls were by nature sexually promiscuous, making any efforts at rehabilitation futile."<sup>15</sup> One legislator from North Carolina went as far to say that 'it would take the United States army to correct the morals of all the negro girls in the state.'<sup>16</sup> In establishing these homes, they argued against the idea that black

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<sup>14</sup> See Odem.

<sup>15</sup> Cahn 70

<sup>16</sup> Ibid. Clubwomen's efforts to build industrial homes for black girls are only one example of black women protecting black girls. This historical work can be traced to plantation slavery, when women's kinship

girls were inherently immoral, and therefore, could not be “saved” or were undeserving of state institutions. Instead, this chapter looks at prevention and development, rather than correction, and shows how organizations channeled concerns about idleness and delinquency into their programming, creating a space to allow girls to define themselves against the narrative of black girl immorality.

### **Juvenile Delinquency in Washington**

Washington’s black community leaders urged youth organizations to take the lead in the battle against juvenile delinquency. In 1937, the 12<sup>th</sup> Street Young Men’s Christian Association held a conference on youth. The conference theme was “Strategy of Youth in a Changing Society,” and participants discussed key issues such as economic security and insecurity, health, housing, juvenile delinquency, and voting. Participants in this conference, known as the Youth Assembly, outlined what they believed were the major problems facing black youth in the nation’s capital. Delegates and participants in this conference included community leaders, doctors, and representatives of the PW YWCA and the Girl Scouts.<sup>17</sup> In the discussion of juvenile delinquency, delegates argued that home environment, chronic unemployment, and lack of recreational facilities, among other factors, each contributed to juvenile delinquency. According to the report of the Assembly, delegates believed that youth organizations played a crucial role in curbing delinquency. They urged teachers and parents to “encourage [their children] to become a

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networks made an effort to protect adolescent black girls from sexual violence at the hands of male slaveowners. See Deborah Gray White, *Ar’n’t I a Woman: Female Slaves in the Plantation South* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1999), 91-118.

<sup>17</sup> It is not clear whether these PW YWCA representatives were leaders in the organization, or members.

part of more organized groups [such as] the Girl Scouts, Boy Scouts, Girl Reserves and the like.”<sup>18</sup>

In 1943, Elsa Castendyck and Sophia Robison published their study, “Juvenile Delinquency Among Girls,” in the *Social Science Review*. Here, they analyzed the spike in girls’ delinquency among all races in different regions in the U.S. during World War II. Using data from community studies, field reports from the Children’s Bureau and other private and public agencies, Castendyck and Robison attributed the uptick in girls’ delinquency to wartime factors that included increased movement of families and young people; young female drifters from rural areas into urban centers or near camps looking for work (often in seedy locales); the growing number of women working outside of the home; the absence of fathers who were fighting in the war; overcrowded housing; lack of recreational and leisure facilities; overcrowded and outdated classrooms; and “the absence of social and legal measures for the protection of children and young people from unwholesome community influences.”<sup>19</sup> Figure 2.1 shows the number of delinquency cases among white girls and girls of color living in the nation’s capital between 1940 and 1942.

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<sup>18</sup> Papers of the Phyllis Wheatley YWCA, MSRC.

<sup>19</sup> Elsa Castendyck and Sophia Robison, “Juvenile Delinquency Among Girls,” *The Social Service Review*, Vol. XVII, No. 3 (September 1943), 253. Castendyck and Robison were clear about the difficulties in measuring juvenile delinquency. They relied mostly on community studies, field reports from the Children’s Bureau and other private and public agencies. The other limit of these statistics is that they “are not a measure of the incidence of the behavior but only of the communities’ concern about it.”<sup>19</sup> In *Relative Intimacy*, Rachel Devlin writes, “Female arrest and detention rates are colored by shifts in the definition of crime, the extent of surveillance, and the means of enforcement, all of which, to further complicate matters, differed according to the legal and social practices of each state.” For example, ungovernable behavior, a common offense among girls, was a very slippery term. Castendyck and Robison say, it “may be used to describe a variety of offenses that may include stealing and sex offenses if in the opinion of the court the circumstances warrant a general rather than a specific charge.”

**Figure 2.1<sup>20</sup>**

<b>Washington, D.C. Number of Delinquency Cases (Girls)</b>					
<b>White</b>			<b>Negro and Other</b>		
<b>1940</b>	<b>1941</b>	<b>1942</b>	<b>1940</b>	<b>1941</b>	<b>1942</b>
71	78	73	214	180	251

Delinquent girls of color in Washington outnumbered delinquent white girls between 1940 and 1942. According to the 1940 census, blacks comprised 28.2% of the population of the District of Columbia.<sup>21</sup> In that same year, 75% of girl delinquents were girls of color. Although delinquency increased among white girls between 1940 and 1941 and decreased among black girls that same year, the large increase in black girls' delinquency between 1941 and 1942 is notable. Between 1940 and 1942, in the twenty-six courts throughout the country sampled for this study, the number of white girl delinquents increased 50%, while the number of delinquent girls of color increased 25%.<sup>22</sup> In many ways, the nation's capital did not follow national trends. First, there were more delinquent girls of color than white delinquent girls. In most of the twenty-six courts in the sample, delinquent white girls outnumbered delinquent girls of color. Second, in D.C. between 1940 and 1942, white girl delinquency only increased by about

<sup>20</sup> Table created from Castendyck and Robison report. In their report, the category "white" includes Mexicans, and the category "negro" includes blacks and all other people of color.

<sup>21</sup> "Table 9. District of Columbia—Race and Hispanic Origin for Selected Large Cities and Other Places: Earliest Census to 1990," <https://www.census.gov/population/www/documentation/twps0076/DCtab.pdf>, Accessed June 2, 2016.

<sup>22</sup> Castendyck and Robison 256. In the same time period, delinquency among white boys increased 35%, while delinquency among boys of color increased 11%.

2.5%. For girls of color, delinquency increased 15%. Both percentages are less than the national average. Finally, the overall increase in black girl delinquency in the nation's capital between 1940 and 1942 exceeded the percentage increase of delinquency among white girls.

As scholars of black criminality and Robison and Castendyck argue, the fraught relationship between police and communities of color cannot be ignored. The police, a parent, the school, or an individual could petition a girls' case to court. The report shows that throughout the sample, police petitioned black girls' cases at higher rates than white girls for stealing and sex offenses. Within the South Atlantic region, which included Washington, Baltimore, Norfolk, Greenville, South Carolina, Atlanta, and Miami, the largest discrepancies appear in cases of sex offenses and ungovernable behavior. Police were petitioners for 92% of sex offense cases involving black girls, and 86% for white girls, even though the percentage of black and white girls charged as sex offenders was equal. With cases of ungovernable behavior, police petitioned 51% of white girls' cases and 42% of black girls' cases.<sup>23</sup> Ungovernable behavior, a common offense among girls, was a slippery term. It could have been "used to describe a variety of offenses that may include stealing and sex offenses if in the opinion of the court the circumstances warrant a general rather than a specific charge."<sup>24</sup> It is unclear how courts of the District of Columbia defined ungovernable behavior, and whether the regional statistics were representative of what was happening in the nation's capital. However, the data offers insight into the specific issues that leaders of black girls' organizations faced in their efforts to curtail delinquency.

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<sup>23</sup> Castendyck and Robison 260

<sup>24</sup> Ibid 257

It is useful to think about black girls' interactions with police and what types of cases involving black girls police petitioned most frequently. One possible explanation for the large increase in black girl delinquents in Washington is that they may have been pursued more rigorously than their white counterparts, which would drive their numbers up. As in other cities, police brutality against black Washingtonians was a constant reminder of their second-class status. Chris Myers Asch and George Derek Musgrove write, "District police were notorious for their rough treatment of black residents, particularly the poor...An [National Negro Congress] study found that local police had killed an average of four black men every year during the late 1920s and early 1930s."<sup>25</sup> This violence was not only reserved for black men. Stories depicting black women "bruised and battered" from encounters with the police appeared in the black press regularly.<sup>26</sup> Taking into consideration the relationship between the community and the police, it was also possible that organizational leaders believed that instilling good character within girls would shield them from police violence.

Whether the spike in delinquency among D.C.'s black girls was real, or attributed to more aggressive reporting or policing, girls' organizations believed that they could discourage girls from participating in delinquent activities and keep them from attracting police attention. Furthermore, they sought to instill values that included an appreciation of the Christian faith, chastity, and service.

### **Christian Instruction**

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<sup>25</sup> Chris Myers Asch and George Derek Musgrove, *Chocolate City: Race and Democracy in the Nation's Capital* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017), 267.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid

In an interview, Reverend Robert Moten Williams of Asbury Methodist Episcopal Church named some of the major issues that black youth in D.C. faced. He pointed to the lack of recreational facilities and inadequate housing as two issues. He then added, “The children need more religion than they are receiving. More religious instruction for all children should be provided for.”<sup>27</sup> Historically, the black church anchored black social life, particularly in the South. Organizations for black girls were also part of this social network, and in Washington, D.C., some of these organizations placed Christianity at the center of their missions or found their home in churches.

Women of all races incorporated religion within their organizing. Religion not only informed ideologies within women’s organizations and activism, but the church was also an important space for women’s organizing to take place. Historian Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham’s work on the women’s movement in the black Baptist church shows that although the black church mirrored the patriarchal structure of the larger society, black churchwomen carved out a space of autonomy and resistance. Their resistance was embedded in day-to-day activities that included building schools, fundraising, and visiting the sick.<sup>28</sup> Christianity was central in other African American institutions such as Nannie Helen Burroughs’s National Training School for Women and Girls, where students were taught that the three essentials for living a successful and respectable life were the “Bible, Bath, and Broom.”<sup>29</sup> Many black leaders tied Christian piety to racial

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<sup>27</sup> T.E. Davis, Interview with Rev. Robert Moten Williams, Box 131-132, E. Franklin Frazier Papers, Research Project, Notebooks, Negro Youth Study, Washington Community, MSRC.

<sup>28</sup> Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women’s Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993). See also Judith Weisenfeld, *African American Women and Christian Activism: New York’s Black YWCA, 1905-1945* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998).

<sup>29</sup> Victoria W. Wolcott, “‘Bible, Bath, and Broom’: Nannie Helen Burroughs’s National Training School and African-American Racial Uplift,” *Journal of Women’s History* 9:1 (Spring 1997), pp. 88-110.

uplift, and characterized it as a marker of respectability. Organizational leaders, particularly those in the Phyllis Wheatley Y, believed that by encouraging Christian living, they would develop strong character and morality among adolescent girls.

The YWCA provides one of the most explicit examples of the relationship between religion and organizing among women and girls. The founders of the YWCA indicated that they were an organization of Christian women within the organization's name. Christian instruction extended to the Girl Reserves of the YWCA and their programs. In the foreword to the *Girl Reserve Manual for Advisors*, leaders were reminded that "There is a standard toward which the development of all membership—both girls and advisers—is set. The standard is expressed in the name 'The Christian' and makes the teachings of Jesus the informing and directing principles of any of the Association's programs. His example of growth in wisdom and stature and in favor with God and man is consciously followed."<sup>30</sup> The organization clearly articulated its alignment with Christian teachings. Furthermore, YWCA leadership envisioned the Girl Reserves as a space to develop girls and young women into not just women, but Christian women. The manual outlined the objectives of the movement, which was to "provide or supplement those ideals and convictions which help a girl to live as a Christian of her age should and to aid her to put into practice in her community her standards of Christian living. It endeavors to give girls through normal, natural activities the habits, insights and ideals which will make them responsible Christian women..."<sup>31</sup> In short, the Girl

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<sup>30</sup> *The Girl Reserve Movement: A Manual for Advisors*, (National Board, Young Women's Christian Associations: New York, 1921), 3.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid* 41



Reserves sought to impart within girls and young women the principles of Christian womanhood.

Bible Study classes or a formal curriculum were not the methods of Christian instruction within the Girl Reserves. The organization believed that this type of instruction was more suited for the church. Instead, they envisioned the Girl Reserves as an extension of the church's instruction. Rather than formal instruction, the principles of Christianity undergirded the activities that the Girl Reserves provided. In short, organizational leaders used participatory methods to instill the values and practices of Christianity within girl members. An example of this was the practice of Worship service. At the PW YWCA, Girl Reserves participated in monthly worship services, known as vespers, and opened their individual meetings with a prayer. Although the exact structure of the PW YWCA's vesper services is not known, the Girl Reserves manual highlighted the role of worship within the organization. According to the text, a "girl needs worship, both to develop and strengthen in her attitudes of thanksgiving, unselfish service, and reverence, and to awaken a greater sense of group consciousness and a willingness to make herself one of the group. Worship is essential both for strengthening the individual life and for releasing that life from individualism."<sup>32</sup> Here, worship was an experience that was both individual and collective. It would strengthen a girl's character, but also prepare her to serve others, which was a facet of Christian womanhood and black uplift.

Camp was another space where the PW YWCA sought to guide the District's African American girls in the ways of Christian living. The PW YWCA owned Camp

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<sup>32</sup>*The Girl Reserve Movement: A Manual for Advisers* 297.

Clarissa Scott, located in Highland Beach, Maryland.<sup>33</sup> It opened in 1931 and each year, girls escaped the city's summer heat for a couple of weeks. The PW YWCA advertised Clarissa Scott as a space where Washington's black girls could have respite from the city and "needed healthful recreation under trained supervision and Christian atmosphere."<sup>34</sup> A headline from a page out of a 1944 souvenir program for the camp said, "It's the Y's Camp Clarissa Scott for Fun and Fellowship!" A sentence at the bottom of the page said, "Camping Builds Character."<sup>35</sup> Organizations such as the PW YWCA saw themselves as having a role in curbing delinquency and believed that they could do this through removing girls from the city and into a Christian atmosphere. Although the Girl Scouts was not a Christian organization, it also saw the potential of camp to steer girls away from delinquency.

Another photograph in the Clarissa Scott pamphlet depicted a group of campers walking to a worship service.<sup>36</sup> It demonstrates the collectivity of the worship and fellowship experiences highlighted in the Girl Reserve program. On the one hand, this

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<sup>33</sup>The namesake of the camp was Clarissa Scott-Delaney, a poet of the Harlem Renaissance. Scott-Delaney was born in 1901 in Tuskegee, Alabama, and was the daughter of Emmett J. Scott, secretary to Booker T. Washington at Tuskegee Institute. After graduating from Wellesley and traveling through Europe, Scott moved to Washington, D.C., and became a teacher at Dunbar. She published a total of four poems, several journal articles, and a play, titled *Dixie to Broadway*. Scott's poem, "Solace," won a prize in 1925. Scott published most of her work in *Opportunity*. In 1926 she married Hubert T. Delaney, a lawyer. They moved to New York City, where she worked with the National Urban League and the Woman's City Club of New York as a social worker. One of her tasks was to collect statistics for a "Study of Delinquent and Neglected Negro Children." Scott-Delaney died in 1927 from kidney disease. Her family donated land to the PW YWCA in Scott Delaney's memory. See "A Poetic Talent, Clarissa Scott Delaney," [http://www.aaregistry.org/historic\\_events/view/poetic-talent-clarrisa-scott-delaney](http://www.aaregistry.org/historic_events/view/poetic-talent-clarrisa-scott-delaney), Accessed August 9, 2016; "Clarissa Scott Delany (1901-1927)," [https://wikis.library.gwu.edu/dcpoetry/index.php/Clarissa\\_Scott\\_Delany\\_\(1901-1927\)](https://wikis.library.gwu.edu/dcpoetry/index.php/Clarissa_Scott_Delany_(1901-1927)), Accessed August 9, 2016.

<sup>34</sup> "News Release—Phyllis Wheatley Y.W.C.A.—December 16, 1947," Phyllis Wheatley YWCA Collection, Folder: Publicity, Box: 392-1676 MSRC.

<sup>35</sup> "It's the Y's Camp Clarissa Scott for Fun and Fellowship!" Box 392-1690, Phyllis Wheatley YWCA Collection, MSRC.

<sup>36</sup> "It's the Y's Camp Clarissa Scott for Fun and Fellowship!" Box 392-1690, Phyllis Wheatley YWCA Collection, MSRC; See also "Mid-Summer, 1944 Souvenir Program," Phyllis Wheatley YWCA Collection, Box 392-1690, MSRC.

could have illustrated adults' attempts to safeguard campers against negative, Un-Christian influences and could grow campers' faith while away from home and their home churches. On the other hand, from the perspective of the girls, worshipping and fellowshiping together could have allowed them to forge bonds with each other over shared religious practices. In camp, girls spent days or weeks living, eating, and socializing with each other. The act of going to church together added another layer to these interactions.

In contrast, the Girl Scouts was a nonsectarian organization that sought to build character within its members, though not explicitly through Christian practice. Still, scouts pledged "to serve God and [their] country when they recited the Girl Scout promise. Sandra King-Shaw, a black scout in Washington, noted that black scouting was rooted deeply within the church. In fact, she was a member of the first troop at Asbury Methodist Church. In an interview, King-Shaw recalled that her troop worked with their hands, went on local trips, and went camping, but she did not mention any specific religious-related activities.<sup>37</sup> Girl Scout troops in Washington and beyond did not form only in Protestant congregations, and members of troops were not always members of the same religious faith. For example, when Juliette Gordon Low founded the Girl Scouts in 1912 in Savannah, Georgia, Protestants, Catholics, and Jewish girls were members of the same troops in that city.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Interview with Sandra King-Shaw, Adelle Banks, Oral History Interviewer, Asbury United Methodist Church, Washington, D.C., April 19, 2017. For more on King-Shaw, and why she joined the Brownie troop at her church, see Chapter 1, pp. 23, 34-35.

<sup>38</sup> Stacy A. Cordery, *Juliette Gordon Low: The Remarkable Founder of the Girl Scouts* (New York: Viking, 2012), 248.

Early on, the organization accepted girls from different backgrounds, but there were conflicts based on religious difference. By 1936, there were only three GSCNC troops based in Catholic churches. Reverend Edward A. Fuller of the St. Aloysius Church and School in Washington queried to the Council about developing troops at his parish. When he offered ideas about the investiture ceremony, a ceremony where new scouts were welcomed into the organization and given their pin, the Council rejected his proposal, which they deemed “too Catholic.”<sup>39</sup> In 1938, Reverend Fuller contacted the Council about merging the Girl Scout program into the activities of the church and school. In response, the Council said that it was “not advisable to include in the program the teachings of any church, however much the importance of the teachings of the various churches is appreciated in the development of religion and character.”<sup>40</sup> The national headquarters got involved in the discussion and reiterated to the GSCNC,

“It is understood that Girl Scout troops cannot be used as a medium for religious teaching and the national policy relating to mixed troops protects the child in this regard. However, when church troops have a membership entirely of their own faith, the national organization does not interfere with church observances which might be related to the troop. It is desirable to maintain a Girl Scout troop in the St. Aloysius Parish and since the troop consists only of girls from the parish, greater flexibility can be allowed than were it a troop open to girls of any religious faith.”<sup>41</sup>

Although Girl Scouts pledged to “serve God” when they recited the organization’s promise, the conflicts between Fuller, the GSCNC and GSUSA prove that beyond that

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<sup>39</sup> Ann Robertson, *Girl Scout Council of the Nation’s Capital* (Charleston, SC: Arcadia Publishing, 2013), 48; For more on Girl Scout ceremonies see Girl Scouts of the United States of America, “Ceremonies,” <http://www.girlscouts.org/en/about-girl-scouts/traditions/ceremonies.html>, Accessed February 25, 2018.

<sup>40</sup> “Girl Scouts of the District of Columbia, Inc.,” 22, Folder: GSCNC-Council History, Central Files, GSCHP.

<sup>41</sup> “Girl Scouts of the District of Columbia, Inc.,” 23.

line, the organization did not consider Christianity or religion to be a determinant of one's character or a path to build character.

*Rosella Hillman and Black Girls' Christian Values*

Christian ritual was central to the YWCA program, but black girls in Washington expressed both an acceptance and ambivalence in their relationships with Christianity. Looking at this relationship highlights how they crafted their moral selves, and how their concepts of morality and its link to Christianity compared to those of girls' organizations. Thirteen-year-old Rosella Hillman, a Catholic girl from a domestic labor household, cited her religion as instructive in how she shaped her moral values. Though she was not a member of any of the organizations in this dissertation, her thoughts about how she viewed herself and her choices illustrates the process that many girls likely went through in developing their moral selves. Her story also points to potential areas of contention between members of the PW YWCA and their leaders.

Hillman was another participant in E. Franklin Frazier's Negro Youth Study. The interviewer, identified as Miss Lee, asked Hillman if she ever had sex. Hillman said that her priest said that premarital sex was not allowed. She went on to say, "I would have to tell the Priest in confession and if I didn't tell him I couldn't take Holy Communion..." Hillman's Catholic identity influenced how she determined whether or not a particular act was moral. Her specific reason for not engaging in premarital sex was because it went against her priest's teachings. Hillman's comments also show the centrality of participating in the Holy Communion. Confessing to her priest would invoke feelings of shame, but not confessing was not an option if she wanted to participate in Communion and avoid eternal damnation. Hillman's devotion to following religious teachings and

rituals shaped some of her opinions about intimacy, but she also revealed how she pushed back against those teachings.

Hillman outlined for Lee what she believed were acceptable forms of intimacy and which were not. She said that she did not see anything wrong with kissing and admitted to kissing boys during games. She told this to her priest, who said that she should not do it again. Despite the priest's advice, Hillman maintained that she still saw nothing wrong with kissing boys. While Hillman felt the need to tell her priest that she kissed a boy, which signals that she either believed that her actions wrong or that she believed that the priest would consider it immoral, she continued to believe that there was nothing wrong with kissing boys.<sup>42</sup>

Regardless of religious values, Hillman's rationale for not engaging in premarital sex and her thoughts about kissing are illustrative of the process that black girls engaged in to form their personal values. Adolescent girls interviewed for Frazier's Negro Youth offered different reasons for why they chose to have sex or not, and each had their own set of boundaries for physical intimacy. Whether or not organizational leaders and adolescent girls agreed on which intimate acts were permissible or not, sex and chastity were central to ideas about and experiences of black girlhood.

### **Chastity**

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<sup>42</sup> Lee also conducted an interview with Mrs. Hunton, one of Rosella's teachers at Syphax School. The interview reveals that Rosella's behavior received not only disapproval from her priest, but from Hunton. She told the interviewer, "Rosella is rowdy. She flaunts and flounces herself in front of the boys. I have observed her in the cloak room, dancing and doing what they call 'pecking.' Of course I know that certain amount of the ragtime, that rug-cutting goes on, but there is a way to do it and Rosella looks vulgar! And a [cap] she used to wear pulled down on one side, just that ragtime touch!" Interview with Mrs. Hunton, Interview by L. Lee, May 9, 1938, E. Franklin Frazier Papers, Research Projects Negro Youth Study, Washington, D.C., Box 131-113, Folder 13: Incomplete Interviews, MSRC.

The 1920s ushered in a period of sexual liberation that defied traditional notions of sexuality and proper female behavior. In black and white America, sexual satisfaction came to be seen as critical to a successful marriage, healthy adolescence, and individual well-being. The blueswoman, rather than the flapper, was an important cultural figure for black women in this period. Blues singers such as Ma Rainey, Bessie Smith, Ida Cox, and Ethel Waters presented an image of womanhood that differed greatly from the image presented by middle-class women's organizations such as the YWCA or the National Association of Colored Women. Unlike the chaste clubwoman, the blueswoman openly expressed her desire for and enjoyment of sex. The sexual expressiveness of the blueswoman, combined with the larger shift in American culture toward shorter hemlines and greater female independence, provided black women with an enticing alternative to the vision of womanhood that valued sexual purity over personal pleasure.<sup>43</sup>

As this new, more sexually-liberated version of womanhood flourished, so too did concerns about girlhood sexuality. Still, adolescent girls of all races were expected to remain chaste. However, black girls' and women's sexuality was a longstanding politically-charged issue within African American communities. Racist notions of black girlhood and womanhood cast black women and girls as hypersexual, which made them vulnerable to sexual violence at the hands of white men. Scholars have traced the ever-present threat of sexual assault of enslaved adolescent girls and women at the hands of their masters.<sup>44</sup> From the period of enslavement and through the twentieth century, the

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<sup>43</sup> Deborah Gray White, *Too Heavy a Load: Black Women in Defense of Themselves, 1899-1999* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1999), 124-128.

<sup>44</sup> See Nazera Sadiq Wright, *Black Girlhood in the Nineteenth Century* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2016), 10-12; Deborah Gray White, "The Life Cycle of the Female Slave," in Miriam Forman-Brunell and Leslie Paris, eds. *The Girls' History and Culture Reader: The Nineteenth Century* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2011), 15-30; Deborah E. McDowell, *The Changing Same: Black Women's*

ongoing assumption that black girls and women were inherently immoral led to the assumption that they could not be victims of rape and sexual assault. This also meant that early on, black girls were viewed as sexual objects earlier than their white counterparts. Some black women and girls embraced a politics of respectability that favored sexual purity and dissemblance as a survival strategy.<sup>45</sup>

Black girls and women who advocated for and practiced sexual purity challenged the mainstream belief that they were hypersexual and instilled in them a belief that they not only uplifted the race but that they were fit for citizenship. As Deborah Gray White notes throughout *Too Heavy a Load: Black Women in Defense of Themselves*, clubwomen during the first half of the twentieth century clung to the belief that, in the words of clubwoman Josephine Silone Yates, the “race could rise no higher than its women.”<sup>46</sup> In her discussion of chastity and the socialization of black girls, historian Stephanie Shaw says, “Adhering to this code of morality would, however, do more than protect the individual, family, and race from embarrassment. A breach of these practices, whether or not it resulted in a premarital or early pregnancy, could easily eliminate the professional opportunities for which parents were preparing their daughters.”<sup>47</sup> Organizations sought to shape narratives of and police black girlhood sexuality. The girls themselves often held opinions about acceptable sexual behavior that differed from those

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*Literature, Criticism, and Theory* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 37; Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*

<sup>45</sup> Darlene Clark Hine, “Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women in the Middle West,” *Signs* 14:4 (Summer 1989), 912-920; Deborah Gray White, *Too Heavy a Load: Black Women in Defense of Themselves, 1894-1994* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1999), 70.

<sup>46</sup> White 43

<sup>47</sup> Stephanie J. Shaw, *What a Woman Ought to Be and to Do: Black Professional Women Workers during the Jim Crow Era* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), 24.



of the organizations, there were also instances that they subscribed to traditional notions of sexual propriety, and in turn, policed each other.

### *Camp*

It is important to think about organizations like the PW YWCA and the GSCNC, and, to an extent, the ritual of the debutante ball, as homosocial spaces. William Henry Jones, a Howard University sociologist, claimed that personnel at the PW YWCA sought to “appreciate, control, and direct the human-nature impulses and desires of the young women.”<sup>48</sup> One space where the PW YWCA, as well as the GSCNC, did this was camp. Parents could send their daughters to an overnight camp outside of the city, or a day camp in the city. Whether a girl went to Camp Clarissa Scott or a GSCNC day or overnight camp, she would be with other girls.

Public health officials argued in favor of recreational programs as a preventative measure against ‘wrongful’ sexual behaviors during the Great Depression.<sup>49</sup> They argued that young people with an excess of unstructured leisure time were more likely to engage in masturbation, homosexuality, and premarital sex. While anxieties about masturbation were directed mostly toward boys and young men, the concern about premarital sex applied to both sexes.<sup>50</sup> When asked to identify the largest problem that young people faced in Washington, D.C., James A. Brown, President of the Golden Rule Christian Endeavor Union and owner of a printing business, replied, “The main problem with our

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<sup>48</sup> William Henry Jones, *Recreation and Amusement Among Negroes in Washington, D.C.: A Sociological Analysis of the Negro in an Urban Environment* (Washington, D.C.: Howard University Press, 1927), 58.

<sup>49</sup> Mitchell 193

<sup>50</sup> Ibid

youth today is sex.”<sup>51</sup> American activists, reformers, and politicians believed that adult-supervised recreational facilities and activities were the solution.

Brown and other black youth leaders in Washington went one step further. He tackled the “sex problem” by keeping adolescent boys and girls in unisex groups so that they would not be tempted to pair off and engage in sexual intercourse. Black playground directors interviewed for Frazier’s Negro Youth Study expressed similar sentiments. Miss Nickens, a worker at the Deanwood playground in Southwest DC said, “We did have a problem along the sex line with some girls who come over here just to talk to the boys. I don’t like to keep them segregated but had to do it for the good of the grounds.”<sup>52</sup> Workers at the Garfield playground in Southeast DC observed, “The older girls do not take any interest in anything but the boys. The boys are almost as bad...The girls get much more attention than the boys.”<sup>53</sup> Mr. Martin of the Brown-Young-Phelps playground in Northeast stated, “The only sex troubles we have is when these little boys ask these girls for ‘a piece of ass.’...These girls help to keep that short [sic] of thing going...We have a hard time trying to interest the older girls here. There are about 11 who take part in the activities, but the rest just come here and look around and talk to the

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<sup>51</sup> T.E. Davis, Interview with James A. Brown, July 18, 1938, Box 131-132, E. Franklin Frazier Papers, Research Project, Notebooks, Negro Youth Study, Washington Community, MSRC. The Christian Endeavor Union was an evangelical organization that sought to reach out to young people. It began in 1881 under the direction of Pastor Francis E. Clark and his wife Harriet Clark at the Williston Congregational Church in Portland, Maine. They established the Union after a week of revival services where thirty young people became born again Christians. See World’s Christian Endeavor Union, “History,” [www.worldsceanion.org/history](http://www.worldsceanion.org/history), Accessed February 22, 2016. According to the official website for the Golden Rule Christian Endeavor Union, “The formation of the Golden Rule Christian Endeavor Union grew out of a specific need for racial equality in the District of Columbia, in 1924. African-American churches pulled out of the Washington, DC C.E. Union to form the Golden Rule Union. Mr. Thaddeus Chase served as the Union’s first President...Many churches of various denomination formed the Golden Rule C.C. Union.” <http://grce.tripod.com/id1.html>. Accessed February 22, 2016.

<sup>52</sup> “Playgrounds (as of 1938)” Folder 6: Social Organization, Institutions, Box: 131-132, E. Franklin Frazier Papers, Research Project, Notebooks, Negro Youth Study, Washington Community, MSRC.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid

boys. We cannot get them to take part in anything.”<sup>54</sup> In each example, the playground workers characterized the girls as the troublemakers or instigators of boys’ aggressive behavior. Their observations reinforced negative perceptions of black girls’ character and sexual behavior.

However, not all playground directors experienced “sex problems” among their youngsters. Some attributed this to the fact that the children that visited their playgrounds were too young to have any interest in the opposite sex.<sup>55</sup> Others claimed that they did not have any issues with inappropriate relations between girls and boys because they had plenty of activities to keep them busy. For example, Carrie Knox who started one of the earliest black Girl Scout troops in Washington was the Director of the Dunbar Community Center and playground. She proudly stated, “My girls are always busy. We have dramatics, swimming, outdoor games, sewing, handicraft and other activities for them. They don’t get a chance to loaf and hang around the boys here.”<sup>56</sup>

For parents who might have felt uneasy about heterosocial recreational spaces, a Girl Scout or PW YWCA camp, if they could afford it, would have been an appealing alternative to a playground or community center for summer recreation. For example, a 1944 article in an African American Washington newspaper, titled “Here’s Your Chance to Help Curb Delinquency,” attempted to promote Camp Bay Breeze, a GSCNC camp located in Lusby, Maryland. According to the article, “One of the most effective means so far designed to provide an active outlet for children during the school vacation period is the summer camp. Such camps take juveniles off the streets; permit them to make life-

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<sup>54</sup> “Playgrounds (as of 1938)”

<sup>55</sup> Ibid

<sup>56</sup> Ibid

long friendships; follow their favorite hobby or learn one; build their bodies and keep busy.”<sup>57</sup> Here, the GSCNC presented camp as a space of correction for delinquents, similar to the way the Mrs. Swann viewed the PW YWCA in her decision to send Nicholas there. Additionally, groups like the YWCA and Girl Scouts used camp to shield girls, who were not considered delinquent, from negative influences. In short, camping could be a reformatory or preventative measure. Here, it becomes clear that organizational leaders not only thought that camp was a solution to idleness and delinquency because it gave girls something to do and a supervised place to play, but because it physically separated girls from peers who they might have considered a bad influence.

Spaces like camp offered homosocial summer recreation for Washington’s black girls. Parents and leaders believed that camp would occupy girls’ time, and, in the case of overnight camps, literally remove girls from their typical environments, so that there would not be an opportunity to be idle or indulge in deviant sexual behavior. The ritual of the debutante ball also acknowledged black girls’ sexuality, but in a different way. With the cotillion, organizers were not necessarily trying to prevent premarital sex between debutantes and their escorts but they sought to acknowledge and put the representation of the virginal adolescent black girl on a pedestal.

### *The Debutante*

The cotillion marked a young woman’s social debut and signified her sexual maturation. Karal Ann Marling writes, “These are puberty-linked, female ceremonies certifying that a girl has become a woman ready for marriage, perhaps, or for an adult

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<sup>57</sup> Audrey Weaver, “Here’s Your Chance to Help Curb Delinquency,” 1944, GSCNC.

role in whatever quadrant of the social spectrum she may find herself.”<sup>58</sup> If the debutante ball represented a young woman’s sexual maturation, then underlying this notion is that debutantes were expected to be chaste.

As discussed in the first chapter, a young woman secured her spot in the debutante ball if either a member of the sponsoring club or a member of a related social club selected her. Or, she could be the daughter of a member of the sponsoring club. While there was a clear set of criteria to determine who could be a debutante, something such as chastity would be harder to determine. Unless a young woman had a child or was pregnant, one could not prove that she had engaged in sexual intercourse. Mrs. Orelia Ledbetter chaired the 1965 Girl Friends cotillion, but her thoughts about judging a potential debutante’s character and morality were not specific to that period. Ledbetter alluded to the difficulty of determining a potential debutante’s sense of morality. In her comments about being selective about who could debut she said, ‘we had to make rigid rules, such as that there will never be more than 24 debutantes, all of whom will have a satisfactory scholastic record and, as far as one can judge these things, moral integrity.’<sup>59</sup> Here, Ledbetter admitted that there were limits in determining one’s morality. Still, due to the clannishness and tight social network of Washington’s black elite, it is likely that organizers relied heavily on one’s reputation.

Once they were chosen to debut, debutantes marked their entrance into society wearing long white ball gowns and gloves. The color represented purity and “shining

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<sup>58</sup> Karal Ann Marling, *Debutante: Rights and Regalia of American Debdom* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2004), 3.

<sup>59</sup> Frances Lanahan, “24 Make Bows in Capital at Girl Friends’ Cotillion,” *New York Times*, December 28, 1965, p. 18.

newness to society.”<sup>60</sup> The representation of debutantes as pure worked to debunk racist stereotypes about black girls’ and women’s sexuality. The local and national black press disseminated these images to the masses. Representations of black girls in the media were rare and extremely limited in scope. The few representations of them in mainstream media that did exist were often caricatures. They were often portrayed as unkempt and uneducated. The picaninny and *Gone with the Wind*’s Prissy come to mind as examples. In the eyes of national consumer and popular culture, upon puberty, the black girl moved instantly from child status to an image of either the promiscuous, enticing, and sexually threatening Jezebel or the unattractive, overweight, asexual Mammy.<sup>61</sup> However, the image of a debutante, clothed in white and looking regal, created a different narrative of black girlhood.

The black press highlighted the physical attractiveness of the debutantes. Writers frequently used the words “pretty,” “gorgeous,” and “beautiful” to describe the girls. One writer described how “20 young beauties...curtsied their way into the hearts of every guest.”<sup>62</sup> While the debutantes were considered physically attractive and desirable, and the debut represented a young woman’s coming of age and maturity, the press was careful to not present the debutantes as hypersexual. The debutante’s beauty, innocence, and femininity, all characteristics not usually ascribed to black girls and women, made her a source of racial pride because they countered the notion that black women and girls were unattractive, unrefined and hypersexual.

### *Negotiating and Policing Sexual Values*

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<sup>60</sup> “Debutante Cotillion tops holiday season,” *Washington Afro-American*, December 31, 1960, 11.

<sup>61</sup> Cahn 4

<sup>62</sup> “D.C. Girl Friend’s gift boosts Summer Outing Fund \$1000,” *Washington Afro-American*, Undated, but likely 1960s.

African American girls' organizations and the black press expected girls to maintain respectability by remaining chaste, but did girls relate to these expectations? The Frazier Negro Youth Study interviews provide insight into how girls grappled with and negotiated their moral values. While their ideas of what was morally acceptable often differed significantly from the moral education of girls' organizations, the separate views were not necessarily in direct opposition. In fact, there were girls that shared the same views. Girls' values were central to their identities, but they also used these same values to police their peers.

Francis Meachum was a seventeen-year-old junior at Armstrong High School and a member of the PW YWCA Dancing Club. The Frazier study classified her as a "girl worker."<sup>63</sup> The interviewer, identified only by the initials L.L. asked Francis, "Don't you think girls should have sex relations?"<sup>64</sup> Francis replied, "Not until they reach a certain age." The interviewer followed up the response with another question: "What age?" In response, Francis said that young women should not have sex until they are married. Here, Francis offered contradictory answers. At first it appeared that she believed that premarital sex was acceptable, as long as one was of a certain age. But when questioned about what age, she said that girls should wait until they are married. Perhaps, she meant to say that a young woman was ready to have sex when was old enough to get married.

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<sup>63</sup> "Francis Meachum," E. Franklin Frazier Papers, Research Projects Negro Youth Study, Washington, D.C., Box 131-113, Folder 15: Incomplete Interviews MSRC.

<sup>64</sup> It is unclear whether or not L.L. was a man or woman. In *Crescent City Girls: The Lives of Young Black Women in Segregated New Orleans*, LaKisha Simmons analyzes interviews of adolescent girls that were part of Allison Davis and John Dollard's *Children of Bondage: The Personality Development of Negro Youth in the Urban South*. Like Frazier's work, their study was also part of American Youth Commission's Negro Youth Study series. Simmons notes in her text that a young man interviewed at least one of the adolescent girls in the Davis and Dollard study. See LaKisha Michelle Simmons, *Crescent City Girls: The Lives of Young Black Women in Segregated New Orleans* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015), 132-139.

L.L. continued the line of questioning, “Don’t some before they are married?” Francis explained, “Yes, ninety-nine out of a hundred. These girls all around talk about sex relations. Think you are crazy if you say you haven’t had any. They don’t believe you.” The next question that the interviewer asked Francis was more personal: “Have you had any?” Francis replied, “No.” L.L. continued, “Haven’t you wanted to?” Looking down, Francis said, “Un un.” The transcript then notes that the interviewer “observed it was only natural for girls to want to have sex relations.”<sup>65</sup> This exchange is instructive for two reasons. First, Francis suggests that most girls her age were engaging in premarital sex, and that they expected their peers to be doing the same. The girls in Francis’s social circle considered not having sex to be the exception, rather than the general rule. Second, Francis’s tone and body language, as recorded in the interview transcript, highlights her discomfort at the line of questioning. Even when the interviewer assures her that sexual desires were normal, Francis does not want to open up. Perhaps she was shy. Perhaps at that moment, Francis truly did not desire to have sex. Or, perhaps she did not desire to have sex with boys.

When an interviewer asked Lucy Savage what she thought about girls who had multiple sexual partners, she replied with an answer similar to a number of other girls interviewed. She believed that having casual sex with multiple partners was not ideal, but that there was no harm in being intimate with a boyfriend. In response, the interviewer said, “But sometimes girls get caught just as you do or sometimes they contract a social disease.”<sup>66</sup> Here, “get caught” meant to become pregnant. According to the interview transcript, Lucy, who had a child, did not respond to the comment. The interviewer

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<sup>65</sup> “Francis Meachum”

<sup>66</sup> “Lucy Savage”



continued, “Doesn’t it pay not to be so intimate with boys?” Lucy said, “I don’t know.” Again, Lucy’s silences and brief replies can be interpreted as either her feeling shame or in complete disagreement with the interviewer. Regardless, Lucy expressed discomfort throughout the interview.

Sixteen-year-old Maribelle Just was a student at Dunbar, and founder of a girl-led club, the Junior Debs. The interviewer asked her if there were any clubs that rivaled her own. According to Maribelle, the Sappy Sues was the main rival of the Junior Debs. Maribelle criticized and differentiated herself from the girls in the Sappy Sues by describing what she believed to be their poor behavior. She said, “Those girls seem to be faster than we are. They smoke and I think that they drink. Their boy-friends seem to be lots older than they are and seem to be rather ‘thuggish.’ They have all been to the Colonnade to dances...I believe that only two of my club members have been in the colonnade to dance. I haven’t been there because I haven’t been allowed to go. I don’t have any particular desire to attend an affair there.”<sup>67</sup> The interviewer then asked Maribelle whether or not she believed that she was better than the girls in the Sappy Sues. Maribelle replied, “I think I do. I know that I don’t do the things those girls do. I neither smoke nor drink, nor have I been loose around the boys...I don’t make a habit of kissing every boy I know. I won’t say that all the girls act like that, but they just give me the impression of being willing to do anything to get a boy’s attention”<sup>68</sup>

Sixteen-year-old Charlotte Pinkett, another member of the Junior Debs, echoed Maribelle’s sentiments about the Sappy Sues. Charlotte believed that the Junior Debs

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<sup>67</sup> “Maribelle Just,” Folder 14: Incomplete Interviews, Box: 131-113, E. Franklin Frazier Papers, Research Projects Negro Youth Study, Washington, D.C., MSRC.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid

were the “pick of the crop.” She believed that although the members of the Sappy Sues and the Junior Debs were around the same age, she considered those in the other group to be “so much faster.” Charlotte continued, “Most of us have just begun having company but they have been entertaining boys since their junior high school days. They go around with any old boy who comes along. They have all been to the Colonnade and most of them smoke and drink. I am almost sure they do other things too. Well, I mean have sexual relations with boys.”<sup>69</sup> When asked whether there were any rivalries between the two clubs because of boyfriends Charlotte replied, “They (the girls) have their own bunch of boys and besides I don’t think, at least, I know that we would not go around with the boys who take them out.”<sup>70</sup>

Both Maribelle and Charlotte mentioned “The Colonnade.” This is a reference to the Lincoln Colonnade, a dancehall located in the basement of the Lincoln Theater at 1215 U Street NW. The Colonnade featured dances and performances from the era’s biggest musicians such as Louis Armstrong.<sup>71</sup> Maribelle said that she was not permitted to attend dances at the Colonnade, and she and Charlotte both emphasized the fact that they did not go to the Colonnade. This suggests that The Colonnade was a space that many considered unsavory and not appropriate for “nice” girls. Historians have written extensively about the link between dancehalls and the perceived licentious behavior of adolescent girls of all racial and ethnic backgrounds. Such places were characterized as “sinful,” and youth who visited them “threatened respectability because dance halls were

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<sup>69</sup> “Charlotte Pinkett,” Folder 14: Incomplete Interviews, Box: 131-113, E. Franklin Frazier Papers, Research Projects Negro Youth Study, Washington, D.C., MSRC.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> “Lincoln Theatre and Lincoln Colonnade, African American Heritage Trail,” [https://www.culturaltourismdc.org/portal/lincoln-theatre-and-lincoln-colonnade-african-american-heritage-trail#.Vd8S0\\_IViko](https://www.culturaltourismdc.org/portal/lincoln-theatre-and-lincoln-colonnade-african-american-heritage-trail#.Vd8S0_IViko). Accessed August 27, 2015.

associated with immoral behavior, physical closeness between youth, and improper sexual activity.”<sup>72</sup> Maribelle and Charlotte emphasized the fact that they did not frequent The Colonnade to prove that they were not like the girls in the Sappy Sues. Second, Maribelle and Charlotte discussed the perceived sexual behaviors of the girls in the Sappy Sues. According to the Junior Debs, the girls in the Snappy Sues were “fast” and had relationships with “thuggish” boys. Although Maribelle admitted to kissing boys, she was sure to highlight that she had not kissed too many of them. Kissing boys, to a certain degree, was acceptable, but having sexual intercourse, at least according to Maribelle and Charlotte, was going too far. In their minds, having sexual intercourse with boys was something that girls in the Snappy Sues, and not the Junior Debs, did. Maribelle and Charlotte’s comments demonstrate how teenage girls policed or made judgments on each other based on perceived sexual behavior, or whether or not a girl smoked, drank, or frequented unsavory commercial spaces.

The interrelated projects of building character and confronting idleness and delinquency were about more than just personal moral values. It was also about contributing to society through service and being a good citizen of black Washington, a good citizen of black America, and a good citizen of the United States.

### **Service**

In 1930, the National Association of Colored Women (NACW) created the National Association of Colored Girls (NACG), the youth wing of the organization. In the 1933 edition of the NACG handbook, the *Girls’ Guide*, young readers learned,

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<sup>72</sup> Simmons 122. See also Tera Hunter, *To ‘Joy my Freedom: Southern Black Women’s Lives and Labors after the Civil War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), 168 and Robert M. Frumkin and Mayme S. Brandyburg, “Expected Versus Actual Social Behavior of Negro Adolescent Girls in a Southern Rural Community,” *The Journal of Negro Education* 23:2 (Spring, 1954), pp. 197-200.

“When I am busy doing good I shall have no time to do evil.”<sup>73</sup> The girls’ organizations in this study perpetuated this idea; that if girls used their free time in the service of others, they would not be idle, and would have neither the time nor energy to engage in deviant behavior. Girls’ organizations used service projects to structure their members’ free time.

Looking at the service components of the PW YWCA Girl Reserves, GSCNC scouts, and debutantes in this period reveals the dual nature of service in African American communities. The first form of service was service to the African American community. With the cotillion, the sponsoring organization and its guests performed service through philanthropy. The proceeds of many cotillions went to either charitable causes or black community institutions. With the PW YWCA and the GSCNC, community service took the form of volunteerism such as donating time to Freedman’s Hospital. The second form, as exemplified by the Girl Reserves and Girl Scouts, was service to the nation. During World War II, black scouts and Girl Reserves in Washington joined their fellow scouts and reserves across the United States in doing their part on the homefront. However, there was more at stake for black girls performing war work. This work among black Y girls and girl scouts were part a larger web of war work in general, and the Double V campaign in particular. Regardless of the form that service took, black girls performed citizenship. They presented themselves as good, contributing citizens of the United States and of black Washington.

### *Service to the Community*

The Girl Scouts and the Girl Reserves each had a legacy of service. An excerpt of the Girl Reserves code stated: “I will do my best to honor...my country, and my

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<sup>73</sup> The National Association of Colored Girls, *Girls’ Guide* (1933), 41.

community, to help other girls...”<sup>74</sup> When scouts recited the Girl Scout Promise, they pledged to “help people at all times.”<sup>75</sup> The Girl Scouts slogan, “Do a good turn daily,” reiterated the pledge to help others in the Promise, and urged scouts to do a good deed for someone each day.<sup>76</sup> Sarah Nash, a black D.C. scout, remembered wearing her Girl Scout uniform to school, which included a pin. She would wear the pin upside down until she “did a good turn.”<sup>77</sup> After completing the good deed, she would rotate the pin right side up. This shows how the Girl Scouts incentivized service, which could have been a draw to join for some girls. On the other hand, some scouts may have felt compelled to volunteer in their communities or do good deeds only for an award, such as a badge, or recognition. Still, the act of rotating the pin could have been a source of pride for Nash and other wearers. The act of helping others may have made them feel good about themselves. The fact that Nash remembered this aspect of scouting as an adult suggests that this was a notable component of her scouting experience.

The PW YWCA’s 1943 Annual Report of Program and Services included a section titled, ‘An Idle Mind is the Devil’s Workshop.’ Here, the executive board addressed the “rising tide of juvenile delinquency,” and claimed that the volunteer work that its Girl Reserves performed in the previous year was a remedy for it.<sup>78</sup> The volunteer work mentioned in the report included singing carols at Freedman’s Hospital and

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<sup>74</sup> World Young Women’s Christian Association, *The Girl Reserve Movement: A Manual for Advisers*, 1921 edition (New York: National Board, Young Women’s Christian Associations, 1918), 45.

<sup>75</sup> Girls Scouts of the United States of America, “Who We Are,” <http://www.girlscouts.org/en/about-girl-scouts/who-we-are.html>, Accessed February 28, 2018.

<sup>76</sup> Girl Scouts of the United States of America, “Traditions,” <http://www.girlscouts.org/en/about-girl-scouts/traditions.html>, Accessed February 28, 2018.

<sup>77</sup> Krystal Archer, “History of African American Girl Scouts in Alexandria and the Metropolitan Area,” (1994), 5, GSCNC.

<sup>78</sup> “Annual Report of Program and Services, 1943,” Annual Reports, Executive Director and President, 1943-1948, Box 392-1676, PW YWCA Collection, MSRC.

Stoddard Baptist Home, a retirement home for Baptist ministers and their wives.<sup>79</sup> In 1943, the PW YWCA's Girl Reserves established a project known as "Hospital Playmates," where girls volunteered at the Children's Ward of Freedman's Hospital. They told stories, played games, and helped with crafts. Other playmates made bandages for the Central Supply Room or assisted in the offices and switchboard. Although Girl Reserves' thoughts about volunteer work are absent from the historical record, take Sarah Nash's thoughts into consideration again. The Girl Reserves did not have a badge or awards system like the Girl Scouts, but some may have volunteered at the hospital or retirement home out of obligation to their organization, rather than a true desire to serve.

The service work that black scouts and Girl Reserves completed was hands on. Their version of community service stressed volunteerism and everyday good deeds. This version of service to the community was quite different than that illustrated by the debutante ball. The cotillion is an example of the ways in which class shaped African Americans' service to their own communities.

The debutante ball signified a young woman's coming of age and entrance into society, but it was also often a fundraiser. For example, the Girl Friends cotillion raised money for youth summer programs and a children's hospital.<sup>80</sup> It is unclear whether all the money that the Girl Friends collected went to charitable causes, or only a portion of the proceeds. Guests who attended these events were among the most prominent in D.C. black society. An article in the *Washington Afro-American* stated, "Pioneers and

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<sup>79</sup> "December 1938," Phyllis Wheatley YWCA Collection, Box: 392-1719, Folder: Programs, Association Events, MSRC; "History," Stoddard Baptist Nursing Home, <http://www.stoddardbaptisthome.org/about-us/history/>, Accessed May 28, 2016.

<sup>80</sup> "Girl Friends present 24 debs; \$1000 to Children's Hospital," *Washington Afro-American*, Unknown date; "D.C. Girl Friend's gift boosts Summer Outing Fund \$1000."

middlemen of Washington's first families formally extended fellowship here...several generations of this city's 'upper crust' citizens...attended.'"<sup>81</sup> Attendees had the means to support their community institutions.

The fundraising aspect of the cotillion is part of the broader relationship between elite African American social life, philanthropy, and uplift. Service had been a pillar of black organizations since the nineteenth century. Middle-class and elite African Americans believed that it was their duty to uplift their communities through uplift work and philanthropy. The debutante ball was a performance of black middle-class and elite values. This performance extended outside of the debutantes at the center of the ritual. By attending a debutante ball that raised money for a cause, Washington's black elite could perform, or affirm their identities as good citizens who used their financial gain to support other members of the race.

Service marked the essential difference between the African American debutante ball and those sponsored by white organizations. Though in both traditions, debutantes learned how to waltz, were paired with an escort, and learned the ins and outs of charm and social graces, the philanthropic piece of the cotillion tradition was race-specific. Karal Ann Marling writes,

While a succession of blonde New York society debs frittered away their time in various jet-set escapades, black girls (and their escorts) learned hard lessons about their obligations to other people of color. The debut ceremony attested to their readiness to lead, as professionals and persons of influence in their communities.<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> "1600 See 67 Debutantes Introduced to Capital Society," *Washington Afro American*, May 14, 1949.

<sup>82</sup> Marling 15

This is not to say that white cotillions were never tied to a charitable cause, but for the black cotillion, social responsibility was embedded in the tradition, and was an essential part of race work.

By attaching a philanthropic cause to the debutante ball, organizers worked to sustain their communities through financial aid and developed young women to continue this work. In short, cotillion organizers invested in the black community's short- and long-term needs. In addition to the tasks that debutantes completed in preparation for their bows to society, they were also responsible for selling tickets and advertisement space for the event's souvenir booklet. In some cases, the debutante who sold the most tickets or advertising space received the distinction of "cotillion queen" or some other special award. Debutantes also had the opportunity to network with guests who were prominent members of the community.

Taken together, selling tickets and networking opportunities served as an educational tool to develop the next generation of middle-class and elite black women citizens who would engage in similar causes as adults. Stephanie Shaw's work on black child-rearing practices during Jim Crow further illustrate this point. She writes, "Parents encouraged their daughters to secure their own futures, but parents intended that the children use their education and their subsequent positions—paid or unpaid—in a socially responsible way."<sup>83</sup> The same traits needed to fundraise and network successfully, such as charm, charisma, and the ability to persuade, were the same traits that young women would take with them as they assumed their identity as a middle- or

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<sup>83</sup> Shaw 37



upper-class black citizen. Because the debutante ball was a coming-of-age ceremony, the debut signaled that these young women were ready to engage in work for the race.

*Service to the Nation*

The Girl Scouts of the USA had a legacy of mobilizing its scouts in times of war and national crises. Ann Robertson writes, “as World War I began...Girl Scouts quickly gained notice and praise for their wartime service.”<sup>84</sup> During WWI, D.C. scouts knitted scarves for soldiers and delivered homemade baked goods and sandwiches to soldiers at Washington canteens. When the influenza pandemic landed in 1918, local scouts went to playgrounds across the city to serve soup to children.<sup>85</sup> The YWCA established its “patriotically named” Girl Reserves program in 1918 during World War I to encourage patriotic work among girls and teenagers in the YWCA.<sup>86</sup>

With the onset of World War II, the girls and young women of the PW YWCA and the GSCNC joined adolescent girls around the country who volunteered for the war effort. American youth contributed to the war effort by growing victory gardens and volunteering at hospitals. Ann Robertson describes the contributions of GSCNC scouts during World War II. She writes, “Girl Scouts sold war bonds, collected scrap metal, and helped with meals, housework, and child care as their mothers took jobs.”<sup>87</sup> The Girl Reserves of the PW YWCA salvaged silk hose and ties and made USO scrapbooks. The PW YWCA believed that “through such war service activities...the younger members

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<sup>84</sup> Robertson 87

<sup>85</sup> Robertson 87

<sup>86</sup> Leslie Paris, *Children's Nature: The Rise of the American Summer Camp* (New York: New York University Press, 2008), 132; Jodelle Mistretta and Melanie Wright, “Programs: Girl Reserves & Clubs,” <http://womhist.alexanderstreet.com/portywca/programs/reserves.htm>, Accessed March 4, 2018.

<sup>87</sup> Robertson 87

find security for themselves as they serve others.”<sup>88</sup> Here, the PW YWCA framed service not merely as a good deed, but as an act that would impact the development of a girl’s self-worth. Black scouts in Washington also participated in war work. Sarah Nash fondly remembered distributing ration stamps and rolling bandages for wounded soldiers at Freedman’s Hospital.<sup>89</sup>

Scouting in the nation’s capital was still segregated at this time, but black and white scouts often held joint events. One of these events was Girl Scout Week, an annual celebration held in March that coincided with the founding date of the organization. In 1942, the GSCNC centered Girl Scout Week activities on the war effort. There were seven districts in the Council, and each district led an activity one day out of the week. Activities included various “homemaking demonstrations” such as canning, sewing, making toys for children, and cooking on “a toaster fashioned from an old coat hanger.” Scouts also contributed defense stamps to a Victory Fund for children around the world and showed off vegetables grown in a troop victory garden. The scouts of District VII, which included black troops, closed the week’s activities with a health and safety demonstration.<sup>90</sup> The Girl Scout motto, “Be prepared,” stressed that “A Girl Scout is ready to help out whenever she is needed. Willingness to serve is not enough; you must know how to do the job well, even in an emergency.”<sup>91</sup>

The service that Girl Reserves and scouts engaged in contrasted other images of adolescent girls in the period. The promiscuous “Victory Girls,” “Khaki Whackies,” and

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<sup>88</sup> “Annual Report of Program and Services, 1943,” Annual Reports, Executive Director and President, 1943-1948, Box 392-1676, PW YWCA Collection, MSRC.

<sup>89</sup> Krystal Archer, “History of African American Girl Scouts in Alexandria and the Metropolitan Area,” (1994), 5, GSCNC.

<sup>90</sup> “Girl Scout Week Plans Will Aid War Program,” *The Washington Post*, Oct. 25, 1942, p. S8.

<sup>91</sup> Girl Scouts of the United States of America, “Traditions”

“Amateur Girls” became a source of panic.<sup>92</sup> According to Cahn, the public panic over young women’s promiscuity focused virtually exclusively on the white teenage pickup girl. While there were stories of black teenage girls who pursued their sexual and social desires with soldiers, they were not at the forefront of anxieties on the homefront. However, black protective agencies used these instances to “lobby for job opportunities and improved social services for black youth.”<sup>93</sup>

Organizational leaders believed that war work among black scouts and Girl Reserves deterred delinquent behavior, but whether intentionally or not, it also impacted larger ideas about American and African American citizenship. Since its inception in 1912, the Girl Scouts argued that it was progressive and “built on the democratic principle.”<sup>94</sup> Promoting democracy and patriotism within girls’ organizations was particularly important in the 1930s, when policy makers and civic leaders worried that idleness would lead young people to become an “‘army of disillusioned, bewildered youth’ that constituted ‘a potential menace to the social order of the nation.’”<sup>95</sup> In 1939, Mary McLeod Bethune, an educator, clubwoman, and head of the NYA, argued, “an underutilized ‘rising army of trained Negro youth’ could well ‘prove fertile ground for the seeds of resentment and of false political and economic doctrine.’”<sup>96</sup> In short, youth leaders worried about young people turning to communism or socialism. African American leaders like Bethune championed American democracy, but they were also willing to point out the hypocrisies of this democracy.

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<sup>92</sup> Devlin 55.

<sup>93</sup> Cahn 183.

<sup>94</sup> Lillian S. Williams, *A Bridge to the Future: The History of Diversity in Girl Scouting* (New York: GSUSA, 1996), 19.

<sup>95</sup> Mitchell 199.

<sup>96</sup> Mitchell 192

America's entrance into the war profoundly affected African Americans. World War II had two battlefronts: While African Americans were fighting fascism abroad they were also waging a domestic battle against racial discrimination. In 1942, the *Pittsburgh Courier* launched the Double V campaign, which called for victory at home and abroad. The principle of the campaign was that African Americans should wholeheartedly support the war effort, but they should also continue to fight for civil rights within the United States. The Double V campaign challenged the hypocrisy of America's claim that it was a model of democracy.<sup>97</sup> African American Girl Scouts too played an important role within the Double V campaign. During the war, Girl Scouts and Boy Scouts were prominent in parades each year, proudly marching alongside soldiers, sailors, and women of the women's army corps.<sup>98</sup> The Girl Scouts' extra push for service during World War II demonstrates the organization's belief that it had a central role in promoting patriotism and good citizenship. The decision to have scouts march in uniform, along with the military men and women, shows that there was a felt connection between scouting, patriotism, and democracy within the African American community.

## Conclusion

Girls' organizations believed that they could tackle idleness and juvenile delinquency among girls and young women through creating activities, programs, and opportunities to instill the values of Christianity, chastity, and service within their members and participants. But ultimately, how effective could leaders in these social spaces be? Howard University sociologist William Henry Jones noted in his 1927 study

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<sup>97</sup> Earnest L. Perry, Jr., "It's Time to Force a Change," *Journalism History*, 28:2 (2002), 85-96.

<sup>98</sup> "1,000 Troops in Bud's Parade: Soldiers, Wacs, and Sailors to March," *The Chicago Defender*, August 14, 1943, 19.

on recreation and leisure among African Americans in the District that “wholesome recreation” did not necessarily correlate with a reduction in juvenile behavior.<sup>99</sup> He came to this conclusion based on a map created by the D.C.’s juvenile court. According to the map, the areas of the city with the greatest number of delinquents were located in the same areas that housed playgrounds. Jones wrote, “The problem of delinquency is deeper than recreational adjustments or maladjustments. It probably bears a closer relation to the mores and public opinion than to any other social forces...”<sup>100</sup> He argued that recreation may have encouraged delinquency “by increasing social contact, and thereby create conflict and the gang spirit.”<sup>101</sup> Martha Lloyd, a member of the Les Bonnes Soeurs at the PW YWCA, and a first-year student at Howard University in 1938 remarked, “Now, I think what Washington needs is more recreational opportunities. There are so many public dances and girls go there unchaperoned. They might not belong to a club which will give dances and therefore they have to go to these public dances. Of course, there is the Y.W.C.A., but that doesn’t reach the mass of girls.”<sup>102</sup>

Lloyd and Jones’s comments highlight the limitations, or as Jones might argue, futility, of girls’ organizations to curb the spread of idleness and delinquency. While Jones hypothesized that recreation often encouraged delinquency through social interaction, Lloyd, like organizational leaders, believed that more recreation was the solution. However, Lloyd also pointed to the issue of access and inclusion in girls’ organizations. For a variety of reasons, including employment, familial obligations, or

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<sup>99</sup> William Henry Jones, *Recreation and Amusement among Negroes in Washington, D.C.: A Sociological Analysis of the Negro in an Urban Environment* (Washington, D.C.: Howard University Press, 1927), 22.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid

<sup>101</sup> Ibid 23

<sup>102</sup> “Martha Lloyd,” Folder 15: Incomplete Interviews, Box: 131-113, E. Franklin Frazier Papers, Research Projects Negro Youth Study, Washington, D.C., Box 131-113, MSRC.

cost, girls may not have been able to join their local Girl Scout troop or Girl Reserves club or participate in activities like camping. And if a young woman was not from a middle-class or elite socially-connected family, then she certainly would not have been sponsored as a debutante. Both examples point to the ways in which black girlhood was an exclusive category. In many ways, girls' organizations created a social hierarchy among black girls.

The PW YWCA, GSCNC, and debutante ball were each invested in developing a solid moral foundation within black girls and steering their young participants away from the twin perils of idleness and delinquency. However, each group took a slightly different approach to achieve these goals. The PW YWCA viewed character through the lens of Christianity, while the Girl Scouts and the debutante ball were secular organizations. Still, each group believed that service, whether to the community or the nation, would produce upstanding citizens. Sexuality was another primary component of black girls' and women's ideas about character. Girls' organizations presented their members as chaste young women. As the Negro Youth Study interviews reveal, black girls' navigated an uneven terrain in the development of their sexual values. While some girls, like Girl Scout Sara Nash, may have bought into organizations' goals, others, like Rosella Hillman, may have questioned some of their ideas.

While this chapter focused on the development of girls' inner selves: their faith, their views about sex, and their willingness to serve their communities and their nation, the next chapter moves to a discussion of the outer self. Just as leaders in the PW YWCA, GSCNC, and debutante ball committed to building character within their constituents and black girls in Washington more broadly, they also committed to developing their physical

bodies. Black girls' physical bodies were central to how they imagined themselves as well as their experiences of girlhood.

### **Chapter 3: “She is attractive...And very well-groomed too”: The Politics and Pleasures of Health, Beauty, and Dress**

“Do you look well in your sport clothes and your party dresses? Do you have that good posture that accentuates the positive? And do you have that sweet, dainty and clean feeling after your daily bath...After today no more hasty glancing in the mirror.”<sup>1</sup> The above questions came from a description of a January 5, 1946 workshop, “As Others See You,” sponsored by the Phyllis Wheatley YWCA. This workshop was part of the Girls’ Work Department’s month-long “Charm School for Girl Reserves.” The Girls’ Work Department held the charm school between December 1945 and January 1946. Attendees met once each week to discuss various topics such as dating, getting along with other girls and with family, fashion, grooming, hair, makeup, and poise. The “As Others See You” workshop focused on clothing, poise, and hygiene. The title and description of the workshop demonstrate the immense value placed on self-presentation. Leaders wanted girls to know how to dress, carry, and care for their bodies, and develop good self-esteem. Similarly, girls who were concerned about how others saw them, or did not feel that they looked well in their sport clothes or party dresses, or had good posture, or experience that “sweet, dainty and clean feeling after bathing” would have found the Charm School workshop helpful in building an outer appearance and physical body with which they were happy. Black girls’ physical bodies were central to how black girls and women imagined the possibilities of black girlhood.

The chapter begins with the camping programs of the Girl Scouts of the Nation’s Capital (GSCNC) and Phyllis Wheatley YWCA (PW YWCA). Virginia McGuire, the

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<sup>1</sup> Girls’ Work Department, “Charm School for Girl Reserves,” Box 392-1690, Folder: Other Departmental Programs, PW YWCA Collection, MSRC.



head of the PW YWCA's camp committee (and future chair of the GSCNC District VII), urged "civic-minded citizens" to contribute financially to the PW YWCA's Camp Clarissa Scott because, for "a small outlay of money the return on an investment in health for young girls is so great that parents cannot afford to keep their children away from this health development this summer."<sup>2</sup> Because the D.C. Girl Scout council and recreational facilities like playgrounds and swimming pools in Washington were segregated, and African Americans in the city did not have an adequate share of these facilities, camps were crucial for girls to have places to play outdoors. The PW YWCA opened its Camp Clarissa Scott in 1931 and black scout leaders sought to bring camping to their girls soon after the founding of District VII in the mid-1930s. By the late 1930s, D.C. had the highest rate of tuberculosis in the nation, and African Americans were disproportionately affected. Segregation coupled with the health crisis made camps a response to the detrimental effects of segregation on the health of African Americans. Camps took girls out of the dirty and unhealthy environment of the city and brought them into the fresh air.

Organizations touted the health benefits of camping, but for girls, it offered a sense of adventure and pleasure through physical activities like hiking and swimming. Girl Scouts like Sheila Gross talked about the fun that she and other campers had going on a hike, while others recalled the long journey from the D.C. city center out to the camp site. Campers' stories highlight black girls' relationships to their environment and nature, and the joy that they found from staying active. As in other chapters of this dissertation, we also get a glimpse of girls' interpersonal relationships, and how camp fostered these relationships.

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<sup>2</sup> "Girl Scout Camping Objectives," Meetings-National Board: Camp Committee, 1937-1938, GSCHP; "Pledge Support For D.C. Girls' Camp," *The Afro-American*, January 28, 1933.

Black girls could hike or swim at camp, but they also stayed active in the city. The second part of the chapter looks at physical movement outside of the world of camping. The Phyllis Wheatley Y sponsored numerous athletic and recreational programs in their building. Among the most popular activities was dance. Parents, leaders in the PW YWCA, and teenagers alike believed that dance helped to build healthy bodies and imparted self-confidence and poise. While girls at the PW YWCA learned modern dance, debutantes and their escorts learned how to waltz. However, both taught girls “acceptable” ways to move their bodies and offered them a sense of control over their bodies. Dance was about athleticism and strength, but it was also about poise.

Debutantes, Girl Scouts, Girl Reserves, and their leaders were not only attentive to the physical development of girls, but the outward appearance and presentation of their bodies as well. The final section of the chapter addresses notions of beauty and dress. The PW YWCAs extensive programming included workshops that taught teenagers the ins and outs of looking their best. Young women who sought to cultivate their looks or desired to feel beautiful would have had an interest in these workshops. Maxine Leeds Craig notes that historically, “many African American efforts to reclaim the honor due to the race have particularly focused on celebrating and defending the beauty or dignity of black women.”<sup>3</sup> In the black press, debutantes’ beauty was often a point of discussion. Photographs of debutantes reveal that while they were beautiful, a striking number of them were light or fair-skinned, particularly in the 1940s and early postwar period. While debutantes’ beauty could have been a source of race pride, it could have been damaging

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<sup>3</sup> Maxine Leeds Craig, *Ain’t I a Beauty Queen: Black Women, Beauty, and the Politics of Race* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 14.

for other girls or debutantes who did not fit that aesthetic, potentially negatively impacting interpersonal relationships between the young women who debuted together.

Dress was another aspect of self-presentation. The debutante's ballgown signified her maturation and made a statement about her class position. Gowns were formal, and it was the responsibility of the debutante's family to purchase the dress. Members of the Girl Scouts and Girl Reserves wore a uniform. If Girl Scouts and Girls Reserves represented girls of the highest character and integrity, then having a uniform was a physical marker that the wearer embodied those traits. With the segregated Girl Scouts, black women insisted that black scouts be allowed to wear the same uniform as white scouts. This asserted their equality and made the point that they too were of upright character. For many scouts, the uniform was a source of pride.

The racist assumptions that existed about black women's moral bodies, namely, that black girls and women were inherently immoral, extended to their physical bodies. The bodies of black girls and women, and black people in general, were typically viewed as diseased and dirty. The conditions of segregation, including poverty and lack of recreation, had very real health consequences for African Americans, which often made them more susceptible to disease. Furthermore, these conditions reinforced medical and social scientific discourses about disease among black people. LaKisha Simmons writes, "Diseased African Americans were already stigmatized, assumed by doctors, reformers, and researchers to have failed to live up to a proper mode of living and thus deserving of their fate in sickness."<sup>4</sup> The idea of the diseased black body was gendered and aged. For

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<sup>4</sup> LaKisha Michelle Simmons, *Crescent City Girls: The Lives of Young Black Women in Segregated New Orleans* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015), 147. For more on the detrimental effects of segregation on African Americans' health, see Samuel Kelton Roberts, Jr. *Infectious Fear: Politics, Disease, and the Health Effects of Segregation* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009).

example, black girls were the scapegoat for the spread of venereal disease among African Americans in the south. Nelson Jackson, southern director of the Urban League said, “It is the teen-age girl who furnishes much of the [sexual] activity...Their recreational outlets frequently take the form of nightly visits to taverns and ‘juke-joints’...From there they are taken by soldiers to cheap hotels and rooming houses...or wander off to dark places where illicit sexual activity occurs.”<sup>5</sup> Jackson’s account characterized black girls as vectors of disease, and burdened them with the sole responsibility for contracting the disease.

Racist characterizations of black girls’ and women’s bodies have underscored movements for racial uplift and civil rights as early as the nineteenth century. Ava Purkiss writes, “Black women used various strategies—including dress, comportment, political organizing, petitioning, and campaigning—to gain full citizenship rights.”<sup>6</sup> Historians such as Susan L. Smith have traced the long history of black women’s health activism from the nineteenth through mid-twentieth century. Clubwomen in organizations such as the National Association of Colored Women (NACW) sponsored “clean-up” and other public health programs. Midwives in the rural South, who were often poor themselves, offered health services and health education to their communities. Between 1935 and 1941, the women of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority ran the Mississippi Health Project, which provided primary health care to rural blacks in the state.<sup>7</sup> The black press and community leaders asserted the beauty of African American girls and women

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<sup>5</sup> Nelson Jackson, quoted in Simmons, 147.

<sup>6</sup> Ava Purkiss, “‘Beauty Secrets: Fight Fat’: Black Women’s Aesthetics, Exercise, and Fat Stigma, 1900-1930s,” *Journal of Women’s History* 29:2 (Summer 2017), 16.

<sup>7</sup> Susan L. Smith, *Sick and Tired of Being Sick and Tired: Black Women’s Health Activism in America, 1890-1950* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995); See also Deborah Gray White, *Too Heavy a Load: Black Women in Defense of Themselves, 1890-1990* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1999), 131, 158-159.

through bathing beauty competitions, beauty pageants, and beautiful baby contests.<sup>8</sup>

Beginning at the turn of the twentieth century, middle-class black women engaged with the physical culture movement and fitness bridged health culture and beauty culture “to promote their ideals of the slim and beautiful black female body at a time when thinness garnered new political significance.”<sup>9</sup> The development and presentation of black girls’ physical bodies: their health, beauty, and dress, were not only central to the agenda of girls’ organizations, but central to larger claims for black citizenship and race pride.

Looking at health, beauty, and self-presentation illuminates the ways in which girls’ organizations functioned simultaneously as sites of education, race work, and girls’ pleasure. Organizational leaders wanted to develop healthy bodies, but also use representations of black girls’ bodies to change the narrative of black girls’ bodies as diseased, ugly, and lacking grace. This agenda could have led to higher self-esteem, joy, and a positive relationship with one’s body, but could also cause the opposite effect if one fell outside of the bounds of what was considered beautiful or healthy.

### **Bodies in Motion: Health and Recreation in the GSCNC and PW YWCA**

*Housing, Disease, and Recreation: The Health Landscape of Washington, D.C.*

Inadequate housing, disease, and the lack of recreation, all outgrowths of segregation, converged to create a landscape in which black youth in the nation’s capital were particularly susceptible to poor health. Understanding health conditions in Washington, and its impact on the city’s black residents, illustrates why organizational leaders prioritized the health of girls.

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<sup>8</sup> Leeds-Craig 3-22; Blain Roberts, *Pageants, Parlors, & Pretty Women: Race and Beauty in the Twentieth-Century South* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2014), 149-191

<sup>9</sup> Purkiss 15

Housing inequality was one of the primary markers of segregation in Washington. Many African Americans throughout the nation were often forced into subpar housing because of discrimination and poverty. Perhaps the most compelling example of the housing problem in Washington during the twentieth century was the city's alley dwellings. These residences sprouted after the Civil War to accommodate the influx of African American migrants. The living conditions of these homes were always abysmal. Even as late as the 1930s, the majority of these types of homes had no heat, electricity, running water, gas, or adequate sewage removal. Children who lived in alleys had no place to play, and in the opinion of social investigators, "the overcrowding...exceeds the limits of decency."<sup>10</sup> By 1930, about one third of D.C.'s black population lived in what would be considered "the better alley dwellings."<sup>11</sup> In 1934, nearly 10,000 blacks and 500 whites lived in alley dwellings.

The rapid expansion of the federal government and increased migration of both blacks and whites to the nation's capital during the New Deal Era created a housing shortage.<sup>12</sup> The federal government razed blocks of residential neighborhoods to make room for new government buildings and low-cost housing for government workers. In addition to the influx of residents, the cost of living increased. This had the greatest impact on D.C.'s poorest residents, who had a difficult time locating affordable adequate housing. The

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<sup>10</sup> Federal Writers Project, *Washington: City and Capital* (Washington, D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, 1937) 1076-1077.

<sup>11</sup> Federal Writers Project, "Negroes in Washington," 8, US WPA Records, 1524-1975, Federal Writers Project, 1722-1939, Box A 874, Folder: District of Columbia-Contemporary Culture-General Negroes in Washington-4/18/36, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. (Herein LOC). This is an estimate, and seems like it is a high estimate compared to the 1934 numbers.

<sup>12</sup> Howard Gillette, *Between Justice and Beauty: Race, Planning, and the Failure of Urban Policy in Washington, D.C.* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006), 140; Samuel Kelton Roberts, Jr., *Infectious Fear: Politics, Disease, and the Health Effects of Segregation* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 25; "Negroes in Washington," 4.

revitalization of historically black neighborhoods such as Georgetown, Foggy Bottom, and the West End, displaced black residents.<sup>13</sup> Legislators sought to remedy the housing crisis with the creation of public housing. However, this had its shortcomings. According to Howard Gillette, “it failed to satisfy either those the policy was intended to help or the most vociferous critics of substandard housing.”<sup>14</sup>

Inadequate housing had consequences for the health of African Americans living in the nation’s capital. The majority of black Washingtonians did not live in alley dwellings, but according to a WPA report, “housing conditions among the Negroes, though good in the case of the more prosperous minority, remain unsatisfactory among a great part of the population and lamentable among the least fortunate class. This is reflected in the local Negro death rate, which rose after 1930 to the highest figures in 1933, for any of the thirty American cities separately covered in the annual death rates for Negroes, published by the Census.”<sup>15</sup> Tuberculosis was among the top three causes of death among urban blacks in the first half of the twentieth century. Most of those infected caught the disease through airborne travel of the tubercle bacillus, which would then attack their lungs. Factors related to poverty and environment were the primary causes of the disease. Contemporary public health scholars argue that substandard housing was a ‘fundamental cause’ of the illness. Poor diet, stress, and overwork were also culprits. Prior to the creation of pharmacological treatments in the late 1940s, doctors and public health officials believed that improving or removing the sick from these environments would

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<sup>13</sup> Gillette 141-142

<sup>14</sup> Ibid 135

<sup>15</sup> “Negroes in Washington,” 1.

cure the disease. In fact, this approach was more effective in preventing the disease than curing it.<sup>16</sup>

Samuel Kelton Roberts' work on tuberculosis in Baltimore in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries is instructive in thinking about the impact of the disease in black communities, and the health effects of segregation. For black children under the age of five, the tuberculosis mortality rate exceeded the rate of white children. In 1920, 1931, and 1940, the rates were 74, 342, and 310% higher among black children, respectively.<sup>17</sup> Additionally, tuberculosis mortality among blacks sharply increased between the 5-14 age group and the 15-24 age group between the 1920s and 1940s.<sup>18</sup>

D.C.'s tuberculosis mortality rates exceeded the national average. Local organizations such as the Negro Anti-Tuberculosis Society of Washington, D.C., which began in the early decades of the twentieth century, sought to curb the disease through education and public health initiatives. The society "administered a 'Hygienic Oath' that featured admonitions about the necessity of fresh air and sunlight, the importance of wholesome food and abstinence from alcohol consumption, and the 'contagiousness of consumption.'"<sup>19</sup> Six hundred and nine Washingtonians died from the disease in 1934, four hundred sixteen of whom were black. The number of black deaths nearly doubled the following year.<sup>20</sup> Rates of tuberculosis were high among African Americans nationwide, but by 1938, Washington, D.C. claimed one of the highest rates of

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<sup>16</sup> Samuel Kelton Roberts, Jr., *Infectious Fear: Politics, Disease, and the Health Effects of Segregation* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 4.

<sup>17</sup> Roberts 23

<sup>18</sup> Ibid 24

<sup>19</sup> Ibid 101

<sup>20</sup> Ibid



tuberculosis in the United States.<sup>21</sup> The environment of the nation's capital was not optimal for the health of the city's black youth. One way that girls' organizations sought to combat this was by removing girls from the city and sending them to camp.

*Camping for Black Girls in the GSCNC and PW YWCA*

With the help of the Association of Nurses and the Girls' Service League, an African American club in Birmingham, Alabama, Pauline Bray Fletcher opened a camp for black children just outside of Bessemer, Alabama. The camp was formerly known as Camp Margaret Murray Washington, but by 1943, was named after Fletcher. Pauline Bray Fletcher was the first black registered nurse in the state and worked for the Anti Tuberculosis Association.<sup>22</sup> Fletcher believed that fresh air and outdoor recreation was vital to the health of the race. She said, "Disease is making dreadful inroads in the Negro race. The children are the hope of any race. Malnutrition is a forerunner of tuberculosis, and many other diseases. Let's use the proverbial ounce of prevention and save the children. The recreating power of sunshine, fresh air, good food in the country under wise supervision will send the children far on the road to health, happiness and a more useful life."<sup>23</sup>

When Virginia McGuire implored D.C.'s black citizens to support the PW YWCA's Camp Clarissa Scott in 1933 because of the health benefits that it would offer Washington's black girls, she likely had a similar reasoning as Fletcher. McGuire did not specify what she deemed the "return on investment in health" that she argued camping

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<sup>21</sup> "WPA and Negro Health," United States Public Health Service, 1937, Box 392-1719, Phyllis Wheatley YWCA Collection, MSRC.

<sup>22</sup> Cherri Ellis, "Camp Fletcher stands the test of time," <http://www.campfire-al.org/index.php/camp-fletcher/camp-fletcher-history>, Accessed February 11, 2018; Rebecca Stiles Taylor, "Alabama Women Name Camp for Pauline Fletcher," *The Chicago Defender*, August 28, 1943, 17.

<sup>23</sup> Rebecca Stiles Taylor, "Alabama Women Name Camp for Pauline Fletcher," *The Chicago Defender*, August 28, 1943, 17.

provided for black girls. However, considering the state of black health in the District at that moment, and also considering the idea that in this era social scientific and public health discourses, as LaKisha Simmons points out, black girls were seen as possessing diseased bodies, McGuire likely saw camp as an avenue to strengthen and cultivate healthy bodies, and therefore, strengthen the race and counter the idea of black bodies as diseased.

Organizations like the Girl Scouts had touted camping as a healthful activity since the early twentieth century. Susan Miller analyzes the Personal Health merit badge from the Girl Scouts' founding in 1912 through 1920. She writes, "a girl's health depended on proper meals, fresh air, and regular outdoor exercise—all the things, in other words, that a camping experience provided."<sup>24</sup> Miller argues that in the 1930s, experts debated whether or not camps were actually beneficial or damaging to children's health. In 1931, J. Edward Sanders argued in a National Bureau of Casualty and Surety Underwriters study that camps were more hazardous than beneficial to children's health. He maintained, "Numerous diseases, great and small—from rare, but devastating, typhoid and polio outbreaks, to colds and summer flu, afflicted children at camp. They suffered from heat stroke and constipation, sprained their ankles, and got terrible cases of poison ivy."<sup>25</sup> He went further and argued that the structured nature of camp fostered 'worry and nervous strain' among campers.<sup>26</sup> Despite such warnings, girls' organizations throughout America such as the Girl Scouts, YWCA, and Campfire Girls continued to bill camp as a

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<sup>24</sup> Susan A. Miller, *Growing Girls: The Natural Origins of Girls' Organizations* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2007), 193.

<sup>25</sup> Miller 193

<sup>26</sup> J. Edwards Sanders, *Safety and Health in Organized Camps* (New York: Casualty and Surety Underwriters, 1931), 81, quoted in Miller, 193.

space that promoted health among girls. Throughout the 1930s, camping brochures emphasized fresh air and exercise as a healthy alternative to congested cities. Furthermore, the language and sense of urgency employed by black leaders in the GSCNC and the PW YWCA, and even larger black communities, suggest that they believed that camping was beneficial to girls' health.

The Girl Scouts offered day and overnight camps.<sup>27</sup> Overnight camping could last from a period of two days to a couple of weeks. Established camps accommodated scouts for a two to three-week session. As the name suggests, day camps did not involve sleeping at camp overnight. Each day had a set of activities, and campers would return home in the late afternoon. Established and day camps were meant for girls from different troops to camp together.<sup>28</sup> Prior to increasing Girl Scout camp desegregation in the 1950s, there were established camps exclusively for African American scouts as well as segregated camps, where black and white scouts would use the same site, but during separate sessions.<sup>29</sup> While at camp, girls were supposed to gain an appreciation for nature, and learn how to be independent and resourceful. Scouts learned about the environment, cooked their own food, and were encouraged to work with their hands.<sup>30</sup>

African American scouts of the GSCNC, all under District VII, participated in both established camping and day camping, but the majority attended day camp. Black

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<sup>27</sup> This is a very general overview of the camping offered by the Girl Scouts. The Girl Scouts offered five main options for camping: established camp (which was regular sleep away camp), day camp, troop camp, overnight camp, and gypsy trips. Troop camp typically lasted for a weekend, while overnight camp only lasted for one night. Gypsy trips, now known as traveling camps, involved traveling to more than one campsite within a weekend. Overnight camp, troop camp, and gypsy trips also differed from day camp and established camp in that the former were designated for individual troops. Because these three options involved only one troop at a time, the opportunity for girls of different races to camp together was not possible unless the troop was interracial. Prior to the 1960s, most troops were not interracial.

<sup>28</sup> "November 1939 Minutes," Meetings-National Board: Camp Committee, 1939-1941, GSCHP.

<sup>29</sup> "December 1936 Minutes," Meetings-National Board: Camp Committee, 1935-1936, GSCHP.

<sup>30</sup> "Girl Scout Camping Objectives," Meetings-National Board: Camp Committee, 1937-1938, GSCHP.

scouts who attended established camps either stayed at Camp Rockwood, located in Potomac, Maryland, or attended a desegregated camp elsewhere. Black scouts were able to attend Rockwood because GSUSA owned and operated it. While surrounding camps were closed to black campers, Rockwood's status as a national camp meant that the site was open to all scouts, regardless of race. Sandra King-Shaw became a Girl Scout in the 1940s, and recalled traveling to Massachusetts to attend an integrated camp.<sup>31</sup> One of the day camps that District VII operated was Camp Pine Crest, located at Minnesota Avenue and Benning Road, NE.<sup>32</sup>

The PW YWCA owned and operated Camp Clarissa Scott, a sleepaway camp where girls stayed for a designated period of days or weeks, and Camp Day and Stay, a day camp for African American girls. The PW YWCA opened Camp Clarissa Scott in 1931 in the black resort community of Highland Beach, Maryland.<sup>33</sup> A 1935 pamphlet for Clarissa Scott lists the costs to attend: \$6.00 per week of attendance, \$2.00 for roundtrip transportation, \$1.50 per day of the weekend, and \$2.00 for a special weekend rate that included supper on Saturday, overnight stay, and two meals on Sunday.<sup>34</sup> Based

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<sup>31</sup> Barbara Laskin, "A Discussion of Black Women's Contributions to Girl Scouting in the Nation's Capital," *CapiTalk*, June/July 1987, GSCNC History Center.

<sup>32</sup> "Continuity Script for Year 1941: Colored Girl Scout Day Camp Broadcast, Station WINX," GSCNC History Center. Day camps existed throughout the city, but it is important to note that it is difficult to assess when these camps were established and how long they existed.

<sup>33</sup> Charles Douglass, son of Frederick Douglass, and his wife Laura founded Highland Beach in 1893 after they were barred from dining at a restaurant at Bay Ridge, a nearby resort. They purchased the 40-acre tract on the Chesapeake Bay and transformed it into a summer vacation destination for their friends and family. Elite blacks such as Robert and Mary Church Terrell were known to frequent the resort. Highland Beach became the first African American municipality in Maryland after it was incorporated in 1922. Today, it is a residential area, and those that live there do not allow commercial establishments. See "History of Highland Beach," <http://www.highlandbeachmd.org/>, Accessed August 9, 2016. See also Andrew W. Kahrl, *The Land Was Ours: African American Beaches from Jim Crow to the Sunbelt South* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012), 3, 86-113; Jack E. Nelson, Raymond L. Langston, and Margo Dean Pinson, *Highland Beach on the Chesapeake Bay: Maryland's First African American Incorporated Town* (Highland Beach Historical Commission)

<sup>34</sup> "Girls!! Come and Enjoy Camp Clarissa Scott Near Highland Beach, Md.," PW YWCA, Phyllis Wheatley YWCA Collection, MSRC. Looking at these prices in 2017, one week of attendance would

on these figures, camping at Clarissa Scott was likely not a viable option for girls coming from poor families. The PW YWCA also offered Camp Stay at Home, a day camp for girls who were unable to attend Clarissa Scott. The evidence suggests that Camp Stay at Home existed since at least 1938.<sup>35</sup> It is unclear what the cost, if any, was to attend Camp Stay at Home.

Leaders saw camping as something so important that it should be open to all black girls. Because of this, GSCNC and PW YWCA camps were not restricted to members of the Girl Scouts and Girl Reserves. Organizations such as the GSCNC and PW YWCA saw themselves as addressing a critical gap in the support of black girls throughout the nation's capital. According to the Camp Clarissa Scott applications from the summer of 1948, most girls heard about the camp through school or during another activity at the Y. An article from the *Washington Afro-American* reported, "Educational leaders have done much to stimulate interest in Camp Clarissa Scott by sending girls from various schools who are worthy and need such an outing, providing funds for same."<sup>36</sup> The terms "worthy" or "deserving" were seen often in organizational manuscripts or the black press when describing who could gain access to a certain organizational service or outing. In this context, it appears that camp leaders were looking for girls who they deemed upright in character, but who could not afford camp.

### *Reflections from Campers*

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equate to \$108, roundtrip transportation would the special weekend rate would equal \$36, and \$27 for each day of the weekend.

<sup>35</sup> *Y-View*, Folder: Copies of "Y" Paper, Box 392-1719, Phyllis Wheatley YWCA Collection, MSRC.

<sup>36</sup> "Camp Clarissa Scott to Open July 17 for Six-Week Period," *Washington Afro-American* (July 15, 1933), 5.

Sara Nash reflected on her journey from her home in Northwest D.C. to camp. She remembered, “Most of us lived in Northwest Washington, and that meant going all the way to New York Avenue, getting on the streetcar, changing the streetcar at New York Avenue and 14<sup>th</sup> Street, getting on the bus, and riding all the way out into the country—out in ‘stickville’ we called it because we thought we’d never finish riding! We would get off on 34<sup>th</sup> and Benning Road, and then we would hike from there on over to 42<sup>nd</sup> Street, and go up the path, up into the woods...After you passed 15<sup>th</sup> and Benning Road, you were in the country.”<sup>37</sup> Based on Nash’s description of the trip to camp, she is likely describing traveling to Camp Pine Crest, located off of Benning Road NE. Nash framed her and her friends’ trip to camp as an exciting journey to the outskirts of the city, rather than a simple ride to camp. Even though Pine Crest was a day camp, there was still a sense of adventure and escape in attending camp. With just one trip across the city, campers would be transported to another world unlike that of their homes in the city. This sense of wonder that campers experienced was also displayed in a 1941 radio play written by the girls of GSCNC District VII. The play offers a snapshot of life at Pine Crest. The story revolves around “Bobby,” a prospective camper, on her tour with “Blue Skies,” a senior scout who shows “Bobby” around the camp. “Bobby” remarked, “Oh! What a beautiful place. One would never realize that a spot like this could be found in the midst of the city.”<sup>38</sup> Adult leaders understood camping as a way to remove girls from the filth of the city, but for girls, removing themselves from an urban space offered a sense of adventure in a new environment.

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<sup>37</sup> Barbara Laskin, “A Discussion of Black Women’s Contributions to Girl Scouting in the Nation’s Capital,” *CapiTalk*, June/July 1987, p.2.

<sup>38</sup> “Continuity Script for Year 1941: Colored Girl Scout Day Camp Broadcast, Station WINX,” GSCNC History Center.

Once they arrived, an array of activities welcomed campers, whether at a Girl Scout or PW YWCA camp. Swimming, arts and crafts, hiking, bicycling, and dancing were among the options. Camp leaders “carefully selected [activities] for their health, character building and educational values.”<sup>39</sup> One of the characters in the 1941 radio play remarked, “Our leaders are anxious for us to develop the habit of walking.”<sup>40</sup> Camp leaders emphasized remaining active and engaging in exercise. In many cases, female physical education teachers from Washington public schools led camping programs.<sup>41</sup>

Campers also offered their opinions on activities at camp. Sheila Gross, a sixth grader and member of D.C. Troop 35, reported on her time at Camp May Flather, a GSCNC established camp located in Solon, Virginia. She shared, “I was in a group that played games and sang funny songs. We went on an overnight hike and slept out in the open. I had such a good time that I would like to go back next summer.”<sup>42</sup> Renee Garnes, a fifth grader and fellow member of Troop 35 reflected on the weekend that the troop spent at Weston Lodge around Halloween. She recalled, “We had a Hallowe’en party with many exciting games, costumes, ghost stories, and refreshments. What a good time we had singing the Hallowe’en songs we had learned in school! We slept on cots in one large room, but could not get to sleep until about ten o’clock because we talked about our party...we returned home tired and hungry but happy that we had enjoyed an exciting weekend.”<sup>43</sup> Joyce Woodson, a fifth grader and veteran camper, described her experience

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<sup>39</sup> “Girls!! Come and Enjoy Camp Clarissa Scott Near Highland Beach, Md.,” PW YWCA, Phyllis Wheatley YWCA Collection, MSRC.

<sup>40</sup> “Continuity Script for Year 1941: Colored Girl Scout Day Camp Broadcast, Station WINX”

<sup>41</sup> “Camp Clarissa Scott to Open July 17 for Six-Week Period,” *Washington Afro-American* (July 15, 1933), p. 5.

<sup>42</sup> “Ms. Gregg’s Troop 35 Makes History,” Pansy Gregg Troop #35 1950s, GSCNC. Sheila’s account of her time at Camp May Flather is from 1955. This is significant because it was the first year that all scouts were welcome. May Flather was the GSCNC’s established camp in Solon, Virginia.

<sup>43</sup> “Trip to Weston Lodge,” Pansy Gregg Troop #35 1950s, GSCNC.

at Camp Oak Hill saying, “We did not live in tents; we lived in cabins...We had all kinds of activities. There was riding, shooting, arts and crafts, tennis, dramatics, dancing, music, and swimming. My favorite activity was swimming.”<sup>44</sup> Gross, Garnes, and Woodson’s comments reflect the pleasure that many black girls got out of camping.

The joy that the girls expressed about camping was rooted in movement and physical activity. Specifically, physical activities that were not readily available in an urban segregated setting. For example, Gross mentioned an overnight hike. An activity like this would not have been possible in an urban setting, that did not have the seclusion, open areas, varied terrain, flora and fauna that made a hike enjoyable. Woodson mentioned swimming. In a segregated city like Washington, black children did not have as many options for this activity. At camp, they could swim freely, and build their swimming skills.

Black Washingtonians believed that they lacked access to adequate recreation, a vital component of a healthy lifestyle. In 1938, a group of African American ministers offered what they believed were the most pressing problems that the black youth of Washington, D.C. faced, and each cited the lack of recreational facilities as a major issue. Rev. J.M. Harrison, Jr. said, “They provide plenty of places for the whites but nothing for Negroes.”<sup>45</sup> Nearly ten years later, some of Washington’s residents echoed the same sentiments. An article in the *Washington Post* presented the opinions of seven District residents of different ages, professions, and races. Morris DeRossett, a cook and resident

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<sup>44</sup> “Camp Life,” Pansy Gregg Troop #35 1950s, GSCNC. Although Gross, Garnes, and Woodson’s comments were from the 1950s, the specific activities that they talk about were also in place in previous decades.

<sup>45</sup> T.E. Davis, Interview with Rev. J.M. Harrison, Jr., June 28, 1938, E. Franklin Frazier Papers, Research Project, Notebooks, Negro Youth Study, Washington Community, Box 131-132, MSRC.



of NW Washington said, “There are enough places of recreation here for white people, but there are practically none for Negroes...There would be enough movies and parks and swimming pools here, if Negroes were allowed to use them along with white people.”<sup>46</sup>

Sociologist E. Franklin Frazier’s Negro Youth Study provides quantitative evidence on the state of race and recreation in D.C. in 1938. According to a field report on playgrounds, there were 11 white summer recreation centers and 6 for blacks; 6 white swimming pools and 2 black pools; 11 white wading pools and 3 black wading pools. The report continued, “During the regular school year there are in operation eight school community centers, two boys’ clubs and one playground for the recreational activities of the Negro children and adults.” By 1930, there were about 132,000 African Americans living in the nation’s capital. They comprised 27.3% of the population.<sup>47</sup> The black population continued to swell during the 1940s, exceeding 280,000.<sup>48</sup>

The system of segregated recreation in Washington was unique because of its status as a federal city. Recreation was not under the sole control of the federal government or municipal bodies. Playgrounds, local parks, recreation centers, and pools were under the purview of city agencies, while the federal government controlled other spaces. Sites controlled by the city were racially segregated, while those controlled by the federal National Capitol Parks, a division of the National Park service, were not

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<sup>46</sup> “D.C. Opinions on Adequacy of Recreational Facilities,” *The Washington Post*, Feb. 10, 1947, p. 2

<sup>47</sup> “Negroes in Washington,” 1.

<sup>48</sup> Asch and Musgrove 273

segregated and could not refuse people because of race. This policy of non-discrimination was in place since the early 1930s.<sup>49</sup>

During the sweltering summer months, young African Americans nationwide were often forced to swim in dangerous and filthy watering holes for fear of arrest if they were to swim at the local lake or beach. These waters were hazardous and unpatrolled, and black children drowned in them every summer. Parents appealed to their municipalities to end, in the words of Andrew W. Kahrl, the “environmental injustice.” For these parents, having recreation available provided their children with “a tonic for the toxic environments that enveloped their daily lives.”<sup>50</sup> Black reformers and everyday citizens offered moral arguments in favor of more recreation, claiming that it would take children “off the streets and out of so much mischief.” However, playing in the streets had physical, and sometimes fatal, consequences for children. In September 1938, the *Washington Star* reported that “an unprecedented number,” a total of nine, children died that summer as a result of being hit by cars while playing in the street. The newspaper published a series of reports that detailed each one of the deaths in order to determine whether or not these deaths were a result of negligence or a lack of playground space.<sup>51</sup> Camps offered a space where black girls could play safely.

Girls also found pleasure in interacting with nature. Consider again the GSCNC District VII radio play. Characters in the play took on names such as “Blue Skies,” “Brown Owl,” and “Tawny Owl.” The senior unit of the camp was titled “Mighty Trees.”

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<sup>49</sup> Martha H. Verbrugge and Drew Yingling, “The Politics of Play: The Struggle over Racial Segregation and Public Recreation in Washington, D.C., 1945-1950,” *Washington History* 27:2 (Fall 2015), 57-58.

<sup>50</sup> Andrew W. Kahrl, *The Land Was Ours: African American Beaches from Jim Crow to the Sunbelt South* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012), 13-15.

<sup>51</sup> “Curb Likes Are Death Lines, No. 7,” *The Evening Star*, September 5, 1938.

Susan Miller notes that camp leaders encouraged girls to assume these names to reinforce the idea that girls' "interests and the lessons of nature study were inextricably linked."<sup>52</sup> At the end of the play, "Bobby" told the audience everything that she learned during her Pine Crest visit. She says, "I also enjoyed the Nature Snooping with Mr. McHenry, Naturalist from the Capitol Parks, I learned the names of ten trees, including their legends, (Excited) and the most exciting thing was to see Mr. McHenry place the garter snake in his lap. I never knew that so many snakes were harmless, and a friend to man. Oh! The knowledge I have gained here, today, could not be measured."<sup>53</sup> To be clear, the radio play was meant to advertise the camp, and therefore, the narrative had to grab the attention of listeners, even if the writers had to embellish to do this. However, if we take seriously the voices of the young writers, then this section of the play highlights the joy that campers felt in cultivating a close relationship with nature and learning about nature. Intimacy with nature was a goal of leaders in organizations like the Girl Scouts, YWCA Girl Reserves, and the Camp Fire Girls. According to Miller, "Girls were meant to draw inspiration from the intimacy of their relationship with nature and develop a devotion to favored aspects of the natural world."<sup>54</sup> With nature study, the desires of the campers and leaders aligned.

Camp, like the organizations themselves, served multiple purposes. By advocating for the health benefits of camp, organizational leaders argued that black girls were entitled to a healthy girlhood. They reinforced this healthy lifestyle at camps through

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<sup>52</sup> Miller 127

<sup>53</sup> "Continuity Script for Year 1941: Colored Girl Scout Day Camp Broadcast, Station WINX," GSCNC History Center. According to the transcript, the troop members wrote the play, but it is unclear if this was of their own volition.

<sup>54</sup> Miller 131

physical activities like hiking and swimming. Leaders also addressed the impact of segregation on black Washingtonians: poor health and lack of recreation. They understood camp as a space to begin to remedy these issues. At the same time, girls were not enthusiastic about camping because it was a healthy activity. Instead, they found the sense of adventure that it provided to be a source of pleasure. Traveling to and staying at camp whisked girls away from their familiar surroundings, and into a new environment with their peers. Camp was a safe space for girls to play, but it was not the only space for them to engage in physical activity. Organizations also opened spaces for physical activity within the city.

### *Dance*

Fourteen-year-old Susie Morgan was a student at Randall Junior High School in Southwest Washington and a member of the Southwest Settlement House Girl Reserves. In an interview for the E. Franklin Frazier-led Negro Youth Study she admitted, “I don’t go to dances, only once at Haloween [sic]—yes, (smiles) I go to those nickel hops sometimes. They have jazz music, rhythm...They rug cut at those hops. Yes, I can rug cut.”<sup>55</sup> Was Morgan’s smile a sly one? Was it a smile that signaled nervousness or embarrassment? Or, was it one that conveyed joy? Regardless, she suggested that she found pleasure from dancing. Like the Girl Scouts who excitedly told newspaper readers about the hiking and swimming adventures, Morgan conveyed the joy that physical movement brought to black girls. Dancing was a popular activity at the PW YWCA, and it was a centerpiece of the ritual of the debutante ball. However, the dancing that girls learned in these organizational spaces were quite different from the rug cutting that

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<sup>55</sup> “Susie Morgan,” E. Franklin Frazier Papers, Research Projects Negro Youth Study, Washington, D.C., Box 131-113, Folder 13: Incomplete Interviews.

Morgan referenced in her interview. Debutantes learned how to waltz, and girls at the PW YWCA could practice traditional forms of dance like tap and ballet. Adult leaders and girls alike recognized dance as a source of pleasure and an opportunity for the development of a healthy body.



**Figure 3.1**<sup>56</sup>

In a 1948 souvenir booklet celebrating its 43<sup>rd</sup> anniversary of its opening and the 3<sup>rd</sup> anniversary of its Thirteenth Street Annex, the PW YWCA highlighted the year's activities. Under the photograph pictured above, began a paragraph with the title, "Health and Happiness Through Wholesome Recreation." The caption reads, "A great deal of attention has been given girls, helping them develop interests, attitudes and appreciation for dancing in folk, tap and ballet. The dance, which is an emotional outlet, also helps develop personality, character and self-expression. Games and athletics are taught, not as a competitive measure, but as a means by which girls are given an opportunity for fair

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<sup>56</sup> "Forty-Third Anniversary Observance of the Phyllis Wheatley Young Women's Christian Association and the Third Anniversary Celebration of the Thirteenth Street Annex: Inside Glimpses," Box 392-1713, Folder: Anniversary, 1948, Papers of the PW YWCA, MSRC.

play, cooperation and courtesy in games and sports.”<sup>57</sup> Physical health was important, but so was emotional health. Ideas about physical activity as an emotional outlet were also prevalent at the national level in discussions about camping and sports as ways to release excess energy. These discussions often had sexual undertones, making a connection between girls’ moral and physical bodies. The dancing and sports that organizational leaders advanced ensured black girls’ emotional health and developed character.

Parents and their daughters acknowledged the ways in which learning dance cultivated grace, poise, and high self-esteem for growing bodies. According to a PW YWCA annual report, “Parents have been concerned that their children develop poise, rhythm and proper physical coordination bringing about self-confidence. The Saturday Dance Workshop has met this need. Teen-agers have had the desire to possess charm, grace and strong, healthy bodies. The Sports and Modern Dance Groups have given them an opportunity to weather that awkward stage in their lives, as well as, discover and develop their skills and talents.”<sup>58</sup> Similarly, debutantes who mastered the waltz and landed the perfect bow demonstrated their self-control and mastery over their bodies.

Dance opens a window into thinking about the ways that black girls thought about and developed relationships with their bodies. The period of adolescence brought with it drastic changes. In *The Body Project: An Intimate History of American Girls*, Joan Jacobs Brumberg traces the ways in which adolescent girls from the seventeenth through the twenty-first century have coped with their changing bodies. Adolescent girls of all races and ethnicities contended with growth spurts, menstruation, and pimples throughout

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<sup>57</sup> “Forty-Third Anniversary Observance of the Phyllis Wheatley Young Women’s Christian Association and the Third Anniversary Celebration of the Thirteenth Street Annex: Inside Glimpses”

<sup>58</sup> “1949 Annual Report Programs and Services: ‘Choosing the High Road,’” Phyllis Wheatley YWCA Collection, 392-1690, Folder: Statistical Reports Made to UCS – 1949, Box: 392-1690, MSRC.

puberty. These bodily changes could create a deep feeling of self-consciousness and awkwardness.<sup>59</sup> While these were universal experiences, it could have been particularly difficult for African American girls who already had so many negative ideas attached to their bodies.

Dance was a method to strengthen the body, but organizational leaders also viewed this physical activity as a culturally enriching experience. Julia West Hamilton assumed the role of President of the PW YWCA in 1930, and sometime during the first decade of her presidency, she asked Bernice Hammond, an African American dancer, to teach a dance class at the PW YWCA. Hammond taught dance at the PW YWCA until she opened Bernice Hammond Studios on U Street in Northwest D.C., the first dance studio in Washington, in 1939.<sup>60</sup> Hamilton fully supported Hammond's decision to open her own dance school declaring, "Our people could use some culture."<sup>61</sup> Hamilton's comment came after Hammond decided to branch out from teaching classes at the PW YWCA and 12<sup>th</sup> Street YWCA, but it demonstrated the notion that dance had the potential to benefit the race by making the young cultured. In this sense, culture meant possessing knowledge outside of traditional black culture. Furthermore, when Hammond referenced the cultural power of dance, she was likely talking about ballet and similar forms of expression, not the "rug cutting" that Susie Morgan engaged in at the nickel hops.

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<sup>59</sup> Joan Jacobs Brumberg, *The Body Project: An Intimate History of American Girls* (New York: Vintage, 1997).

<sup>60</sup> "Bernice Jackson, dance studio founder," Obituary, *Washington Post*, May 7, 2016.

<sup>61</sup> Bernice Hammond Interview, <https://soundcloud.com/ngoma-center-for-dance/bernice-hammond-interview>, Accessed December 19, 2017.

Cotillion organizers also had an interest in infusing culture in debutantes through traditional dance forms. As Katrina Hazzard-Donald notes in *Jookin': The Rise of Social Dance Formation on African-American Culture*, the ritual of the black debutante ball was not an adaptation of the European tradition, but a direct derivation of the of it.<sup>62</sup> This meant that the classical dance forms that white debutantes and escorts learned, black debutantes and escorts learned as well. They underwent weeks of instruction. They learned how to waltz, curtsy, bow, and present. John Evans, and escort at a Girl Friends cotillion in New York, recalled, "We had this humorless old guy who drilled us on how to hold a lady's hand, how to bow, and how to lead in a waltz."<sup>63</sup> Evans' comments suggest that the formal dancing aspect of the debutante ball was not a teenager's idea of fun dancing. Hazzard-Donald writes, "There may be some unrestrained dancing, but it is not emphasized."<sup>64</sup> The black debutante ball prepared young women, and to some extent their male escorts, to take their place in the black elite. By making the waltz the centerpiece of the dancing aspect of the ritual, cotillion organizers marked it as an elite event; distinct from a broader black working-class culture. They assumed that as adult members of the black elite, young black women would encounter social situations where they needed to possess a basic knowledge of ballroom dancing and social graces in order to successfully fulfill their roles as elite black women.

## **Beauty**

Beverly Goodloe's 1938 Dunbar High School yearbook inscription read, "She is attractive and so nice, And very well-groomed too. Her math she always studies twice.

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<sup>62</sup> Katrina Hazzard-Donald, *Jookin': The Rise of Social Dance Formations on African-American Culture* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990), 162.

<sup>63</sup> Lawrence Otis Graham, *Our Kind of People: Inside America's Black Upper Class* (New York: Harper Collins, 1999), 47.

<sup>64</sup> Hazzard-Donald 170



Her friendships are so true.”<sup>65</sup> The inscription also noted her memberships in the Girl Reserves and Fleur-de-Lis club, and her aspiration to teach mathematics. It is not clear if students wrote their own inscriptions or if the yearbook staff did so. Regardless, Goodloe’s inscription is a snapshot of her public persona. According to the text, she was a diligent math student and a good friend, but also good-looking and put-together. In short, her physical appearance was just as important or as notable as her personality, achievements, and dreams. Goodloe and other students were likely aware of the value placed on personal grooming and appearance among their peers. Because of this, beauty clinics such as the PW YWCA-sponsored “As Others See You” workshop described in this chapter’s introduction would have attracted the interest of teenagers.

While catering to black girls who desired to create the best physical versions of themselves, African American leaders used beauty as a terrain to build racial pride. This was most evident in the black press and local black businesses who sponsored beauty contests and put black life on display, as well as the tradition of the debutante ball. This form of race work, however, could be a slippery slope. The attempt to capture and claim the beauty of black girls and women often reinforced the color and class hierarchies that existed in black communities, which could be damaging to the self-esteem of darker-skinned young women and negatively impact their interpersonal relationships with other black girls.

In the United States, whiteness was the standard of beauty. This effectively placed black women and girls, particularly those with ethnic features, outside of the boundaries of what was deemed beautiful in mainstream American culture. However, as Maxine

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<sup>65</sup> Dunbar High School, “Beverly Contelena Goodloe,” *Liber Anni* (1938). For more on Beverly Goodloe see Chapter 1 of this dissertation.

Leeds-Craig writes, “African American women’s beauty became part of the symbolic repertoire with which champions of the race sought to assert racial pride.”<sup>66</sup> African American leaders, activists, and everyday citizens recognized that “beauty, at its core, was about power...”<sup>67</sup> African Americans sought to instill in the race a sense of pride by proclaiming the beauty of black girls and women of all ages. In the early decades of the twentieth century, magazines like the *Crisis* and the *Brownies Book*, both published by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) regularly featured photographs of infants and children. The youths in these photographs came from well-to-do homes, were attractive, and were often pictured doing activities such as playing an instrument, such as a violin, or reading a book. Many of those featured were light-skinned. While NAACP leader W.E.B. Du Bois and *Brownies Book* editor Jessie Redmon Fauset intended for these photographs to challenge racist pseudo-science of the day to show that black children were healthy, beautiful, intelligent, and cultured, the publications often reinforced the very ideas that they sought to counter. Eugenics underscored the presentation of these photographs. Katherine Capshaw describes how DuBois and his contemporaries appropriated “the rhetoric of physical and intellectual superiority in order to evidence the vigor and dynamism of black childhood.”<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Leeds-Craig 5

<sup>67</sup> Blain Roberts 5

<sup>68</sup> Katharine Capshaw Smith, “*The Brownies’ Book* and the Roots of African American Children’s Literature,” <http://childlit.unl.edu/topics/edi.harlem.html>. Accessed December 21, 2015.



**Figure 3.2**  
(Library of Congress Digital Collections)

African Americans also used beauty contests to put a spotlight on the beauty of the race's girls and women. The *New York Age* sponsored one of the earliest black beauty contests in the 1910s. Beauty contests remained a popular form of entertainment throughout the twentieth century in black communities across the United States. In the 1920s and 1930s, adolescent black girls and women modeled in "bathing beauty" contests on black beaches along the coasts. Black Washingtonians flocked to bathing beauty contests at Carr's Beach during the Great Depression, where models were between the ages of sixteen and forty.<sup>69</sup> While, event organizers put adolescent girls' and

<sup>69</sup> Marya Annette McQuirter, "Claiming the City: African Americans, Urbanization, and Leisure in Washington, D.C., 1902-1957" (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Michigan), 2000, 212-222.

young women's bodies on display to attract business, these contests challenged the claim that black girls and women were unattractive. Still, "What version of black feminine beauty was best suited to contradict racist assumptions about black women? In the case of the black beauty contest, skin color and, to a lesser extent, hair texture proved the focal points."<sup>70</sup> Like the photographs in the *Crisis* and the *Brownie's Book*, beauty pageants and bathing beauty contests placed limits on the standards by which black girls and women could be considered beautiful.

### *Debutantes' Beauty*

Debutantes were generally considered physically attractive. Writers in the local and national black press frequently referenced the attractiveness of young women making their social debut using words such as "pretty," "beautiful," and "petite," among others.<sup>71</sup> One writer described how "20 young beauties...curtsied their way into the hearts of every guest."<sup>72</sup> African American girls and women have historically been excluded from traditional notions of beauty. Leeds Craig contends that although the "most blatant forms of caricature," such as blackface, and cartoons and figurines that mocked blacks' skin color, hair, and facial features, "diminished in the decades after the Second World War...the core images lived on in updated and softened revisions."<sup>73</sup> Presenting debutantes as physically attractive allowed African Americans to instill racial pride through self-representation. Devlin writes, "As the objects of the photographic gaze, black girls (like white) were chosen because of their sexual desirability."<sup>74</sup> While

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<sup>70</sup> Blain Roberts 172

<sup>71</sup> See *Jet*, December 27, 1962, cover; "Nation's Most Beautiful Debs," *Ebony*, April 1957, cover; "Dinner Dance top event," *Washington Afro-American*, January 4, 1964, 6.

<sup>72</sup> "D.C. Girl Friend's gift boosts Summer Outing Fund \$1000," *Washington Afro-American*, January 4, 1964.

<sup>73</sup> Leeds Craig 24.

<sup>74</sup> Devlin 129.

debutantes were physically desirable, cotillion organizers and the black press were careful to not present them as hypersexual. The debutante's beauty, innocence, and femininity, all characteristics not usually ascribed to black girls and women, made her a source of racial pride.

Positioning debutantes as the shining example of the beauty of black girls was problematic, particularly because most of these young women were fair- or light-skinned. In the case of Washington, D.C. specifically, the issue of colorism and the link between complexion, beauty, and social status must be discussed. Audrey Elisa Kerr's *The Paper Bag Principle: Class, Colorism, and Rumor and the Case of Black Washington, D.C.*, examines complexion lore in the nation's capital. Kerr writes, "Perhaps with the exception of New Orleans, no city has documented more thoroughly the complexion preoccupations of African Americans, as represented in letters, club minutes, editorials, and photographic images. Above all, these preoccupations have been documented in the memories of District residents."<sup>75</sup> Black Washingtonians have argued that complexion, class, and family lineage influenced membership in the city's clubs and churches. This also extended to the city's schools, such as Dunbar High School. According to a woman named Phyllis, who graduated from Dunbar and entered Howard University in the 1940s, "Dunbar had a reputation of favoring light people...if you were light but were not too bright [smart], you would be able to get by."<sup>76</sup> Students who attended Dunbar in the 1940s and 1950s claimed that students with darker complexion made up for their complexion with intellect. A 1948 graduate of Dunbar, who also identified as light-

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<sup>75</sup> Audrey Elisa Kerr, *The Paper Bag Principle: Class, Colorism, and Rumor and the Case of Black Washington, D.C.* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2006), 37.

<sup>76</sup> Kerr 84

skinned, noted, “You’d see a darker black going to Dunbar...and you’d say, ‘Gee, you must be smart if you go here’...There didn’t seem to be any overt hostility...you were just sort of looked on with wonder if you were dark-skinned and went there.”<sup>77</sup> A 1951 graduate concurred, “If you went to Dunbar, you were either very smart or very light...”<sup>78</sup>

An examination of photos from Washington’s black debutante balls, particularly those from the 1940s to the early 1960s, reveals that many debutantes were in fact, fair- or light-skinned (See Figures 3.3-3.4). While photographs reveal that a significant number of debutantes had a fairer complexion, the same did not hold true with the escorts. Colorism was a gendered issue, and that color was linked to notions of beauty and social status among women. In the postwar period, famous black women who were deemed the most beautiful included Lena Horne and Dorothy Dandridge. Each of these light-skinned women possessed European facial features. For girls coming of age in this period, “Images of attractive women available through the media reinforced the message that beauty was found in light skin, straight long hair, thin lips, and a narrow nose.”<sup>79</sup> In many ways, the debutante ball reinforced these Eurocentric notions of beauty.

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<sup>77</sup> Kerr 83

<sup>78</sup> Ibid 85

<sup>79</sup> Leeds-Craig 30



**Figure 3.3:** This photograph features the group of young women that debuted with the Bachelor-Benedict Club in 1942. Scurlock Studio Records, ca. 1905-1994, Archives Center, National Museum of American History



**Figure 3.4:** This photograph features the group of young women that debuted with the Bachelor-Benedict Club in 1946. Scurlock Studio Records, ca. 1905-1994, Archives Center, National Museum of American History

### *Colorism and Black Girls' Interpersonal Relationships*

Ideas about color shaped black girls' relationships with each other. In the 1930s, Howard University's professor of sociology E. Franklin Frazier, collected life histories of his students. In these histories, students responded to questions about race and color, and how these categories shaped their inter- and intra-racial interactions. A young woman, known as L.L. recounted in her "Life History" that she became color conscious in elementary school. She described herself as light skinned with the 'best' hair out of her siblings. She told a story about befriending a "dark, unattractive, and rather ungainly girl" in seventh grade. Her mother disapproved of the friendship. L.L. admitted to continuing the friendship, but "in subtle ways of making fun of [her friend] Mary" the friendship



ended. She says that her sister had a similar experience, and that they “both found that just such things caused to become deeply imbedded in us some color prejudices of which most of the time we were unaware, but which would crop out when we least expected it.”<sup>80</sup>

Other girls in Frazier’s youth study also talked about divisions between fair-skinned and brown- and dark-skinned blacks. One self-identified dark-skinned young woman talked about not becoming friends with fair-skinned blacks, while a self-identified brown-skinned teenage girl talked about how youth of different complexions did not socialize with each other and that light-skinned blacks believed that they were better than those with darker skin.<sup>81</sup> Eighteen-year-old Norma Emily Harris, who described herself as fair, remarked that she had friends of all complexions. She believed that personality, rather than color, is what mattered.<sup>82</sup> Seventeen-year-old Lula Mae Briggs Logan, a brown-skinned young woman and member of the Girl Reserves, shared Harris’s sentiments.<sup>83</sup> Some interviewees talked about light and dark-skinned blacks not mingling, while others proudly claimed that they discriminate based on color. Regardless, the Negro Youth Study interviewees displayed a deep awareness of color and its social implications. Because of this, it is possible that internalized attitudes about color impacted interpersonal relationships between black girls who played, camped, or debuted together.

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<sup>80</sup> “Life History Document: Role of Color in the Development of Personality,” June 1939, E. Franklin Frazier Papers.

<sup>81</sup> “Romaine Ballard” and “Rose C. Beckett,” Box 131-108, Research Projects: Negro Youth Study, E. Franklin Frazier Papers, MSRC.

<sup>82</sup> “Norma Emily Harris,” Box 131-108, Research Projects: Negro Youth Study, E. Franklin Frazier Papers, MSRC.

<sup>83</sup> “Lula Mae Briggs Logan,” Box 131-108, Research Projects: Negro Youth Study, E. Franklin Frazier Papers, MSRC. See also “Lucretia C. Lindsay,” Box 131-108, Research Projects: Negro Youth Study, E. Franklin Frazier Papers, MSRC.

Although Washington's legacy of color consciousness and colorism was in many ways embedded in the city's culture and D.C.-specific, it was not unique to the city. Furthermore, this legacy extended well past the 1940s. Margo Jefferson came of age in Chicago in the postwar period. In her memoir, *Negroland*, she reflects on the pervasiveness of colorism in her black middle-class upbringing, and how ideas about color shaped what she thought about herself and others. She writes,

Ivory, cream, beige, wheat, tan, moccasin, fawn, café au lait, and the paler shades of honey, amber, and bronze are best, Sienna, chocolate, saddle brown, umber (burnt or raw), and mahogany work best with decent-to-good hair and even-to-keen features. In these cases, the woman's wardrobe must feature subdued tones. Bright colors suggest that she is flaunting herself. Generally, for women, the dark skin shades like walnut, chocolate brown, black, and black with blue undertones are off-limits. Dark skin often suggests aggressive, indiscriminate sexual readiness. At the very least it calls instant attention to your race and can incite demeaning associations.<sup>84</sup>

Jefferson's detailed listing illustrates the complex color hierarchy within African American communities and highlights the gendered nature of this hierarchy. Lighter skin tones were the most preferred. Skin tones in the mid-range were not the most prized but could be remedied by Eurocentric features such as a looser grade of hair and a thin nose. The least prized skin tones were those on the darker end of the scale. In her description, Jefferson does not attach any mitigating factors to dark skin such as straight hair or European facial features, which suggests that dark skin was viewed as irredeemable.

Jefferson's description of the color hierarchy is tongue-in-cheek, but ideas about skin color, and the attributes ascribed to them, profoundly impacted black girls' relationships with their bodies. Margo described her sister's skin as "burnt sienna," and her and her mother's skin as "café au lait" with "the blue veins in their hands [that] can

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<sup>84</sup> Margo Jefferson, *Negroland: A Memoir* (New York: Vintage Books, 2015), 53.

be seen by anyone. Which, on a timeline stretching back to post-Reconstruction, would secure their membership in the best Negro churches and clubs...”<sup>85</sup> Jefferson then talked about the insecurities about her appearance that she had in her youth. She mentioned that she “always measured [herself] against [her] Negro friends, and even when we had the same basic equipment (skin shade, hair grade, feature size and shape), my glasses put me at a disadvantage.”<sup>86</sup> Although Jefferson’s insecurities are rooted in the fact that she had to wear glasses, the aside that she includes about skin, hair, and facial features suggests that these were part of the criteria that she used in comparing herself to her peers.

The collective experiences of the participants in the Frazier study, and Margo Jefferson, demonstrate how ideas about color and colorism affected adolescent black girls’ relationships with their bodies and with their female peers. Like Jefferson, young women who debuted together may have been sizing each other up. Debutantes who fell in the mid- or low-range of the skin color hierarchy that she described may have questioned their own attractiveness. Furthermore, ideas about people with lighter or darker skin may have impacted the relationships that debutantes made with each other.

### **Dress**

Like health and beauty, dress played an important role in the ways in which African Americans fashioned their identities as citizens. During the Great Migration, middle-class “old settlers” and reformers admonished southern migrants for their clothing choices and took it upon themselves to instruct them on how they should dress, now that they lived in the North. In their “Helpful Hints” pamphlets, the Detroit Urban League instructed migrants on the do’s and don’ts of life in the urban North. Many of these

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<sup>85</sup> Jefferson 57

<sup>86</sup> Ibid 78

“helpful hints” had to do with dress and comportment. They were told, “DON’T go about the streets or on the street car in bungalow aprons, boudoir caps and house slippers. Wear regular street clothes when you go into the streets. TRY to dress neatly at all times, but don’t be a dude or wear flashy clothes. They are as undesirable and as harmful as unclean clothes. The pamphlet included two side by side photographs of a woman, looking unkempt on the left and dressed “appropriately” on the right.<sup>87</sup> Migrants were also aware of how clothing differentiated them from their northern-born counterparts. Beulah Nelson migrated to Washington at the turn of the century for work as a domestic. She described a moment when she overheard her hosts talking about her behind her back. Nelson thought to herself, “And what could I have to wear? Old things stuff from down home.”<sup>88</sup>

Migrants were not the only people subject to critique about their dress. Black middle-class women often dished out the same critiques to working-class and poor black women who remained in the rural South. Blain Roberts writes, “home demonstration agents...spent much of their time convincing rural women that their clothing—seen as loud, ostentatious, and unsophisticated—betrayed the race.”<sup>89</sup> Those who conducted interviews for Frazier’s Negro Youth Study included in their observations notes about girls’ clothing. They used these observations to make judgments about girls’ class status and attitude about themselves. And later, in the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s, young activists were encouraged to “Dress modestly, neatly...as if you were going

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<sup>87</sup> “Helpful Hints for Migrants to Detroit, 1918,” in Thomas C. Holt and Elsa Barkley Brown, eds., *Major Problems in African-American History, Volume II: From Freedom to “Freedom Now,” 1865-1990s* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2000), 132.

<sup>88</sup> Elizabeth Clark-Lewis, *Living In, Living Out: African American Domestic in Washington, D.C., 1910-1940* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Books, 1994), 93.

<sup>89</sup> Blain Roberts 111.

to church,” presenting themselves as respectable citizens in contrast to unruly and violent southern racists.<sup>90</sup>

For girls and young women however, dress and self-presentation was about expressing personal style, staying on trend, and fitting in with peers. An advertisement for a 1948 sewing class at the PW YWCA melded the desires of young women attendees and the goal of the organization to develop young women into responsible adults. The news release for the class said, “Dress in style. Have that ‘New Look.’ Be glamorous. Join the Sewing Class...Be fashionable and neat on a small budget. Make it yourself.”<sup>91</sup> Here, the PW YWCA marketed sewing not as a skill needed for maintenance of the home, but as a skill that would contribute to a young woman’s desire to look fashionable. The PW YWCA also emphasized the economical nature of making one’s own clothes. For girls and young women who were unable to afford a large or expensive wardrobe, sewing would allow them to dress like their more affluent peers. At the same time, the PW YWCA’s emphasis on thrift was illustrative of their broader agenda. One of their goals was to prepare black girls for womanhood. Although, the advertisement was not about domesticity, teaching girls and young women to be thrifty would be a skill that they could employ in their own homes as adults, married or not.

An outfit had the power to produce a variety of feelings and emotions for the wearer. In the above example, girls might have experienced a heightened sense of confidence and beauty because they produced clothing that they and their peers deemed

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<sup>90</sup> Marisa Chappell, Jenny Hutchison, and Brian Ward, “‘Dress modestly, neatly...as if you were going to church’: Respectability, Class, and Gender in the Montgomery Bus Boycott and the Early Civil Rights Movement,” in Peter J. Ling and Sharon Monteith, eds., *Gender and the Civil Rights Movement* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2004), 69-100.

<sup>91</sup> “Phyllis Wheatley Y.W.C.A.—News Release—January 1948,” Box: 392-1676, Folder: Publicity, Phyllis Wheatley YWCA Collection, MSRC.

stylish. They may have also felt pride and accomplishment for creating their own pieces of clothing. Girl Scout and Girl Reserve uniforms, and the signature debutante ballgown evoked similar feelings for scouts, Girl Reserves, and debutantes who wore them: pride, maturity, desirability, and belonging.

### *Girl Scout and Girl Reserve Uniforms*

Girl Scout uniforms have continuously evolved. The signature green uniform debuted in the 1930s. Scouts' green mid-length button-down dress featured a belt, tie, and fashionable beret. In the 1940s, Junior and Senior scouts continued wearing the green dress with a yellow neckerchief, while Brownies sported brown short-sleeved shirtdresses and a brown beanie. Sashes were not introduced until the 1950s, so scouts sewed badges onto the sleeves of their uniforms prior to that time. The Girl Reserve uniform consisted of a blue skirt and white blouse with a blue necktie. Whether spotted in a photograph, walking down the street or the school hallway, debutantes, Girl Scouts, and Girl Reserves were readily identifiable. Sara Nash remained a Girl Scout through high school. During an interview she recalled the meanings and responsibilities attached to wearing her scouting uniform. She remembered how "her teachers knew she and her Girl Scout friends would behave in a certain way. 'They knew that when we walked in, we were going to sit there and sit quietly. We did not want to (do) anything wrong because if our leaders heard about it, then our mothers heard about it.'"<sup>92</sup> Nash felt obliged to be on her best behavior, because her uniform characterized her as well-behaved and attentive in the class room. If Nash challenged this pattern of behavior, specifically while in uniform, she would have risked being reprimanded by her troop leader and her mother.

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<sup>92</sup> Barbara Laskin, "A Discussion of Black Women's Contributions to Girl Scouting in the Nation's Capital," *Capitalk* (June/July 1987), 2.

Along with a sense of responsibility, the Girl Scout uniform also carried with it a sense of pride. Scouts' uniforms doubled as a canvas on which they displayed each of their achievements. After reaching a certain milestone or completing the necessary requirements for a particular patch, scouts received a pin or patch. With one glance, scouts and onlookers could look at their various accomplishments. Nash wore a pin with her uniform that she would rotate right-side-up whenever she completed a good deed. Turning that pin probably made Nash feel like a good person. Sonia Willis did not join the Girl Scouts until 1959, but she felt the same pride that Sara Nash felt about her uniform. She proudly wore her uniform even though she was 'constantly ridiculed by the public for wearing [it].'<sup>93</sup> For her, the feeling that she had from wearing her uniform outweighed how she felt about being made fun of by her peers. Willis' story, however, highlights another possible perspective. Her fellow scouts may not have felt the same pride in wearing the uniform if they were ridiculed for it. While there are not any accounts of how Girl Reserves felt about their uniforms, it could have evoked the same sense of pride.

### *The Debutante Gown*

The signature ballgown was as much a visual centerpiece of the ritual as the deep bow that young women took upon their formal entrance to society. Art historian Karal Ann Marling writes, "After everything else has been discussed and dispensed with, the fancy dress remains the fundamental, indispensable attribute of the debutante...Luscious. Decorative. Unfamiliar. It *feels* different. It rustles. It pinches and prods in all the right

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<sup>93</sup> Laskin 2

places.”<sup>94</sup> And unlike the Girl Scout or Girl Reserve uniform, there was some room for self-expression with the gown. Vivian Heisser, a young woman who debuted with the Bachelor-Benedicts in 1946 told the *Afro-American* that she designed her own white satin gown for the event.<sup>95</sup> Although each debutante wore a white formal gown, she could play around with cuts, necklines, embellishments, and accessories. For the bolder debutante, an off-the-shoulder or strapless gown offered a more daring style. For the demurer debutante, a cap-sleeve gown would do just fine. They could also choose from a wide selection of fabrics. Silk, taffeta, and tulle were popular choices. The gown allowed each debutante to retain some sense of individuality.



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<sup>94</sup> Karal Ann Marling, *Debutante: Rights and Regalia of American Debdom* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2004), 199.

<sup>95</sup> “The Afro Goes to the Bachelor-Benedict’s Party for Debs,” *Afro-American*, April 27, 1946.



**Figure 3.5:** This is a portrait of Miss Ray Wiggs, a Washington debutante in 1960. Scurlock Studio Records, ca. 1905-1994, Archives Center, National Museum of American History

Debutantes could express their personal style with their gowns, but what feelings or emotions were attached to the garment? Although the specific thoughts and desires of the debutantes represented in this study are largely not in the historical record, historian Kelly Schrum offers insight into thinking about what wearing the gown might have meant for black girls as they made their debut, as well as the larger meanings of the debutante gown in American culture. Wearing a gown was a symbol of maturity tied closely to ideas about sexuality. The gown was an outward expression of the entrance into womanhood. Schrum writes, “Girls frequently described the extended pleasure of imagining a dress, shopping, and preparing to wear it.”<sup>96</sup> She demonstrates this using the 1929 diary entry of fourteen year-old Katherine Rosner who wrote, ‘Well, diary, in a few minutes I leave for the greatest event of my life, my first dance!...I love my dress. It’s rose colored taffeta, with a fitted bodice, and a bouffant skirt. There’s a ruffle of tulle along the bottom of the skirt, and tulle at the very top of the dress, and there are many-colored taffeta flowers on different parts of the gown. All I hope, diary, is that I can dance.’”<sup>97</sup> Although Rosner is [presumably] a white adolescent girl younger than the average debutante, it is likely that these same feelings of excitement existed among black debutantes.

Imagine debutantes trying on their gowns for the first time, admiring the elegance and intricate details of the dress. The social pages of the black press dedicated space to

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<sup>96</sup> Kelly Schrum, *Some Work Bobby Sox: The Emergence of Teenage Girls’ Culture, 1920-1945* (New York: Palgrave, 2004), 63.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid

debutantes at the height of the social season. Knowing that she would be photographed in her elaborate gown could have added to the excitement of the moment. In her discussion of New Orleans Carnival balls, LaKisha Simmons writes, “The elaborate dress was a key piece of the performance; dressing as royalty allowed for an imaginative embodiment of prominence...signifying magic and class privilege and erasing blackness as abjection. When black girls enacted such scenarios, their bodies appeared in a new context.”<sup>98</sup> For the black debutante, dressing in a white ball gown gave her the opportunity to wear an outfit that differed greatly from her everyday school wear and challenged racist notions of black girlhood and womanhood. While adults might have thought about challenging racist depictions of the black woman’s body as critical race work, here, Simmons persuasively frames it as a pleasurable or joyous act.

In American culture more broadly, adolescent girls associated wearing a gown to their desires to look sexually appealing. In a short story written in 1934, a high school girl wrote, ‘Sydney shivered as she slopped the sheathing satin dress down over her cool, trembling body. As she smoothed it down over her lifting, young curves she glanced at herself in the mirror. She looked like a wet, young blade of grass.’<sup>99</sup> The excerpt from the short story evokes the sensual pleasure that adolescent girls might have felt in wearing a formal gown. This excerpt came from *Ladies Home Journal*, and as such, was probably written with a white girl at the center of the story, geared towards a white audience. However, it is possible that black girls also experienced feeling of sensuality in wearing a gown. However, portraying a sexual image and the idea of sexual desire among African Americans was a slippery slope. While debutantes were characterized as the pinnacle of

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<sup>98</sup> LaKisha Michelle Simmons 197.

<sup>99</sup> Schrum 63.

beauty and femininity in the black press, and they were meant to be seen as desirable, they were not supposed to be overtly sexual. Striking this balance was particularly crucial for African Americans who sought to challenge distorted images of black female sexuality in American culture.

The uniforms of the Girl Scouts and Girl Reserves, as well as the debutante ball gown had meaning for the individual wearers, but these garments also granted scouts, Girl Reserves, and debutantes access to a collective identity and sense of belonging. Not everyone could be a debutante. One had to be handpicked to participate, so wearing that gown was a privilege afforded to few. Wearing the gown was a physical marker of a debutante's membership in not only the exclusive group of young women, but a member of the black elite more broadly. As Sarah Nash noted in her remembrances of scouting as a high schooler, she and her friends wore their Girl Scout uniforms to school. As expressed by many of the girls and young women in Chapter 1 in describing why they joined a particular organization, they wanted to make friends and belong. Furthermore, regarding the segregated D.C. Girl Scout council, wearing a uniform allowed a black scout to assert her equality with white scouts. Black leaders in the D.C. scouting movement insisted that black scouts be given the same program as white scouts. Uniforms and scouting manuals were likely part of what black leaders had in mind when making this request. When a white scout expressed to Sandra King-Shaw, a Girl Scout at Asbury United Methodist Church in NW Washington, her utter shock about the notion that black girls were scouts, King-Shaw responded by saying that there were no

differences between black and white scouts, and that they used the same program and did the same activities.<sup>100</sup> The uniforms proved that they were part of the larger movement.

## **Conclusion**

Girls' physical bodies were central to ideas about and experiences of black girlhood. Organizational leaders in the GSCNC and the PW YWCA believed that African American girls had a right to a healthy childhood. Sending girls to camp and offering recreational activities was one small way that leaders gave them access to that right. While leaders praised the health benefits of fresh air and physical movement, girls considered spaces like camp or a dance class as sites of joy and pleasure. This chapter traced the ways in which black girls developed healthy relationships with, and celebrated, their bodies. But it also illuminated how the physical body could be a source of pain or displeasure. This is seen most clearly with the issue of colorism. African Americans' attempts to put black girls' and women's beauty on a pedestal often privileged only certain types of black girls: those with lighter skin tones. This had the potential to not only be damaging to one's self-esteem, but impact girls' interpersonal relationships.

Organizations for black girls sought to develop the whole girl: morally, physically, and emotionally. In turn, girls turned to social organizations to find belonging in their peer groups and make friends with people with similar backgrounds and interests. Both leaders and girls did this in single-sex spaces; or, in the case of the debutante ball, girl-centered spaces. However, how did organizations respond to growing acceptance of heterosocial socializing in the postwar period? In this chapter, it is clear how ideas about

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<sup>100</sup> Interview with Sandra King-Shaw, Adelle Banks, Oral History Interviewer, Asbury United Methodist Church, Washington, D.C., April 19, 2017.

beauty and personal appearance shaped girls' relationships with each other. But these ideas also had implications for their interactions with the opposite sex.

## **Chapter 4: Canteens and Cotillions: Learning and Performing Courtship in the Postwar Phyllis Wheatley YWCA and Black Debutante Ball**

### **Introduction**

By 1957, the *Washington Afro American* featured a weekly advice column titled “Date Data.” Teenage readers wrote in to “The Chaperone” to seek guidance on their dating dilemmas. A seventeen-year-old young woman wrote, “I am a girl 17 and in love with a boy 19. A girl friend of mine went out with him. He says he doesn’t love her. What must I do. Should I forget him. I still love him.” She signed the letter, “CONFUSED.”<sup>1</sup> In response, the Chaperone succinctly informed Confused that because she was not married or engaged to the young man with whom she was in love, he had the right to see other girls, and she should go out with different boys. She wrote, “Having dates is healthy and normal. Unless you want to chuck up all your youth and settle down to getting married, get rid of the notion that you must date only one boy.”<sup>2</sup> The Chaperone also advised young women about dealing with unreliable dates, gathering the courage to introduce themselves to crushes, and the pitfalls of being in love with a married man. The fact that there was an entire column dedicated to helping teenagers sort through their dating woes is telling. The “Date Data” letters highlight the postwar period’s institutionalization of dating within youth culture.

Courtship practices in America underwent various changes in the twentieth century. Contemporary ideas about dating began to gain prominence by the mid-1920s. Its origins in urban working-class culture, and the practices of “treating” and prostitution, made dating a source of controversy in middle-class families. However, it “became a key

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<sup>1</sup> Confused, “Date Data,” *Washington Afro-American*, May (28?), 1957, p. 7.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

ritual of youth culture in the 1920s and was unquestionably the dominant form of 'courtship' by the beginning of World War II."<sup>3</sup> Historians have argued that World War II served as a catalyst for change in American dating culture. Prior to the war, young women were encouraged to amass as many dates as possible. However, with the number of eligible young men significantly lower because of the war, young women did not have as many options. As a result, by the end of the war, they began to put more emphasis on finding a stable partner.<sup>4</sup>

The increasingly heterosexual-oriented culture that emerged in the postwar period reflected changes in American culture in general, and youth culture in particular. Larger social and political changes in America brought on by the Cold War created panics over homosexuality, which grew in conjunction with fear of the spread of communism. In political and social discourses, the strength of the heterosexual family mirrored the strength of the nation. Therefore, anything that challenged the growth of the patriarchal family was deemed a threat.<sup>5</sup> Historian Susan K. Cahn writes, "By midcentury, subtle changes in ordinary life had shifted the patterns of sociability and structures of opportunity in which sexual desire and adolescent dreams take form."<sup>6</sup> The expansion of the high school began in the 1930s, and by the 1940s and 1950s, high school attendance

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<sup>3</sup> Beth Bailey, "From Front Porch to Back Seat: A History of the Date," *OAH Magazine of History* (July 2004), 23. For more on treating as a practice and an antecedent of dating see Kathy Peiss, *Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in the Turn of the Century New York* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986); Elizabeth Alice Clement, *Love for Sale: Courting, Treating, and Prostitution in New York City, 1900-1945* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006).

<sup>4</sup> Ibid 24.

<sup>5</sup> Susan K. Cahn, *Sexual Reckonings: Southern Girls in a Troubling Age* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), 236. See also Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (New York: Basic Books, 1990); George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940* (New York: Basic Books, 1994).

<sup>6</sup> Ibid 212.

became nearly universal.<sup>7</sup> Historian Kelly Schrum contends that the move towards nearly universal attendance of high school “proved to be the single most important factor in the development of teenage culture.”<sup>8</sup> In the classroom and through extracurricular activities, young people had the ability to socialize with each other and develop a culture free from parental supervision.<sup>9</sup> Extracurricular activities in high school became sites of mixed-sex socializing, which was not the case prior to the early 1940s. According to Cahn, “same-gender or nonsexual activities—like girls’ homemaking clubs, boys’ religious service groups, or coed subject-oriented French or Math clubs—generally stood at the foreground of student life. By midcentury this held true only for elementary and junior high school children who typically played in single-sex groups.”<sup>10</sup>

Black and white adolescent girls who came of age in the postwar period lived in and shaped a heterosocial culture consumed with romance, dating, and marriage. The institutionalization of heterosocial rites and recreation within high school impacted their lives most directly. One of the heterosexual rites that became institutionalized within high school culture was the school dance.<sup>11</sup> These events were a source of controversy among black and white religious leaders who questioned the morality of the ritual. “Opponents argued that even when chaperoned, dancing was the first step on a hell-bound slope toward drink[ing], irresponsible carousing, and sinful sexuality.”<sup>12</sup> However, these objections did not stunt the increased occurrence of events such as the prom and homecoming. A common accompaniment to the prom and homecoming celebration was

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<sup>7</sup> Grace Palladino, *Teenagers: An American History* (New York: Basic Books, 1996), xx; Cahn 212.

<sup>8</sup> Kelly Schrum, *Some Work Bobby Sox: The Emergence of Teenage Girls’ Culture, 1920-1945* (New York: Palgrave, 2004), 12.

<sup>9</sup> Schrum 12

<sup>10</sup> Cahn 215

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid* 216

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid*



the selection of a queen, chosen by peers based on her attractiveness and popularity. To be sure, the recognition of beauty and charm were not new to high school culture, but Cahn claims that in the 1920s and 1930s, characteristics like strong character, loyalty, and intelligence were just as important as beauty. While the selection of the queen “did not involve heterosexual coupling...it did lay out some of the terms on which girls established their worth in the ‘marketplace’ of dating and eventual marriage.”<sup>13</sup> Nevertheless, the emphasis on attractiveness as a desirable attribute demonstrates how heterosocial rites in high school culture positioned girls as objects of male desire, whose value largely rested on their looks.

Changes in high school curriculum also signaled the institutionalization of heterosexuality. Family life and sex education stemmed from the professionalization of psychiatry and psychology. Sex educators played an important role in postwar American culture because of their knowledge of sexual adjustment, family life, and marriage.<sup>14</sup> Instead of emphasizing the act of sex and eroticism, they leaned toward broader discussions of emotions, healthy family dynamics, and personality.

The emergence of a heterosexual romantic culture fostered the development of heterosocial recreation, but what did this change mean for sites of homosocial recreation such as the PW YWCA? Like the “Date Data” column, and high school family life courses, organizations for black girls positioned themselves as resources for teenage women who needed guidance navigating the dating scene, and as facilitators of heterosexual interaction within socially-acceptable settings. Historians of American girls’ organizations in the postwar period have not fully examined how these groups reckoned

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<sup>13</sup> Cahn 218-219.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid 237

with an increasingly heterosocial-oriented youth culture and sought to remain relevant.<sup>15</sup>

However, an exploration of these issues addresses how organizations remained viable community institutions. This is particularly important to consider for black communities, where social institutions solidified intraracial relationships, and served as critical sites of recreation and race work.

This chapter is about the emergence of a more heterosocial-oriented youth culture in the postwar period. African Americans remain marginalized in literature on postwar youth culture, but organizational manuscripts, newspapers, photographs, yearbooks, and school newspapers show that black girls and the organizations that catered to them were active participants within the institutionalization of heterosexuality within youth culture in the postwar period. Single-sex organizations, specifically the Phyllis Wheatley YWCA (PW YWCA), adapted to this change with the creation of co-ed programming and workshops that taught girls the basics of dating, beauty, and charm. These programs included forums where girls could ask questions about dating, a charm school, and a Teen Canteen, where youths of both sexes mingled. This programming not only kept the PW YWCA relevant, but it allowed them to surveil and influence the heterosexual relationships that their members pursued.

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<sup>15</sup> Most studies about girls' organizations seem to end in the postwar period or earlier. Examples of works that look at organizations such as the YWCA, Campfire Girls and the Girl Scouts in the postwar period and beyond include: Jessica L. Foley, "'Meeting the Needs of Today's Girl': Youth Organizations and the Making of a Modern Girlhood, 1945-1980," Ph.D. Dissertation, Brown University (2010). Abigail Sara Lewis, "'The Barrier Breaking Love of God': The Multiracial Activism of the Young Women's Christian Association, 1940s to 1970s," Ph.D. Dissertation, Rutgers University-New Brunswick (2008); Marcia Chatelain, "International Sisterhood: Cold War Girl Scouts Encounter the World," *Diplomatic History* 38:2 (2014), pp. 261-270; Jennifer Helgren, "'Homemaker Can Include the World': Female Citizenship and Internationalism in the Postwar Camp Fire Girls," in Jennifer Helgren and Colleen Vasconcellos (eds.), *Girlhood: A Global History* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2010), pp. 304-322. The works that do cover the postwar period and beyond are overwhelmingly focused on girlhood citizenship in an increasingly global world as well as integration and civil rights activism.

While the ritual of the debutante was always heterosocial, the debutante ball was a space where exclusive social organizations and the parents of children of the black elite could control with whom their daughters interacted. The debutante ball was exclusive, and organizers were not only selective in choosing debutantes, as evidenced in previous chapters, but were also choosy about the escorts. Parents and ball sponsors ensured that their daughters met young men from similar socioeconomic backgrounds. This conscious coupling allowed adults to maintain the rigid social stratification characteristic of black Washington, and ensure the reproduction of elite black families.

The PW YWCA was an educational site where adults instructed adolescent girls on courtship basics and how to date, while the debutante ball offered a visual representation of idealized courtship. A comparison of the two illuminates the ways in which class and social status shaped courtship practices among black Washingtonians. While both the PW YWCA and debutante ball organizers adhered to traditional notions of respectability and sexuality, the PW YWCA catered to girls of more diverse socioeconomic backgrounds. In contrast, debutantes came from well-connected families of the middle and upper classes. The exclusive nature of the cotillion highlighted the insularity of Washington's black elite, and its desire to remain that way.

Even though adults controlled these heterosocial spaces, members of the PW YWCA and debutantes could have used their organizational involvement to fulfill their desires for dating and romance. A PW YWCA workshop on dating or how to become dateable might have been appealing to those wanting to navigate romantic interactions. While the debutante ball was a performance of elite class status, it was also a ritual steeped in romantic notions of courtship. As both participants and observers, adolescent

black girls could have understood the debutante ball as a site to experience idealized courtship and engage with fantasy. Thinking about black girls' pursuit of romance offers a glimpse of black girls' emotions and inner worlds, which are often difficult to uncover in the archive. Furthermore, looking beyond the organizations and focusing on their members casts black girls as agents who had and actively pursued their individual desires, rather than mere recipients of organizational leaders' ideas and representatives of the race.

Although debutantes may have attached romantic feelings to the cotillion, there may also have been a sense of anxiety, particularly in the ways that they related to their young male escorts. As discussed in earlier chapters, colorism was a fixture of D.C. society, and many debutantes in this period were light- or fair-skinned. Building from insights from the previous chapter, the notion that lighter skin was more attractive could have led darker-skinned debutantes to feel less attractive in the eyes of the escorts, or potential suitors. Furthermore, while some debutantes might have been concerned about catching the eye of a male attendant, it is equally possible that some viewed the heterosexual coupling aspect of the ritual with disdain or felt nervous at the thought of being paired with a young man, who may have been older.

Despite the possibilities of anxiety, thinking about black girls' pursuit of romance offers a glimpse of black girls' emotions and inner worlds, which are often difficult to uncover in the archive. Furthermore, looking beyond the organizations and focusing on their members casts black girls as agents who had, and actively pursued, individual desires that superceded those of the organizational leaders.

### **Adolescent Girls: A Nationwide Study**

Before delving into the specific programming of the PW YWCA, it is necessary to assess the challenges and issues that single-sex organizations had to reckon with to remain viable social outlets for adolescent girls in the postwar period. In 1958, Elizabeth Douval and Joseph Adelson authored a study, *Adolescent Girls: A National Study*, conducted under the Institute for Social Research at the University of Michigan, and in collaboration with the Girl Scouts of the United States of America (GSUSA). The study assessed the needs of adolescent girls and evaluated how youth agencies could best serve these needs. Girls who participated in the study responded to a questionnaire that included questions about family life, dating, friendship, organizational involvement, leisure, and their aspirations. The authors solicited participation from a total of 2,004 girls between the ages of eleven and eighteen, and 1,925 of them responded.<sup>16</sup> Participants came from a variety of regional and class backgrounds, and attended public, private, and parochial schools. Girls in the sample were categorized as either members or non-members, presumably of the Girl Scouts. African Americans comprised eight percent of non-members, and six percent of members. The *Adolescent Girls* study was one of the most influential studies of the 1950s, and demonstrates how larger cultural shifts impacted the relationships between girls' organizations and their members.

One aim of the *Adolescent Girls* study was to assess the activities that consumed the lives of girls. Its questions shed light on the activities adolescent girls prioritized, and how organizational membership fit within their lives. Work responsibilities prevented some girls from joining an organization. Fifty-one percent of the total sample earned

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<sup>16</sup> At the time of the study, there were 7.3 million girls living in the US in grades six through twelve. Institute for Social Research, *Adolescent Girls: A Nation-wide Study of Girls between Eleven and Eighteen Years of Age* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1958), B-1.

money outside of the home. This figure surprised the authors, because in the case of boys, just under fifty percent claimed to earn money outside of the home.<sup>17</sup> The social activities that took up the most time of the girls in the study were dances, parties, and dating. This information had specific implications for organizations that sought to maintain the interest of teenage girls over the age of thirteen.

Fifty-one percent of the total sample claimed that they were dating. Within specific age groups, seventy-two percent of girls between the ages of fourteen and sixteen, and ninety-one percent of girls over the age of sixteen said that they dated. So, while a little less than half of the total sample did not date at the time of the study, most girls aged fourteen and above did. Girls were also asked how frequently they dated, and most said that they went on dates weekly or every weekend.<sup>18</sup> For high school girls who were in the process of learning how to interact with peers of the opposite sex, what the study terms “male-female adjustment,” dating was a “legitimized means” by which adolescent girls learned how negotiate these interactions.<sup>19</sup> Increased interest in dating drew girls away from organizations because of lack of interest in an organization’s activities. Moreover, dating often took up a lot of time. In addition to the outing itself, “the elaborate preparations, and the before-and-after discussions become highly involving...”<sup>20</sup>

Dances and parties also ranked at the top of the list of adolescent girls’ social activities. The authors of the study divided activities into seven categories which included: team sports, individual sports, outdoor activities, formal social activities,

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<sup>17</sup> Institute for Social Research 123-124

<sup>18</sup> Ibid 128

<sup>19</sup> Ibid 127

<sup>20</sup> Ibid

informal social activities, hobbies, and creative activities. Formal social activities, which included dances and parties, ranked highest in terms of level of participation and enjoyment among the total sample. Outdoor and creative activities ranked the lowest in terms of participation, but outdoor activities ranked above average in terms of level of enjoyment. In contrast, creative activities ranked at the bottom of the enjoyment scale.<sup>21</sup> For organizations, these findings could have been disheartening, especially when outdoor and creative activities was a primary facet of an organization's programming, such as camping for Girl Scouts.

So, what were girls' organizations expected to do with this data? Particularly, how were organizations supposed to maintain the interest of girls over the age of sixteen, when their other obligations and interests may not have allowed them the extra time needed to participate in a group? The authors of the study wrote, "By this age, girls are very much absorbed in working out an adult social adjustment and an adequate adaptation vis-à-vis boys."<sup>22</sup> They recommended that organizations create specific programs around the social interests of adolescent girls. However, the authors also emphasized that programming for high school girls should not consist only of dances and parties. They argued that because these types of social activities were available through schools and other informal channels, such narrow-focused programming agenda "would offer nothing unique..."<sup>23</sup> Instead, the study recommended that organizations offer some social activities to pique the interest of high school girls.

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<sup>21</sup> Institute for Social Research 137

<sup>22</sup> Ibid 132

<sup>23</sup> Ibid 155

Membership statistics of the PW YWCA reveal that like other girls' organizations across the United States, they too experienced a decline in this period. In 1947, the PW YWCA Y-Teens had 579 members in 17 clubs in junior and senior high schools. Girls came from the Chapel Oaks housing projects, the Benning Heights projects, Jivin' Co-Eds, a Y-Teen choral group, a Tuesday dance group, a Friday sports club, and a Saturday morning craft workshop.<sup>24</sup> Although the exact numbers are not clear, the organization faced a steady decline in membership between 1953 and 1956.<sup>25</sup> In the face of declining membership, organizations like the PW YWCA sought to remain relevant by adapting to changes in youth culture. Elements of the heterosexual romantic culture became embedded in the programming of the PW YWCA as early as the mid-1940s.

### **Dating Education and Heterosocial Spaces at the Phyllis Wheatley YWCA**

A survey of Cardozo High School's 1960 edition of their yearbook, *The Purple Wave*, offers insight into the ways that interactions with the opposite sex played a major role in the lives of black students in the nation's capital. Next to their photographs, students listed their extracurricular activities, pet peeve, career ambition, and motto. The pet peeves highlight students' opinions about dating and interactions with the opposite sex. Maile Beatty noted that "silly boys" were her pet peeve.<sup>26</sup> Beatty's classmate Linnea A. Blocker echoed this sentiment.<sup>27</sup> Bonnie Jean Batts, a member of the Y-Teens, did not like "sloppy boys."<sup>28</sup> Other gripes among Cardozo's female students with the opposite

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<sup>24</sup> Mrs. Alice L. Bell, "Annual Report of Program and Services: Phyllis Wheatley Young Women's Christian Association, for the Year 1947," 6, Box 392-1676, Folder: Annual Reports, Executive Director and President, 1943-1948, PW YWCA Collection, MSRC.

<sup>25</sup> "Minutes, January 3, 1956," Box: 392-1768, PW YWCA Collection, MSRC.

<sup>26</sup> "Maile Beatty," *The Purple Wave* (1960), Yearbook Collection, Charles Sumner Museum and Archives, Washington, D.C. (herein CSMA).

<sup>27</sup> "Linnea A. Blocker," *The Purple Wave* (1960), Yearbook Collection, CSMA.

<sup>28</sup> "Bonnie Jean Batts," *The Purple Wave* (1960), Yearbook Collection, CSMA.



sex included “being stood up by a boy,” which Y-Teen member Dewana A. Dobbins listed in her yearbook inscription. Mildred Cobbs listed, “Boys pulling on girl in the halls.”<sup>29</sup> Girls were not alone in voicing their opinions about the irksome qualities of the opposite sex. A handful of boys in Cardozo’s class of 1960 listed “nagging,” “gossiping,” and “irritating” girls as their pet peeve.<sup>30</sup> These inscriptions highlight how interactions with the opposite sex, specifically dating, were central in the lives of Washington’s black high school students. Furthermore, the inscriptions explain what students valued in potential dates.

Girls’ organizations responded to cultural shifts in postwar girl culture. In 1946, the YWCA of America changed the name of the Girl Reserves to the Y-Teens. While the Girl Reserves were strictly for girls, Y-Teen clubs had the option of remaining single-sex or becoming co-ed.<sup>31</sup> The transformation of the Girl Reserves to the Y-Teens reflected a move toward more co-educational programming that had already begun prior to the 1946 official change, and the broadened scope of the program.<sup>32</sup> The PW YWCA adopted the Y-Teen program among its teenagers in Washington, and like YWCA programs in other cities, had already started to create programming that was not only co-ed, but catered to adolescent girls’ dating lives. The PW YWCA sponsored dating workshops where girls learned how to be dateable and the “right” way to date, which meant that while dating, they adhered to traditional notions of charm, grace, and chastity. Organizational leaders used dating education to advance idealized and acceptable notions of courtship. They also

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<sup>29</sup> “Dewana A. Dobbins” and “Mildred Cobbs,” *The Purple Wave* (1960), Yearbook Collection, CSMA.

<sup>30</sup> See “Julian David Allen,” “Daniel Burrell,” “Howard Clemons,” “John Cooper, Jr.,” “Reginald K. Crews,” *The Purple Wave* (1960), Yearbook Collection, CSMA.

<sup>31</sup> “Annual Report, Program Services, 1948,” Box 392-1676, Folder: Annual Reports, Executive Director and President, 1943-1948, PW YWCA Collection, MSRC.

<sup>32</sup> “YWCA Names Mrs. Janet Boyington to Direct New Teen-Age Program,” *Ann Arbor News*, September 17, 1946.

opened a Teen Canteen, where young men and women could come together to socialize in a “respectable” space under adult supervision.

*Learning Courtship: Dating Education at the PW YWCA*

Adolescent girls sought out different resources outside of their peer groups in their dating education. For example, they could read advice books published exclusively for a teenage audience, such as Evelyn Millis Duvall’s popular *Facts of Life and Love for Teen-Agers*, published in 1956. The chapters in the book offered a frank discussion of sex, dating, and marriage.<sup>33</sup> Elsie Archer’s *Let’s Face It: A Guide to Good Grooming for Negro Girls*, published in 1959, discussed similar topics.<sup>34</sup> Archer wrote in the first chapter of the book, “This book will not help you mechanically prepare your future. It will, with your efforts, help you to become more personable, more attractive and it will help you to become an individual who will not be left on the side lines to suffer, but one who will be wanted and one who will be accepted.”<sup>35</sup> For Archer, this meant being wanted and accepted by boys.<sup>36</sup> For African American teenage girls in Washington who were dating or wanted to become dateable, the PW YWCA was also a potential resource.

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<sup>33</sup> For more on this book see Rachel Devlin, *Relative Intimacy: Fathers, Adolescent Daughters, and Postwar American Culture* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 117.

<sup>34</sup> Elsie Archer, *Let’s Face It: A Guide to Good Grooming for Negro Girls* (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott Company, 1959). According to a 1963 article in the *New York Recorder*, Archer was a fashion representative for McCall’s Patterns, former fashion editor at *Ebony*, and served as Good Grooming Consultant for the Girl Scouts of America. She was also a board member of the Morningside Community Center, United Neighborhood Houses and the Federation of Protestant Welfare Agencies. See “Self-Confidence to be Theme of Teen-Age ‘Leader’ Group,” *New York Recorder*, March 21, 1964, 12.

<sup>35</sup> Archer 14

<sup>36</sup> The discussions that Archer undertakes in *Let’s Face It* are more gender-specific, rather than race specific. Although the book was written for African American girls, the only time that Archer mentions race is when she talks about negative stereotypes regarding African American skin and hair.

In 1944, the Girls Work Department of the PW YWCA sponsored a “Boy Dates Girl Clinic,” which was touted as one of the most “outstanding” events held that year.<sup>37</sup> Mrs. Helen Southard, a psychologist on the National YWCA staff, and Dr. Paul Cornely, Professor of Public Health at Howard University, led the clinic.<sup>38</sup> According to a report, the event “gave a large number of girls the opportunity to discuss their problems from a physiological and psychological point of view.”<sup>39</sup> It is likely that the discussion focused on the biological and emotional aspects of sex, sexuality, and dating. While on the National YWCA staff, Southard published widely about psychology, the adolescent body, sex education, and marriage.<sup>40</sup> Since Cornely was a Professor of Public Health, it is also possible that there were discussions about venereal disease and hygiene.

A transcript of the PW YWCA event does not exist, but a brief overview of Southard’s written work can point to her approaches in talking about sex and dating, which offers insight into what information girls who attended her talk at the PW YWCA received and how Southard might have addressed their questions. In 1955, Southard co-

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<sup>37</sup> “Annual Report of Program and Services: Phyllis Wheatley Y.W.C.A., Washington, D.C., 1944,” 1, Box 392-1676, Folder: Annual Reports, Executive Director and President, 1943-1948, PW YWCA Collection, MSRC.

<sup>38</sup> Cornely was the first African American to earn a degree in Public Health (1934) and also served as the medical director of Freedmen’s Hospital. He played a key role in the desegregation of hospitals. See “Remembering Paul Cornely,” *The Washington Post*, April 1, 2002.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid

<sup>40</sup> Southard’s publications include: *A Story About You*, co-authored with Marion O. Lerrigo (The National Education Association and the American Medical Association, 1956); *Finding Yourself*, co-authored with Marion O. Lerrigo (The National Education Association and American Medical Association, 1955); *Learning About Love*, co-authored with Marion O. Lerrigo (National Education Association and American Medical Association, 1955); *Sex Before 20: New Answers for Youth* (Dutton, 1967); *Facts Aren’t Enough*, co-authored with Marion Lerrigo (National Education Association and American Medical Association, 1955); *Parents’ Responsibility*, co-authored with Marion Lerrigo (National Education Association and American Medical Association, 1955); *Sex Education Program: A Guide for Leaders* (New York: National Council YWCA, 1965); *Family Activities with Other Families: Needs and Interests at Different Ages* (New York: National Board YWCA, 1959); *Attention is Needed, Action is Called For: Teen Women Tell About Their Needs* (New York, 1974); *Sex Education: Let’s Get Going* (New York: National Board YWCA); *Have You Met Yourself?: A Psychological Introduction* (New York: The Woman’s Press, 1942); *Planning for Sex Education, with Particular Reference to YWCA Work with Junior and Senior High School Students* (1943).

authored a series of books with Dr. Marion O. Lerrigo for the “Sex Education Series.” This series, published for the Joint Committee on Health Problems in Education of the National Education Association and the American Medical Association, consisted of five books, all co-written by Southard and Lerrigo. Each book catered to a specific audience: parents, young children, adolescent girls and boys, and schools and youth organizations. In *Finding Yourself* and *Learning About Love*, Southard breaks down the physiological and emotional experiences of dating, marriage, and sex for adolescent boys and girls between the ages of twelve and twenty. *Finding Yourself* was meant for middle schoolers and younger high school students, while the authors wrote for an older teenage audience in *Learning About Love*. There were not any major differences in the texts, in terms of information presented, other than in-depth discussions about marriage and marriage preparation in the text for older teenagers. Both books were about fifty pages in length, talked about the reproductive system, which included illustrations; and tackled issues regarding sexual attraction, desire, and premarital sex.

Southard and Lerrigo assured their readers that sexual desire was a normal facet of adolescence. They wrote, “Teen-agers should be neither surprised nor ashamed if their attraction to someone of the other sex is accompanied by new physical urges. These new feelings usually appear during adolescence, along with the body changes which make a boy or girl sexually mature.”<sup>41</sup> For the girls attending Southard’s talk at the PW YWCA, being assured that their feelings of sexual attraction were normal were probably comforting. Although Southard and Lerrigo took a sex-positive approach in their discussions of dating and marriage, they cautioned against petting, excessive

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<sup>41</sup> *Finding Yourself* 45.

masturbation, and premarital sex. They mentioned that the act of premarital sex went against many religious faiths, and that engaging in such behavior could cause feelings of guilt. However, they did not couch their claims in moral arguments. Instead, they focused on the emotional and physical consequences of such relations, specifically on the individual. For example, they spent a significant amount of time talking about pregnancy as something that could be emotionally damaging for both parents and the child, and venereal diseases as a potential physical consequence.<sup>42</sup> The authors explained how dating one person seriously grew out of friendships and group dating, and encouraged adolescent readers to pursue friendships with the opposite sex.<sup>43</sup> They also emphasized that physical attraction or physical pleasure relationships should not be the sole foundation of a relationship. Southard and Lerrigo explained, “when a friendship is based *only* on the physical attraction of sex, it is unlikely to be satisfying, for the relationship is often a selfish one.”<sup>44</sup> As in other areas of the texts, Southard and Lerrigo situate their argument in ideas about emotion and personal fulfillment, rather than morality.

Southard and Lerrigo’s approaches to sex education and dating were typical of the period. In her analysis of class assignments from southern African American college students enrolled in sex education and marriage courses in the 1940s, Christina Simmons found that educators accepted modern ideas about courtship while holding onto traditional notions of respectability. She features the work of Gladys Groves, a white sex and marriage education instructor in North Carolina, as a case study. Like Southard and Lerrigo, Groves acknowledged that acts such as petting occurred frequently among young

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<sup>42</sup> *Learning about Love* 25-29.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid 21 and 31; *Finding Yourself* 44-45.

<sup>44</sup> *Finding Yourself* 43.

daters, but, rather than pass judgement on whether petting was right or wrong. Girls of the PW YWCA might have found the arguments about emotion more palatable than moral arguments.

Overall, the authors believed that arming adolescent readers with knowledge about sex, personality, and marriage would empower them to make their own decisions. They believed that this type of knowledge helped young people understand themselves, their significant others, and develop a personal code of ethics that they had the courage to stand by. They wrote, “A young woman who has the right facts and attitudes about men and women will understand that the eagerness of some dating partners for expression of sex is normal, although she also understands the necessity for control. A young woman also needs to realize that it is normal for her to have sex interests, and that these interests can be expressed in a number of desirable ways.”<sup>45</sup> Again, although Southard and Lerrigo adhered to traditional notions of sexuality, the manner in which they presented the information could have been more appealing to the adolescent audience. They saw sex education as potentially empowering for adolescents. For teenage girls who were often beholden to respectability politics and admonishment by adults, Southard and Lerrigo’s approach gave them a sense of power and control over their own minds and bodies. For young black women in particular, this sense of control coupled with the idea that feelings of sexual desire were normal, had the potential to allow them “to reject the sexual shame that for them carried a particular racial charge.”<sup>46</sup>

Programming like the Boy Dates Girl Clinic continued at the PW YWCA in the 1940s and decades later. At the “Charm School for Girl Reserves,” topics were not only

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<sup>45</sup> Southard and Lerrigo, *Learning About Love*, 10.

<sup>46</sup> Christina Simmons 113.

about fashioning and grooming the body, but also covered the topic of dating.<sup>47</sup> The description of the second meeting in the series read, “It’s Saturday night and you and your best friend are double dating. Her man is cuter than yours. Do you have a good time as part of the foursome? Ignore your date and concentrate your wiles on Peggy’s?”<sup>48</sup> The dilemma presented in the workshop description probably echoed the concerns of many teenage girls who were inexperienced in navigating the dating world. For them, the charm school could have been appealing because it would provide them with the ins and outs of dating etiquette. A seventeen-year-old Dunbar High School student, identified as J.F., penned the following letter, which appeared in the “Ask Pat” column in the school’s newspaper, *The Newsreel*: “Because I am 17 years old and a senior in Dunbar, this question may seem absurd coming from me. On various occasions I find myself confused as to when a boy precedes a girl and when he follows her. Will you give me some examples?”<sup>49</sup> J.F.’s letter hints to embarrassment at having to ask about proper etiquette in mixed-sex social setting. However, it shows that learning how to properly interact with the opposite sex was something that girls desired to learn. In response, Pat assured J.F. that she should not be embarrassed about asking her question, because many of her peers were unaware of such etiquette. She then outlined correct protocol:

1. A girl goes up the steps first; coming down, the boy precedes the girl.
2. Upon entering a restaurant, the girl goes first because she chooses the place to sit.
3. When entering a building, the boy holds the door, and the girl goes first.
4. When attending a theater, the girl follows the usher, but if there is no usher, the girl goes first.

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<sup>47</sup> See Chapter 3 for a discussion of additional topics at the Charm School.

<sup>48</sup> Girls’ Work Department, “Charm School for Girl Reserves,” Box 392-1690, Folder: Other Departmental Programs, PW YWCA Collection, MSRC.

<sup>49</sup> “Ask Pat,” *The Dunbar Newsreel*, March 1954.

5. The girl gets on the bus first, but the boy gets off first, helping the girl.<sup>50</sup>

The complex nature of dating etiquette was likely a common cause of anxiety among high school girls. As a result, in addition to consulting with peers, programs such as the Charm School at the PW YWCA could have piqued the interest of many teenage girls who were new to the dating world, or looking to gain more knowledge about the subject. Discussions about dating were even included within the activities at the PW YWCA's Camp-Stay-at-Home.<sup>51</sup> Similar programs outside of the PW YWCA point to the popularity of these types of workshops among Washington's black high school girls. For example, the Dunbar chapter of the Future Homemakers of America (FHA) held a forum on the pros and cons of dating, and discussed specifics such as what to wear on a date and curfews.<sup>52</sup>

While the Charm School for Girl Reserves only dedicated one week to dating specifically, the other aspects of charm emphasized in the workshops could have also been framed as necessary for gaining the attention of the opposite sex and becoming dateable. As discussed in Chapter 3, these workshops on charm, hygiene, and self-presentation were meant to develop healthy habits and encourage the development of good self-esteem, other texts from the time that provide the same lessons also link the importance of appearance to the male gaze.

In *Let's Face It*, Archer covered topics ranging from personality, the adolescent body, popularity, poise, and dress. In each chapter, she wrote about the attainment of charm and femininity as important in the pursuit of womanhood and building self-

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<sup>50</sup> "Ask Pat"

<sup>51</sup> "The Planning and Priorities Committee YWCA of National Capital Area, 1964," 7, Box 392-1680, Folder: Planning and Priorities Committees Report, PW YWCA Collection, MSRC.

<sup>52</sup> "FHA Members Discuss Dating, Plan Programs on Dress, Grooming," *The Dunbar Newsreel*, February 21, 1963.



confidence. However, along with her emphasis on self-improvement, she also frequently referenced the male gaze and the importance of having male attention. In Archer's chapter titled, "The Clothes You Wear," she wrote about the importance of dressing for one's body type and dressing tastefully. She wrote, "This is the kind of girl that boys want to meet and be with. It's this kind of a girl who stands out in the crowd. If you're this kind of a girl, then you're one whom your friends will be proud of. What pleasure you'll get out of receiving compliments from boys on your appearance. You'll get a greater pleasure when the girls break down and tell you how nice you look. It may take them a long time to get around to it, but when they do, they usually mean it."<sup>53</sup> Here, Archer characterized girls as somewhat unwilling to complement each other, and she placed enormous value on gaining the attention from boys.

The Girl Reserve Charm School and Archer's *Let's Face It* demonstrate the great value placed on femininity, particularly as a prerequisite for success in the dating world. Although the charm school and advice manual could be interpreted as superficial, and only concerned about girls' self-presentation as it related to the opposite sex, African Americans placed great social and political value on self-presentation. For many, knowing how to dress tastefully and walk gracefully challenged racist stereotypes that painted African American girls and women as unkempt. While the PW YWCA and the numerous advice manuals served as educational spaces, the organization was keenly aware of the desires of adolescent black girls, and sought to reconcile both.

*The PW YWCA Teen Canteen*

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<sup>53</sup> Archer 127.

The PW YWCA sponsored workshops to help adolescent girls navigate the dating scene and learn how to become dateable, but the organization also facilitated social interactions between young women and men where the lessons outlined above could be put into practice. The organizations did this through hosting events such as the Valentine's Day Sweetheart Ball, skating parties and various forums and panel discussions. Here, I will focus on one particular program: The Teen Canteen. The PW YWCA's Teen Canteen, later called Cozy Nook, brought together teenage girls and boys to socialize. The exact start date of the PW YWCA's Teen Canteen is not clear, and it appears that it was not held consistently, but it existed by 1947.<sup>54</sup> Young people who attended the canteen could listen to music, play games, and dance. While the canteen could have appealed to girls looking to socialize with boys outside of school, organizational leaders could maintain control over how their girls socialized with boys within a "wholesome" setting.<sup>55</sup>

The PW YWCA established the Teen Canteen at a time when community centers and organizations across the nation, both white and black, were implementing similar programs. For example, in Washington in 1950, members of the Delta Sigma Theta sorority opened the Baker's Dozen Youth Center for black teenagers in the city. The center, which began in 1944, grew out of thirteen members of the sorority--hence the

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<sup>54</sup> It is also important to note that as early as 1944, there were co-ed programs planned. These gatherings were known as Junior Assembly, and it met twice a month. In addition to dances and parties, youth of the Assembly also took tours around Washington or played games together at the PW YWCA after school. See "Annual Report of Program and Services: Phyllis Wheatley Y.W.C.A., Washington, D.C., 1944," 2, Box 392-1676, Folder: Annual Reports, Executive Director and President, 1943-1948, PW YWCA Collection, MSRC.

<sup>55</sup> "Report of Steering Committee: Phyllis Wheatley Young Women's Christian Association, Washington, D.C. on National Program Study," (April 1950), Box: 392-1701, Folder: Untitled, PW YWCA Collection, MSRC.

name baker's dozen--organizing to stem the tide of juvenile delinquency.<sup>56</sup> Like other communities, D.C.'s blacks established canteens largely as a response to the rise in juvenile delinquency during World War II, which was thought to be a result of music and mothers joining the work force. In fact, there was a congressional hearing on juvenile delinquency in 1943. To stem the tide of juvenile delinquency, some towns imposed curfews for teenagers or escorted young women that they thought were engaging in behavior unbecoming of "nice" girls.<sup>57</sup>

Mark McCloskey, recreation director for the Office of Community War Services (OCWS), was among those charged with task of curbing juvenile delinquency. He found curfews and bans on music to be unproductive, and instead argued for increased recreation. Witnesses at the 1943 congressional hearings collectively believed that adolescents "who participated in recreation programs were not the boys who were breaking into houses and cars or the girls who walked the streets in search of excitement."<sup>58</sup> While they agreed upon this point, they also acknowledged that there were few recreational outlets for teenagers. Historian Grace Palladino writes, "Whether adults approved of their behavior or not, teenagers would hang around sleazy drug stores, nightclubs, skating rinks, or movie houses, if they had no better choices."<sup>59</sup> Because of the war, many municipalities had scaled back on recreational facilities such as community centers and pools. While cities with strong defense industries received federal funds for recreation, most of this money was reserved for servicemen and adult war

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<sup>56</sup> Cultural Tourism DC, "Baker's Dozen, Inc. Building, African American Heritage Trail," <https://www.culturaltourismdc.org/portal/baker-s-dozen-inc.-building-african-american-heritage-trail>, Accessed December 27, 2017.

<sup>57</sup> Grace Palladino, *Teenagers: An American History* (New York: BasicBooks, 1996), 83.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid 85

<sup>59</sup> Ibid

workers, rather than teenagers. Having adequate space for recreation was already an issue for African American communities even before the war, as discussed in Chapter 3.

With the push from the congressional hearings to find a solution to teenage delinquency, and the support of the OCWS, McCloskey approached teenagers themselves to design a recreation program to their liking. Palladino writes, “The response was unequivocal—the high school crowd wanted a place to meet their friends and dance.”<sup>60</sup> Before the end of the war, over three thousand teen canteens existed throughout the United States. Canteens differed from area to area, but most had a jukebox, a place to dance, ping-pong tables, and soda bars. Teenagers managed canteens and planned events, but adults provided financial and communal support. They also “served as unobtrusive chaperons.”<sup>61</sup> Canteens gave teenagers a sense of autonomy, even though they remained highly controlled spaces. There, adults separated teenagers from other young people who they deemed bad influences. They were also often organized around neighborhood boundaries. Palladino writes, “In effect, neighborhood canteens meant that Catholics, Jews, and Protestants, whites, blacks, and Hispanics, tended to join their own separate clubs, essential social insurance, considering that teenagers intended to dance.”<sup>62</sup> With the expansion of high schools, student populations were more heterogeneous than in previous years. However, parents “routinely encouraged teenagers to keep to their own kind, especially when it came to dancing or dating.”<sup>63</sup> Parents’ anxieties about dancing in mixed company came from the parallels drawn between dancing and sex---, dancing could lead to illicit sexual relationships.

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<sup>60</sup> Palladino 86

<sup>61</sup> Ibid 86-87

<sup>62</sup> Ibid 88

<sup>63</sup> Ibid

There were many parallels between the national teen canteen movement and the PW YWCA's Teen Canteen. Evidence from the PW YWCA suggests that the organization saw the canteen as a possible solution to juvenile delinquency. In Julia Hamilton West's 1947 Annual Report of the President, she discusses the "Debu-Teen Canteen," a new project. Hamilton wrote, "so much is being said about juvenile delinquency and so little is being done about it..."<sup>64</sup> For Hamilton and other leaders in the PW YWCA, the canteen was a way for them to do their part. According to Hamilton, the Canteen received rave reviews from youth, parents, and the police. She says, "It has succeeded beyond our expectations. The 'Teen-agers' are proud of the opportunity for cultural development and parents come with their children from other sections of the city. The police officers say it is the best conducted canteen they know of and quite a help in building 'morale' for the boys and girls."<sup>65</sup> The fact that police officers offered their praise of the Canteen further solidifies it as a preventative measure.

Concerns about the mobility and independence of girls that Palladino described at the national level also dominated conversations among the women of the PW YWCA. In a February 1956 meeting of the Board of Directors, Hamilton and other members of the board discussed the work that they accomplished in the previous year, as well as what they wanted to undertake in the future. One of their central concerns was the issue of girls hanging out on the corner with boys and staying out late at dances. Miss Virginia Williams commented, "I work with 16 obstreperous girls. They come in Monday

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<sup>64</sup> "New Project," Annual Report of the President, January 28, 1947, Folder: Annual Reports, Executive Director and President, 1943-1948, Box: 392-1676 PW YWCA Collection, MSRC.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid

mornings boasting of going to dances and not getting home until 12 and 1:00...”<sup>66</sup> The solution that board members proposed was to increase the available times for teenagers to visit the PW YWCA. Mrs. Eunice Matthews suggested, “Try to find something to interest girls after school hours; provide something so stimulating and interesting they will seek to come to get it rather than standing on the corner. The home is not doing it because they are not in the home. There should be some interests after school hours and on the weekends.”<sup>67</sup> Mrs. Florence Couch echoed these sentiments and said, “We need to open the doors of the Phyllis Wheatley on Friday afternoon for entertainments that will last until about 10:00...and on Saturday and Sunday to interest these children all weekend.”<sup>68</sup> Something like the Teen Canteen, which ran in the evening on the weekends, could have addressed these issues. In addition to proposing extended hours at the PW YWCA, the board emphasized the importance of hearing from the teenage girls, and figuring out what they wanted out of the program, and what would draw them to the organization. They recognized that giving teenagers a say could lead to a more successful program. With the Teen Canteen, as on the national level, teenagers oversaw organizing.<sup>69</sup>

Juvenile delinquency and teenage independence are important to think about in the context of girls dating. Anxieties about delinquency and mobility were gendered. Adults feared that girls’ increased independence, combined with a lack of recreational options, would engage in delinquent behavior. For girls, delinquency was often thought about in terms of sexuality. At places like the PW YWCA Teen Canteen, girls could

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<sup>66</sup> “Board of Directors Meeting, February 28, 1956,” Box: 392-1698, Folder: Unmarked Binder, PW YWCA Collection, 392-1698, MSRC.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid

<sup>68</sup> Ibid

<sup>69</sup> “Young Women’s Christian Association of the National Capital Area, Annual Report, 1966,” Box 392-1695, PW YWCA Collection, MSRC.

fulfill their desire for heterosexual interaction. However, instead of seeking these interactions on the street corner, a dancehall, or the backseat of a suitor's car, girls could remain within the boundaries of respectability.

The Boy Meets Girl Clinic, the Charm School for Girl Reserves, and the Teen Canteen each illustrate how the PW YWCA integrated changes in youth culture within their programming. These various programs catered to teenage girls pursuing heterosexual relationships who sought to learn how to navigate the dating scene and earn the attention of potential dates. While the PW YWCA embraced modern ideas about dating, the organization's leaders desired to facilitate a "wholesome" space where girls could learn about and engage in relationships with the opposite sex, while maintaining respectability. Adults ensured this by maintaining a physical presence at teen events. The PW YWCA programs open a window into learning and engaging in courtship in the lives of black adolescents. While the PW YWCA's programs appeared to be open to young African Americans from a variety of socioeconomic backgrounds, not all courtship practices were inclusive. In contrast to the PW YWCA, the debutante ball was an explicitly elite representation of black courtship.

### **Idealized Black Elite Courtship at the Debutante Ball**

A 1946 article in the *Afro-American* recounted one of black Washington's major social events of the spring season: the annual Bachelor-Benedict cotillion. It read, "Vivian and Harold discovered during the party that they both have a fondness for dancing and music. He speaks French and Spanish fluently and has traveled extensively. He's 20, has studied at NYU and Catholic U., and plans a pre-medical course. They have

had several dates since the dance.”<sup>70</sup> The story of Vivian Heisser and Harold Hart reads somewhat like a fairytale. Both Heisser and Hart had a passion for the arts, and Harold was a cultured young man with professional aspirations. As a debutante, Heisser would have been considered one of Washington’s most beautiful young black women. In contrast to Hart, nothing else is said about Heisser’s personal achievements, except that she was a music student at Howard and designed her own ballgown for the evening.<sup>71</sup> This article suggested to readers that they too could find their perfect match. The author’s sole focus on Hart’s personal achievements highlights what middle-class girls should look for in a partner, and that gaining the attention of this type of young man was the ultimate achievement. For debutantes interested in meeting suitors, Heisser and Hart represented a best-case scenario in coming out at the ball. For adolescent girls unable to participate, their story could be read as a romantic fantasy. Finally, for parents, this debutante and escort represented their aspirations for their children.

While the PW YWCA’s program for teenagers became increasingly co-educational, the ritual of the debutante ball always included interactions between high school girls and boys. In fact, this interaction was a vital aspect of the ritual. The debutante ball centered on a young woman’s official entrance into society and marked her marriageability. Like dating education and co-ed programming at the PW YWCA, the debutante ball gave adults a sense of control over the dating choices of adolescent girls and instructed girls, but it was also a representation of idealized courtship. I argue that the controlled nature of the debutante ball also served to maintain the social status among

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<sup>70</sup> “The Afro Goes to the Bachelor Benedict’s Party for Debs,” *Washington Afro-American*, April 27, 1946.

<sup>71</sup> It is notable that in this particular example, the author discussed Hart’s aspirations, while neglecting Heisser’s. However, I am not arguing that debutantes’ personal achievement did not matter.



Washington's black elite, which was enmeshed in ideas about class and color. This is one of the key divergences from the PW YWCA.

*Debutantes' Traits and Marriageability*

The first three chapters of this dissertation analyzed the various criteria that it took to be selected as a debutante. First, debutantes had to demonstrate scholastic achievement. Doing well academically signaled that a young woman worked hard and took her education seriously. It also put her on the path to further her education after high school and secure the economic stability and prestige afforded by a career that would put her in the league of black professionals. Second, potential debutantes had to be moral and upright in character. This pushed back against the idea that black girls were inherently immoral. Additionally, because the debutante ball marked a young woman's sexual maturation, organizers assumed that eligible debutantes had not engaged in inappropriate sexual behaviors. Third, debutantes were typically considered physically attractive. Like the insistence on young black women's morality, highlighting the beauty of young black women challenged the notion that black girls and women were unattractive and instilled a sense of race pride.

These various selection factors have been linked to the project of racial uplift, but consider what these traits meant in terms of a debutante's marriageability and probability of finding a potential suitor. Take scholastic achievement for example. Lula Jones Garrett wrote in her "Gadabouting in the U.S.A." column, "For generations it has been an open secret between mothers-in-the-know that it's a top investment to send a pretty daughter (pretty, mind you) to Fisk University. It is situated so nicely adjacent to Meharry Medical College. Not that there isn't a plenty of brain on the Nashville, Tenn. Campus! Howard

University is second choice...first only if the co-ed is particularly beautiful, what with H.U. men having seemed more interested in prospective wives' economic status than their looks, or maybe, even age. But if she's well-heeled you can head her for the Capital."<sup>72</sup> Here, Garrett's discussion about college was not to boast of debutantes' academic achievements, but to highlight college as a place to find a life mate. For example, sending one's daughter to Fisk would place her in a good position to meet a future doctor from Meharry. Marrying a future doctor would not only bring pride to the family, but ensure that the young woman would solidify her position among the black elite. Furthermore, she referenced the importance of one's looks in attracting a man, an idea emphasized in Archer.

Colorism was embedded in ideas about what many African Americans considered attractive. This had a clear impact on how girls and young women viewed themselves and their relationships with their female peers, but this also shaped many of their interactions with young men. In the July 16, 1957 edition of the "Date Data" column in the *Washington Afro American*, the letter writer, who identified herself as "DISTURBED," wrote to Chaperone about her fear that the love of her life was not attracted to her because of her dark skin. She wrote, "I am 17 and in love with a boy who is 20. He is very light, and I am dark. His friends always seem to tease him about me, but he doesn't get mad or anything. I think he loves me, but found out that he has been dating other girls. Do you think that he is color conscious?"<sup>73</sup> Chaperone dismissed the letter writer's theory about her beau being "color-struck" and said that she had no basis for her concern.

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<sup>72</sup> Lula Jones Garrett, "Gadabouting in the U.S.A.," *Washington Afro-American*, May 28, 1957.

<sup>73</sup> "Date Data," *Washington Afro-American*, July 16, 1957

Chaperone advised further that because the two are not engaged, both should be free to date others as they wish, and not be tied down.<sup>74</sup>

Chaperone dismissed DISTURBED's claim, but the letter-writer's feelings were representative of what many of her female peers experienced. Maxine Leeds Craig writes, "When girls matured into young women, they encountered color prejudices in dating. Male supremacy operated in black communities no less than in the larger society. As women waited to be asked to dance, to be invited on a date, or to receive affection from men, they were vulnerable to and dependent on male assessments of their beauty. More often than not, male choices were shaped by racialized standards of beauty."<sup>75</sup>

Advertisements for hair straightening methods and bleaching creams were commonplace in the black press on the local and national levels. These ads promised that consumers would be more beautiful and have enhanced feminine features by using these products. A 1957 advertisement for Black and White Bleaching Cream in the *Washington Afro-American* featured a bold and large heading that asked its female readers, "Want to be Lucky in Love?" Under this heading, it says "Don't let dull **dark skin** [emphasis in original text] hold you back." The ad goes on to label dark skin as unattractive, and light skin as the attractive alternative.<sup>76</sup> The marketers behind this ad explicitly link light skin to finding a partner, and dark skin as a barrier to that goal. Scholar Audrey Elisa Kerr notes that the quest for beauty was "heightened womanhood but not for vanity's sake. Becoming more attractive to men and thus finding a good mate—was the unstated

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<sup>74</sup> "Date Data," *Washington Afro-American*, July 16, 1957

<sup>75</sup> Maxine Leeds-Craig, *Ain't I a Beauty Queen: Black Women, Beauty, and the Politics of Race* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 29.

<sup>76</sup> "Black and White Bleaching Cream, Ad," *Washington Afro-American*, June 4, 1957.

aspiration, since successful men presumably sought fair-toned women.”<sup>77</sup> Furthermore, Maxine Leeds Craig posits that the idea was that “successful” black men pursued light skinned women.

Taken collectively, DISTURBED’s letter, the newspaper advertisement, and Jefferson’s anecdote show that ideas about color not only influenced what young black women thought about themselves, but how they imagined the ways in which young men viewed them and their potential to have a romantic relationship. To place this idea within the context of the debutante ball, reconsider the story of Heisser and Hart. The pictures of Heisser that accompanied the text of the article revealed that she was fair-skinned. In addition to pictures of her individually, there were also photographs of her receiving a corsage from Hart and the two young people holding each other in an embrace. Additionally, three of Heisser’s fellow debutantes who were also included in the spread were light skinned. For darker skinned young women, the Heisser-Hart scenario may have seemed an unfulfillable fantasy.<sup>78</sup>

### *Choosing the Right Escort*

The exclusivity of the cotillion did not end with choosing a debutante. Because organizers wanted to ensure that their young women could meet and be matched with equally eligible young men, they were intentional about selecting escorts. Debutante organizers looked for the “right” young man to compliment the debutante, and choosing him was a selective process. In his insider’s examination of the black elite, Lawrence Otis Graham says that the ideal escort was “good-looking, credentialed, and completely

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<sup>77</sup> Audrey Elisa Kerr, *The Paper Bag Principle: Class, Colorism, and Rumor in the Case of Black Washington, D.C.* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2006), 3.

<sup>78</sup> “The Afro Goes to the Bachelor Benedict’s Party for Debs”

unfazed by the whole routine of dance lessons, formal dress, and social fanfare.”<sup>79</sup>

Someone like Harold would be considered an ideal escort. He was cultured, college-educated, and was on the path towards a prestigious career in medicine. Another example is Henry H. Kennedy, Jr., a former United States District Judge for the US District Court of Washington, D.C. As a Princeton-bound seventeen-year-old, he was a “favored Washington escort” when he participated in the Girl Friends Cotillion in 1965. He escorted Virginia Brown, the daughter of the archbishop of Liberia.<sup>80</sup> According to Mrs. Mazaline Baird, President of the Washington chapter of the Girl Friends during the same year that Kennedy served as an escort, most of the young men were freshman at local colleges and universities such as Howard, George Washington University, Georgetown, or American University.<sup>81</sup> Kennedy reflected, ‘Most of us didn’t admit it, but it was a badge of honor to be an escort.’<sup>82</sup> For parents and organizations, being selective about escorts ensured that debutantes would have a pool of eligible young men who came from similar socioeconomic backgrounds. Additionally, “Finding a good escort for a debutante is de rigueur for parents who want to look good in front of guests they’ve invited to the cotillion...”<sup>83</sup> In short, the background of the escort was not only meant to compliment the debutante, but raise the profile of her family.

### *Conscious Coupling*

A major part of the debutante ritual was the father (or male authority figure) leading his daughter into the hands of her escort. This act was a visual representation of a

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<sup>79</sup> Lawrence Otis Graham, *Our Kind of People: Inside America's Black Upper Class* (New York: HarperCollins, 1999), 48.

<sup>80</sup> Graham 48

<sup>81</sup> Frances Lanahan, “24 Make Bows in Capital at Girl Friends’ Cotillion,” *New York Times*, December 28, 1965, p. 18.

<sup>82</sup> Graham 48

<sup>83</sup> Ibid 47

function of the debutante ball: guiding young women and men of the same socioeconomic and cultural background together. The black elite's desire to maintain its exclusivity through its daughters and sons can also be traced in other exclusive social clubs such as Jack and Jill of America, a club for upper-crust African American mothers and their children. Begun in the 1930s in Philadelphia, Graham calls Jack and Jill the place "Where Black Elite Kids are Separated from the Rest."<sup>84</sup> In addition to its national reputation as elitist, there have also been claims about colorism in the Washington, D.C. chapter of the organization. Kerr writes, "There is no black club or organization in any city that has been associated with 'paper bag tests' with as much frequency as Jack and Jill of America, Inc....According to one informant, a native Washingtonian, the first stories that she heard about paper bag tests were in connection with Jack and Jill..."<sup>85</sup> Again, although claims about colorism cannot always be proved definitively, the pervasive narrative regarding it is notable, and speaks to the exclusive nature of elite black social networks. Jack and Jill, as well as the debutante ball, demonstrate how young people, particularly girls, were not only responsible for leading the race, but responsible for maintaining her family's social status.

Colorism is one of the primary themes in Margo Jefferson's memoir of her life growing up black and middle-class in Chicago. In one passage, she describes her skin tone, as well as that of her mother and sister. Jefferson remarks that "the blue veins in [her and her mother's] hands can be seen by anyone. Which...[would] ensure their presence at events like the 1930s dinner dance given by a Washington, D.C., men's club that called itself the What Good Are We's. 'Don't bring any brown-skinned girls,' his

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<sup>84</sup> Graham 19-44

<sup>85</sup> Kerr 62-63

host told [Jefferson's] burnt sienna bachelor father, who was doing his internship in Baltimore. And he did not. No ladies browner than Margo and her mother were present that night, and their numbers were scant. Pale beige, cream, and ivory, even alabaster, were on abundant radiant display.”<sup>86</sup>

The men of the What Good Are We's were presumably from the elite class, working in positions similar to that of Jefferson's physician father. Dr. Jefferson's host's request that he not bring any brown-skinned girls underscores Leeds Craig's point about elite black men seeing light-skinned black women as a marker of their success and elite status. Furthermore, Jefferson described her father as “burnt sienna,” which would be considered brown-skinned, rather than light-skinned. This points to the notion that ideas about color were gendered. Figure 4.1 shows that most of the escorts at the 1947 Bachelor-Benedict cotillion were not light-skinned. Additionally, Jefferson's description of the range of shades, and the ideas attributed to these shades, were directed towards black women.

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<sup>86</sup> Margo Jefferson, *Negroland: A Memoir* (New York: Vintage Books, 2015), 57-58.



**Figure 4.1:** This photograph features the group of young women that debuted with the Bachelor-Benedict Club in 1947. Scurlock Studio Records, ca. 1905-1994, Archives Center, National Museum of American History

In addition to maintaining class boundaries, it is also important to consider the eugenic implications of this adult-led interaction between elite young men and women. Finding a light-skinned woman as a girlfriend and a potential wife not only solidified a young man's class status, but having children with this person would produce children that were not dark-skinned. Shantella Y. Sherman writes, "Colorism—social mobility, currency and a beauty aesthetic that preferred light skin and Anglo features over dark skin and African features—also greatly informed the nature and scope of 'racial fitness' ideologies in many Negro communities."<sup>87</sup> She continued, "In the hands of New Negro

<sup>87</sup> Shantella Y. Sherman, *In Search of Purity: Popular Eugenics and Racial Uplift Among New Negroes, 1915-1935*, Published Dissertation, (Self-Published, 2012), 8.



eugenicists, ideas about racial inferiority became linked to loose indicators such as behavior, class, color, and education...One of the most widely-accepted race theories among men like Frazier, was *hereditarianism*, which held that heredity played the most significant role in determining human character. Accordingly, degeneracy plagued African-Americans, along with the inability to produce positive heritable qualities such as intelligence. Improving one's social condition demanded education, a separation from people and places that were deemed socially unacceptable, and proper mate selection. The idea was that grooming, instruction, and discipline could lessen genetic errors in character and encourage racial fitness."<sup>88</sup>

The conscious coupling of the debutante and her escort not only demonstrated the ways in which parents and organizational leaders sought to maintain control over young women's interactions and relationships with the opposite sex, but was meant to reproduce the image of the ideal black family. *Washington Afro-American* columnist Pearlie C. Harrison claimed that "Many have found life-mates because of the introduction they received on 'coming-out-night.'"<sup>89</sup> Parents hoped that their daughters, who were considered among the most eligible of their peers, would meet potential husbands, who were equally as eligible, and grow families that adhered to traditional notions of marriage and family life. For African Americans, portraying a strong, patriarchal family challenged notions of the pathological black family.<sup>90</sup>

### *Finding Romance and Fantasy at the Ball*

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<sup>88</sup> Sherman 10-11

<sup>89</sup> Pearlie C. Harrison, "Every year, the Bachelor Benedicts warm gay hearts," *Washington Afro-American*. The date is unknown, but Harrison worked as a columnist for the newspaper by 1960.

<sup>90</sup> See Devlin 131. Devlin also offers a deeper discussion of the role of the father at the debutante ball, and how his representation as a provider further marked the ritual as a celebration of the patriarchal black family.

Writer Lawrence Otis Graham interviewed Alberta Campbell Colbert, a resident of Washington, D.C., whose daughter Doris debuted with the Bachelor-Benedicts in 1962. She said, ‘I don’t think any child *asks* to be a debutante or an escort at a cotillion...Quite simply, she did it to please her father.’<sup>91</sup> Colbert’s statement suggests that young people who participated in a debutante ball did so out of familial obligation, rather than personal desire. However, I think that it is useful to consider the ways that young women could have found pleasure in being a debutante, particularly as it relates to ideas about romance and courtship. Thinking strictly in terms of societal prescription and familial obligation obscures black girls’ inner worlds and emotions, as well as the ways that they expressed their own sense of agency. Recovering black girls’ emotional lives in the archives is difficult, and the archival sources that form the basis of this chapter, those pertaining to the cotillion in particular, do not feature the voices of girls expressing their ideas about romance. However, I use LaKisha Simmons’s work on black girls’ pleasure cultures in Jim Crow New Orleans to reread the debutante ball as a pleasurable experience for black girls, and frame the cotillion as a space where adolescent girls experienced romance and fantasy.

Girls in the period of this study came of age at a time when romance was a centerpiece of American culture.<sup>92</sup> Consider again the story of Heisser and Hart, which for young readers of the black press, might have read like a fairytale. The beautiful Heisser met the handsome and eligible Harold. Their story represented idealized romance. Both Simmons and Cahn show the centrality of romance in southern adolescent

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<sup>91</sup> Graham 46

<sup>92</sup> LaKisha Michelle Simmons, *Crescent City Girls: The Lives of Young Black Women in Segregated New Orleans* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015), 185. See also Cahn 212.

girls' lives. High school girls read romance stories and crafted their own narratives.

Simmons writes, "By sharing and discussing these narratives with one another and even by writing their own stories, black girls constructed and imagined romantic subjectivities in opposition to their daily encounters with Jim Crow and to restrictive notions of black womanhood."<sup>93</sup> While the system of segregation in the nation's capital was not as rigid as other southern cities, it remained "a powerful institution" at midcentury.<sup>94</sup> Young readers also consumed publications such as *True Confessions*, a romance and pulp fiction magazine.<sup>95</sup> While the *Afro American* was not pulp fiction, young readers could have still consumed the images and stories about debutante balls as an act of romantic fantasy.

While some debutantes may have harbored romantic feelings for their escorts, it is equally likely that they did not. For some, the very thought of being paired off with a young man may have caused feelings of discomfort. As evidenced in questions posed in the "Date Data" and "Ask Pat" columns in the *Washington Afro-American* and Dunbar's *Newsreel*, respectively, adolescent girls navigating the dating world often faced awkward situations or simply did not know how to interact with the opposite sex. Furthermore, being paired with someone they probably did not know well could have added another layer of anxiety. These feelings would have been particularly acute for young women did not have extensive dating experience. Nat King Cole's daughter, Carol "Cookie" Cole, debuted with the Los Angeles chapter of the Links in 1961. *Ebony* magazine covered her coming out. In the magazine she admitted that while she was nervous about tripping

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<sup>93</sup> LaKisha Michelle Simmons 180

<sup>94</sup> Wendell E. Pritchett, "A National Issue: Segregation in the District of Columbia and the Civil Rights Movement at Mid-Century," *Faculty Scholarship* (2005), p. 1322, [http://scholarship.law.upenn.edu/faculty\\_scholarship/1226](http://scholarship.law.upenn.edu/faculty_scholarship/1226), Accessed July 15, 2015.

<sup>95</sup> LaKisha Michelle Simmons 180-182

during the presentation and putting a run in her stockings, she was particularly nervous about interacting with her escort. Karal Ann Marling writes in her description of Cole, “the cotillion was her first date, and her escort was a college man!”<sup>96</sup> The seventeen-year-old’s nervousness about her first date was likely compounded by the fact that her escort was older than her, and presumably more sophisticated than boys her age. Ambivalence towards the escort would have also been a likely feeling for debutantes not attracted to the opposite sex. Rituals like the debutante ball glorified heterosexuality and the patriarchal family. Like postwar American culture more generally, anything that contrasted this was unwelcome.

Debutantes may have also felt ambivalence or outright indignation towards the ritual because they believed that adults should not mediate their social interactions, particularly those with the opposite sex. Consider the *Adolescent Girls* study. When participants in the *Adolescent Girls* study responded to the question of whether they thought dating was an autonomous activity that they were in control of, they overwhelmingly saw it as an autonomous endeavor that was not “under day-by-day parental control. Only a minority of the girls refer to parental or school considerations when asked about dating. Even for this group, parents and schools are mentioned more often as a second response by older girls. The major role parents today have in a girl’s dating is regulating the hour at which the girl must come home.”<sup>97</sup> Additionally, writers to the “Date Data” column often complained about the control that their parents sought to enforce when regulating their dating lives. For example, fifteen-year-old “WORRIED”

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<sup>96</sup> Karal Ann Marling, *Debutante: Rites and Regalia of American Debdom* (Lawrence: Kansas University Press, 2004), 154.

<sup>97</sup> Institute for Social Research, 104.

wrote to Chaperone complaining about her father, who would not allow her to receive male company. She argued that she should be able to receive young men at her house because her friends who were the same age were allowed to do so.<sup>98</sup>

Beyond the heterosexual coupling and romance that writers in the black press emphasized, even general descriptions of the ball's venue evoked images of romance. An article from 1963 read, "How lively is that moment in a sweet girls [sic] life when, beautifully gowned in white, carrying red, red roses, surrounded by well-wishers, and sponsored by mother, or other kin, or maybe a friend or organization, she makes her DEBUT; steps into SOCIETY. Surely the enchanted bit of time that it takes her to make a pretty BOW and then almost waltz toward the proud young man now stepping up to meet her must be, at least, the third most exciting hour in her life, her Engagement Party being Number Two and her Wedding Day Number One."<sup>99</sup> While the prospect of heterosexual coupling and the characterization of the debutante as a milestone on the road to marriage were evident, the language used to describe the event created overt romantic imagery. For example, the author's decision to use words such as "enchanted" and the inclusion of images such as red roses and the emphasis on the debutante's beauty and "sweet" nature contribute to the romance of the event. Because the debutante ball was an exclusive event, reading about the event in the newspaper or hearing about the event from classmates allowed girls who were unable to participate in the ritual, to experience the romance and fantasy of the event.

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<sup>98</sup> "Date Data," *Washington Afro-American*, July 2, 1957; See also "Date Data," *Washington Afro-American*, July 9, 1957.

<sup>99</sup> *Washington Afro-American*, January 5, 1963, p. 8

The debutante ball opens a window into thinking about social practices of the black elite. I argue that the conscious coupling of the carefully-selected debutante and escort offered a visual representation of idealized courtship and aspirations for maintaining social status. The idealized representations presented in the black press and photographs allow the ball to be read as an romantic event where adolescent girls, debutantes or not, could consume the texts, images, and surroundings as an act of fantasy and romantic escape.

### **Conclusion: Why Black Courtship Matters**

Despite adolescent girls' belief that adults had little to no influence on how they shaped their dating lives, the PW YWCA and the ritual of the debutante ball provided spaces where black girls' courtship remained under the regulation and supervision of community leaders. This however, did not mean that black girls did not pursue these spaces out of their own desires. For those unsure about dating etiquette, they found a potential resource at the PW YWCA. Debutante ball organizers were more selective about the young women and men who interacted at their events, but the visual and written imagery of the ritual could have been appealing to participants and distant observers alike, who lived in a romance-centric culture.

The PW YWCA and the debutante ball wanted to show girls how to date, and represented ideal courtship, but in the postwar period, marriage remained the expected end goal for young women. Organizational leaders hoped that dating education would provide young women with the tools to eventually select a life partner. Teaching girls how to be marriageable had profound social and political implications for African Americans. Organizations were pushing back against pathological representations of the

black family, and for many, particularly those of the middle class, the attainment of the patriarchal black family was a marker of racial progress.<sup>100</sup> By creating a stable family, African Americans were making a case for citizenship.

There is a long history of African Americans using marriage and advocacy for the patriarchal family as a demonstration of readiness for citizenship and an as an argument for full citizenship rights. For newly freed slaves and the first generation of men and women who came of age after emancipation, marriage was an outward expression of freedom. During slavery, slave marriages were not recognized under the law. Furthermore, it was common practice for slaveowners to select spouses for their slaves or break up slave marriages at their own impulse. Accordingly, African Americans that came of age in the late nineteenth century “treasured their right to select their mates, to court, and to marry.”<sup>101</sup> At the turn of the twentieth century, black politicians and intellectuals tied marriage to racial uplift. They argued that it countered stereotypes about African Americans’ inability to maintain loving relationships. According to Eleanor Alexander, the “image of proper married life was so important [to the black elite] that W.E.B. DuBois and Nina Gomer, both miserable in their relationship for forty years, remained married. He said they did so for the good of the race.”<sup>102</sup> Black elites also believed that stable marriages would serve as an example for working-class and poor

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<sup>100</sup> Devlin 133

<sup>101</sup> Eleanor Alexander, “The Courtship Season: Love, Race, and Elite African American Women at the Turn of the Twentieth Century,” *OAH Magazine of History* (July 2004), 17. See also Karen M. Dunak, “Ceremony and Citizenship: African American Weddings, 1945-60,” *Gender and History* 21:2 (August 2009), 403; Katherine M. Franke, ‘Becoming a Citizen: Reconstruction Era Regulation of African American Marriages,’ *Yale Journal of Law and the Humanities* 11 (1999), pp. 251-309; Noralee Frankel, *Freedom’s Women: Black Women and Families in Civil War Era Mississippi*; Nancy F. Cott, *Public Vows: A History of Marriage and the Nation* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), pp. 31-44.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid

blacks who, according to journalist Anna Jones ‘have not made the progress of the elites’,<sup>103</sup>

The New Negroes of the 1920s and 1930s also tied marriage and the fulfillment of traditional gender roles to racial advancement. Specifically, New Negro men believed that husbands and wives should adhere to traditional notions of marriage and family. This meant that men and women would fulfill their traditional gender roles in a marriage, with the husband acting as the breadwinner and patriarchal authority figure. Wives would support and “inspire” their husbands.<sup>104</sup> As Anastasia Curwood details in her work, many middle- and aspiring-class New Negroes believed that they should differentiate themselves from poor and working-class blacks. They argued that the acceptance of traditional gender roles was a “key differentiator” between upper-class and lower-class African Americans.<sup>105</sup> Curwood also shows that ideas about marriage were a point of contention among New Negro men and women. New Negro women’s professional and activist goals, as well as the onset of the Great Depression, challenged New Negro men’s conception of the patriarchal family.<sup>106</sup>

In a 1965 *New York Times* article, Mrs. Alicia Webb, Debutante Co-Chairman for the D.C. Chapter of the Girl Friends, said, “We hear so much about crime and slums and backwardness...This is a chance to show the other side, the fact that we have a decent and civilized, and attractive Negro community here in the capital.” The teenage women who debuted were responsible for showing this alternative view of blacks in Washington.

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<sup>103</sup> Anna H. Jones, “The American Colored Woman,” *Voices of the Negro* 2 (October 1905), 694, quoted in Alexander, 17.

<sup>104</sup> Anastasia Curwood, “New Negro Marriages and the Everyday Challenges of Upward Mobility,” *Escape from New York: The New Negro Renaissance Beyond Harlem* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), 291.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid

<sup>106</sup> Ibid



They were attractive, intelligent, and exuded poise and grace. They represented not only their families, but blacks in Washington as a whole. Webb's comments are from the same year that Daniel P. Moynihan, then Assistant Secretary of Labor and Director of the Office of Policy Planning and Research released his controversial report, *The Negro Family: A Case for National Action*, also known as the Moynihan Report. Moynihan's central claim in the report was that family disorganization was the main barrier to blacks' progress in America. In his report, black women shouldered the blame. Throughout the text, he argued that black "matriarchs" propagated the "tangle of pathology" that ensnared African American families in the urban North.<sup>107</sup> Moynihan's characterization of black families, and black women were not novel. In fact, he drew widely from Howard sociologist E. Franklin Frazier, who made similar claims about black women and the pathological black family in *The Negro Family in the United States* (1939) and *Black Bourgeoisie* (1957).<sup>108</sup>

Organizers in the PW YWCA and the debutante ball desired to prepare adolescent girls for marriage, but they saw this as part of the larger family structure. The PW YWCA held programs not only about marriage preparation, but also about family life. Additionally, the debutante ball served as a visual representation of the ideal middle-class family. Thinking more about dating expands what we know about African American youth culture and social life. In addition to preparing young women for marriage, girls' organizations sought to develop the future leaders of the race. This is a theme that I discuss throughout the dissertation, but in the next chapter, I explore how the postwar

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<sup>107</sup> Daniel Patrick Moynihan, *The Negro Family: A Case for National Action* (United States Department of Labor, 1965).

<sup>108</sup> E. Franklin Frazier, *The Negro Family in the United States* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1939); *Black Bourgeoisie* (New York: Free Press), 1957.

period shaped ideas about girls' leadership. Specifically, I examine how the expansion of girlhood citizenship at the national level impacted black girls living in Washington.

## Chapter 5: “*Integration* was the watchword”: Debating the Promises and Perils of Civil Rights and Integration in D.C.’s Girls’ Organizations

In her description of Washington, D.C. in the 1950s and 1960s, Florence Radcliffe, president of the PW YWCA from 1963-1966 wrote, “The climate of the community was one of brotherhood and human relations. *Integration* was the watchword. Everywhere close racial ties were extolled—churches, schools, organizations, etc. Acceptable Blacks were recruited for board memberships (not more than one or two), organizations, and community leadership. It must be clearly stated that Blacks embraced this new freedom with enthusiasm.”<sup>1</sup> Radcliffe’s statement highlights the hopes and limitations of integration in the nation’s capital during the era of civil rights. . By the 1950s, the system of segregation in the nation’s capital had slowly eroded. Schools in Washington desegregated in 1954 with the *Bolling v. Sharpe* decision, and organizations such as the Coordinating Committee for the Enforcement of the D.C. Anti-Discrimination Laws, as well as everyday citizens, made progress in desegregating public accommodations and recreational spaces.<sup>2</sup> Desegregation in the city did not automatically result in true integration. African Americans in Washington continued to face backlash from white citizens and congressmen who were intent on delaying or stopping altogether the process of desegregation in the District.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Florence J. Radcliffe, *A Simple Matter of Justice: The Phyllis Wheatley YWCA Story* (Pompano Beach: Exposition Press of Florida, 1985), 17.

<sup>2</sup> Gregory M. Borchardt, “Making D.C. Democracy’s Capital: Local Activism, the ‘Federal State,’ and the Struggle for Civil Rights in Washington, D.C.,” Ph.D. Dissertation, The George Washington University (2013); Constance McClaughlin Green, *The Secret City: A History of Race Relations in the Nation’s Capital* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967); Marvin Caplan, “Eat Anywhere!” *Washington History* Vol. 1, No. 1 (Spring 1989), pp. 24-39.

<sup>3</sup> Bell Clement, “Pushback: The White Community’s Dissent from ‘Bolling,’” *Washington History*, Vol. 16, No. 2 (Fall/Winter 2004/2005), pp. 86-109.

Battles against segregation in Washington reflected changes sweeping across the United States. The civil rights movement and the 1954 *Brown v. Board* decision forced organizations such as the Girl Scouts and the YWCA to reflect on their racial politics and the ways they fell short in putting their inclusive rhetoric into practice. Chapter 1 showcased how organizations sought to address the needs of black girls in a segregated society, but this chapter deals with how these organizations grappled with the question of how these needs could best be met in an integrated society. Each organization had a different response to this. This chapter examines the impact of the civil rights movement, particularly calls for integration and interracial cooperation, on the organizations and rituals at the core of this study, and the role of black girls during this transformative moment.

The dissertation argues that girls' organizations served as a platform for black girls and their leaders to imagine the possibilities of black girlhood. In the 1950s and 1960s, organizational leaders and their participants reckoned with how the civil rights movement, particularly integration, shaped the possibilities and limitations of black girlhood. The Girl Scout Council of the Nation's Capital, the Phyllis Wheatley YWCA, and debutante ball organizers had very different thoughts about this. The push for inclusion in black scouting seen in the 1930s turned into a push for full equality by the 1950s. The process of camp desegregation illustrates this battle most visibly. Scouting leaders as well as the scouts themselves asserted that, like the argument made for school desegregation, separate was not equal; And true equality within the organization could not be achieved with segregated camping. While the GSCNC embraced integration and interracial cooperation, the PW YWCA presented a different narrative. In 1960, the

organization was met with a proposition to form a federation with the white DC YWCA and the smaller suburban YWCAs in the D.C. suburbs. While the PW YWCA collaborated with the white Y on numerous occasions, the PW YWCA's leadership was hesitant about coming under the same umbrella as the DC YWCA. They believed that the needs of black girls would not be prioritized, and in the long run, would not serve the interests of their main constituents.

The black debutante ball offered yet another narrative. As desegregation swept the nation's capital in the 1950s, debutante balls were not touched by the larger societal changes. This was largely due to that fact that exclusive social clubs such as the Bachelor-Benedicts and the Girl Friends, were private and under no obligation to open up to white members. Lawrence Otis Graham writes, "Among many old elite families, there simply is no value in introducing a daughter to society through a nonblack club or group." A black elite mother from New Orleans explained, "It makes no sense to be introduced by them if you're not going to be a meaningful part of the white community."<sup>4</sup> The mother's statement highlights the limits of desegregation in everyday black life, particularly for those who belonged to the black elite. Furthermore, these were social clubs, made up of people who were, presumably, friends with each other. Desegregation meant that blacks and whites might have more contact in professional or educational settings, but it did not mean that they would become friends with each other. Furthermore, Washington's black elite was particularly insular and clannish compared to black enclaves in other cities. Even when the nation's capital reached a black majority in

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<sup>4</sup> Lawrence Otis Graham, *Our Kind of People: Inside America's Black Upper Class* (New York: Harper Collins, 1999), 51.

1957, the city's black elite clung to its rigid exclusivity.<sup>5</sup> Because integration was never really a debate within the black cotillion tradition, it will not be a focus of this chapter.

Collectively, the GSCNC and PW YWCA offer a fresh perspective of the civil rights movement in Washington and beyond. Looking at these social spaces opens up alternative sites for uncovering civil rights work in Washington and beyond, and expands who we think of as participants in the movement. Thinking about the civil rights movement in the District often conjures images of the March on Washington or the Supreme Court. However, same-sex spaces such as Girl Scout camps and girls' organizations more broadly were hotbeds for debates about integration. Historians have shown how the decentralized structure of the Girl Scouts and YWCA prevented the organizations from effectively enforcing racial policies throughout their local councils and associations, but what is missing is a sustained analysis of how the integration process played out on the ground, which this chapter provides.<sup>6</sup> While the Girl Scouts

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<sup>5</sup> Graham 213-245

<sup>6</sup> Nancy Marie Robertson shows the legacy of interracial activism, as well as the ways in which black women challenged their white counterparts' racist behavior and policies within the organization since early in its founding. She ends with the passage of the Interracial Charter, the mandate that desegregated the YWCA. Robertson shows how in many ways, the charter exacerbated or had no effect on racial tensions within the organization. Black women continued to challenge white women in the Y after 1946. Nancy Marie Robertson, *Christian Sisterhood, Race Relations, and the YWCA, 1906-46* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2007), 4. Robertson's work sets the foundation for Abigail Sara Lewis, who picks up where Robertson left off in her discussion of the YWCA. Lewis argues that World War II, and Japanese internment in particular, sparked a radical reconstruction of the meanings of interracial work and cooperation. She contends that the organization's approach "went from 'separate but equal' to full inclusion." Lewis also argues that its new approach set the YWCA up as one of a handful of multiracial spaces for race work within the civil rights movement. Abigail Sara Lewis, "'The Barrier Breaking Love of God': The Multiracial Activism of the Young Women's Christian Association, 1940s-1970s," Ph.D. Dissertation, Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey (2008), ii. Jessica Foley's dissertation covers the same time period as Lewis, but it looks at both the Girl Scouts of the USA (GSUSA) and YWCA. Race is not the main focus of Foley's work, but she offers a chapter-length discussion of integration in the Y-Teens and Girl Scouts in the era of the *Brown v. Board* decision. She argues that girls' organizations employed "the same youth-centric racial liberalism that informed the majority opinion in *Brown*..." The Girl Scouts and YWCA sought to shape female citizens who valued racial equality. They did this by creating opportunities for black and white girls to interact with each other and form bonds. Foley continues, they saw these personal interactions as acts with "progressive implications." Jessica L. Foley, "'To Rid Teenagers of Prejudice': Integrating the Y-Teens and the Girl Scouts in the Era of *Brown v. Board*," pp.

and YWCA were in many ways “force[s] for desegregation,” integration was not inevitable.

### **Segregation in Postwar Washington**

The political and social landscape of postwar Washington was marked by major demographic shifts and clashes between attempts to constrain and displace black Washingtonians and growing calls for desegregation in public accommodations, housing, employment, education, and recreation. Between 1930 and 1940, Washington’s black population grew forty-one percent, to a total of 187,000. Between 1940 and 1950, the African American population reached 281,000. By 1960, the black population was 412,000. While black Washingtonians made up 27 percent of the population in 1930, by 1960, 71 percent of the population was African American.<sup>7</sup> At the same time that the number of black Washingtonians grew exponentially, whites flocked to the surrounding suburbs of northern Virginia and Maryland.<sup>8</sup> One of the consequences of the black population boom was overcrowding in residential areas and black schools. Real estate brokers and landlords continued to implement discriminatory housing practices such as restrictive covenants. Additionally, throughout the 1940s and 1950s, redevelopment plans, block busting, and the end of rent control left African Americans in Washington with very few affordable housing options. Redevelopment, in particular, sought to displace blacks from more central neighborhoods in the District and move many to the

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100-154, in “‘Meeting the Needs of Today’s Girl’: Youth Organizations and the Making of a Modern Girlhood, 1945-1980,” Ph.D. Dissertation, Brown University (2010) 45.

<sup>7</sup> Spencer R. Crew, “Melding the Old and the New: The Modern African American Community, 1930-1960,” in Fracine Curro Cary, ed., *Washington Odyssey: A Multicultural History of the Nation’s Capital* (Washington, D.C., Smithsonian, 2013), 214.

<sup>8</sup> Constance McCloughlin Green, *The Secret City: A History of Race Relations in the Nation’s Capital* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967), 276.

outskirts of the city ‘the rear of Anacostia’ and make the nation’s capital “a magnificent white metropolis.”<sup>9</sup>

Although for many years the segregated school system in Washington served as an example for how segregated schooling could be successful, migration pushed many blacks to advocate for integration. School-age black children were a large part of the migration into Washington in the interwar period. More students led to overcrowding, and lower per capita expenditures. There was also a moratorium on building new schools during World War II. With less money to spend on maintaining schools, black schools crumbled, while many white schools “remained under capacity.”<sup>10</sup> Borchardt writes, “To alleviate the overcrowding, the school board introduced staggered programs of double shifts at certain [black] schools...In 1946, approximately 6,700 pupils in [these schools] attended school for less than six hours. Rather than a temporary measure, these double shifts remained in place throughout the postwar years and elicited growing hostility between frustrated black parents and the Board of Education.”<sup>11</sup>

At the same time that segregation struggled to hold its grip on Washington, citizens and local institutions such as the District Employment Center set mandates and formed committees, like the Committee against Segregation in Recreation, to combat discrimination in the nation’s capital. Additionally, President Truman appointed members to a Committee on Civil Rights.<sup>12</sup> The 1948 *Hurd vs. Hodge* decision reversed the 1947 Supreme Court decision that upheld restrictive covenants. Constance Green writes, “The results were quickly visible: the 1950 census showed that of the 3,887 residential blocks

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<sup>9</sup> Green 279

<sup>10</sup> Borchardt 60

<sup>11</sup> Ibid 60-61

<sup>12</sup> Green 277-278



in the city, nonwhite accommodations had spread into 459 more than in 1940, and the number of exclusively white blocks had dropped from 2,041 to 1,956. Most of that change occurred after the decision of May 1948.<sup>13</sup> The Citizens' Committee Against Segregation in Recreation had some success in 1948 when it opened boys' boxing matches to black members of the Amateur Athletic Union and track meets at the privately-owned Uline Arena. Campaigns for integrated playgrounds continued to be met with defeat until school desegregation in 1954.<sup>14</sup>

### **Integrating the GSCNC**

At the end of World War II, the GSUSA began to reflect on the ways that its inclusive rhetoric contradicted its vague language on racial issues and organizational practices. In the same way that Americans questioned whether or not they could truly be the leaders of the democratic free world when their society sanctioned segregation and violence against African Americans, the Girl Scouts recognized that in order to cultivate productive citizens in a changing world they would have to reckon with their racial politics. The GSUSA began to make a concerted effort to live up to its reputation as a democratic, progressive organization. Executive staff members recommended that more African Americans should be hired at the national level.<sup>15</sup>

The GSUSA demonstrated its dedication to interracial cooperation with the creation of the Interracial Working Group (IWG) in 1946. The IWG recommended that every department within the national organization should do its part to diversify the organization, attend intercultural seminars, and "subscribe to the principles of the Girl

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<sup>13</sup> Green 283

<sup>14</sup> Ibid 290

<sup>15</sup> Lillian Serece Williams, *A Bridge to the Future: This History of Diversity in Girl Scouting* (New York: Girl Scouts of the U.S.A., 1996), 25-26

Scouts.” According to historian Lillian S. Williams, the IWG also recommended in a report that “staff members should be consistent in implementing Girl Scout policies regardless of the region in which they traveled.”<sup>16</sup> This was major a proposition because the Girl Scouts decentralized structure gave autonomy to local councils, who would often prioritize local customs over national policy. In a 1949 report to the national staff, Alice Carney of the Community Relations Division declared that most of the members of the national staff were fervently against segregation, and the Girl Scouts should eradicate racial prejudice within the organization’s policies. She wrote, “We must educate the community through the girls and leaders to see the necessity for tearing down the sad unnecessary fences that prejudice builds between individuals and groups...We are determined to put our house in order.”<sup>17</sup>

By the 1950s, the GSCNC also began to put its house in order. As the push for civil rights became more pronounced in Washington and in other American cities and towns, the Council began to move towards a policy of integration. Black leaders who sought to bring scouting to the District’s black community in the 1930s pushed for inclusion and the chance to join scouting. However, by the 1950s and throughout the 1960s, the struggle moved from inclusion to integration. While inclusion was about having the *opportunity* to be a part of the official organization, even if that participation was segregated and had limitations (i.e. having to attend overnight camps outside of the region), integration meant the dissolution of such limitations on black scouts.

Camping was at the heart of the scouting program, which makes it an ideal site to study the process of integration. By the 1950s, camp desegregation became a primary

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<sup>16</sup> Williams 25-26

<sup>17</sup> Alice Carney quoted in Williams, 20.

focus of GSCNC leaders. African American scout leaders and scouts who actively fought for the full inclusion, and eventually integration of the GSCNC, made claims that black girls were worthy of the same rights and privileges as their white counterparts. The GSCNC desegregated its camps in 1955. While sources suggest that the policy was mostly accepted at the council's main established camp, May Flather in Mount Solon, Virginia, there was backlash and resistance to integrate at other camp sites. Camp integration in 1955 did not signal complete integration of the Council itself. For example, District VII, the district to which all black troops were shuttled, regardless of neighborhood, did not dissolve until 1957.<sup>18</sup> Parents and black scout leaders continued to bring their concerns to the national organization about continued incidents of discrimination through the 1960s.

### *The Desegregation of Girl Scout Camps*

Camping was often the highlight of scouting for blacks and whites, but for most black scouts, "camping served as the reminder that they weren't considered equals with white girls."<sup>19</sup> Before the GSCNC desegregated its camps, most black scouts attended day camps run by the adult leaders of District VII, or traveled to another state to camp over a period of weeks. Alma Jackson recalled that when she started a troop in 1945 at Israel Baptist Church in Northeast Washington, black and white scouts attended different camps. She also remembered that at this time, many black troops traveled to Richmond to attend an established camp because May Flather was only open to black girls after the

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<sup>18</sup> "February 28, 1957 Camp Committee Minutes," Camp Committee Minutes, 1957-1958, The Ann Murray Collection II, GSCNC.

<sup>19</sup> Barbara Laskin, "A Discussion of Black Women's Contributions to Girl Scouting in the Nation's Capital."

end of the camping season.<sup>20</sup> Some also stayed at Camp Rockwood in Potomac, Maryland. Rockwood's status as a national GSUSA camp meant that campers could not be rejected because of their race. Others attended a desegregated camp elsewhere. For example, Barbara Reason, a 1956 graduate of Dunbar High School, traveled to Massachusetts, Pennsylvania, and Wyoming for camp.<sup>21</sup> In fact, the Council often offered camperships to black girls camping outside of the region. The GSCNC also held workshops, some integrated and others not, where scouts learned camping skills, and were expected to bring their knowledge back to their troop.<sup>22</sup>

Black scouts from Washington who attended camps in other regions were major players in the desegregation of camps. Henrietta Abernathy first got involved with scouting as an adult in the mid-1940s. Her daughter, who was a scout, was invited to a camp in Annapolis specifically for the purpose of integrating the camp. McNair does not talk about the criteria for selecting scouts to integrate camps or why her daughter was chosen to participate. However, looking at the literature on school integration is useful here for thinking about how GSCNC leaders might have selected scouts.

In her memoir, *Warriors Don't Cry*, Melba Patillo Beals of the Little Rock 9 described the group of students who were ultimately chosen to integrate Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas. She wrote, "We integrating students shared many things in common...Our parents demanded that we behave appropriately at home and in public. I couldn't imagine that any one of us would ever talk back to our folks or other adults.

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<sup>20</sup> Alma Jackson, Interview with Colleen Brown and Ethel Harvey, May 13, 1985, Oral Histories Collection, Girl Scout Council of the Nation's Capital.

<sup>21</sup> Katharine Elson, "Scout Trail Leads Barbara Into Air," *Washington Post*, June 24, 1956, p. F13.

<sup>22</sup> Camp Committee Minutes, 1953-1955 and Camp Committee Minutes, 1954-1956, The Ann Murray Collection II, GSCNC.

All of us were church-going; all our parents demanded good grades in school. Although none of us had a lot of money, we had pride in our appearance. Most of all, we were individualists with strong opinions. Each of us planned to go to college.”<sup>23</sup> In short, they embodied what it meant to be a respectable adolescent citizen.

Historians have shown how civil rights organizations deployed respectability as a tool of protest during the civil rights movement. Groups like the NAACP were intentional in selecting representatives for a case or campaign that demonstrated upright character and an adherence to middle-class values. One of the most well-known examples of this is the decision to have Rosa Parks be the face of the Montgomery Bus Boycott.<sup>24</sup> Participating in the Girl Scouts, an organization that promoted character development and traditional values, served as a marker of respectability for adolescent members. So, it is likely that the scouts selected to integrate camps, like McNair’s daughter, were exceptional in their commitment to scouting and development of good character. It is also likely that they had prior experience with established camping. One had to develop a certain set of technical skills to thrive at established camps.

The opportunity to integrate a camp likely stirred up several emotions within black scouts: honor, pride, excitement, and even isolation. Thirteen-year-old Sandra King-Shaw camped at Bonnie Brae in Massachusetts. Like McNair’s daughter, King-Shaw was among a group of black scouts chosen from Washington to participate in one

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<sup>23</sup> Melba Patillo Beals, *Warriors Don’t Cry: A Searing Memoir of the Battle to Integrate Little Rock’s Central High* (New York: Pocket Books, 1994), 35.

<sup>24</sup> Danielle L. McGuire, *At the Dark end of the Street: Black Women, Rape, and Resistance—a New History of the Civil Rights Movement from Rosa Parks to the Rise of Black Power* (New York: Vintage Press, 2010), 91; Marisa Chappell, Jenny Hutchinson and Brian Ward, “‘Dress modestly, neatly...as if you were going to church’: Respectability, Class and Gender in the Montgomery Bus Boycott and the Early Civil Rights Movement,” in *Gender and the Civil Rights Movement*, Peter J. Ling and Sharon Monteith, eds. (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1999), pp. 69-100.

of the earlier efforts to integrate Girl Scout camps.<sup>25</sup> She said that leaders were “hoping to get us [black and white scouts] started in knowing each other, forreal.”<sup>26</sup> King-Shaw’s reflection on the purpose behind the camping experiment shows how some scout leaders across the United States believed that camp would serve as an educational site, teaching girls how to interact with each other in an integrated society. King-Shaw continued, “There were few enough of us [black campers] so that we were only one to a tent.”<sup>27</sup> This was King-Shaw’s first time living with white people. She said, “I didn’t have anyone to share anything with. No one knew what I knew, and I didn’t know what they knew. I didn’t know the white world...”<sup>28</sup> She fell ill with a headache while at camp, and one of her white tent mates, Scotia Nova Brady, tried to comfort her. King-Shaw reflected, ‘I remember her asking me if I was all right, and I just wanted to be in the bunk by myself. I can remember crying quietly. She sat with me. I think, for the first time, I was aware how by myself I was...Everybody else was fair—white, blonde—and I was brown; and while being brown was not the issue, being the *only* one who was brown was an issue. I think I must have cried myself to sleep that night, but I did not want to go home.’<sup>29</sup>

King-Shaw’s experiences at camp highlight the feelings of isolation that often accompanied young people who integrated spaces like schools. Consider again Melba Patillo Beals of the Little Rock 9. She described walking to her homeroom class on the first day that she and other black students attended Central High School. They were each assigned to different classes. She reflected, “‘Why can’t any of us be in the same

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<sup>25</sup> “African-American History,” GSCNC.

<sup>26</sup> Adelle Banks, Oral History Interviewer, Asbury United Methodist Church, Washington, D.C., Interview with Sandra King-Shaw, April 19, 2017.

<sup>27</sup> Sandra King-Shaw quoted in Laskin.

<sup>28</sup> Interview with Sandra King-Shaw

<sup>29</sup> Sandra King-Shaw, quoted in Laskin.

homeroom or take classes together?’ I asked...I turned to see the hallway swallow up my friends. None of us had an opportunity to say a real good-bye or make plans to meet. I was alone, in a daze...I went, squeezing my way past those who first blocked my path and then shouted hurtful words at me. ‘Frightened’ did not describe my state; I had moved on to terrified. My body was numb.”<sup>30</sup> Although King-Shaw did not mention anyone hurling insults towards her at camp, or threatening bodily harm, the emotional impact was just as notable.

The images that survive of civil rights protest depict the violence that blacks, young and old alike, experienced. Beals said, “In 1957, while most teenage girls were listening to Buddy Holly’s ‘Peggy Sue,’ watching Elvis gyrate, and collecting crinoline slips, I was escaping the hanging rope of a lynch mob, dodging lighted sticks of dynamite, and washing away burning acid sprayed into my eyes.”<sup>31</sup> Beals’ searing imagery is more extreme compared to what most black scouts in the GSCNC reported when encountering whites living near their camps, but this does not mean that Girl Scouts were exempt from physical threats.

In 1948, a group of masked men in white robes raided Camp Pauline Bray Fletcher in Bessemer, Alabama, near Birmingham, where a group of black and white scout leaders were training. The camp was named after Pauline Bray Fletcher, the first African American registered nurse in Alabama.<sup>32</sup> The white and black leaders slept in separate cabins, but the mixed-race encampment still angered the men who were

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<sup>30</sup> Beals, 110. Loneliness is something that Beals discusses in her memoir on more than one occasion. See also p. 149.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid 1

<sup>32</sup> Rebecca Stiles Taylor, “Alabama Women Name Camp for Pauline Fletcher,” *The Chicago Defender*, August 28, 1943, 17. See also Chapter 3 of this dissertation, p. 124.

presumably members of the Ku Klux Klan. The masked men entered a cabin where the two white leaders slept, claiming that they were “hunting for ‘hammer and sickle’ cards.”

<sup>33</sup> None of the twenty one African American women were attacked, but the Jefferson County Girl Scout Council decided to send them home as a safety precaution. A spokesman, although it is not specified whether or not she spoke on behalf of the Jefferson County Council or the national organization, said, ‘We are not backing down, however, and we are determined to see that these girls get a fair chance at scouting.’<sup>34</sup> Mrs. Paul Rittenhouse, the national camping director said, “The Girl Scout organization believes that its program should be open to all girls, and with the full support and cooperation of Southern members, is endeavoring to extend membership to the Negro race.”<sup>35</sup> The national organization appealed to the FBI to investigate the raid, but it is not clear if a federal investigation ever materialized. However, it is clear that a local investigation did occur.<sup>36</sup>

Sara Nash, a black leader in the GSCNC, recalled an incident at a Girl Scout camp that involved a white woman who lived near the campsite. According to Nash, the woman threatened to sic her dog on her and the black campers if any of them came over to her property. The woman informed Nash that ‘the dog didn’t like black people and would bite [them].’<sup>37</sup> King-Shaw and Nash’s recollections, coupled with the attack at Camp Pauline Bray Fletcher show that camp could be just as emotionally-charged and tense as other more well-known sites of civil rights protest.

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<sup>33</sup> “Scouts Ask U.S. Probe of Raid on Dixie Camp,” *The Chicago Defender*, June 26, 1948, 1.

<sup>34</sup> “Raid Breaks Up Girl Scout Camp,” *St. Petersburg Times*, June 15, 1948, 1.

<sup>35</sup> “Scouts Ask U.S. Probe of Raid on Dixie Camp,” 4. Perhaps the spokesman in the *St. Petersburg Times* article is Mrs. Rittenhouse.

<sup>36</sup> “Probe Continued in Y Camp Raid,” *The Baltimore Afro-American*, June 29, 1948, 5.

<sup>37</sup> Sara Nash, quoted in Laskin.



As late as 1953, it did not appear that camp desegregation in the GSCNC was on the horizon. The leaders of District VII began to raise money to build an established camp for their girls. It is unclear when the fundraising began or where District VII sought to build the camp, but sources suggest that fundraising occurred up until the integration of May Flather in 1955. District VII's fundraising efforts were not a secret. In fact, the Council borrowed money from the District from time to time when the Council was low on money between the end of the calendar year and the annual cookie sale. According to Ethel Harvey, the Council always paid them back with interest, but not all leaders within District VII were pleased with the arrangement. Some criticized the Council for borrowing money without making an effort to offer an established camp for black scouts.<sup>38</sup> In addition to raising money to build an established camp, District VII formed its own Committee on Established Camping in 1953.

In December 1954, just months after the *Brown v. Board* and *Bolling v. Sharpe* decisions, the GSCNC Committee on Camping recommended to the Executive Board that Washington and Montgomery County established camps should be open to all girls regardless of race. According to Alma Jackson, heated discussions about integrating Camp May Flather ensued. One of the issues raised was how people living in the area would react to an integrated camp. In 1949, fights broke out at the Anacostia Pool in Southeast Washington after African Americans sought to integrate the pool. The pool was under federal jurisdiction, which meant that the pool technically was not segregated. However, because of custom, only whites living in the neighborhood patronized the pool since its opening in 1937. As a result of the fights between black and white patrons,

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<sup>38</sup>Alma Jackson, Interview with Colleen Brown and Ethel Harvey, May 13, 1985, Oral Histories Collection, Girl Scout Council of the Nation's Capital.

Secretary of the Interior Julius A. Krug closed the pool. It did not reopen until the following the summer.<sup>39</sup> The desegregation of D.C. schools in 1954 prompted backlash from white citizens. The Federation of Citizens Associations pleaded with the Board of Education to slow down the process of desegregation. In October of 1954, white students at Anacostia, Eastern, and McKinley High Schools walked out in protest and marched to the steps of the Supreme Court. Bell Clement describes the demonstration as “anemic,” but it signaled the dedication among white parents and students to uphold segregation in Washington.<sup>40</sup>

Margaret Coffin, chairman of Camp May Flather, gave a presentation in support of the integration of the camp. According to Alma Jackson, the presentation was so convincing, that the board accepted the committee’s recommendation and officially desegregated May Flather in early 1955.<sup>41</sup> According to GSCNC archivist Ann Robertson, May Flather desegregated “quietly...There was no big fanfare, no press release.”<sup>42</sup> The lack of fanfare surrounding the desegregation of May Flather suggests hesitancy on the part of the Council to publicize its efforts towards equality. The fallout from the desegregation of recreation and schools likely contributed to the Council’s decision to desegregate quietly.

The GSCNC prepared itself for backlash. In February of 1955, the Camp Committee created a special subcommittee designed specifically to field inquiries

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<sup>39</sup> Martha H. Verbrugge and Drew Yingling, “The Politics of Play: The Struggle over Racial Segregation and Public Recreation in Washington, D.C., 1945-1950,” *Washington History*, Vol. 27, No. 2 (Fall 2015), pp. 57.

<sup>40</sup> Bell Clement, “Pushback: The White Community’s Dissent from ‘Bolling,’” *Washington History*, Vol. 16, No. 2 (Fall/Winter, 2004/2005), 100-102.

<sup>41</sup> Jackson Interview, Girl Scout Council of the Nation’s Capital.

<sup>42</sup> Ann Robertson, “Camp May Flather Desegregates in 1955,” <https://gshistory.com/2015/08/31/camp-may-flather-desegregates-in-1955/>. Accessed April 28, 2017.

regarding camp desegregation. Margaret Coffin was in charge of responding to calls regarding May Flather in particular.<sup>43</sup> In Robertson's brief description of that first summer she writes, "Council staff and members of the Camp Committee went to the bus stop as girls prepared to depart for Mt. Solon, Virginia...The women announced that from this day forward, Camp May Flather was open to all girls."<sup>44</sup> Gertrude "Bobby" Lerch, who was the Camp Committee chair, and would go on to serve as Council President from 1963-1965, stationed herself at the bus stop armed with the Council checkbook, ready to give a refund to any parent who objected to interracial camping. Based on Robertson's description, it appears that some scout parents may not have known that May Flather was desegregated. Whether or not parents knew, Lerch did not give out any refunds that summer.<sup>45</sup>

The Council sent a special invitation to Troop 35, an African American Intermediate troop based at the Charles Young Elementary School in Northeast Washington, to attend May Flather that summer. Again, because the Council invited this troop, it is likely that many were not aware of the move towards desegregation. The invitation also suggests that the Council wanted to take smaller steps towards integration, rather than having it automatically opened to all District VII troops. Pansy Gregg was a second grade teacher at Charles Young, and led this troop. Beverly Pyles, Sandra Smith, Norma Turner, Sheila Gross, and Theresa Dorsey attended May Flather from July 11-July 25 for a two-week session.<sup>46</sup> The school's newsletter had a brief write-up titled, "Miss

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<sup>43</sup> "February 10, 1955," Camp Committee Minutes, 1953-1955, The Ann Murray Collection II, GSCNC.

<sup>44</sup> Robertson, "Camp May Flather Desegregates in 1955."

<sup>45</sup> Robertson, "Camp May Flather Desegregates in 1955."

<sup>46</sup> "June 30, 1955," Pansy Gregg Troop #35 1950s, GSCNC; Robertson, "Camp May Flather Desegregates in 1955."

Gregg's Troop 35 Makes History." It reported that the scouts "had lots of fun and learned many new skills in swimming, art craft, and outdoor living."<sup>47</sup> One of the campers, Sheila Gross, reported on her experiences in the newsletter. The sixth grader wrote, 'I had a lot of fun at Camp May Flather last summer. I learned how to swim and how to make earrings and bracelets...I had such a good time that I would like to go back next summer.'<sup>48</sup>

Gross's description of her experience attending a desegregated camp differed markedly from Sandra King-Shaw's experience discussed earlier. When it came to sleeping arrangements, the Camp Committee decided that rather than place black scouts alone or in large or segregated groups, two or three black scouts would be in one unit with white scouts.<sup>49</sup> This structure might have contributed to Gross's positive experience at camp. Also, it is important to consider that Gross and King-Shaw's recollections were published in two very different spaces, a school newsletter and a retrospective article, respectively. Since King-Shaw was talking about her experiences years later, she had time to reflect on and process her emotions.

One of the factors necessary for a smooth transition to integrated camping was ensuring that camp directors and other staff were committed to integration. For example, the Camp Committee stated in a meeting that day camp directors must accept "all people and [have the] ability to live and work with girls and adults of various races, religions and nationality backgrounds."<sup>50</sup> The seemingly smooth transition at May Flather could not be

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<sup>47</sup> "Miss Gregg's Troop 35 Makes History," Pansy Gregg Troop #35 1950s, GSCNC; Robertson, "Camp May Flather Desegregates in 1955."

<sup>48</sup> Miss Gregg's Troop 35 Makes History"

<sup>49</sup> "April 28, 1955," Camp Committee Minutes, 1954-1956: Camp May Flather 1954-1955, The Ann Murray Collection II, GSCNC.

<sup>50</sup> "February 7, 1957," Camp Committee Minutes, 1957-1958: Camp, The Ann Murray Collection II, GSCNC.

accounted for at all of the GSCNC camps. Day camps were also sites of conflict. On February 28, 1957, the camping committee held a special meeting to discuss integrated day camping at Plato Place in Forestville, Maryland. Although the 1955 statement immediately desegregated established camping, it appears that day camps that wanted to integrate had to present their case before a District Committee. At this time, all black troops were under the jurisdiction of District VII East and West. The proposal to integrate day camping at Plato Place passed in January 1957, but the District Committees of Districts I, II, and IV objected. Instead, they suggested that black scouts would camp on separate days. The members of District VII were so distressed at the thought of segregated camping, that they threatened to withdraw from the annual cookie sale as an act of protest. Cookie revenue was one of the primary ways that the Council sustained itself financially and also had symbolic import. Like camping, Girl Scout cookies were deeply embedded in the organization's identity. Camping was one of the most important aspects of girl scouting, and African Americans in the scouting movement argued that it would be unfair to participate in the cookie sale when they were denied full participation in one of the most vital areas of scouting. The Camp Committee adopted the following resolution:

The Camp Committee reiterates its original proposal, approved in January, that Plato Place be operated as an integrated camp by Districts I & II, District IV, District VII East, and District VII West. This proposal was and is consistent with long-held camping policy of non-segregation. It is also consistent with council operating policy of providing camping opportunities to all girls, and using to best advantage the facilities available to the council.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> "February 28, 1957 Camp Committee Minutes," Camp Committee Minutes, 1957-1958, The Ann Murray Collection II, GSCNC. For an example of an earlier debate about integration in day camps see "October 5, 1954," Day Camp Coordinating Committee, Camp Committee Minutes, 1954-1955, The Ann Murray Collection II, GSCNC.

Here, it seemed that the Council wanted to live up to its promise of inclusion for all girls, regardless of race.

Integration measures in the GSCNC camps did not signal the full and immediate integration of the Council itself. In fact, District VII, which by the 1950s had expanded into District VII East and District VII West, did not cease to exist until 1957.<sup>52</sup> According to an article in *Trefoil*, the Council's newsletter at that time, they cited increased suburbanization and the changing face of D.C. neighborhoods as the reason for restructuring, not integration. This was likely another way to say that the rapid in-migration of blacks and out-migration of whites forced the GSCNC to rethink its district system. African American leaders and parents reported ongoing segregation and discrimination within the Council in the late 1950s and early 1960s. In November 1956, the same year that King declared the Girl Scouts a "force for desegregation," Mrs. Vivian Scott Ramsey wrote a letter to Girl Scout national headquarters. The opening lines of the letter read, "I am writing to you in the interest of my daughter, Rheva Eileen Ramsey, whose one supreme wish is to join the Brownies. The only trouble seems to stem from the fact that she is a Negro."<sup>53</sup> Mrs. Ramsey had recently moved to Washington, D.C. from New York, and wanted to enroll Rheva in her neighborhood troop in Northeast Washington. She began the process in June 1956, hoping that Rheva could join a troop in the fall. Mrs. Ramsey contacted Mrs. Andrew Gibbs, Area Chairman in charge of managing the troops in that area. At this time, all of the members of the troop that met at Bunker Hill School, where Rheva attended school, were white, but Mrs. Gibbs assured

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<sup>52</sup> "February 28, 1957 Camp Committee Minutes," Camp Committee Minutes, 1957-1958, The Ann Murray Collection II, GSCNC.

<sup>53</sup> "Vivian Scott Ramsey to the Girl Scouts of America," November 8, 1956, Civil Rights—Councils—Region III, GSCHP.

Mrs. Ramsey that there would not be any barriers to Rheva's membership, "inasmuch as [Ramsey's] principles were Christian ones—regarding the individual first with no particular stress laid to racial background."<sup>54</sup> Although Mrs. Gibbs offered this assurance, she referred Mrs. Ramsey to Mrs. Jean Beane, the troop's leader.

Mrs. Beane explained that because it was the summer, it would be difficult to assess whether or not there would be any open spots in the troop. She then presented Mrs. Ramsey with three options: Rheva could join an existing black troop in another neighborhood, establish a new troop, which would also be segregated, or place Rheva's name on Mrs. Beane's troop's waiting list. Mrs. Ramsey selected the third option "stating that [her] daughter would be a member of an integrated—not segregated—society once she becomes a woman; and coming from New York, I preferred that she have the experience of a wider contact with humanity—the same that she had experienced in New York."<sup>55</sup> Here, Mrs. Ramsey characterizes the Girl Scouts as an organization that would prepare her daughter for adulthood. At a moment when calls for and moves toward integration were becoming more vocal and visible, she argued that the Girl Scouts was an ideal space for children of different races to learn how to interact with each other.

When September arrived, Mrs. Ramsey was met with disappointing news. Mrs. Beane informed her that the troop leaders "wanted to maintain segregation and since they were VOLUNTEER workers—they had the choice of deciding who would belong to their group."<sup>56</sup> She then added that integration was a process that would take time. Mrs. Beane and her fellow leaders' decision to bar Rheva demonstrates how the structure of the

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<sup>54</sup> "Vivian Scott Ramsey to the Girl Scouts of America"

<sup>55</sup> Ibid

<sup>56</sup> Ibid

organization itself made it difficult to enforce policies for racial inclusion. Again, this occurred one year prior to the dissolution of District VII, but the rationale for their decision, that as the troop leaders they could decide who could join and who could not, suggests that even if the policy was integrated troops, they would not be obligated to comply. Although the GSCNC appeared to be moving towards integration, particularly with camp desegregation in 1955, racist attitudes of leaders within the Council prevailed. The decentralized structure of the Girl Scouts at both the national and local levels limited its ability to truly be a force for desegregation.

Determined to get Rheva into a troop, even if it was further away and not integrated, Mrs. Ramsey contacted Mrs. Janet Jones, who led an all-black troop. Mrs. Jones, who Mrs. Ramsey mentions was also born in the North like herself, was dissatisfied with the custom of segregation that placed black girls in her troop when there were other troops closer to their place of residence. While the letter suggests that Mrs. Jones would be willing to take in Rheva, she told Mrs. Ramsey that she wanted residency, and not race, to determine girls' placements in troops. Mrs. Jones's thoughts on troop placement highlight ongoing racial antagonism in the GSCNC following camp desegregation.

It appears that at the time that Mrs. Ramsey wrote this letter, she was still waiting to receive official word on Rheva's acceptance into a troop. She wrote, "Yet, while I wait to see what action, if any, will assure my daughter's acceptance in Girl Scouting, my daughter's strongest current desire goes unsatisfied. May I have your assurance that something will be done so that Rheva can have the wonderful opportunity afforded by



being a member of the Girl Scouts?”<sup>57</sup> Mrs. Ramsey’s determination to enroll Rheva in the Girl Scouts is instructive. First, it shows that even when faced with blatant racism within the local council, she still believed in the organization and its potential to shape her daughter in positive ways. Second, it also suggests that she saw the progressive potential of the Girl Scouts. Finally, when thinking about the movement more broadly, it illustrates the ways black mothers fought to have their daughters on the frontlines of integration.

The dissolution of District VII in 1957 placed the GSCNC ahead of certain spaces in the nation’s capital, in terms of desegregation. This proved to be an issue for the Council in the years following integration. In 1960, Mrs. Eursalene J. Martin and Mrs. Lenora Smith, the leader and assistant leader, respectively, of Troop 720 penned a letter to the GSUSA in order to voice their concerns about “discriminatory practices toward the Negro girls of this area.”<sup>58</sup> Their frustration lay with the GSCNC’s continued relationship with segregated establishments.

In the letter, Martin recounted that on a few occasions, she received information in the mail from the Council regarding requirements for scouts to earn badges. She detailed one specific incident involving the merit badge for swimming. The Council instructed leaders to contact Coach Bill Armstrong at the Ambassador Hotel about logistics. When Martin contacted him, he told her that “this was not an interracial activity.”<sup>59</sup> Black scouts could swim between 8 and 9:30 on Sunday morning, while white scouts had the pool between 11 and 1. Martin wrote, “As a volunteer scout worker,

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<sup>57</sup> “Vivian Scott Ramsey to the Girl Scouts of America”

<sup>58</sup> “Letter from Eursalene J. Martin and Lenora Smith to Mrs. Charles U. Culmer,” March 4, 1960, Civil Rights—Region III, GSCHP.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid

and a working mother, I find these hours set aside for the Negroes very inconvenient. Obviously, they are a means of excluding the Negroes.”<sup>60</sup> Similar incidents happened with activities related to the ice skating and good grooming badges, which Martin notes, excluded blacks. Because the Council did not make note of segregation or exclusionary policies, black leaders and scouts often faced embarrassment when making arrangements or attempting to perform certain activities at designated places. Not only would this have been a humiliating situation, but it could have also been extremely upsetting for scouts who were looking forward to earning a merit badge. Like camping and the cookie sale, earning badges was a central component of the scouting program. It not only kept girls active, but earning a badge and being able to display it on one’s uniform was a source of pride. Therefore, not having the same access to earning badges meant that black scouts were not able to participate fully in the program.

Martin’s letter suggests that she believed that this was the Council’s oversight, rather than an underhanded attempt to exclude black scouts. Like Ramsey, Martin was attuned to the fact that regardless of the Council’s move towards integration, “the actions of private establishments cannot be regulated by the Scout principles.”<sup>61</sup> Martin concluded the letter calling for “a thorough investigation,” and that the GSCNC “be instructed to secure only the services of concerns that do not segregate.”<sup>62</sup> Again, it is clear that the decentralized structure of the organization meant that local custom oftentimes overrode national policy. Furthermore, Martin’s letter highlights the Council’s continuous struggle to integrate. For her, integration was more than about camp and troop

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<sup>60</sup> “Letter from Eursalene J. Martin and Lenora Smith to Mrs. Charles U. Culmer”

<sup>61</sup> Ibid

<sup>62</sup> Ibid

designations, but also about the Council's relationship to the community. It was not enough for them to integrate, but rather, they also had to sever ties with those who continued to do so. Doing so would demonstrate a true commitment to equality. It is not clear if the situation was ever resolved or if Martin ever received the investigation that she asked for. National headquarters responded to Martin and told her that they sympathized, but since it seemed like a local, council-specific issue, she should take it up with the council.<sup>63</sup>

The story of the GSCNC in the era of civil rights reveals that while in many ways it was a "force for desegregation," in other areas it fell short of this characterization. It also reveals the unevenness of the process of desegregation. Although camps desegregated, the structure of the Council itself remained segregated for a couple more years. And even when the Council dissolved this structure, leaders continued to speak out against the remnants of segregation within the GSCNC. Still, black parents and leaders continued to recognize the value of scouting in black girls' lives, and the organization itself in society's move towards a more integrated and democratic society. The PW YWCA however, offers a different narrative. While the organization recognized the value of interracial work in a changing society, it also did not consider integration a viable changing agent.

### **Battling Integration in the YWCA Movement in Washington, D.C.**

Florence Radcliffe faced Mrs. Mabel Cook, President of the YWCA National Capital Area, and said: 'It is obvious that we are on different sides of the street. You were planning an empire. We were thinking of how to work together for better understanding

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<sup>63</sup> "Alice Wagener to Mrs. Eurselene J. Martin," March 11, 1960, Civil Rights—Region III, Girl Scout Center for Historic Preservation.

with each other.’<sup>64</sup> Radcliffe sums up what she, and other leaders of the PW YWCA, saw as the limits of interracial work within the YWCA movement in the nation’s capital. In 1960, Washington’s Health and Welfare Council proposed the merger of the YWCAs in the metropolitan Washington area, which included the PW YWCA, DC YWCA (the white YWCA in Washington), Montgomery YWCA, Alexandria YWCA, and Fairfax County extension. The PW YWCA, initially wary of the coalition, eventually decided to take part in the agreement, and join with the other associations to form the YWCA of the National Capital Area (YWCA NCA). However, it did not take long for the PW YWCA to reevaluate its decision. In this section, I use former PW YWCA president Florence Radcliffe’s account of the merger and the ultimate decision to back out of the agreement as a way to explore the limits of integration and interracial work in girls’ organizations. Ultimately, the PW YWCA saw integration as a threat to its autonomy, power, and legacy.

### *Integration at the National Level*

The move towards integration in the YWCA movement in the nation’s capital happened in the decades following the National YWCAs (YWCA USA) push for desegregation. The racial violence that followed World War I intensified black women’s and white allies’ calls for greater interracial cooperation within the YWCA USA, but the organization solidified its commitment to interracial work in 1946, when delegates at its national convention voted unanimously to adopt the Interracial Charter.<sup>65</sup> This charter desegregated the YWCA and committed it to ‘pioneer in an interracial experience that

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<sup>64</sup> Radcliffe 67

<sup>65</sup> Nancy Marie Robertson, *Christian Sisterhood, Race Relations, and the YWCA, 1906-46* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2007), 164.

shall be increasingly democratic and Christian.’<sup>66</sup> Prior to the passage of the charter, the organization operated under a branch system. Black “branches” were part of the larger (white) central associations. Under segregation, the branches had some control over day-to-day activities, but were typically “financially dependent upon and administratively subordinate to” the central associations.<sup>67</sup> This system of segregation was not restricted to the South.<sup>68</sup>

Like the Girl Scouts, the postwar world forced the YWCA USA to reflect on its own policies. The Interracial Charter opened, “Today racial tensions threaten not only the well being of our communities but also the possibility of a peaceful world.”<sup>69</sup> The YWCA believed that upholding segregation not only jeopardized its position as a Christian organization, but also fell short of the democratic promise of America. The YWCA’s language highlighted its changing belief that racial inequality was incompatible with Christian sisterhood and democracy.

#### *Early Attempts to Affiliate the PW YWCA and DC YWCA*

M. Alphonso Hunton, Sr., secretary of the Twelfth Street YMCA, was the person to originally suggest to the PW YWCA that it should affiliate with the National YWCA. This was in 1911. The leaders of the PW YWCA were open to hearing Hunton’s viewpoints on the issue and exploring the possibility of affiliating with the national organization. “Mr. Hunton had a glowing picture of how the YMCA as a branch of the local YMCA had prospered. They had a segregated building, but this building was the

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<sup>66</sup> Robertson 163

<sup>67</sup> The branch system officially became organizational policy at the 1915 convention in Louisville. Robertson 7.

<sup>68</sup> See Judith Weisenfeld, *African American Women and Christian Activism: New York’s Black YWCA, 1905-1945* (New York: New York University Press, 1997).

<sup>69</sup> Robertson 163

center of Washington, D.C., cultural experience. He suggested that the women could have a similar place in the community by joining forces with the larger community.”<sup>70</sup> However, the women of the PW YWCA were cautious and did not completely hop on board with Hunton’s suggestion. The PW YWCA had existed since 1905, and for the first six years of its existence, it had done well for itself independently. In the meeting with Hunton, Mrs. Frances Boyce, then president of the PW YWCA, explained all of their achievements thus far. “It bought property, conducted classes, all to improve the circumstances of Black working girls and women.”<sup>71</sup> Most importantly, it had done so independently, without the help of the National YWCA or the white Central YWCA, which emerged after the founding of the PW YWCA.

Although the women of the PW YWCA were wary, they soon researched the process of gaining national affiliation. It was not until 1918 when the National YWCA decided that the PW YWCA should join with the DC YWCA, also known as Washington’s Central YWCA, which already had national affiliation. Despite the urging of the National YWCA, the Central YWCA “was adamant in its refusal to accept PW YWCA. It felt that this collection of Black women had no place in its organization. Besides, such an affiliation would place a drain on them financially.”<sup>72</sup> Besides their blatant racism, this last point about the PW YWCA as a financial liability would prove to be ironic by the 1960s. Radcliffe writes, “In its embarrassment that a Christian organization, such as Central YWCA, would be so petty, the National Board offered affiliation to PW YWCA on the same basis as the Central YWCA.”<sup>73</sup> Even though the YWCA was a Christian

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<sup>70</sup> Radcliffe 6

<sup>71</sup> Ibid

<sup>72</sup> Ibid

<sup>73</sup> Ibid

organization based on the principles of “Christian sisterhood,” the opinions of the DC YWCA highlight the blatant discriminatory practices in the nation’s capital that were a hallmark of the Woodrow Wilson administration. This interaction also occurred one year prior to the 1919 race riots. The tense relationship between the PW YWCA and the DC YWCA mirrored race relations in D.C. in the first decades of the twentieth century. And this relationship would remain fraught over the next forty years.

Despite the tensions between the PW YWCA and the DC YWCA, there was eventually interaction between the two YWCAs in the decades following the affiliation incident. Julia West Hamilton, who presided over the PW YWCA from 1928 until her death in 1958, spearheaded much of this interaction. Although recognizing the differences between both organizations, she invited them to events and also had leaders of the DC YWCA serve as guest speakers. Radcliffe characterizes Hamilton as a ‘bridge builder’ who believed that interracial work facilitated the advancement of all women.<sup>74</sup> She writes, “It was under Mrs. Hamilton’s determined and unflagging leadership that the women of PW YWCA taught their white sisters the day-to-day life requirements for building a true Black and white unity among women of this country.”<sup>75</sup>

As the black population of Washington continued to grow, so too did the membership of the PW YWCA. Conversely, as the white population of Washington diminished, so too did the DC YWCA’s membership. Many of their former members spread to suburban associations: the Alexandria YWCA in Virginia, the Montgomery YWCA in Maryland, and the Fairfax County Center, a branch of the DC YWCA. This membership drain, as well as increased competition for public funding, caused financial

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<sup>74</sup> Radcliffe 13

<sup>75</sup> Ibid

strain within the DC YWCA.<sup>76</sup> According to Radcliffe, the prosperity of the PW YWCA at mid-century and the financial hardship experienced by the DC YWCA at the same moment, set the stage for what would be a proposition for the associations to “amalgamate.”<sup>77</sup>

### *The Integration Proposal*

In addition to membership dues and special events, the Washington metropolitan area YWCAs received funding from the Health and Welfare Council (HWC). In the summer of 1960, HWC Budget Committee issued a statement to the D.C. associations, recommending that the PW YWCA and the DC YWCA combine to form one association. About six month later, the Membership Subcommittee of the HWC released a second statement, recommending the commencement of a study to examine the usefulness of establishing an individual metropolitan association that would include the PW YWCA, the DC YWCA, and the suburban associations and branch.<sup>78</sup> Prior to this proposal, the metropolitan Ys were already loosely connected. In 1948, the YWCAs in the metropolitan area formed a YWCA Area Council. The Council was comprised of representatives from each association. Since the PW YWCA was the sole black association in the Council, white women formed the majority. Although black women were outnumbered on the Council, Radcliffe notes that a “cordial relationship existed” between the women.<sup>79</sup> The Area Council basically served as a space where the Ys in the area could air common concerns. However, there was no attempt to relinquish any

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<sup>76</sup> Radcliffe 16

<sup>77</sup> Ibid 17

<sup>78</sup> Ibid

<sup>79</sup> Ibid



association's autonomy. The HWC's proposition, or in Radcliffe's words, an ultimatum, called for a much closer tie between the associations.

Although skeptical, the PW YWCA's leaders ultimately decided to proceed with the HWC's recommendation. The process began with a review of the HWC memorandum in August 1961, nearly seven months after the HWC released it. Grace Hill Jacobs, then president of the PW YWCA, called for a meeting of representatives from the PW YWCA, as well as the other Ys in the metropolitan area to discuss the proposal. According to Radcliffe, "This memorandum had rested on the desks of the several YWCAs in the area...None of the other YWCAs had taken action on this communication because of its sensitive subject—'merging'" (21). However, Jacobs decided to open the dialogue in an effort to increase communication between the difference associations, which she believed would allow them to more effectively serve the girls and women in their communities, and to make a good impression on the HWC.

Three years passed between the HWC's proposition and an actual agreement. In those three years, the Area Council deliberated on the effectiveness of amalgamation. In May 1963, after a series of meetings, the four Ys decided that a metropolitan body would be feasible, and with a written agreement, formed the YWCA of the National Capital Area (YWCA NCA).<sup>80</sup> The terms of the agreement stated that the new association would be under a trial period for three years. At the end of the three year period, they would assess whether or not to continue as an umbrella organization.<sup>81</sup> Mrs. Bloomer of the Montgomery YWCA and Mrs. Mabel Cook of the DC YWCA were elected president and executive director of the YWCA NCA board, respectively. The board of the YWCA

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<sup>80</sup> Radcliffe 34-36

<sup>81</sup> Ibid 47

NCA also consisted of six representatives from each association. Again, black women were vastly outnumbered on the board.<sup>82</sup>

### *Debates and Concerns about Integration*

The PW YWCA had many concerns about the YWCA NCA before entering the agreement and after the agreement had been signed. They questioned the timing of the proposition as well as the purpose and benefit. After all, an Area Council already existed. They wondered how black Washingtonians would react to a move towards amalgamation and how it would affect the daily operations of the PW YWCA. The women of the PW YWCA asked: “Would their identity prevail in an association membered by whites? Would the first YWCA in the District of Columbia, PW YWCA, disappear from the annals of history? What would be the role of Black women in the new order?”<sup>83</sup> After the National YWCA made integration its official policy in 1946, black women involved in the YWCA across the United States raised similar questions and concerns.

One of the PW YWCA’s primary issues with uniting under the YWCA NCA was the possibility of losing autonomy. In many ways this initial fear was justified. Under the agreement, the PW YWCA staff and budget fell completely under the control of the YWCA NCA. Radcliffe notes that Cook began to attend every staff meeting. Soon after the formation of metropolitan organization, Cook requested that the PW YWCA turn over their financial records, records of assets, and deeds.<sup>84</sup> This fear of loss of autonomy was a common concern among black YWCA branches in other cities. Although most leaders in black branches opposed segregation, they also acknowledged the safety found

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<sup>82</sup> Radcliffe 38

<sup>83</sup> Ibid 17-18

<sup>84</sup> Ibid 47, 63

in the spaces that they controlled. Historian Nancy Marie Robertson writes, segregated branches “brought African American women and girls into the organization and provided them with a sense of race pride. They also offered needed services to their communities. Branches...were places that afforded ‘the sense of being “at home in our own building,” [and] the freedom from fear of incivility or discriminatory acts.’”<sup>85</sup> Although black branches were under the jurisdiction of white associations, there was autonomy in their day-to-day branch operations. Unlike black branches in other areas of the United States however, the PW YWCA of Washington was not a branch; it operated independently from the Central YWCA. So for them, the change proved jarring.

Another concern was the imbalance of power. Again, the National Area Council that preceded the YWA had a white majority, but “PW YWCA had no problem because at the table each group was equal.”<sup>86</sup> This imbalance of power was particularly problematic for black women, who were often characterized as incompetent leaders. Radcliffe asserts that rumors floated around the community claiming that the PW YWCA staff “was poorly trained” and that “the board members were ignorant domestics with no skills for maintaining the ‘Y’ facilities.”<sup>87</sup> Throughout the text, Radcliffe blames the YWCA NCA for spreading rumors about the PW YWCA in an effort to divide the organization’s black leadership as well as the community it served.

Hand-in-hand with the imbalance of power and lack of autonomy was the loss of leadership opportunities for black women. The branch system allowed black women to obtain leadership training and positions that might not have been possible otherwise.

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<sup>85</sup> Robertson 166

<sup>86</sup> Radcliffe 56

<sup>87</sup> Ibid 53

After all, some black women found that newly integrated associations hesitated to offer black women leadership positions over whites. While most black women in the YWCA heartily supported integration, “they questioned whether integration would be implemented in such a way as ‘to really result in the advancement of the Negro group.’”<sup>88</sup> In the case of the PW YWCA, the concern about leadership was directed at the YWCA NCA board. All of the top positions of the board were occupied by white women.<sup>89</sup> The possible danger with this was that race-specific issues impacting black women and girls could be placed on the back burner, and the ideas of black leaders would not be taken seriously. After the passage of the Interracial Charter in 1946, the main concern of black women in the YWCA was that white women would assume that the organization’s race problem was solved, and that there would be no need to continue the work of race progress.<sup>90</sup> With the formation of the YWCA NCA, the PW YWCA believed that their voices were not being heard.

### *The March on Washington*

The PW YWCA’s concerns surfaced with an incident surrounding the 1963 March on Washington. The March on Washington offered the YWCA NCA the opportunity to demonstrate their steadfast support for full citizenship rights and democracy for all. It would allow them to put their verbal support into action. However, the YWCA NCA wanted to close its headquarters the day of the march in order to prevent any potential damage from protesters. Furthermore, it “protested any involvement

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<sup>88</sup> Robertson 166

<sup>89</sup> Radcliffe 38

<sup>90</sup> Robertson 166

that PW YWCA wished to have with the march.”<sup>91</sup> Not to be held back, the PW YWCA proceeded with its plans.

The PW YWCA came up with the idea to hold a service at Bethlehem Chapel at the Washington Cathedral “providing a spiritual experience to seek help and guidance in the successful resolution of the direct action of August 28, 1963” in the weeks leading up to the March.<sup>92</sup> They believed that as a Christian organization, that would be their greatest contribution. Cook, President of the YWCA National Capital Area, initially rejected the idea. However, the PW YWCA persisted, and eventually held a meeting for other associations to decide whether or not they wanted to participate. Opinions were mixed. Some believed that the YWCA NCA should not associate itself with the March on Washington. Others thought that, while the intentions behind the service were noble, it would actually exacerbate tensions between blacks and white throughout the city. Most however, believed that the PW YWCA’s idea was a good one, and that they should proceed. Cook eventually came around to the idea, but insisted that the event be jointly sponsored. Radcliffe wrote, “PW YWCA compromised on this point.”<sup>93</sup>

In a letter to YWCA members, Radcliffe wrote, “This Hour of Prayer and Meditation is urgently needed in this time of crisis, social unrest, and search for the realization of human needs. It is needed for our city, our country and in a larger sense our world. As women committed to the Christian ideal and attuned to the words of our Lord...it is only fitting that we take the leadership in seeking Divine Guidance for our city at this time.”<sup>94</sup> Radcliffe explained the importance of the service, as well as the

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<sup>91</sup> Radcliffe 40

<sup>92</sup> Ibid

<sup>93</sup> Radcliffe 42

<sup>94</sup> Ibid 43

important role that Christian women could take in the movement. She also emphasized the importance of black YWCA women in creating this opportunity. She continued, “This will be the first joint effort of the YWCA of the National Capital Area. More important, however, this idea of prayer and meditation was conceived and nurtured at Phyllis Wheatley.”<sup>95</sup> Although this was publicized as a joint event, Radcliffe refused to diminish the leading role of the PW YWCA. This was her way of pushing back against integration’s tendency to make the leadership of black women in interracial organizations less visible.

Beyond the meditation hour, the women of the PW YWCA ended up marching with representatives of the National Board. The behavior of the YWCA NCA left a bad impression in the minds of the PW YWCA’s leaders. The YWCA NCA’s hesitance in standing up for civil rights cast doubt on its intentions. For the PW YWCA, this was an early indication that a metropolitan-wide organization was hazardous to black interests.

#### *Challenging the YWCA NCA*

The PW YWCA decided after the March on Washington incident that the current structure of the YWCA NCA was unacceptable. However, it was two years before the PW YWCA leaders took action. They drew up a series of resolutions to withdraw from the YWCA NCA. Radcliffe wrote, “The resolutions made it crystal clear that agreement or no agreement, PW YWCA, with its long history and heritage in the Washington community, would not become a branch of a new organization.”<sup>96</sup> In addition to the YWCA NCA’s behavior in planning for the March on Washington, the PW YWCA was also suspicious of the motives behind the creation of the metropolitan organization. At

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<sup>95</sup> Radcliffe 43

<sup>96</sup> Ibid 62

the time of the merger, the PW YWCA held various properties, one which they leased to the federal government, and made up seventy percent of its budget without help from community funders such as the HWC. Radcliffe contends that the DC YWCA not only saw the merger as a way to remedy its financial maladies, but was also blinded by racism. In short, they could not bear seeing the PW YWCA prosper while it struggled to survive. Robertson presents a similar example in her book. While she does not name the local association, she says that it shut down its black branch and claimed that it did so in order to enact integration. However, the local association only did so when it hit a financial rough patch. The black women of the now defunct branch believed that local association had nefarious intentions, not the least of which was to close the branch in order to discontinue programming in the black community.<sup>97</sup>

Not all of the PW YWCA board members were in favor of severing ties with the YWCA NCA. A minority, led by former president Grace Hill Jacobs, believed that it should defer to the original 1963 agreement. Even though there was division on the PW YWCA board regarding the decision to sever ties with the YWCA NCA, those in favor of going against the YWCA NCA did have community support. The *Washington Afro-American* published an article in support of the PW YWCA on July 24, 1965. The piece described the 1963 agreement as “clearly discriminatory in that it made no such demands on any of the other four associations.”<sup>98</sup> The article reaffirmed that the PW YWCA was not opposed to integration, “but felt more strongly that full integration could be achieved

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<sup>97</sup> Robertson 168

<sup>98</sup> Radcliffe 75

without complete subjugation.”<sup>99</sup> Printing this piece signified the importance of the PW YWCA in black Washington.

The PW YWCA demanded retention of their corporation, control over their budget and assets, and control over their personnel. They also stated a willingness to work with the YWCA NCA on shared concerns of the area YWCAs, similar to the setup of the former Area Council.<sup>100</sup> After pushback, the PW YWCA and YWCA NCA came to an agreement in March 1966. The demands listed above were honored in the new agreement. While the PW YWCA retained its affiliation with the YWCA NCA, it maintained its autonomy and identity. In short, the new agreement made the YWCA NCA similar in structure to a federation.<sup>101</sup> Fannie Pitt Byrd of the Harlem YWCA wrote in the *New York Age*, ‘Our race must learn that to reach its long-range goal: full citizenship—we must increasingly face a sacrifice of short-term gains. We must give up what may be some “advantages” of segregation for the slower process of integration.’<sup>102</sup> However, many of the women of the PW YWCA were not willing to sacrifice short-term gains. For them, full integration was a detriment to the goal of full citizenship. They saw community control as the method for improving the lives of black girls in Washington.

## **Conclusion**

The GSCNC and the PW YWCA demonstrate the complicated process of integration in girls’ organizations. A comparison of the two also reveals that integration and interracial cooperation meant different things to different leaders. While African Americans in the GSCNC sought to fully integrate into the organization, the women of

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<sup>99</sup> Radcliffe 75

<sup>100</sup> Ibid 76

<sup>101</sup> Ibid 96-99

<sup>102</sup> Robertson 167



the PW YWCA believed that full integration would do more harm than good for the communities of black women and girls that they served. Regardless of their ultimate trajectories, the civil rights era was transformative in the history of girls' organizations. Groups such as the Girl Scouts and YWCA reckoned with the discrepancies between their inclusive rhetoric and their organizational practices. This chapter expands how we define sites of civil rights work as well as who participated in the movement. One question that remains is what integration meant for the future of organizations and the black girls that they served. Would girls' relationship with the GSCNC and PW YWCA change or remain the same?

## Epilogue

If the civil rights movement was a moment for national organizations like the Girl Scouts of the USA and the Young Women's Christian Association to take a stand on racial issues and the place of black girls and women within their ranks, then the late 1960s and early 1970s was the period of implementation and execution. Black leaders and members were emboldened by calls for Black Power at the national level and self-determination within activist movements in Washington.<sup>1</sup> At the same time, organizational leaders, particularly in the Girl Scouts, argued that understanding and building bridges between the races would remedy the continued friction between blacks and whites in Washington and beyond. Imagery of Washington, D.C. in 1968 is overwhelmingly related to the riots that took place there on April 4 of that year in the aftermath of the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. Indeed, the uprising and the social changes that stemmed from it were transformative not only for the political, social, and physical landscape of the city, but for the girls' organizations, their leaders, and members that occupied the city.

In December 1969 two Brownie troops gathered for a Christmas project. Troop 1342 of Mid-Eastern Washington and Troop 1056 of Southwest Montgomery (in Maryland) baked cookies, played games, sung songs, and performed a flag ceremony.<sup>2</sup> This seemingly unremarkable gathering was actually significant. It was the first event of the Inter-Association Friendship Committee. The committee was comprised of troops in

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<sup>1</sup> See Lillian S. Williams, *A Bridge to the Future: The History of Diversity in Girl Scouting* (New York: Girl Scouts of the United States of America, 1996), 25; Brooke Alexis Thomas, "More Than Girls Selling Cookies: Black Girl Scouts in Response to Black Power, 1970-1977," MA Thesis, University of South Alabama (2016).

<sup>2</sup> "Inter-Association Friendship Committee," GSCNC.

Northeast D.C. and Southwest Montgomery County Maryland. Northeast consisted of black inner-city scouts, while Southwest Montgomery scouts were suburban whites. The purpose of the Committee was to foster friendships between girls of different racial and socio-economic background with the hope that it would lead to greater understanding between the races.

Leaders in Northeast D.C. and Southwest Montgomery formed the Committee as a response to the Kerner Report, released in 1968. President Lyndon B. Johnson appointed eleven members to the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorder in July 1967. The Commission was assembled to study the causes of the recent urban rebellions and to make recommendations for remedying the unrest. The Commission released its Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, known as the Kerner Report, named after the chair of the Commission, Illinois Governor Otto Kerner, Jr., February 29, 1968. The report concluded that the nation was “moving toward two societies, one black, one white—separate and unequal.”<sup>3</sup> Just short of two months after the release of the report, riots broke out in Washington.

Mary Ann Claxton, the Southwest Montgomery Association Chair, met with prominent black GSCNC leader Ethel Harvey to discuss what the findings of the Kerner Report meant for scouting. These conversations continued between black and white Council leaders through the following year until its first event. The Inter-Association Friendship Committee continued through at least the 1980s. Its programming included service work and social events like potlucks.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, *Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders* (Washington, D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, 1968), 1.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid

Ethel Harvey was elected as Council president in 1972 and served in that position until 1981. Not only was she the first black president of the GSCNC, but the first black president of any Girl Scout Council. In her reflection on her tenure as president she said, "I think at that period, the Kerner Report was one of the things that people were trying to respond to. The National Organization said that it supported the principles of the Kerner report, which was to get people together. And here in the nation's capital, we certainly did, and many, many people set to work to improve relations and understanding between the races. I think we did a good job of getting people together."<sup>5</sup> The formation of the Inter-Association Friendship Council and Harvey's discussion of it demonstrate African American leaders' sustained commitment to integration and interracial cooperation.

This spirit of understanding was also embedded in some PW YWCA programming. The campers and staff at the Y's Camp Stay at Home program, wrote a letter, dated July 31, 1968, to the ambassador of Trinidad and Tobago. The campers visited the embassy for one of the camp's day trips. After thanking the ambassador for welcoming them at the embassy, providing a fun and informative trip, the campers wrote,

We have thought much about the short talk with us on the understanding between people of our two nations. The impression we got was that the many races in your country live together that the harmony [sic], and this presents a challenge to us here in America. It is a simple thing knowing that we all have different opinions and will disagree, but we are more deeply concerned with a compromise. How we reason together with peaceful understanding? We, the campers here at this YWCA, as the younger generation, are more determined to bring about peace, unity and brotherhood for all.<sup>6</sup>

PW YWCA leaders reinforced campers' desire for leadership and acknowledged the importance of their leadership. In 1970, they created the Teen Board to get youth more

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<sup>5</sup> "Comments from Ethel Harvey for 35<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Tea," May 12, 1998, GSCNC History Center.

<sup>6</sup> Letter to Ambassador of Trinidad and Tobago," July 31, 1968, Folder: Camp Stay at Home 1967, Box: 392-1781, PW YWCA Collection, MSRC.

involved in the workings of the organization.<sup>7</sup> As is evident with Girl Scout camp desegregation in the 1950s and the Inter-Association Friendship Committee in the late 1960s, youth leaders and their members believed that young people were responsible for bringing about racial reconciliation.

Chris Myers Asch and George Derek Musgrove write, “The riots were both catastrophic and cathartic, a crisis that captured the nation’s attention and gave the city’s problems widespread visibility.”<sup>8</sup> One of those issues was policing. Activists in D.C. had been organizing against police brutality since at least the 1930s, but 1968 brought the issue to a head.<sup>9</sup> After a spate of black deaths at the hands of police in the summer of 1968, the Black United Front (BUF), a coalition of moderate and radical black leaders, held a series of neighborhood meetings on solutions to police violence. Stokely Carmichael founded the BUF in January 1968. The organization was a coalition of one hundred community leaders that served as a unified body to “speak with one voice for ‘a rightful and proportionate share in the decision making councils of the District, and rightful and proportionate control of the economic institutions in the Black community.’”<sup>10</sup> The BUF compiled a list of thirteen demands, calling for community control of the D.C. police department. Some of these demands included a requirement that all police officers live in Washington, recruitment of new officers, and a ban on all-white police patrols in black neighborhoods.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> “Involving Youth Intentionally,” Folder: Board Meetings (Rough) 1970, Box: 392-1696, PW YWCA Collection, MSRC.

<sup>8</sup> Chris Myers Asch and George Derek Musgrove, *Chocolate City: A History of Race and Democracy in the Nation’s Capital* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017), 359.

<sup>9</sup> Police brutality was the central focus of the National Negro Congress. For more on them and organizing against brutality in the Washington in the 1930s, see Asch and Musgrove 266-267.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid 353-354

<sup>11</sup> Ibid 367.

The PW YWCA also engaged in discussion about policing. In October 1968, it held a lecture on police-youth relations.<sup>12</sup> A summary of the lecture does not remain, but it is likely that rather than taking an approach that called for a complete overhaul of policing, the PW YWCA instead took a stance that focused more on working within the current system of policing and individual reform. This is seen most clearly with the founding of the Wheatley Crime Stoppers Club in 1970. The program was meant for boys between the ages of seven and twelve, “to impress them while they are most impressionable. The emphasis lies on shaping attitudes so that the boys will have a personal desire to want to be on the side of law and order.”<sup>13</sup> The Crime Stoppers program was similar to the Model Precinct Program proposed in 1968 by Robert Shellows, a white psychologist in the federal Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO). One part of the program included teenage patrols “recruited to help police monitor suspicious activity.”<sup>14</sup>

Notably, this program was specifically for boys. This is instructive for two reasons. First, it shows how women in the PW YWCA gendered crime and police violence against black bodies as a male issue, rather than one that affected both genders. Second, it shows how the PW YWCA sought to brand itself as a true community

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<sup>12</sup> “1968 Youth Programs,” Folder: Program, Box: 392-1673, PW YWCA Collection, MSRC.

<sup>13</sup> “Annual Report Program and Services, March 27, 1971,” Folder: Annual Report, 1970, Box: 392-1677, PW YWCA Collection, MSRC.

<sup>14</sup> Asch and Musgrove 368. Other aspects of the program included centers where citizens could access police and public health and welfare agencies around the clock. Police officers would also be required to take courses in sensitivity training and black history. The Office of Economic Opportunity awarded Shellow \$1.4 to implement the project for eighteen months in the Thirteenth Precinct of the city. The area of Fourteenth Street that was heavily impacted by the riots was part of this precinct. The program received backlash from both police, who were unwilling to give up control, and black citizens, who believed that although they would be the most impacted, were not consulted. Still, black Washingtonians’ opinions on the Model Precinct program were not monolithic. There was a class and generational divide, with older middle-class blacks more in favor of the program. The Model Precinct Program ended up folding in 1973.

institution in this period, interested in not only serving the entire neighborhood. Rosetta B. Mitchell remarked in her 1968 President's Message, "Our aim is to meet the challenges of a YWCA in an inner city. Phyllis Wheatley is where the Action Is. Women in the 'Y' have been called a group of middle class women serving middle class women. It is beginning to catch on that we are a group of Christian women serving where we are needed in the community."<sup>15</sup> Although the PW YWCA's views on policing may not have been firmly about community control, they stayed committed to remaining an autonomous entity through the 1970s. A struggle that began in the 1960s. Today, the PW YWCA still operates as a residence for women, but it is no longer affiliated with the National YWCA nor the National Capital Area YWCA.<sup>16</sup>

The self-determination that characterized black D.C. activism in the late 1960s and 1970s, and the Black Power Movement more broadly, also impacted the tradition of the debutante ball. By the mid- to late-1960s, black professional, civic, and religious organizations across the United States also began to sponsor similar events. While this signaled somewhat of a democratization of the debutante ball, it retained its exclusive air. Katrina Hazzard-Donald writes, "The rise of black consciousness in the 1960s left the black elite largely defensive. Many organizations dropped cotillions from their program and substituted dinner dances, but that substitution drew them no closer to the working-class community. The restricted admission, the cost of the affairs, and the location of the site, all discouraged working-class blacks as participants."<sup>17</sup> Mrs. Mazaline Baird, a

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<sup>15</sup> "Annual Report Program and Services of the Phyllis Wheatley Branch YWCA, March 22, 1969," Box: 392-1695, PW YWCA Collection, MSRC.

<sup>16</sup> The Board of Directors, Phyllis Wheatley Young Women's Christian Association, Inc., *Meet me at the Y* (2016), 1.

<sup>17</sup> Katrina Hazzard-Donald, *Jookin: The Rise of Social Dance Formations in African-American Culture* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990), 167.

member of the arrangements committee of the Washington chapter of the Girl Friends commented on the perception of cotillions in a 1969 article in the *Washington Star*. She said, “We keep hearing it’s passé, it’s too bourgeois, too imitative of the white middle class...The cotillion isn’t so much an introduction into society anymore...It’s just a good time for all.”<sup>18</sup> Despite Baird’s reframing of the purpose of the cotillion and her claim that their ball never lacked for debutantes, 1969 would be the final year that the club sponsored their cotillion.

Young people were also simply losing interest in the ritual, and they were vocal about their disdain. A 1967 article in the *New York Times* chronicled the lives of Washington’s black elite, which, for non-blacks outside of the city, had heretofore been a secret. Mayor Walter Washington’s daughter, Bennetta, abruptly walked out of the receiving line at her debutante ball in the mid-1960s. She was a junior at Radcliffe when she made her statement in the *New York Times* saying, “it all seems sort of ridiculous to me.”<sup>19</sup> United States District Court Judge Aubrey Robinson’s daughter declined to participate completely. The Washington Chapter of the Girl Friends held its last cotillion in 1969 because, according to the organization, young African Americans believed that these events were “irrelevant to present needs.”<sup>20</sup> Detractors would argue that the needs of the black community: economic justice, quality housing, among other issues, could not be remedied by the debutante ball, even if it had a philanthropic purpose.

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<sup>18</sup> “Debutantes at Girl Friends Cotillion Bow,” *Washington Star*, 1969.

<sup>19</sup> Bennetta Jules-Rosette, quoted in Myra MacPherson, “Washington’s Negro Society Emerging From the ‘Secret City,’” *New York Times*, November 19, 1967, 88.

<sup>20</sup> The Girl Friends, Inc., “Community Service,” *Chatterbox* (1969), 8, Sc Ser.\_\_M.C5444.1960-1969. Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York, New York.



In addition to the disdain of anything imitating whiteness, the Black Power Movement also brought with it a certain aesthetic. The traditional look of the debutante as discussed in this dissertation: light-skinned, European facial features, straightened hair, wearing a large white ball gown, contrasted greatly with what historian Tanisha Ford terms “soul style,” and the embrace of “black is beautiful” in the Black Power era.<sup>21</sup> This new aesthetic embraced African features, particularly natural hair. Radical feminist icons such as Angela Davis, with her large afro, embodied this aesthetic. As young black women embraced this Afrocentrism, the debutante ball, which glorified a different image of black womanhood, was less appealing.

Despite its wane in popularity, the tradition of the debutante ball continues to this day, though with less social fanfare as in decades past. Furthermore, elite black Washingtonians have instilled a new tradition for their young adult children. In 1980, Dr. Carlotta “Buff” Miles, a psychiatrist, launched the Tuxedo Ball. The event draws elite blacks from major cities across the United States. Similar to Jack and Jill, the Tuxedo Ball brings together black youth from similar socio-economic backgrounds together to get to know one another. Miles and attendees of the ball insist that the purpose is for the young people to network with each other and adult professionals before they go off to college. Frederika Hill Stubbs, who attended the Tuxedo Ball with her husband and two sons noted, “Each year the ball issues a directory with the names of the participants along with their home and college addresses so that the kids can keep in touch with each other.”<sup>22</sup> This emphasis on networking with the “right” people is reminiscent of the

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<sup>21</sup> Tanisha C. Ford, *Liberated Threads: Black Women, Style, and the Global Politics of Soul* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015).

<sup>22</sup> Frederika Hill Stubbs, quoted in Lawrence Otis Graham, *Our Kind of People: Inside America's Black Upper Class* (New York: Harper Collins, 1999), 51-52.

debutante ball, and its focus on maintaining and reproducing an elite class of African Americans.

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This dissertation began with the founding of the PW YWCA, the black debutante ball tradition, and African American involvement in the Girl Scout Council of the Nation's Capital. Segregation and racism shaped the formation of these spaces for black Washingtonians. Young black women and girls who migrated to the nation's capital at the turn of the twentieth century did not have the same options available to them that their white counterparts possessed. Because of discrimination in public accommodations and housing, they could not simply go to any boarding house for women or hotel and be offered a place to stay. The PW YWCA addressed this and established itself as a residence and resource for these women and girls. In contrast, black women who wanted to bring scouting to black girls did not create their own scouting program. Instead, they fought for inclusion in the already-established Girl Scout Council of the Nation's Capital. Scouting opened up new opportunities for recreation and socializing for black girls in Washington.

Throughout the twentieth century, the Phyllis Wheatly YWCA, Girl Scout Council of the Nation's Capital, and the debutante tradition continued to grow in black D.C. Girls attended charm workshops, played games and went to camp, and made their bows to society together. Then, the postwar period introduced a period of transition. As evidenced by the Girl Scout study in 1958, adolescent girls across the United States were increasingly more interested in hanging out in mixed groups with the opposite sex, rather

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than having a social life that revolved solely within single-sex spaces such as the PW YWCA and the Girl Scouts. Adapting to these changes in girls' culture, of which black girls were a part, the PW YWCA began incorporating co-ed activities within their programming for teenagers. The relationship between the debutante and the escort had always been central to the cotillion tradition but a closer look at this relationship revealed the ways the ritual perpetuated the heterosexualization of youth culture characteristic of the postwar period.

The civil rights movement also proved to be pivotal in the histories of the organizations, both locally and nationally. Segregation fostered the growth and development of these organizations, but would they survive desegregation? They did, in fact, survive. Black leaders in the scouts went from arguing for inclusion in the 1930s, to calling for full integration by the 1950s. Leaders in the PW YWCA and debutante ball organizers, however, were not as on board for integration. While the women of the PW YWCA were not averse to interracial work, which is something that they engaged as early as Julia West Hamilton's presidency, which began in the 1930s, they ultimately believed that remaining an autonomous black institution would best serve the needs of their members and community. The exclusive social clubs that sponsored debutante balls were private, and therefore were not obligated to integrate. Furthermore, they did not see the value in integrating, because for the most part, black and white society in Washington remained very much separate.

Looking at these social spaces reveals how black girls and black women used them to collectively develop black girls' moral, physical, and social selves. The GSCNC, the PW YWCA, and the debutante ball did not exist solely to allow black women to

cultivate black girls and young women in their image. And, these spaces were not solely sites of pleasure and leisure for black girls. They were each of these things. And because they were multi-functional, they played an important role in black communities not only in Washington, but in other black communities throughout the United States. At the same time that girls could visit the PW YWCA to take a dance class or meet with their clubs, they could desegregate a camp. Girl Scouts enjoyed camping with their friends, but also had the opportunity to be on the frontline of the civil rights movement and calls for integration. And while the debutante ball allowed elite black parents to exert some control over their teenage daughters' heterosexual interactions and dating choices, it also allowed an opportunity for these young women to dress up and feel like royalty for one night. Understanding these organizations and rituals helps us to broaden our understanding of the lives and experiences of black girls in Washington.

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