

Snapshot

African American Community Life
in Ithaca, New York
1900 to 1950

By Ingrid W. Bauer

Cover Photo

State Street in the 1940s: Allen Jones, ?, ?, Bob Thomas, Claude "Sonny" Cook, William "Bill" Herndon, and Adolph Reed [left to right] (DeWitt Historical Society of Tompkins County, James L. Gibbs photo collection).

About the Author

Ingrid Bauer earned her BA from Cornell University in January 2002. Born and raised in Western Massachusetts, she is now proud to call Ithaca home. In the fall of 2000, she volunteered to take part in the Cornell-Ithaca Partnership's oral history project. The following winter, she began conducting historical research for the Cornell-Ithaca Partnership. Her research formed part of her senior thesis examining the historical relationship between the Southside neighborhood and the African American community in Ithaca.

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Preface

"Snapshot: African American Community Life in Ithaca, New York, 1900-1950" is part of an ongoing effort to recognize, preserve, and celebrate the history of the Southside neighborhood and Ithaca's African American community. Since 2000, the Cornell-Ithaca Partnership, residents of the Southside neighborhood, and members of the African American community have collaborated on a number of projects related to neighborhood and community history, including a book of oral histories, a play adapted from the book, and an exhibit of a "typical" Southside living room.

The decision to research the history of the African American community between 1900 and 1950 emerged from the Cornell-Ithaca Partnership's oral history project. When elder African Americans began talking about what life used to be like in the Southside neighborhood, they said it felt like "goin' back fifty years!" (Community history meeting, September 12, 2000). They remembered the Southside neighborhood as a vibrant locus of African American community life, despite the hardships they faced: migration, floods, the Depression, job discrimination, *de facto* segregation, and daily forms of prejudice.

This "Snapshot" demonstrates how the Southside developed as an important space for African Americans during the first decades of the twentieth century. The St. James AME Zion Church and the Southside Community Center, as well as social clubs, community organizations, and black-owned businesses played important roles in forging community life during this period. However, Ithaca was not officially segregated, and African Americans lived in other neighborhoods as well, as the Northside's Calvary Baptist Church attests. Furthermore, the Southside neighborhood was home to people of all ethnic and class backgrounds, from the wealthy business owners on South Albany Street to the Italian and Irish immigrants on the 200 block of Cleveland Avenue.

Since the 1950s, the Southside neighborhood has faced a series of challenges, from urban renewal to the war on drugs to the current crisis of commercial development. Remembering when the Southside was "where it's at" is not merely an exercise in nostalgia, but is a way for neighborhood residents to regain a sense of pride in their community today and to plan for a better future.

Historical Background

The history of African Americans in Ithaca and Tompkins County reaches back more than 200 years. The first white settlers from Maryland and Virginia brought slaves with them to Ithaca and Caroline around 1805, and slaves were an integral part of the rural agricultural economy.

After New York State abolished slavery in 1827, formerly enslaved and free African Americans began settling in the village of Ithaca, whose African American community grew from nine in 1820, to 112 in 1830, to 136 in 1840 (Horne, 1988: 18). Many of them found homes in the southwest part of the village, or lived with their employers.

One of the first community achievements of Ithaca's African American population was to establish a church. A group of 17 African Americans, led by former slave Peter Webb, split from the white-dominated Methodist Episcopal Church around 1833. This group formed their own congregation of the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, a denomination founded in New York City in 1796. After meeting for three years in members' homes, the congregation built the St. James AME Zion Church on Wheat Street in 1836. The church gained recognition as a state and national historic landmark in 1982.

The St. James Church and its congregation played an important role in the abolitionist movement and as a station on the Underground Railroad. Both black and white Ithacans came to see Frederick Douglass speak at anti-slavery conventions held at St. James in 1842 and 1852 (Foner, 1975: 237-241). Pastors of St. James Church worked with black and white abolitionists in Ithaca and in surrounding towns who helped former slaves escape to Canada. In homes throughout Ithaca, fleeing slaves were hidden in basements, secret rooms, and, in one house, the large brick oven (Galvin, 1943: 141-142). Harriet Tubman, a leader in the Underground Railroad who lived in nearby Auburn, N. Y., was one among many who led slaves to freedom through Ithaca. Some former slaves remained in Ithaca, where they found jobs and became part of the small but growing free black community.

Settling in Neighborhoods

Since the 1830s, a significant number of African Americans have lived in Ithaca's Southside, which has always been a diverse working-class neighborhood. In the 19th century, African Americans did not only live in the Southside, but lived where they could afford to, forming residential clusters in working-class neighborhoods or "living-in" with their employers. Many decided to settle in the Southside because of the location of the St. James AME Zion Church, the tradition of Underground Railroad activity in the area, the ability of African Americans to purchase homes, and their desire to live in a black community. As early as the 1850s, some African Americans also began to settle in the Northside neighborhood.

In 1880, the first census year to provide detailed data on residential patterns, "Black households ... were scattered in several neighborhoods: Southside, with the greatest concentration on the block bounded by Wheat, Clinton and Plain Streets, and on West Green Street near Corn; on South Cayuga Street; and on North Albany Street. No block was solidly black." By 1900, only one black household remained on South Cayuga Street. More African Americans now resided on the Northside, with a total of 50 people living north of Cascadilla Street (Horne, 1987: 13).

By the turn of the century, the African American population on Wheat Street had grown. The street was also more visibly divided between black and white, with African Americans on the 100 block, spreading out along South Corn and South Plain Streets, and Irish Americans on the 200 block, extending onto South Meadow Street. "There is nothing to suggest that this segregation by block was deliberate or planned," argues local historian Gretchen Sasche. "It may, in fact, have been determined more by blacks desiring to live closer to their church and extended family members than by the Irish trying to move away from the blacks and create an Irish neighborhood" (DeWitt Historical Society, no date).

Little is known about the decision to rename Wheat Street. A petition to change the street's name to Cleveland Avenue was presented by residents and property owners to the Ithaca Common Council on July 15, 1908, passing by a vote of five to one on August 5th. Around this time, other Ithaca streets were being renamed "avenues" as well, perhaps to sound more sophisticated.

What is surprising was the decision to name Wheat Street after President Grover Cleveland, who had died only a few weeks earlier on June 24, 1908. Cleveland was unpopular for his role in the economic depression of the 1890s, and was also a Democrat. At the time, the Democratic Party was dominated by Southern conservatives who took a vehemently anti-black, anti-Catholic, and anti-Jewish stance. Sasche writes, "Perhaps by the time of his death all this was forgotten by a new generation of Wheat Street residents, who were interested in discarding their rural, old-fashioned name for a more modern and urban image." Another explanation could be that black residents, who may have opposed naming their street after Cleveland, did not, were not asked to, or were prevented from signing the petitions presented to Common Council.

Home ownership was a reality for some African Americans by the turn of the century. In 1900, about one third of the 117 black heads of household owned their own homes. (Horne, 1987: 9). The pattern continued in 1920, with an equal number of black-owned homes located on both the Southside and the Northside. There were also a handful of African American families on Giles, Hudson, Eddy, Pearl and East State Streets. About 75 African Americans "lived-in" on East Hill, working as cooks, domestics, and custodians for families, fraternities, boarding houses, and dormitories, primarily related to the growth of Cornell University (1920 federal census).

Class and race appear to be closely connected in the formation of residential areas. While residential segregation was not the law, as in the Jim Crow South, de facto segregation and discrimination occurred in Ithaca, as was common in many Northern communities. Race-restrictive deed covenants, which were legal until 1948, were common in new subdivisions near Cornell, as well as in the suburbs on West Hill and South Hill (Tompkins County deed records). Thus African Americans were limited to the downtown neighborhoods until the 1950s, when the impact of the civil rights movement and the efforts of local activists began to desegregate Ithaca's neighborhoods (interview with Jemma Macera, October 5, 2001).

Migration

During the first half of the 20th century, millions of African Americans left the South in what is known as the Great Migration. Pushed by economic hard-

ship, prejudice, and racist violence, and pulled by family letters and newspaper reports, industrial jobs, and the promise of freedom from discrimination, rural African Americans headed to cities in the North and West (Grossman, 1989). Chicago, Detroit, and New York experienced a vast influx of migrants. Black Southerners also came to smaller cities such as Syracuse, Rochester, and Ithaca.

Census data show that Southern migrants began to settle in Ithaca as early as 1900, and gradually more arrived (Horne, 1987: 6). During the teens and twenties, however, Ithaca did not offer the number of industrial jobs that made migration to larger Northern cities particularly appealing to black Southerners. In fact, Ithaca's African American population decreased from 470 (3.2 percent of the total population) in 1910 to 453 (2.7 percent) in 1920. Yet migrants were making a mark on the population, perhaps replacing the long-established families from New York State. In 1920, about half of African Americans in Ithaca were born out of state, 150 were from Southern states (33 percent), and 58 were from Virginia (13 percent) (1920 federal census).

As Southern migrants came in during the 1920s, many other African Americans left Ithaca to find work or to continue their education. In 1923 *The Monitor*, Ithaca's first African American newspaper, reported that Harold Murray left Ithaca to work for the Noiseless Typewriter Company in Mexico. Lincoln Carter left Ithaca "to enter the clothing business" in New York City. Hugh Hall left Ithaca for New York City as well (June 1923: 6).

Oral histories and census data indicate that a more significant period of African American migration to Ithaca followed World War II. During World War II, sisters Anita Reed and Dorothy Rollins moved from Ithaca to Washington, D.C., where government jobs were widely available, although racism there was more overt than in Ithaca. In Ithaca, the sisters say, African Americans did not get hired because there was a shortage of jobs. After the War they returned to Ithaca to stay, as did many new migrants (Oral History Book).

Race relations

While less overt than the racist Jim Crow policies of the South, daily forms of discrimination and prejudice affected the lives of Black Ithacans. Some older Ithacans don't remember having any "race problems" per se, except "you

could get ignored" (Community history meeting, September 12, 2000). When searching for housing, applying for a job, or getting a bite to eat, African Americans encountered subtle forms of hostility that prevented their participation as equals in the Ithaca community.

Explicit displays of racism, however, were not unheard of in Ithaca during the 1920s. The Ku Klux Klan, whose ranks peaked in 1924 with two million members nationwide (Southern Poverty Law Center, 1997), gained ground in Central New York (Haley, 1983). In the fall of 1925, five hundred members of the Klan marched through downtown Ithaca, where the streets were lined with thousands of supporters. That evening the Klan held a ceremony at the Circus Flats, concluding with the burning of a cross (*Ithaca Journal*, October 5, 1925). Clearly, many native white Ithacans supported the Klan. But Mrs. Eleanor Washington claimed that in the African American community, "nobody paid any attention to the KKK and they just went away!" (Horne, 1988: 26).

Work

Until the 1950s, the majority of African Americans in Ithaca held blue-collar positions in industry and service work, while a few owned small businesses. Domestic service, especially at Cornell, was one of the most common occupations. At the turn of the century there were 125 black servants, more than one third of who worked in fraternity houses. Three employment agencies, operated by local women, placed black servants for the growing demand by Cornell-affiliated employers (Horne, 1987: 9).

The number of unskilled black laborers declined from 50 in 1880 to 40 in 1900, "perhaps reflecting the beginning of foreign immigration" (Horne, 1987: 9). However, by this time more black men had entered skilled trades. In 1900 there were two carpenters, two masons, one brick manufacturer, three stove mounters or repairers, two cigar makers, one letter carrier, one photographer, one baker, and two bootblacks, one with his own shop. Three black barbers were listed, as were three caterers, and a secretary at Treman, King and Co., a hardware store owned by one of Ithaca's most prominent white businessmen. The few black women who held skilled positions included one practical nurse, a Canadian-born dental assistant, a hairdresser, and the storekeeper at a grocery store at 519 West Clinton Street. Miss Jessie Jackson, who later became a mu-

sic teacher, was employed as a typist in a law office (1987: 10).

Many of the same labor patterns held true in the 1920s. For women, work outside their homes meant working in others' homes, usually as cooks (39) and domestics (30) (1920 federal census). Lucy Brown recalled:

My mother worked for Professor Howard Merrick, who was the head of the Graduate School. She worked! I can tell you she only had Thursday and Sunday afternoon off. All the rest of the time she worked. Men worked long hours too. A few worked at the Ithaca Hotel. I remember hearing that they started off washing dishes and a few men got promoted to waiters, but all the waiters were Black. When I was young, when I was a child and when I was a young woman, all the waiters at the Ithaca Hotel were Black. And that was an evolving process and at one time that was lily white too! (Hill, 1994: 35).

The most common occupations for men were janitors (47 total, 28 in Cornell fraternities), cooks or chefs (22), and waiters (11). Twenty-one could be identified as skilled laborers, working at Morse Chain Works, the coal company, the gas company, the salt company, and the Air Craft company (1920 federal census).

By the 1920s a number of African Americans were entering semi-professional positions. Miss Jessie Johnson had assumed her well-known role as a piano teacher. Charles O. Wilson, editor of *The Monitor*, was a notary public and tax consultant, as well as a private secretary for a white family. Levi Spaulding was Ithaca's first black police officer. Hired in 1919, he served until he died from a heart attack after apprehending a murder suspect in 1930 (Landesman, 1999).

Black-Owned Businesses

Black-owned businesses, many of them located on the Southside, were centers for African American community life. Black-owned businesses provided services unavailable to members of the African American community, and contributed to neighborhood development by circulating wealth within the community.

Barbershops were not only the first businesses in Ithaca to be owned by Af-

rican Americans, they were also places to talk politics and gossip. As early as 1884, at least six of thirteen barbershops in Ithaca were black-owned (Horne, 1987: 9). In the 1920s, Harry B. Parker's "Equal Rights Barbershop" operated out of the Cayuga House (Hill, 1994: 34). His advertisement in *The Monitor* reads: "Yes, a Tonsorial Artist who takes pride in his work and his ability to give you the best service possible" (April 1923: 12). Joe Hopkins operated a barbershop out of the Elks Club when it was still located on Tioga Street (Hill, 1994: 34). Albert Curry of Pennsylvania had a shop on the West End (1008 West Seneca Street), Charles Moore of Georgia had a shop at 539 West Clinton Street, and Bert Johnson continued to run his father's shop on North Aurora Street (his father, George Johnson aided many fugitive slaves on their way through Ithaca, and was a loyal Republican who served for one year as Steward of the New York State Senate, 1872-73 (Hill, 1994: 18)).

Ora Spaulding's hair salon, located at the Cayuga House, offered Marcel Waving (*The Monitor* June 1923: 11). Both Marion B. Wheaton's Bronze Beauty Shop and Geraldine's Beauty Salon were run out of their homes on South Plain Street. Tama Ellis and Hattie M. Jones also ran beauty parlors, and Edwina Walker worked as a hairdresser (1920 federal census).

Other women ran businesses at home. Stella Williams, of 113 S. Plain Street, had a doll and sewing shop (Hill, 1994: 34). Dressmaker Mrs. Georgia Andrews, of 413 East State Street advertised in *The Monitor*: "Being mentally clothed anew it is but natural that people should turn eagerly to new Spring apparel. This desire for new Spring clothes is as natural as the budding of new leaves on the trees" (June 1923: 14). Mrs. Harry Harris operated an employment agency and catered ice cream parties on Sundays at her home at 503 North Albany Street (Horne, 1987: 10).

The editor of *The Monitor* was proud of local businessmen and, besides carrying their advertisements, took time to recognize their accomplishments. "George Bailey of 118 S. Plain Street, Ithaca, is engaged in the business of repairing musical instruments. Bailey is reliable and a genius manufacturer of stringed instruments. He has been in this business for the past fifteen years. If you have an instrument that needs repairing or would like one built give George a chance. He is a member of the Silver Tone Mandolin Club and a Deacon of Calvary Baptist Church." J.F. Dorsey, of 121 South Aurora Street, was a general contractor specializing in: "Excavating, ClamShell and Crane Work,

Sand and Gravel Hauling." *The Monitor* reads: "The progress which J.F. Dorsey has made in the past ten years is an example of what any man can do if he sticks to it. He started in our city as a general laborer and by thought, of which we speak in our editorial, he has succeeded in building a business of which anyone could be proud" (June 1923: 3). OJ Jones was not only the chef for Cornell's athletic club, preparing special meals for the crew and football teams, but was also owner of the XYZ Club, at the east end of the Green St. bridge. *The Monitor* noted "Mr. Jones ... has acquired his widely known ability through 23 years of experience, serving in various large hotels before locating in his present position" (March 1923: 2). He was also "a 'professional' gambler who had a chauffeur and servants" (Horne, 1987: 10).

Other businesses that advertised in *The Monitor* included Hughes Cleaners and Tailoring, at the corner of State and Corn St. Contractor A.B. Jones, of 132 Cleveland Avenue, advertised: "Floors Waxed and Cleaned. Old Floors a Specialty" (April 1923: 2). Walter "Peaches" Everetts owned the Black and White Cab Company since 1920. (June 1923: 3). The Cayuga House, at 501 West State Street, was advertised as the "Leading Colored Hotel in City" by owner Thomas Russell (March 1923: 4). The Cayuga House was later owned by Jim Miller and was known as "Miller's" (Hill, 1994: 34).

Education

In 1841 the New York Colored American reported that Ithaca had a "flourishing" school for "colored" children. By 1860 most African American children were attending school. Around the turn of the century, only 23 African American adults were illiterate, indicating that both recent migrants and long-time residents had attended some school (Horne, 1988: 20).

It is unclear how long segregated schooling lasted in Ithaca. Starting in 1925, children from the Southside neighborhood attended the Henry St. John School, at the corner of East Clinton and South Albany Streets. The building was converted into offices and apartments after the Henry St. John School was closed due to budget cuts (Hobbie, 1988: 205). From 1854 onwards, children from the Northside attended Central School, at the corner of West Buffalo and North Albany Streets. In 1972, Central was renamed after African American principal Beverly J. Martin, and relocated to the adjacent Boynton

Middle School. The expanded school now serves children from both the Northside and Southside neighborhoods (Hobbie, 1988: 113-114).

Jessie Johnson was the first African American to graduate from Ithaca High School, probably around 1879 (Landesman, 1999). Members of the African American community celebrated their high school graduates and college students, and wished that more students would graduate. *The Monitor* congratulated the three young women graduating from Ithaca High School in 1923, Misses Louise Eleanor Taylor, Eloisa L. Marine, and Evangeline Lucille Redmond. In addition, the editor wrote, "We wish more of our young people were graduating this year and hope that these young ladies will continue to study and make a mark for themselves and for the race, as there is plenty of room for such material and the race needs you" (June 1923: 5).

Cornell University was founded in 1865 on the principal of providing study for any person in any field. It was one of the nation's first institutions of higher learning to open its doors to women and African Americans. Edward U.A. Brooks of Elmira was Cornell's first African American graduate in 1894, and Sara Winifred Brown of Winchester, Virginia was the first black woman to graduate in 1897 (Horne, 1988: 21). In 1943, Emma Corinne Brown Galvin was the first African American woman to earn her Ph.D. from Cornell, which then refused to hire her. She eventually gained a position at Ithaca College, and taught folklore classes at the Southside Community Center (Hill, 1994: 48).

Although few local African Americans attended Cornell, students from elsewhere participated in Ithaca's African American community. Thirteen women and fourteen men attended Cornell in 1905, where they felt excluded from student activities (Wesley, 1957: 57). Many of them worked in fraternity houses on campus, which led them to form their own association. What started as the Social Study Club at St. James church in the fall of 1905, grew into the Alpha Chapter of Alpha Phi Omega, the nation's first black fraternity. Alpha Phi Alpha was founded on December 4, 1906 at 411 East State Street, the home of Archie Singleton, who acted as a mentor to the students. The Eta Chapter of Alpha Kappa Alpha sorority was founded by 1923 (Horne, 1987: 16).

Ithaca College began as a music conservatory at the Boardman House next to DeWitt Park in 1892. The college expanded throughout downtown before moving to South Hill in the 1960s. According to musician Bernie Milton, born on North Albany Street in 1942, his mother attended Ithaca College, and he

came an organist, conductor, music teacher, and music writer (Oral History Book). It is unclear if William Powell, whom *The Monitor* called "one of our popular Ithaca Collegiates," was in fact a graduate of Ithaca College pursuing further studies at the Rochester Institute of Technology, or if he was simply an undergraduate at RIT at the time. *The Monitor* proudly tracked the activities of Ithacans studying away from home, showing that a college education was becoming a reality for some African Americans (April 1923: 4).

Churches

The earliest African American institution in Ithaca was the St. James AME Zion Church, founded in 1833. Throughout the United States black churches were not only places of worship, but were also centers for political and social activity (Overacker, 1998). In Ithaca, St. James was an Underground Railroad Station, and its pastors carried on that legacy of activism in the community. Church groups for youth, women, and men met on weeknights. Other community organizations held meetings there, lacking other space until the formation of the Southside Community Center.

St. James, originally a one-story structure, went through many physical transformations over the years. The second story was built in 1861, and in 1887 a group of white Ithacans donated a bell for the tower. In his account of the church's history, Reverend Vincent W. Howell tells of turn-of-the-century financial troubles the congregation faced:

Other exterior and interior repairs were made in 1895, but unfortunately this work resulted in a legal suit brought on by Holmes Hollister, the owner of a local lumber yard and mill. Thus, a mechanic's lien was placed on the property and the title to the church was lost until Hollister's death in 1912, at which time (July 13, 1913) his wife and children sold the property back to the members for \$1.00 (1986: 41).

An article in the Ithaca Daily News (13 August, 1895) describes how the congregation sought contributions from Ithaca residents to help with the repairs. "The church is the only lasting institution that the colored people of our northern cities have..." it commented, saying that 90 % of Ithaca's 500 blacks 'are

willing to go to this church" (Horne, 1987: 14).

In 1857 a second church, first known as "Wesleyan Methodist Episcopal (colored)," was established on North Albany Street, "the other center of the black community" (Horne, 1987: 14). In 1903 the congregation changed its name to Calvary Baptist Church and built a new meeting house, which stands today at 507 North Albany Street. During the 1920s, various community activities and meetings were held on weeknights, including a regular Thursday evening talk "on some of the various questions of the day pertaining to the African-American question" (*The Monitor* March 1923: 5).

Community Organizations

Just as church groups addressed secular issues in the African American community, secular and political organizations often held their meetings at churches, especially at St. James. The Ithaca chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, chartered April 11, 1921, first met at the AME Zion Church. Original members included Allen Jones (the first president), T.L. Irvin, Miss Margaret Thomas, Mrs. Mabel Wright, and John Mason. Over the years, speakers they invited included W.E.B. DuBois, Roy Wilkins, and Walter White, the former NAACP national secretary. The NAACP advertised its membership drive in *The Monitor*:

This organization is the one real organization standing, and working, for a real democracy in America. Many of the complicated problems confronting our race have been solved through its work, but yet there is lots more to be accomplished. It can, and will be, but in order to do so this organization must have the full cooperation of every negro in America, who believes in the full manhood rights, and of every white person who is a real believer in full democracy (April 1923: 1).

Fraternal organizations abounded in the first decades of the 20th century. The Henry Highland Garland Garnet Lodge, founded in 1892, sponsored the Black Masons, which met on the Titus block of West State Street (Hill, 1994: 28; Horne, 1987: 15). The Black Knights of Pythias, listed in the 1900 City Directory, met the second and fourth Wednesday of each month at the Odd Fel-

lows Hall. A branch of the Order of the Eastern Stars was also formed around this time (Hill, 1994: 22). The Young Men's Club met at 141 South Aurora Street, and in 1910 H. Harris was president and W.E. Payne was secretary (Hill, 1994: 28). The Civic Club, whose secretary and manager was Napoleon Jackson, was founded in 1911, and met at 317-319 East Seneca Street. The Black Elks club, Forest City Lodge 180, founded in the 1920s, first met at 119 South Tioga Street, and moved to 536 West Green Street in the 1950s (Horne, 1987: 15-16).

Women's clubs were perhaps the most influential in the community life of African Americans in Ithaca, and many of their social events were listed in *The Monitor*. The Frances Harper Woman's Club, however, was more than a social club. Meeting on Thursday evenings to do arts and crafts, the women also talked about ways to bring the community together. It was their idea to establish a community center for Ithaca's African Americans, similar to the "settlement houses" that served European immigrants on the Northside and the West End (Hobbie, 1988: 117, 125-126).

The Southside Community Center

The members of the Frances Harper club overcame many obstacles, including the racist sentiments displayed during the 1925 Klan rally, to form the Serv-Us League in 1928 (Hill 1994: 38; *Ithaca Journal*, April 26, 1938). Led by Mrs. Jessie Cooper, they raised enough money from within the African American community to rent a house at 221 South Plain Street. In 1930, the South Side House joined the Community Chest, an umbrella group for social agencies in Ithaca (it later became the United Way). As their activities expanded, from a Thursday evening women's group to a full schedule of recreational and educational programs for all ages, so did their need for more space. The Serv-Us league held bake sales and other community events to raise money towards purchasing a house at 305 South Plain Street.

During the Great Depression residents of Ithaca faced hard times, but Southside residents were used to making due with what they had. The disastrous flood of 1935 made the South Side House uninhabitable. Drawing on resources throughout Ithaca, Mrs. Jessie Cooper and the newly hired director James L. Gibbs, of Syracuse's Dunbar Community Center, led activities in schools,

churches, and other community centers, using funds provided by residents and the Community Chest.

It soon became apparent that the South Side House needed a new building. An article in *Opportunity*, an African American magazine published out of New York City, mentioned that by the fall of 1935, six African American youths had been sentenced to prison, and both community members and city officials seemed to agree that their "delinquency" stemmed from the lack of meaningful activities (Dec 1940: 359). With the support of the wider Ithaca community, especially local business leaders such as Robert Treman, a public campaign garnered \$10,000 for a new community center. The Federal Works Progress Administration agreed to provide the labor if the community paid for materials. Work began in September 1937.

Before construction was complete, First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt dedicated the new Southside Community Center on February 17, 1938. The project was running over budget, and a mortgage campaign was launched to raise the necessary \$15,000 to finish construction. Other community members cosigned the mortgage, which was finally paid off in February 1944. *The Journal* cheered for the campaign:

This effort to raise funds for Ithaca's 'community experiment in inter-racial co-operation' has attracted state and national attention as well as local. Mrs. Franklin D. Roosevelt has said: 'It will provide a means of promoting and increasing the good will now existing between the races.' Governor Lehman writes: 'I am watching with keen interest the progress of the South Side Center, and I am very happy to contribute to its success.' Walter White, executive secretary of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, asserted: 'You are intelligently facing the Negro problem here and it is tremendously important to make a success of this laboratory experiment which, if successful, will be followed in other states (26 April 1938).

The Center opened in September 1938, having cost a total of \$49,052 (*Opportunity*, Dec 1940: 360).

The Southside Community Center, directed by James L. Gibbs and his wife Hortense E. Gibbs of Syracuse, offered a wide range of programs. Besides after-school programs and sports, the Center also served as an employment office, calling on white business leaders who sat on the board of directors to lo-

cate skilled jobs for African Americans at the Ithaca Gun Factory, Cayuga Tool Company, and Morse Chain Company. The well-equipped new building included: a Gym-A-Torium (combined gymnasium and auditorium) named after Cornell alumnus and athlete Jerome "Brud" Holland, a library named after police officer Levi Spaulding, a kitchen, a dining room, a canteen, and game rooms, as well as offices and an apartment for the directors. The Center was "the place to be" well into the 1960s, and it continues to serve the community today.

Entertainment

Black social life in Ithaca was quite vibrant during the 1920s. Concerts, dances, dinners, picnics, and trips to friends and relatives throughout Central New York were much-heralded events.

Many community organizations doubled as social clubs. Wa Ha Ma, Inc., the Tomahawks, and the Eastern Star Club were women's social clubs. *The Monitor* reported on Wa Ha Ma's "High Tea" in the decorous language of the era:

On Thursday Night June 7, the Arch Board of Chiefs of the Wa Ha Ma, Inc., held a High Tea in their wigwam. The rooms were attractively arranged and decorated with palms and Wa Ha Ma ornamentations. A little canary bird as well as several beautiful goldfish helped to greet the guests.

Mrs. Egbert Bowe was the lady of honor. The following ladies poured and assisted:--Mrs. Alonzo Brown, Miss Lucy Praether, Mrs. Gilbert Howard, Mrs. Nanie Jones, Mrs. Levi Spaulding, Mrs. Archie Moore, Mrs. Omer Jones, Mrs. I. Summerfiled, and Mrs. James Miller.

Mr. James Miller was the steward of the evening and catered the tea in an unexcelled manner. The serving table was highly decorated with costly silver and flowers and everyone thoroughly enjoyed the menu which was very attractive both to the eye and taste. About 100 were present. All who attended expressed themselves as having an unusually pleasant evening (June 1923: 3).

A similar event was the Frances Harper Woman's Club's annual Mothers' and Daughters' banquet. In May of 1923, Mrs. Agnes Jordan, of 311 South Plain Street, hosted 93 guests to dinner and music (June 1923: 2). At these lavish

events, " 'People would set out their china and other fine dishes and wear beautiful gowns,'" says Mrs. Ruth Mann. " 'Most people knew how to do things because they worked for the white folks. Blacks in Ithaca had a vibrant social life'" (Hill, 1994: 28).

Held by the Daughters of Elks in May 1923, Jazz A La Mode gave a thorough sampling of local musical and theatrical talent. The Elite Novelty Jazz Band, with pianist Miss Gorumm, violinist Mr. Robinson, and saxophonist Julius "Jew Baby" Jones, provided music throughout the show. Other acts included "Funny" Frank Johnson as King Tut in the Sahara Desert, Mabel Baker in the Sheik of Abraham, and Mrs. E. "Bozo" Williams, "The Prima Dona with the nightingale voice" (*The Monitor*, April 1923: 1).

The Ithaca Colored Brass Band, active between 1905 and 1911, was managed by John Wye. The Silver Tone Mandolin Club, of which George Bailey was a member, played through the 1920s (Hill 1994: 28).

Since African American communities in Central New York were rather small and isolated, frequent gatherings of family and friends in nearby towns and cities built regional connections. Around the turn of the century, the Webb-VanDyke-Bailor family, including white relatives and friends, held yearly picnics in Brooktondale. Margaret Williams, born in Owego in 1895, spent summers with relatives in Vestal, and remembers attending these gatherings:

One time I remember going out there [to Brooktondale] from Vestal, and Kip took out his army fife and played, "Molly Put the Kettle on and We'll Take Tea." [The picnic] wasn't all black. There was a lot of white people, too. It wasn't segregated. Mabel Webb, daughter of Peter and Lucina [Williams' great-aunt], played piano for the picnics and everybody danced (Nizalowski 1986: 55).

With the advent of automobiles, black Ithacans "motored" to other cities in Central New York to attend social events. Charles T. Haley explained that his family, from Bath, Steuben County, did the same.

On almost any worthy occasion Black families, the Haley family included, would travel to various cities and towns within a fifty-mile radius to visit other Black families, hold reunions, attend picnics, cultural events (dances, concerts, jazz fests), and of course weddings and funerals. On the surface this may not

seem very much different from what most white families did then or now. But for Blacks these trips were of special importance because they provided the means by which racial and cultural cohesiveness could be maintained. ... These soirees were also means through which the young people could meet future spouses (1985: 55).

Such events were covered in *The Monitor's* "who's who" and "social" columns:

Miss Lillian Cornish of 205 E. State Street, has just returned from a weekend visit with relatives and friends at Elmira, N.Y. (April 1923: 1)

The young ladies of the Delta Sigma Theta Sorority at Syracuse University gave a formal spring dance on Saturday, May 12, at the Odd Fellows hall, Syracuse, New York. Many out of town guests were there. Ithaca, Utica, and Hamilton were all represented. Those from Ithaca who attended the affair were the Misses Teal, Caine, E, and M. Taylor, Singleton, Wathal Payne, F. L. Thompson, and R. L. Harvey. (June 1923: 3).

Messrs. Joseph Reynolds and Hugh Harley motored from Binghamton to visit Mrs. R. Hill and to attend the Jazz a la Mode (June 1923: 6)

Haley suggests that these events were perhaps for the "proper" African Americans in Central New York towns, pointing to the intra-community class divisions that arose following the Great Migration (1985: 56). George S. Schuyler, who grew up in Syracuse in the early 1900s, also recalled social divisions within the African American community.

Schuyler's mother prided herself on maintaining high cultural and household standards and discouraged him from associating with blacks who had recently migrated from the South because "they didn't know how to act." Young George was well aware of an "underworld class" with the "expected contingent of pimps, gamblers, roustabouts, hoboes, and tramps." Above this group were the "poor but respectable" laborers and domestics with homes and families but with little schooling. At the top were the chefs, butlers, coachmen, and others who worked for wealthy whites and, according to Schuyler, did not "fraternize with the riffraff" (Sernett 1995: 74).

In Ithaca, the African American community in the first decades of the 20th century was too small to experience many internal class divisions. However, Dr. James L. Gibbs Jr., who spent his childhood in Ithaca, remembered tensions between the "respectables" who attended church and the Southside Community Center, and those who spent their leisure time at the drinking establishments, and were more likely to get in trouble with the law. The social events described in *The Monitor* were attended primarily, by the former, not the latter. Dr. Gibbs also suggested that fights and arrests outside of bars, such as Miller's at the corner of South Corn and West State Streets, led white Ithacans to make broad generalizations that did not reflect the majority of the African American community (Interview, 5 June 2001).

Conclusion

Given the economic and social limitations that African Americans faced in Ithaca, they managed to build a strong, vital community in the first decades of the 20th century. Much of this community life took place on the Southside, not only because many African Americans lived there but also because most of Ithaca's black-owned businesses, institutions, and social life were located in the neighborhood. While at least half of all African Americans lived in other parts of Ithaca, primarily in their own homes on the Northside or with employers on East Hill, the Southside was where they went to church, attended political and social events, participated in Southside Community Center activities, had their hair done, or went shopping.

Recognizing, preserving, and celebrating the rich African American heritage of the Southside neighborhood is an important step toward improving the quality of life and reinforcing a sense of community for current neighborhood residents of all ethnic and class backgrounds.

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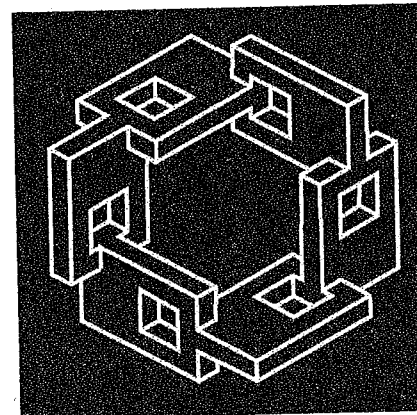
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