

# African American Reformers' Mission: Caring for Our Girls and Women

Based on the work of

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# Overview

This presentation is based on a paper exploring a social services system parallel to the white mainstream system created by female African American reformers during the Progressive Era to target young African American females.

# The Progressive Era

- Developments of this era include
  - Advances in technology
  - Increase in citizen participation and governmental responsiveness
  - Urbanization
  - Industrialization
  - Increase in nation's wealth

# African American Experience of The Progressive Era

- African Americans did not share in the benefits of this era
- Increased hardship
  - Economic
  - Exclusion from labor market
  - Discriminatory governmental legislation
  - Social
    - Jim Crow
    - Lynching
    - Neglected environments
    - Sharecropper system
- Disparity between rich and poor widened

# System of African American Female Reformers

African American female reformers developed a complex system of social welfare services (Hodges, 2001) parallel to the white social services system

# Issues of Identity for Reformers

- Sex struggle held secondary to race struggle
  - Fluid boundaries between gender and race work
  - Improving lives of African American women seen as improving conditions for entire race
- Socioeconomic status of reformers considerably higher than that of those they helped
  - A function of educational achievement
  - Seen as a call to duty and service
- Most reformers were educators
  - Teaching profession carried an aspect of social and political activism
  - Often had to work menial jobs (e.g. domestic servants) to supplement income

# Population Targeted for Service

- Poor and isolated African American girls
  - Rural and agrarian
  - Urban domestic workers
  - Young migrant women living with urban African American families
    - Intimidation and sense of inferiority among lower-class African-American women
- Working college girls
- Many eager to improve their quality of life

# Setting

- Served less fortunate in an array of settings
  - Sororities
  - Social settlements
  - Church groups
  - Schools
  - Clubs

# Services

- Education
- Shelter
- Character development
- Protection

# Education and Character Development

- Education viewed as most essential component of the race's development
- Teach African American girls in different settings
  - National African American sororities made educational welfare their primary focus
    - Alpha Kappa Alpha-Lambda Chapter
  - Founding of African American Schools
  - African American settlement houses
    - Included mothers' clubs which taught fundamentals of child-rearing, homemaking, and self-improvement
  - YWCA
- Reformers supported training in traditional (i.e. domestic) and non-traditional areas

# Protection and Shelter

- Recognized need for virtuous image to counter image popularized by whites
  - Relation of image to African Americans' treatment and protection from criminal abuse and sexual assault (Hine, 1990)
- Pink collar boarding houses provided safe, home-like environment for business women (Fine, 1986)
  - Not available to many African American women who moved to cities alone

# White Rose Mission and Industrial Association

- Founded by Victoria Earle Matthews in 1897
- Shelter for women new to the city
  - Safe home
  - Educational opportunities
  - Training in self-help and racial uplift
  - HQ for domestic workers on their days off
  - Residents became surrogate family (Waites, 2001)
  - WRM's Travelers Aid for African American girls who moved to New York alone
    - Agents stationed at piers to
      - Answer questions
      - Allay fears
      - Provide escort to new jobs or WRM

# Phillis Wheatley Association

- Boarding home in Cleveland similar to White Rose Mission
- Founded by Jane Edna Hunter 1912
- Became political base for working African American women
- National program by the 1930's

# Emma Ransom House

- Opened 1926 by Harlem branch of YWCA
  - Safe, cheap housing for young African American women
  - Also provided
    - Food
    - Job training
    - Social activities
- (Weisenfeld, 1994)

# Refinement

- Reformers sought to refine young African American girls to become more acceptable to whites
- National Association of Colored Women hosted cultural appreciation events (White, 1993)
- Charlotte Hawkins Brown founded Palmer Memorial Institute
  - Hosted teas in her home
- Emotionalism denigrated as lower-class
- Refinement sometimes seen as lack of racial pride

# Perceptions of Reformers' Approach

- Women's approach was holistic
  - Not divided as presented here
- White social welfare reformers criticized African American reformers by claiming they
  - Were out of step with modern policy
  - Could not manage a program
  - Could not manage money(O'Donnell, 1994)
- Feelings and perceptions of those helped by the reformers less known
  - Some evidence of discomfort and resentment
    - Oral history interviews in early 1900's of women migrating from rural south to DC (Clark-Lewis, 2000)

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