ABSTRACT

Title of Thesis: "In This You Street Vicinity": Building a Cultural Center in Washington, D.C., 1903-1912

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The decade of 1903-1912 was a period of great creation in the U Street neighborhood of Washington, D.C., the result of social conditions that had emerged through Reconstruction and beyond. The institutions that were built to house Black Washington's cultural activities in this time were sites of conflict between contingents of Washingtonians, both Black and white, who held competing visions for the future of their city and communities. Although different principles and priorities determined the development and operation of different buildings, such as True Reformers' Hall, the Twelfth Street Y.M.C.A., and the Howard Theatre, the concentration of cultural institutions in this one location produced a coherent idea of U Street that would carry into future decades. U Street at the beginning of the twentieth century was the local creation of people who were involved in national discussions on politics, religion, society, and economics and engaged with what was new and modern in arts and entertainment. Even before it became a famous theater district, U Street was an expression of Black business and Black artistry and the aspirations that the people there had for the future.

“IN THIS YOU STREET VICINITY”:
BUILDING A CULTURAL CENTER IN WASHINGTON, D.C., 1903-1912

by

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Thesis submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of the
University of Maryland, College Park in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts
2024

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Acknowledgments

The path to the completion of this thesis was rewarding but winding, and I have so much gratitude to express for the many people who joined me on this journey and kept me moving all the way to the finish line.

From the History Department at the University of Maryland, College Park, I would like to thank Jodi Hall for her patience and excellent shepherding. I needed it. I would also like to thank my committee members, Dr. Robyn Muncy and Dr. Quincy Mills, for their generosity, their willingness to serve, and their thoughtful readings, questions, and recommendations. Most of all, I would like to thank my advisor, Dr. Saverio Giovacchini, who often had more faith in this project than I did. I am so fortunate to have an advisor who could see the value in the story I wanted to tell and truly appreciated the way I wanted to tell it.

Many thanks are due my beloved History & Library Science cohort, who made graduate school a good experience, especially Andrew Forschler, who more than anyone else has listened to me talk about this project and who has been willing to read so much. I could not have completed this project without the support of my family, especially my mother and sister who spent so much time reading, commenting, and allowing me to talk through every challenging part.

I am very grateful to DC History Conference, where I was given the opportunity to present my research about dancing at True Reformers' Hall and the Howard Theatre. It was inspiring to listen and share with such a strong community of people who care about history and the city.

Much of my writing process was accompanied by excellent recordings of the work of the composer Samuel Coleridge-Taylor by Chineke! Orchestra, Kaleidoscope Chamber Collective, and Luke Welch. I would like to thank them for their artistry.

If we assembled everyone in my life who encouraged me in this endeavor, we could probably fill the floor at True Reformers' Hall. Bring your quarters and let's dance.

Table of Contents

Introduction

"It needs but little observation of business interests and tendencies to as[c]ertain that the energy and sagacity of white business men have so centralized and monopolized Pennsylvania Avenue, the leading thoroughfare for white people, as to crowd out the Negro business man quite exclusively... It seems to be the inevitable trend of circumstances that the only up-to-date business center and opportunity for a respectable thoroughfare for colored people lies on You street, between 7th and 14th streets, with possibly adjacent blocks running along the intermediate streets especially 11th street."[1]

W. Calvin Chase, April 23, 1910

In April of 1910, an editorial in the *Washington Bee*, Washington, D.C.'s longest-running Black newspaper, declared that U Street and its surroundings had become the most important place for Black Washingtonians to do business and had the potential to become even more popular and profitable. Paying particular attention to the many theaters that had opened there in that year or the year prior, editor W. Calvin Chase pointed to the money being invested in the area and to the loyalty of the local patrons. He argued that theaters would have the effect of making the community more "centralized" along U Street and the area formed by the streets connected to it. "Let us have a fashionable and up-to-date business center and thoroughfare in this You street vicinity!" he concluded, knowing that this prospect had already been developing for some time and predicting that there would be more to come.

The decade of 1903-1912 was a period of great creation in the U Street neighborhood of Washington, D.C., the result of social conditions that had emerged through Reconstruction and

[1] "Business Caenter," *Washington Bee* (Washington, D.C.), April 23, 1910.

beyond. The institutions that were built to house Black Washington's cultural activities in this time were sites of conflict between contingents of Washingtonians, both Black and white, who held competing visions for the future of their city and communities. Although different principles and priorities determined the development and operation of different buildings, the concentration of cultural institutions in this one location produced a coherent idea of U Street that would carry into future decades.

U Street at the beginning of the twentieth century was the local creation of people who were involved in national discussions on politics, religion, society, and economics and engaged with what was new and modern in arts and entertainment. U Street was a place where the arts were valued and enjoyed. It was a place where businesses were growing. It was a place where discussions about social problems evolved into actions that built buildings. Even before it became a famous theater district, U Street was an expression of Black business and Black artistry and the aspirations that the people there had for the future.

Black Broadway Before Black Broadway

U Street is known now for what it became in the 1930s and 40s: "Black Broadway."[2] It was a birthplace and home for African-American music, literature, theater, and dance that started to bloom in the 1920s and thrived into the 1960s. Histories of U Street tend to use the lens of biography and focus especially on the most recognizable personalities of the 1930s and 1940s. Pianist, bandleader, and composer Duke Ellington, who was born in Washington, D.C. and began his career on U Street, looms particularly large as both a symbol for the culture of U Street

[2] Briana A. Thomas, *Black Broadway in Washington, D.C.* (Charleston: The History Press, 2021), 103.

and a historical source recalling his memories of the place.[3] The name "Black Broadway" carries with it a few useful associations. It suggests a Black alternative to a white-dominated cultural landmark, New York City's Broadway. It suggests a neighborhood where entertainment is concentrated: not only a business district but also a theater district. It suggests both a collection of venues and a thoroughfare between and around those venues.

Historians of Washington, D.C. have tried to raise the status of the city in the history of the performing arts by incorporating U Street into the national narrative of African-American culture.[4] Washington, D.C. has traditionally been underrepresented in the history of Black performing artists because the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s and 1930s looms so large in our cultural memory of Black artistry, and New York City dominates the historical conversation about African-American theater and dance. Tamara Brown argues for the significance of the Washington Black theater scene, that it was connected to the New York Black theater scene but not dependent or auxiliary to it. She suggests that the cultural revolution that became known as the Harlem Renaissance could be better served by its older name of Negro Renaissance, and that "one can argue that the Negro Renaissance or New Negro Movement occurred in Black communities throughout the United States, especially that of the District of Columbia."[5] The artistic movement was not located in one place, nor was placeless, but multi-located in several places, of which U Street was one.

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[3] Bettye Gardner and Bettye Thomas, "The Cultural Impact of the Howard Theatre on the Black Community," *The Journal of Negro History* 55, no. 4 (1970): 259. Thomas, 127.

[4] Briana A. Thomas, *Black Broadway in Washington, D.C.* (Charleston: The History Press, 2021). Blair A. Ruble, *Washington's U Street : A Biography*. Washington, D.C: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2010. Tamara Brown, "Lingering Lights from America's Black Broadway: Negro Renaissance to the Black Arts Movement, African-American Concert-Theatrical Dance in Washington, D.C.," (PhD diss., Howard University, 2004).

[5] Brown, 49-51.

U Street is a street in northwest Washington, D.C. that runs from 9th Street in the east to 18th Street in the west, converging with Florida Avenue at both ends. Florida Avenue was once known as Boundary Street and marked the outer limits of the city, so even though U Street is now a very central Washington location, it was once at the periphery of the city. The U Street neighborhood is more expansive than one street and can include the lettered streets to the south (S and T Streets) and to the north (V and W Streets). The busiest intersecting street is 14th Street, both at the beginning of the twentieth century and in the present day, but 11th Street and 7th Street were, and are, important as well. I have chosen to refer to this neighborhood as the U Street neighborhood, even though it has a few possible names. Sometimes U Street is considered part of the greater Shaw neighborhood or the more recently-designated Cardozo or Cardozo/Shaw. LeDroit Park and Howard University are also distinct areas adjacent to U Street and relevant to this discussion. But the name U Street is both well-known in the present and accurate to the period of study, sometimes even rendered as "You Street" in the early twentieth century the way it is today. Additionally, by referring to the neighborhood by the name of the street, I wish to emphasize the importance of the street as a street—not only the site upon which buildings sat but the physical space between buildings where people met, interacted, observed, communicated, and moved.

What was happening on and around U Street in the decades before and after the turn of the twentieth century was the commercial and intellectual development of an entertainment district. It was a period of imagination and construction that set up a period of artistic achievement and fame. The Howard Theatre, whose dominance in the Black theater scene is often a key element of U Street stories, did not open in the 1920s when this Negro Renaissance was taking flight. It opened in 1910. And True Reformers' Hall, where a teenaged Duke

Ellington played his first show with his own band in 1917, opened in 1903. When new ideas in the arts were ready to be shown to the world, there were already physical locations in Washington, D.C.—with stages and seating and established audiences—for those performances to be enjoyed.

The "Black Broadway" label emphasizes conventional live theater attendance, but many other leisure and entertainment experiences could be found on U Street. Understanding what else constituted leisure and entertainment besides conventional theater attendance helps us understand why the neighborhood was made into an artistic and business center even before there were theaters. Well before 1920, U Street already displayed many of the features that would earn it the name "Black Broadway." The neighborhood had a concentration of buildings that held a variety of options for spending one's time and money. In a segregated city, the buildings in the neighborhood provided alternatives to white-controlled spaces. And the street existed in the minds of the people as a destination in itself, a "You Street vicinity" that was more than the sum of its buildings.

Why U Street?

The process by which U Street became a center of African-American culture in Washington, D.C. began in the late nineteenth century, as the population grew and the political conditions of the city changed in the post-Reconstruction years. With Howard University, established in 1867, as an anchor, the area attracted Black residents of all social classes.[6] The neighborhood supported and was supported by a variety of Black institutions beyond the

[6] 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, 2019), 186. Thomas, 48-50.

university that grew with the population: churches, fraternal orders, charities, activist groups, newspapers, business leagues, restaurants, and theaters.

The city of Washington had certain foundational characteristics that made possible the creation of a cultural center along U Street. The Black population was significant in terms of numbers and percentage of the total population, diverse in terms of economic status but including some wealth, concentrated in certain areas, and deprived of access to white institutions due to segregation. Segregated Washington was built from the late nineteenth century onwards. Washington's population more than doubled between 1860 and 1880 and more than doubled again between 1880 and 1910. The city presented opportunities for employment, education, and business for both Black and white arrivals. Apart from a remarkable increase between 1860 and 1870, due to people fleeing the South during and immediately after the Civil War, the Black population of Washington as a percentage of the total population of Washington was fairly stable until about 1950. From 1870 to 1920, it stayed between 25 and 32 percent, declining very slightly over that fifty year period.[7] This is not to say it was an insignificant percentage. By numbers, Washington had the largest Black population of any United States city at the turn of the century.[8] The city was a key destination for Black migrants leaving the Jim Crow South, even those who eventually moved further on, but it also attracted white migrants, chiefly from the North.[9] As the population expanded, the overall racial composition did not change. But it did

[7] Campbell Gibson and Kay Jung, "Historical Census Statistics On Population Totals By Race, 1790 to 1990, and By Hispanic Origin, 1970 to 1990, For Large Cities And Other Urban Places In The United States," (U.S. Census Bureau, Working Paper No. 76, February 2005).

[8] Thomas, 48.

[9] Asch and Musgrove, 189. Andrew F. Hilyer, *The Twentieth Century Union League Directory* (Washington, D.C.: The Union League, 1901), 10. "Besides, after the war, there was a large number of northern men settled here."

physically separate, which created a new situation for the development of residences and businesses.

Washington did not have local laws requiring segregation, but the rules and practices that comprise segregation were implemented anyway. It actually had local laws prohibiting segregation, expanded to their fullest extent in 1873 during the brief era when the city was ruled by the semi-democratic territorial government.[10] But in the 1870s and beyond, segregation took hold in spite of these local laws. The 1896 Supreme Court ruling in *Plessy v. Ferguson* legitimized state-level segregation and had a similar legitimizing affect in the District because by that time no one in the District could vote, and without voters, segregation could not be challenged or opposed at the ballot box. When the 1901 District Code was compiled, the anti-discrimination laws were not repealed but simply left out. This technicality was the basis for striking down segregation many decades later by the 1953 Supreme Court ruling in *District of Columbia v. John R. Thompson Co. Inc.*[11] Washington was no haven from racist resentments and anxieties and desires for control that drove the formation of the segregated Jim Crow South, and without home rule, Washington was vulnerable to the infection of Jim Crow rules and practices.

Because of Washington's unique non-state status assigned by the Constitution, Washingtonians have always been locked in a battle for control over the institutions in their city. From 1874, Congress governed the city directly and no Washington resident of any race had voting power. On a local level, this takeover was a response to the corruption and profligate spending of the territorial government that evolved in DC after the Civil War, a territorial government that was biracial though white-dominated. On a national level, the disfranchisement

[10] Asch and Musgrove, 150-151. Joan Quigley, *Just Another Southern Town: Mary Church Terrell and the Struggle for Racial Justice in the Nation's Capital* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 8-9.

[11] Asch and Musgrove, 184, 299-300. See Quigley, 208-231, for the story of the defeat.

of all District voters was propelled by the same white fears of the Black voters and officeholders that a few years later propelled the disfranchisement of Black men in Southern states upon the ending of the protections of Reconstruction in 1877. Congress removed biracial local government by removing local government altogether, and it was an effective strategy, creating a status that lasted until 1973.[12]

Black residential neighborhoods were a new phenomenon in the post-Reconstruction years. Some, including U Street, "grew from contraband camps that had been located nearby."[13] Black and white communities had had separate institutions such as churches in Washington since before the Civil War, but there had not been separate Black and white residential neighborhoods. If Black homebuyers moved into an all-white neighborhood, succeeding against opposition from white residents, the result was often a neighborhood that "turned" from white-inhabited to Black-inhabited, rather than a neighborhood that became integrated. This is what occurred in LeDroit Park, the neighborhood beside Howard University originally designed for white homebuyers, starting with the first wealthy Black homebuyer in 1893.[14] An increasing population in Washington needed new places to live, and this need became a business opportunity for real estate developers and a reason for the formation of new neighborhoods. Developers began grafting new land onto the city, luring white buyers farther away from the center of the city with suggestions of financial and racial homogeneity.

The pains of segregation made the reception of equal treatment in public a priority for Black Washingtonians, particularly elites. Wealth insulated Washington's Black upper class from the harshest effects of segregation, like over-crowded alley-dwelling and permanently low-

[12] Asch and Musgrove, 161-166.
[13] Asch and Musgrove, 179.
[14] Asch and Musgrove, 185-187.

wage work. But it could not insulate them from being treated as lesser-than in public establishments. They were still refused seats, denied service, and otherwise prevented from fully enjoying public space. This grated, particularly on the Black people who saw themselves as better—more educated, more sophisticated, and in many cases wealthier—than the white people who received better treatment. They wanted public spaces where they could receive the treatment they felt was appropriate, and on U Street, public spaces like that could be created.

Another priority was financial. The rise of the U Street neighborhood was made possible not only by empty lots and accessible capital, but by a political perspective that regarded support for Black businesses as a civic duty. Regardless of their competing philosophies of racial advancement, many of Washington's Black leaders considered it their mission to advocate for the support of Black businesses. The exhortation to keep money within the community, whether through banking or purchasing or contracting, was relentless. Newspapers that served Black Washingtonians occupied the advocacy position characteristic of Black newspapers throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries with editorials championing racial equality and invoking the need for the advancement or progress of the race. Business was hailed as one avenue for progress, and U Street-area businesses had the force of the press behind them, connecting the quality and success of their establishments to the future hopes for Black Washingtonians and Black Americans generally.

The Twentieth Century Begins

When the U Street neighborhood was being built up, it was being built up in a context of serious discussion about the best ways—individually and communally, educationally and religiously and industrially—to improve life for Black Americans. The particulars of how

advancement would be achieved were always up for debate, in Washington as throughout the nation. This thesis takes as its focus three buildings, built and opened in the early twentieth century, which were the subject of dreams and discussions within Black Washington. Ownership and management, fundraising and construction, permissible activities and admissible attendees were all arenas where people expressed opinions about how these three buildings would have the greatest benefit to the Black people who lived in Washington, D.C. What purposes was each building supposed to serve? Were each of these buildings, in both their development and their operations, really serving the purposes they ought to serve? If not, how could the course be corrected? The people who planned, owned, built, managed, enjoyed, advertised, or observed these buildings brought different visions, sometimes conflicting visions, to each. The perspectives of real people navigating real situations do not necessarily fall neatly into ideological camps, and the battles fought over the development and operation of institutions in U Street do not map exactly onto an accommodation/integration duality.

I selected these buildings because all were places for entertainment and leisure, places where early twentieth-century city-dwelling people spent the time and money they had to enjoy themselves. They are True Reformers' Hall at 1200 U Street NW, opened in 1903; the Twelfth Street Y.M.C.A. at 1816 12th Street NW, opened in 1912; and the Howard Theatre at 620 T Street NW, opened in 1910. True Reformers' Hall and the Twelfth Street Y.M.C.A. were built and operated by people with a social mission of improvement, to help people live lives of morality and temperance, intellect and industry and activity. True Reformers' Hall and the Howard Theatre were built and operated by people who saw business opportunities in a growing neighborhood: renting space to dancing classes, collecting admission fees, contracting theater companies, selling seats and boxes of seats. And all three of these spaces were enlivened by

people who wanted to enjoy music, move their bodies, meet people, and have fun without suffering the indignities and limitations of segregation. They were places where people came to participate in the life of the city, to share a common experience with other Washington residents, especially other Black Washington residents, whether they were new to the city or had lived here all their lives.

My narrative here is built chiefly from the local Black newspapers of the period: the *Washington Bee*, the *National Forum*, the *Colored American*, and the *Howard University Journal*. Newspapers that served the Black community of Washington contained descriptions of performances and social activities, editorial perspectives on contemporary issues, advertisements for events and items that were fashionable and current, and a wealth of names and locations. The remarks and writings of leaders in religion, education, and business were printed in newspapers, magazines, and books. Another significant source is the Sanborn Insurance Maps. In the early twentieth century, Washington D.C. was mapped for the purposes of assessing insurance risk, with one volume focused on the center city published in 1903 and a second volume showing additional areas published in 1904. The maps identify some businesses and institutions and also offer some hints about the general landscape and the state of transportation and building technology. Additional documents such as performance programs, building permits, and business directories round out the story.

Instead of working through a chronology of construction, I will instead organize these stories by the relationship that each building had to Black Washington. I will start with the building that was entirely the creation of the Black community, proceed to the building whose creation was seriously shaped but not controlled by the Black community, and continue to the building whose creation began fully outside the Black community. Then I will conclude with U

Street, the connective tissue that joins all these institutions and makes them, despite all their differences, one entity.

These buildings all have roles in each other's stories, but they were not developed sequentially, so even though I have ordered their stories somewhat chronologically, it is not really a case of one building's development leading to another's development. The Young Men's Christian Association and the United Order of True Reformers have long, nineteenth-century roots, and though characteristics of True Reformers' Hall probably influenced the creation of the Twelfth Street Y.M.C.A., both were the results of similar processes occurring at the same time: long-held ideals becoming enshrined in physical space. The Howard Theatre had strictly twentieth-century origins, and though its creation was probably also influenced by (different) characteristics of True Reformers' Hall, its creators, the National Amusement Company, were not remotely aligned with the True Reformers. The timeline is further confused by the longer construction period for the Twelfth Street Y.M.C.A., which began before the Howard Theatre was constructed but ended after. The roadways of U Street and the connecting streets, of course, predated the development of these buildings.

Chapter One begins on U Street itself at True Reformers' Hall, which was an extraordinary example of Black economic independence. This story begins in the 1880s and 1890s but is most concerned with 1903-1911, from the year of the building's opening to the year of the organization's financial collapse. The chapter analyzes the philosophy and strategy that allowed the True Reformers to succeed in their building endeavor. It also explores the class and generational tensions that played out in True Reformers' Hall dances and dancing classes.

Chapter Two travels about a block and a half south to the Twelfth Street Y.M.C.A., which was defined by an uneasy but productive coexistence between Black and white supporters.

This story begins in the 1890s but the important years are the initial fundraising in 1907, the construction in 1908, the additional fundraising in 1911, and the opening in 1912. The chapter examines the influence of white philanthropists and civic leaders, Black architects and editors, and the relationship of Black Washingtonians to the federal government.

Chapter Three then moves a few blocks east to the Howard Theatre, which was the project of white entrepreneurs whose intentions were challenged before and after the theater opened. This story begins right at the turn of the century, but it is concentrated around 1909-1911, the years around the opening of the theater during which its value was seriously contested. The chapter investigates the conflicts between the aspirations for and realities of the theater and the differences between Black ownership and Black management.

Chapter Four then takes to the streets, which join these buildings to each other, to other neighborhood establishments, and to the entire city. This story encompasses the stories of the other chapters but focuses on that which connects them: the people experiencing the neighborhood as a whole. These buildings had their own meanings, but their true cultural significance was in the collective. The chapter describes how the gradual addition of new buildings in this period constantly reshaped the visual landscape, the traffic patterns, the news media, and the concept of U Street itself.

Each chapter begins with a scene of neighborhood life which I have composed from all the historical details available to me. The scenes are grounded in newspaper reports, physical realities of particular spaces, and other time period context. I imagine what it would have been like to experience these buildings when they were new and to experience the street as it changed, and I invite you to walk through those places with me.

To frame it in Chase's 1910 words, the U Street "vicinity" was both the "center" and the "thoroughfare." On and around U Street, Black Washingtonians created a place of opportunity, assembly, and aspiration. The center was buildings that resulted from Black Washingtonians' engagement with national business, social, and artistic movements and of restrictions placed on them by racial segregation and discrimination. The thoroughfare was the cumulative effect of everything that had been built and was being built and everyone who experienced the built environment and how it grew. U Street itself, not just its particular stages or lecture halls or dance floors, would become Black Broadway in a decade or two, but in 1903-1912 the process was well underway. It was a process that included successes and failures, struggles and compromises, anger and joy, and a lot of imagination. Enough people believed in U Street's future, and though they might have disagreed on what that future included, they all started with big dreams and transformed those dreams into a center and a thoroughfare.

Chapter One — True Reformers' Hall: Independence and Reputation

It's Friday, October 9, 1903 at True Reformers' Hall.

As we enter the building we hear ragtime music being played by a band. Even from the street outside we might hear the music—if the second-story windows are cracked open and the notes are floating down to U Street. Ragtime music has moderate pace and a steady rhythm. We could imagine that it's "The Entertainer" by Scott Joplin, which was published last year in 1902. The music gets louder as we ascend the stairs to the second floor, where the auditorium is open and full of Black Washingtonians wearing evening dress engaged in a ballroom dance. Pairs of men and women, connected by hand and arm, rotate slowly around the room.

Tonight the brand-new "Hesper Dancing Class" is holding its first event. Someone is standing at the door collecting the admission fee: a quarter. (This is a time when a hat might cost a dollar or two and a sewing machine fifteen or twenty.) At the front of the auditorium there is a raised stage with a proscenium. The auditorium usually has seating for concerts, but tonight all the seating has been cleared to make space for the dancers. A few chairs might remain on the sides of the room, for those who need to rest their feet. The band is on the stage, also to make space for the dancers. There will be three hundred people in this space tonight.

The dances are being taught by a man, who may teach from the stage or who may move among the dancers on the floor. His name is Mr. James Sewell and sometimes he is called "Professor." Professor Sewell demonstrates and explains the dances for the assembled crowd. There are people on the floor who already know how to dance, have been spending their weekends dancing for years. But it's not just a dance, it's a dancing class, and there are also people who are really trying to learn. Maybe they've just moved to the city from the rural South,

or maybe they're young adults, like Howard University students, just starting to participate in urban society.

As more and more people enter the hall, Sewell is harder and harder to hear, especially over chatter—this is social dance, after all—but the newer dancers are helped by the more experienced, and people get swept into the movement. Given that it was widely advertised and there seems to be no barrier to entry besides paying admission, this is probably a more middle-class, or even lower-class, group. It's very important to attend the right dancing class, where you'll meet the right people for your social standing.

A Place for Entertainment

Not all leisure activities in early twentieth-century Washington were open to Black people, but the Black press publicized what activities were available to their readers. The *Washington Bee* and the *Colored American* reported on and advertised events and businesses throughout the city, and sometimes in nearby places such as Baltimore, that their readers might like to attend or to know about even if they could not or did not want to attend. They reported on the activities of Black churches and fraternal organizations with which many of their readers were affiliated. Society pages in these newspapers functioned as our social media does today, sharing who hosted events and who visited whom, and though most people reading were of course not invited to these dinners and parties, the people who were invited wanted everyone to know. The *Howard University Journal*, the main student publication from 1903 to 1917, showed what students did for fun on campus and in the city, and its editors often encouraged participation in campus culture.

For Black residents of Washington, a lively variety of activities was available. There were lectures, some open to the public and some for established societies, given by speakers including activists, ministers, writers, artists or community leaders. There were concerts in genres we would today call classical, spiritual, or gospel, given by local and touring talent.[15] There were dinners and meetings that were accompanied by orchestras, at which people did not dance, and there were dances and dancing classes. There were excursions in which people took boats out onto the Potomac.[16] The Howard University social scene revolved around three seasons: football in the fall, debate in the winter, and baseball in the spring. Entertainment at the university also included participating in and patronizing student performances, especially of vocal and choral music and eventually of plays. There were sanctioned university dances as well.

The entertainment world reported on by the Black press was obviously a social one, which meant there had to be social spaces for entertainment to happen. This is not to say that there was no solitary entertainment in the early twentieth century. Musicians must have played and practiced on their own; the 1901 *Union League Directory* lists six music teachers and five orchestras for hire.[17] The D.C. Public Library opened in 1903 and was never segregated, and reading the newspaper itself was an entertaining activity.[18] But before radio, one probably would have had to go somewhere, and be in the company of others in that place, to hear something

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[15] For the relationship of the Black elite to music and literature, see Jacqueline M. Moore, *Leading the Race: The Transformation of the Black Elite in the Nation's Capital, 1880-1920* (Charlottesville, Va.: University Press of Virginia, 1999), 64-66. Doris Evans McGinty, "'As Large as She Can Make It': The Role of Black Women Activists in Music, 1880-1945," in *Cultivating Music in America: Women Patrons and Activists since 1860*, edited by Ralph P. Locke and Cyrilla Barr, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

[16] For a few examples of boating activities, see "Collation," *Washington Bee* (Washington, D.C.), April 6, 1895. "Grand Outing," "Excursion Season for 1908," *Washington Bee* (Washington, D.C.), June 6, 1908.

[17] Andrew F. Hilyer, *The Twentieth Century Union League Directory* (Washington, D.C.: The Union League, 1901), 69.

[18] Marya Annette McQuirter, "Claiming the City: African Americans, Urbanization, and Leisure in Washington, D.C., 1902–1957," (PhD diss., University of Michigan, 2000), 14-15.

interesting. If you or someone in your household, or perhaps your upstairs neighbor, could play an instrument, you could experience music in your home, but if you did not have the skills or the instrument, you would have had to leave your home to enjoy music. There needed to be places where that listening experience could happen.

Before (and after) there were theaters in the U Street neighborhood, there were multiple-use spaces for entertainment in the neighborhood and beyond. Entertainment took place in schools, churches, and fraternal organization buildings. Churches were the venues that could accommodate the highest number of audience members and which were also in the full control of the Black community. Concerts and lectures had homes in Washington's plentitude of Black churches, such as the Metropolitan African Methodist Episcopal Church on M Street, the Fifteenth Street Presbyterian Church, the Nineteenth Street Baptist Church, and the Lincoln Temple United Church of Christ on 11th Street.[19] Fraternal organizations, being segregated at this time, were also independent from white control: the Odd Fellows, the Knights of Pythias, the Freemasons, the Elks.[20] People entertained in their homes, with music and sometimes even with dancing.[21] Depending on the nature of the dancing, or the fame of any special guests, these announcements might serve to alert the community that a visitor was in town or to boast that a hostess had performed her role well. Social dances seem not to have taken place in churches and instead took place in commercial buildings or buildings belonging to fraternal organizations.[22]

Starting in 1903, True Reformers' Hall frequently appeared in the local Black press. Located at 1200 U Street and known today as the True Reformer Building, this building held

[19] Briana A. Thomas, *Black Broadway in Washington, D.C.* (Charleston: The History Press, 2021), 72. Moore, 70.

[20] See Moore, 179-185 for more on fraternal organizations.

[21] Moore, 52.

[22] Moore, 60.

meetings, concerts, and dances, and its name appears again and again in the newspapers and beyond as a place where Black Washington society gathered. There were conflicting associations with the name of True Reformers' Hall. In J. Arthur Davis's 1911 criticism of the Howard Theatre, True Reformers' Hall appeared as a counter-example to what he called "optional 'Jim Crowism.'" It represented racial solidarity and a better "class" of Black people in the city.[23] But True Reformers' Hall also had some kind of disrepute associated with it. A 1910 editorial in the *Howard University Journal* referred to the dances at True Reformers' Hall as "less favorable circumstances" compared to the "good, wholesome influences" of school-sanctioned on-campus dances.[24]

True Reformers' Hall was valuable as an independent, multi-use space in the era of segregation, and represented Black financial success, but what dancing at True Reformers' Hall represented was variable. The meaning of dancing, as judged by those people speaking in pulpits and papers, could depend on who was dancing and how. As seen through its dancing classes, True Reformers' Hall was a place where the tensions present in an urban community with many social classes represented within one racial group were dramatized and the anxieties around the association of young men and young women in an urban environment with a growing and changing population were exposed. It was so solidly under the control of the Black community that the conflicts that occurred in and around it were not conflicts between races but instead between classes and generations.

[23] J. Arthur Davis, "*The Missing Link" and The Howard Theatre* (Washington, D.C.: Murray Bros. Press, 1911), 10-12.

[24] "Social Conditions at Howard," *Howard University Journal* (Washington, D.C.), April 8, 1910.

An Independent and Multi-Use Space

The building at 1200 U Street was, according to the its current owners, "the first building in the United States to be designed, financed, built, and owned by the African American community after Reconstruction."[25] That four-fold claim—*designed, financed, built, owned*—underlines the significance of True Reformers' Hall to the early twentieth-century city; there was nothing else quite like it. True Reformers' Hall was the artistic vision of John Anderson Lankford, the man who would become Virginia and Washington, D.C.'s first professionally-licensed Black architect. Fully developed as it was within the Black community, it was uncompromised by the interference of white financiers or owners. It served a Black population and profited a Black organization. It was a multi-use space with diverse functions, one of which was entertainment. Its auditorium, or hall, was a popular location for social dancing as well as for concerts and other performances. Its independence and its capacity for multiple uses made it the social center of U Street.

Its independence and its capacity for multiple uses were also hallmarks of the organization which created it. The United Order of True Reformers was a fraternal organization which originated as a temperance society but quickly evolved into a powerful financial institution which involved itself in a strikingly wide variety of commercial activities. It was founded and headquartered in Richmond, Virginia, and its first annual meeting was in 1881, but in the following three decades it grew to operate in multiple states. Founder and long-time director William Washington Browne believed that his Black community needed to practice not only sobriety but economic self-sufficiency, which began with what was essentially life insurance. But they did not stop there. The True Reformers acquired a charter for their Richmond

[25] "True Reformer Building: History," Public Welfare Foundation, accessed May 25, 2024, publicwelfare.org/true-reformer-building/history.

bank in 1888, the same year that the Capital Savings Bank (the first Black bank to commence business) opened in Washington. And in 1899, they formed the Reformers' Mercantile and Industrial Association to publish a newspaper, buy and sell property, and operate businesses such as hotels and stores.[26] It is this association that governed the development of the building at 1200 U Street. On a 1903 map of Washington, the building is labeled "Mercantile Industrial Assn." rather than "True Reformers."[27]

The True Reformers were one organization creating an alternative financial apparatus for Black communities excluded from white-controlled financial resources. Their scale was formidable, but their rationales and strategies were not unique among Black institutions. Black men and women formed organizations that provided some combination of banking, loans, insurance, and other forms of mutual aid. Women could be at the forefront of establishing and leading these organizations, the most notable example of this being the Independent Order of St. Luke. Unlike in traditional all-male fraternal societies which may have had female auxiliaries, in these organizations women and men could lead and labor together.[28] These organizations were built on a principle of mutuality, working together as a community to overcome a significant disadvantage, and they formed the financial foundation for members to make other achievements. The "market exclusion" experienced by Black Americans was also experienced by white immigrants to the United States, and their financial strategies similarly emphasized loyalty

[26] James D. Watkinson, "William Washington Browne and the True Reformers of Richmond, Virginia," *The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 97, no. 3 (1989): 381, 386, 394.

[27] Sanborn Map Company Company. *Washington DC: Volume One.* (New York: Sanborn Map Company, 1903), 25.

[28] Elsa Barkley Brown, "Womanist Consciousness: Maggie Lena Walker and the Independent Order of Saint Luke," *Signs* 14, no. 3 (1989): 616. Shennette Garrett-Scott, *Banking on Freedom: Black Women in U.S. Finance Before the New Deal* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019), 4.

and cooperation within the group.[29] But due to the particularities of Jim Crow and legislated discrimination, the climb was always steeper for Black than white.

The True Reformers had evidently figured out how to organize effectively and discovered how to make money and then more money. Early twentieth-century advertisements in the *Colored American*, advertised health insurance ("sick dues"), life insurance ("death benefits"), and banking.[30] Women and children could participate in the insurance system, and though the leadership of the organization appears to have been predominately middle-class, the membership was not. A collage of photographs of True Reformer activities and officers created around the turn of the century shows that women were well-represented in leadership, though unlike the Independent Order of St. Luke, the True Reformers were mostly led by men.[31] The True Reformers built a great deal of wealth from their insurance system, their bank, their properties, and their commercial operations, not to mention any voluntary contributions to the development of the "old folks' home" they had built outside of Richmond. In 1903, they claimed to have paid out 1.5 million dollars in "sick dues" and over 700 thousand dollars in "death benefits" in two decades of existence and to have received over 350 thousand dollars in deposits in their Savings Bank. The activities of the True Reformers paved the way for other Black businesses, and they were also profitable.[32]

By the time they began building the hall on U Street, the True Reformers had extensive resources and proven strategies for engaging in a successful business. In 1903, its properties were "13 magnificent buildings used as halls, 8 dwellings, 1 hotel, 5 stores, and three farms,"

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[29] Garrett-Scott, 5.

[30] "The Grand Fountain of the United Order of True Reformers," advertisement, *Colored American* (Washington, D.C.) Feb. 7, 1903.

[31] *Grand Fountain of the United Order of True Reformers,* early 20th Century, photographic collage, the Virginia Historical Society, Encyclopedia Virginia, accessed May 26, 2024. encyclopediavirginia.org/4413hpr-720b8b55bcf69b7. Elsa Barkley Brown, 616-617.

[32] Watkinson, 394.

and it also had "under its control 16 large buildings leased by it."[33] Whether they were already counting 1200 U Street in the thirteen halls, or it would soon become the fourteenth hall, owning and operating a large multi-use building was something the True Reformers had done before and knew how to do. The entertainment industry was not new to them, either. In 1900, the True Reformers were operating a theatrical space in Lynchburg, Virginia, and the very first True Reformer building, in Richmond, included a concert hall.[34] The True Reformers' financial strength and diversity of operations apparently bolstered each other in turn. They had the power to launch several enterprises and could then make a profit from those enterprises.

True Reformers' Hall was designed to accommodate diverse operations, with multiple spaces serving different purposes. The floor-by-floor breakdown on the 1903 Sanborn Company Map of Washington reveals a diversity of operations. The 1903 map depicted True Reformers' Hall as "being built." It had steam heat and both gas light and electric light. The first floor was for "stores," the second for an "amusement hall," and the third and fourth floors for "lodge rooms." Delightfully, the map also illustrates the position of the stage on the second floor and labels it "stage 2d 15' high." With the uppers floors reserved for use by the True Reformers, probably to serve as the center of their operations in Washington, the lower floors were designated for engagement with the public and the generation of revenue. The store space and amusement hall space could have generated revenue in multiple ways, and the amusement hall space could and did serve all manner of events and functions. Stores may have leased the first-floor space from the True Reformers, or the True Reformers may have operated their own. The

[33] "The Grand Fountain of the United Order of True Reformers," advertisement, *Colored American* (Washington, D.C.) Feb. 7, 1903.

[34] "Reformer Opera House at Lynchburg," *Reformer* (Richmond, Va.), Jan. 27, 1900. *Grand Fountain of the United Order of True Reformers,* Encyclopedia Virginia.

amusement hall could have been booked by the True Reformers and rented out to other organizations.

The True Reformers were involved in many ventures out of a desire for both financial gain and service to Black communities. In 1903, the year that True Reformers' Hall was built in Washington, the order claimed to be "the leading Colored Fraternal Society of the United States."[35] Many fraternal orders had assets similar to those of the True Reformers, but most did not have financial operations at nearly the True Reformers' scale. As a fraternal society, its commitment was to its members, and as "the leading Colored Fraternal Society," its commitment was by extension to the broader Black community. The insurance system and savings bank protected their finances, the commercial operations provided them with investment and employment opportunities, and the fraternity-owned buildings offered them safe places to congregate. The financial stability and success of the organization was important to beneficiaries of insurance plans, holders of bank accounts, developers of buildings, and patrons of shops and hotels. A social benefit was provided to the Black community by the True Reformers making money.

The rationale that led the True Reformers to create spaces like the building at 1200 U Street, and allowed them to link profit and service to community, was that financial power would drive race progress. In a 1900 newsletter, the True Reformers declared they were "the child of calm and sober consideration, conservatism, co-operation, combination and concentration and working along these lines we vow to keep time to the progress of the century." They believed progress would be achieved via the group's support for itself rather than the group's demand for support from the government. Whatever power they could derive from their organizing skills and

[35] "The Grand Fountain of the United Order of True Reformers," advertisement, *Colored American* (Washington, D.C.), Feb. 7, 1903.

their dollars, it was not a power they intended to wield in a political arena for the causes of desegregation and nondiscrimination. The True Reformers rejected what they called radicalism:

> Our position as regards any hostile or discriminating laws which the present Legislature may see fit to enact is pretty much the same as the man whose head is in the lion's mouth. Abuse of the patrons of these measures but serve to enrage them and make them more persistent in their efforts, while on the other hand if we reason with them and point out to them the injustice of their measures it will have a more beneficient [sic] result…[36]

The risk of retaliation from the Virginia state legislature was too high to make demands, they thought. They apparently believed in the possibility of a successful anti-discrimination campaign based on rational arguments. Or they thought that creating economic sufficiency and social connections would be the key to the advancement of anti-discrimination and loudly disputing discriminatory legislation would not make change. As wealthy and well-known as the True Reformers were, especially in Virginia, and as clearly as they saw their mission to "the race," they rejected political activism.

It was a worldview that prized self-sufficiency, or group-sufficiency, and required no concessions from white people. But the extent of the True Reformers' activities told a slightly different story about some of the organization's ambitions than the declaration of reason in the newsletter did. The image of "the man whose head is in the lion's mouth" suggests that Black Americans were subject to the whims and rages of a predatory white ruling class, which was true, but the True Reformers were able to help the people in the communities in which they operated escape the dangers of the predatory financier, the predatory insurer, the predatory

[36] "Conservativism Versus Radicalism," *Reformer* (Richmond, Va.), Jan. 27, 1900.

landlord. The creation of Black-owned institutions under the True Reformer banner was not, to the thinking of the True Reformers, politically radical, but the people making major real estate acquisitions in multiple towns, in multiple states, do not seem particularly content to wait for improved conditions. Although they would not involve themselves in legal advocacy against discrimination, they were thorough in creating alternatives to discriminatory venues and practices.

In fact, the publication that disavowed radicalism in favor of conservatism also published complaints very similar to those in the *Washington Bee* about Black people who seemed content to patronize discriminatory establishments:

> The Reformer has often tried to point out the folly and the lack of self-respect it showed in the best class of some of our people, who continue to patronize the theatres here which give them the very poorest of accommodation, and compel them to enter places of amusement through side alleys and side doors. How long will some of our people continue this practice of going where they are not wanted.[37]

Watkinson argues that the "status quo" of segregation generated money for Browne and the True Reformers, as it gave them a default customer base, and they were therefore unlikely to challenge it.[38] But the True Reformers were challenging segregation, or at least its painful effects. Their activities were expressions of self-respect, of the desire to maintain dignity. Patronizing True Reformers' Hall meant having no anxieties about putting money into the hands of an oppressor or running oneself into an unexpected and unwelcome barrier.

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[37] "Angry about the Opera 'Parsifal,'" *Reformer* (Richmond, Va.), Jan. 28, 1905.
[38] Watkinson, 396.

If the claim about all the firsts that the building represents is true, 1200 U Street may have been the first building belonging to the True Reformers that they saw through from conception to construction to operation. In 1903, a number of empty lots sat on U Street and the streets intersecting and parallel to it. New construction had the potential to shape the neighborhood and establish it as a center of culture for Black Washington, and the building's location at U Street and 12th Street was prime real estate. The True Reformers' opera house in Lynchburg might have been well-attended and profitable, but a performance venue in Washington was in a different league. The fact that an amusement hall was a central element of the design suggests that the True Reformers had a sense such a thing would be profitable. It was needed in this city, in this neighborhood, and it would draw people to the doors with their entry fees in hand. If it had worked elsewhere, it would work in Washington. The auditorium space was immediately ready to host important parts of the existing social scene, like dancing classes.

Class and the Dancing Class

Dancing classes were a key feature of Washington social life at the turn of the twentieth century. Their schedules, instructors, locations, and cost were advertised and reported in the Black newspapers, especially in the society columns. Dances were advertised and reported as well, but appear to have been mostly distinct from dancing classes. Dances could be one-time events, but dancing classes seem to have functioned more like clubs, with a particular group identity, regular meeting schedule, and limited membership. These qualities are suggested by the names of the classes. Many had artistic or otherwise distinctive names like the Light Fantastic, the Hesper, the Capital City, the Royal Cabinet, the Meadow Brook, the Magnolia, and the

Majestic, names that gave members a sense of belonging.[39] Others were named by the day they met—the Saturday Evening Dancing Class, the Tuesday Night Dancing Class—indicating a regular meeting time.[40] Dancing classes were instituted by existing clubs like the Manhattan, the La Toscas, the Royal Tuxedoes, and the Wilberforcian Musical Association, organizations which would have had existing memberships pre-dating the dancing class.[41] Dancing classes met in dance halls, or in fraternal buildings like the Masonic Hall (on 19th Street) and Odd Fellows' Hall (M Street) or outdoors in parks when pleasant summer weather permitted.[42]

Almost immediately after True Reformers' Hall opened, it became a principal destination for these dancing classes. In September of 1903, the formation of a Mr. James Sewell's "swell 'Hesper' dancing class… at the New True Reformer Hall" was announced.[43] Sewell's name had previously appeared in association with the Manhattan Dancing Class. The following month, the Hesper dancing class "opened Friday evening, the 2dn, inst., at the True Reformers' auditorium, with an attendance of nearly 300."[44] Given the popularity of the dancing class idea, this Mr. Sewell (or the Mr. Brown and Mr. Williamson who are also mentioned) might well have imagined hosting a dancing class in the True Reformers' Hall as soon as he heard about it being built or saw that there was building going up. It might have been an opportunity for him to

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[39] "Here and There," *Colored American* (Washington, D.C.), Feb. 23, 1901."City Paragraphs," *Colored American* (Washington, D.C.), Sept. 5, 1903. "The Week in Society," *Washington Bee* (Washington, D.C.), Sept. 19, 1908. "Royal Cabinet," *Washington Bee* (Washington, D.C.), Nov. 27, 1909. "Fight Returns," *Washington Bee* (Washington, D.C.), June 25, 1910. "The Magnolia Dancing Class," advertisement, "The Majestic Dancing Class," advertisement, Washington Concert Orchestra program, Dec. 28, 1913, Doris McGinty Papers, Box 28, Folder 22 Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.

[40] "Mere Mention," *Colored American* (Washington, D.C.), Nov. 3, 1900. "The Week in Society," *Washington Bee* (Washington, D.C.), July 13, 1901.

[41] "At the New Masonic Hall," *Colored American* (Washington, D.C.), Nov. 15, 1902. "Locals," *Colored American* (Washington, D.C.), May 9, 1903. "City Paragraphs," *Colored American* (Washington, D.C.), Oct 1, 1904. "Some Things That Are Happening," *National Forum* (Washington, D.C.), Oct. 22, 1910.

[42] "At the New Masonic Hall," *Colored American* (Washington, D.C.), Nov. 15, 1902. "Secret Orders," *Washington Bee* (Washington, D.C.), May 11, 1901. "Washington Under the Calcium," *Colored American* (Washington, D.C.), July 19, 1902.

[43] "City Paragraphs," *Colored American* (Washington, D.C.), Sept 5, 1903.

[44] "The Hesper Dancing Class," *Colored American* (Washington, D.C.), Oct. 10, 1903.

expand his reputation and his business. If the Masons hosted dancing classes in their building, so could the True Reformers. Or maybe the idea came to him from someone in the True Reformer organization who might have recruited him as an already well-known teacher to get a dancing class started in the new building. Starting a dancing class would have been one way to bring people, and their money, into the new space, and to get the name of True Reformers' Hall in the newspapers just a few more times. Maybe one or more of those three men was a member of the True Reformers and had become involved that way.

The model was apparently successful, and where one dancing class went, others followed. The next year, in 1904, the Royal Tuxedoes began a dancing class on Thursday nights which met in Room 5 of True Reformers' Hall, "with the exception of the last Thursday night in each month, when they will use the auditorium."[45] The Manhattan Dancing Class, which appears to have been quite long-lived and to have made use of many spaces, held their 1908 Christmas Day dance at True Reformers' Hall.[46] In 1910, the dancing class initiated by the Wilberforcian Music Association was planned to meet on Friday nights, also "in Room 5 of True Reformers' Hall during the fall and winter."[47] Room 5 must have been quite large, as must Room 10, which also hosted dancing classes, but there is nothing to indicate what level of the building they were on.[48] The Meadow Brook Dancing Class also used True Reformers' Hall in 1910.[49] Not all dancing classes referenced in the newspapers have distinctive names, so it is not possible to trace continuities in organizers or instructors, but it appears that there is a consistent presence of dancing classes throughout the decade.

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[45] "City Paragraphs" *Colored American* (Washington, D.C.), Oct. 1, 1904.
[46] "The Manhattan Dancing Class," *Washington Bee* (Washington, D.C.), Jan. 2, 1909.
[47] "Some Things That Are Happening," *National Forum* (Washington, D.C.), Oct. 22, 1910.
[48] "The Week in Society," *Washington Bee* (Washington, D.C.), Nov. 19, 1910.
[49] "Fight Returns," *Washington Bee* (Washington, D.C.), June 25, 1910.

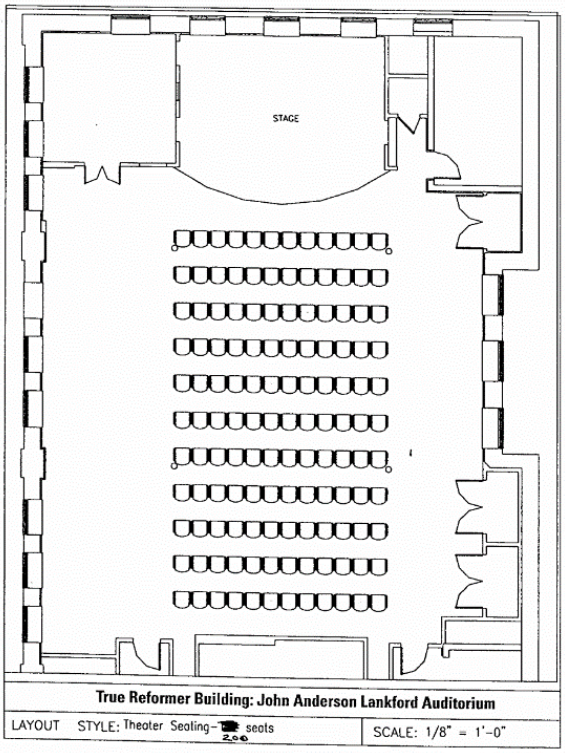
The amusement hall, as it was called on the map, or the auditorium, as it tended to be called in the newspapers, was a space that accommodated both performances and social dances and so would have been an adaptable space. A photograph of the "concert hall" in the Richmond headquarters of the True Reformers, from about 1900, shows what the hall in the Washington building might have looked like. It is a space with a raised proscenium stage and about twenty rows of level seating, separated with a center aisle. A piano sits on the apron, stage left.[50] Musical recitals were held at True Reformers' Hall, so there would have been rows seating for an audience and a proscenium stage, as in the Richmond space.[51] Therefore it would have taken some time and effort to reconfigure the room for social dancing. The seating must have been moveable, able to be set and reset by a team of people.

An image of the concert hall in the Richmond headquarters of the Grand Fountain of the United Order of True Reformers, excerpted from a collage of photographs of True Reformer activities and officers created around the turn of the century. (Virginia Historical Society via Encyclopedia Virginia.)

[50] *Grand Fountain of the United Order of True Reformers*," Encyclopedia Virginia.

[51] Examples include "The 7th Annual Musicale by the Pupils of Prof. R .J. Daniels," June 10, 1907. "Comic Opera Entitled 'The Isle of Never'," June 3, 1907, Doris McGinty Papers, Box 28, Folder 20 Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.

Pockets of space within the auditorium could have been used to clear a dance floor. Galleries on the side might have been used for watching other people or getting a sense of the crowd or just escaping from the fray for a few minutes. Perhaps the orchestras which provided music for the dances would have been placed on the stage, to make more room on the floor and to make it so that the musicians could see the dancers, establishing a connection between them. If one dance could be attended by three hundred, they would have needed all the space they could get, as three hundred people moving is quite a different spatial concern from three hundred people sitting; the building's current owners say the space can seat two hundred.[52] Room 5 and Room 10 could have been located above or below and would have also been empty or adjustable enough to make space for dancing, though possibly not for three hundred people.



The floor plan of the auditorium as arranged in 2024, a downloadable file that could be accessed on the current owner's website by potential renters (Public Welfare Foundation).

[52] "True Reformer Building: Space Layout," Public Welfare Foundation, accessed May 25, 2024, publicwelfare.org/true-reformer-building/space-layout.

The financial arrangement of the dancing classes in True Reformers' Hall is unknown, but it is worth thinking through a few possible scenarios to consider who profited from this form of entertainment. The newspaper quoted no price of admission for the Hesper dancing class, but the standard admission for later dances in True Reformers' Hall was twenty-five cents (the phrase "twenty-five-cent dance" is a common one and refers to not just the cost of the admission but the type of event it is). Three hundred people with twenty-five cents each is seventy-five dollars. If this money came directly to the True Reformers, they would need to give a cut to both the dancing instructors and the orchestra musicians. It could have been a percentage or a flat rate. They would need to pay the people who set up the space and cleaned up the space, who were probably their employees. If the dancing instructors were renting the space from the True Reformers, the money would have moved in the opposite direction, and paying the musicians would have been the responsibility of the dancing instructor. The True Reformers would have still needed to pay their staff. For the dancing classes with more controlled or limited membership, there might have been a dues structure rather than an admission fee, with the money being conducted through, for example, the Wilberforcian Musical Association to the True Reformers, the instructors, and the musicians.

As suggested by the word "class," these events had an educational function as well as a social one. The newspapers advertised that new dances would be taught.[53] At an event that was just a "dance," attendees would have been expected to know how to dance to the music being played, but at an event that was a "dancing class," a teacher explained and demonstrated what should be done. The men who ran dancing classes—they seem to have always been men—were sometimes identified by the newspapers as "managers" and sometimes as those who "conducted"

[53] "Saturday Afternoon Matinee," *Washington Bee* (Washington, D.C.), Oct 24, 1908, for example. "Late Locals," *Colored American* (Washington, D.C.) Jan 3, 1903, for another example.

the dancing. Some enjoyed the title of professor: "Prof Sewall" (Manhattan and Hesper), "Professor Bryon Chase" (Manhattan), "Prof. J E Gwynn" (his class bore his name).[54] They were there not only to program the dancing but to instruct it. Chase apparently gained enough fame in Washington society that the *Colored American* printed news, or perhaps gossip, of his engagement.[55] Because these were partner dances, instructors probably had female assistants for demonstration purposes, but these women went unnamed in the newspapers and they certainly did not get to be "professors." The instructors might also have used more experienced dancers within the class to demonstrate the dances. They might have stood on stage for maximum visibility and communication with the orchestra, or they might have circulated around the floor for communication with the dancers.

Dancing classes could have restricted attendance, which meant that people could be invited or excluded based on social status. It seems that some were events to which a person could show up and walk in, but others were definitely not. In 1902, the Manhattan dancing class was advertised in the *Colored American* with the note that "applications for membership should be made to Prof. Sewall at No. 2024 10th street northwest."[56] Some dancing classes were specifically designated as "private." These kinds of dancing classes were social events, but controlled ones, where only certain people were permitted to associate with each other. The Manhattan dancing class in particular seems to have emphasized its high status. It was described as "composed of some of the finest people in Washington" and as having a "large and select following of ladies and gentlemen."[57] The *Bee* declared of a matinee dancing class held at True

[54] *Colored American* (Washington, D.C.), Aug. 3, 1907. "The Manhattan Dancing Club," *Colored American* (Washington, D.C.), Nov. 22, 1902. "Professor Gwynn's Dancing Class Reception," *Colored American* (Washington, D.C.), June 16, 1900.

[55] "City Brevities," *Colored American* (Washington, D.C.), Sept 13, 1902.

[56] "The Manhattan Dancing Club," *Colored American* (Washington, D.C.), Nov. 22, 1902.

[57] "At the New Masonic Hall," *Colored American* (Washington, D.C.), Nov. 15, 1902.

Reformers' Hall: "Some of the city's best citizens were in attendance, and enjoyed themselves immensely. This promises to be one of the leading classes in the city, and if you want to meet your friends do not fail to attend."[58] This was an event that seemed to be open to the public, as the *Bee* encouraged readers to "come and bring your friends" rather than to apply for admittance. But the reporting nevertheless tried to emphasize the high social status of the crowd.

Not all dancing classes had equal status. In 1902, the *Washington Bee* ran a women's advice column called "Pointer For You" by Miss May Clematis, which was probably a pseudonym. In a list of other general pointers, she advised, "Don't join a dancing class where your social inferiors are."[59] This tidbit, repeated over several weeks, indicates the stratification of dancing classes. There were better and worse classes of dancing classes, superior and inferior people with whom to associate. The advice also indicates the potential disrepute of the dancing class based on the people who were there. If you were surrounded by the wrong people, dancing with them and learning to dance with them, you risked something: damage to your reputation, perhaps, or just a loss of the opportunity to socialize with your equals.

Some critics of dancing set their sights on the lower strata of dancing events, which were not usually called "classes." In 1910, a group of Black ministers led by Reverend J. Milton Waldron mounted what the *Bee* called a "War on the Dance," a declaration against public dances and a vow to undermine their popularity.[60] Despite the title "War on Dancing" appearing in the following issue, it was not explicitly dancing itself that Waldron disliked, it was "dances given by certain colored people on steamboats, picnic groups and public halls." The class subtext was not lost on the editors of the *Bee* who describe Waldron's target audience as "the working class

[58] "Saturday Afternoon Matinee," *Washington Bee* (Washington, D.C.), Oct. 24, 1908.
[59] "Pointer For You," *Washington Bee* (Washington, D.C.), March 22, 1902.
[60] "War on the Dance," *Washington Bee* (Washington, D.C.), Jan. 29, 1910.

or those who go down the river on excursions" in the following issue.[61] The *Bee* challenged Waldron's apparent assumption that the lower classes were badly behaved and that their dancing was vulgar, suggesting that Waldron should actually attend a dance to see for himself, and declaring there was no need for reform in the places where he claimed there was. The *Bee*'s interpretation makes the nature of Waldron's criticism more clear: a middle-class panic over lower-class behavior, in the convenient target of public dancing events. But these events were not the dancing classes at True Reformers' Hall. The *Bee* refers to dances held in the neighborhoods of Bloodfield (southwest, near what is now Navy Yard) and Foggy Bottom (northwest by the Potomac), not U Street.

Dance halls in many cities were of great concern to moralists across the country, but True Reformers' Hall seems to have sat somewhat outside that category. Tera Hunter finds that criticisms of Atlanta dance halls, from around the same time as Waldron's criticisms of Washington dance halls (and steamboats and picnics), were similarly directed. Criticisms came from reform-minded members of the Black middle class or "self-described elites" who "persistently framed their pejorative descriptions of dancing and dance halls in the language of class."[62] They believed that dance events attended by lower-class people had a corrupting effect, that the very presence of dance halls where lower-class people could congregate for these events worked against their goals of race progress. But True Reformers' Hall was not a dance venue, it *had* a dance venue, and even then, the dance venue was only in operation per occasion. Perhaps more to the point, the building profited from dance events, but dance events were not the sole or

[61] "War on Dancing," *Washington Bee* (Washington, D.C.), Feb. 5, 1910.

[62] Tera W. Hunter, *To 'Joy My Freedom: Southern Black Women's Lives and Labors after the Civil War* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1997), 173.

even main source of revenue, and alcohol was not a source of any revenue. U Street was not at all a red-light district, and True Reformers' Hall was not exactly a dance hall.

True Reformers' Hall was apparently a reputable venue, at least by virtue of its location. When J. Arthur Davis, the former manager of the Maceo Theatre, launched an attack on the Howard Theatre, he compared the patrons of the Howard Theatre to the patrons of True Reformers' Hall. He noted that near the Howard Theatre lived the "Le Droit Park community; that, though for the most is the social equal of the community about True Reformers' Hall, has decidedly not the *esprit de corps* which essentially makes and asserts self-consciousness, manliness, and racial integrity."[63] His comparison implies that the people who live on and around U Street near True Reformers' Hall are not only well-to-do but loyal to Black businesses. He quotes a white manager on the subject of the Howard Theatre's success, and his words also imply the racial loyalty of True Reformers' Hall patron: "A white theatrical manager remarks to me: 'This theater is located in a community of a different class of Negroes from those of the True Reformers' Community. As a whole, they have less self-respect and are not as comfortably situated. I think this theater will take.'"

Was this remark made to Davis in passing in a public place, or in a professional conversation that covered other theatrical topics? What kind of segregated theater was this manager running, and why did he know anything about Black communities in Washington? Is this a real quote, or did Davis invent a composite character to stoke some anger? Davis's purpose was to rally Black theater patrons against the Howard Theatre, which at the time of his writing had lost its Black manager and hired a white one, so quoting the remark about "less self-respect" is absolutely intended to sting. Self-respect to Davis is the opposite of accepting segregated

[63] Davis, 12.

seating in a theater. In his view, a self-respecting Black person could patronize the Black-owned True Reformers' Hall but not the white-owned Howard Theatre. True Reformers' Hall was a reputable venue, apparently patronized by at least somewhat "comfortably situated," or well-to-do, people.

But it is difficult to argue that every dancing class or other dance event held at the True Reformers' Hall had a good reputation. Once, the *Bee* announced that "the returns from the Jeffries-Johnson Fight will be made at True Reformer's Hall, under the auspices of the Meadow Brook Dancing Class, G. W. Thomas, Mgr. The returns will be made immediately after each round."[64] It is hard to imagine that a dance interspersed with the distribution of gambling proceeds from a boxing match was one attended by the highest in society. And then there is the wish expressed by the editors of the *Howard University Journal* that students could be deterred from attending dance events at True Reformers' Hall:

> If the students were allowed a pleasant time together with a dance thrown in now and then perhaps True Reformers' Hall would not always be so full of our students attending those twenty five cent dances. The students are bound to seek pleasure some where and if they do not get it at home under good, wholesome influences there is a tendency for them to seek it under less favorable circumstances.[65]

According to the editors, there were some influences that were located at True Reformers' Hall, that were not located at Howard University, that were unwholesome and unfavorable. "Home,"

[64] "Fight Returns," *Washington Bee* (Washington, D.C.), June 25, 1910.
[65] "Social Conditions at Howard," *Howard University Journal* (Washington, D.C.), April 8, 1910.

that is, school, was a controlled environment with a certain standard of behavior shared among everyone there. The public amusement hall did not have the same standard and control.

This apparent contradiction between the high regard in which Davis held True Reformers' Hall and the low regard in which the *Journal* editors held True Reformers' Hall is resolved if Davis was speaking broadly of everything that occurred in the building and the *Journal* editors were speaking narrowly of a certain type of event there. The *Journal* comment came only a year before Davis's essay (April 1910 to May 1911), and it is unlikely that anything about True Reformers' Hall changed drastically in that time, so the difference in reputation must be between the venue and the particular event. Different dancing classes met in True Reformers' Hall, and different classes could have easily drawn crowds of different social ranks. In a building that could have hosted both higher status and lower status events, it may have been that the twenty-five cents dances were in the middle of this scale: reputable but not reputable enough. Also, Davis does not refer to dancing specifically and might be regarding the building more in its capacity as a playhouse.

Men & Women, Youth & Movement

Attending a dancing class was entertainment: listening to music and moving for one's own enjoyment. It was one way of keeping up with the times, engaging with what was new in popular culture. It was a social activity with plenty of interpersonal interaction. To attend a dancing class was to study a skill that would help a person make and maintain social connections, and it was the social element of dancing classes and dances that made them so fraught with issues of reputation and respectability. This is a point that appears to have been so well-understood by everyone that no one needed to say it directly. Every expression of anxiety

and disdain around dancing, every observation of the presence and absence of dancing in different contexts, orbits around the true danger of dancing: the interaction of young men and young women.

Young people of lower social classes faced a double criticism for their dancing based on both their class and their age. When Reverend Waldron began his 1910 campaign against public dances, he expressed particular concern for young people, whom he felt would be unduly influenced by these dances, which were "sources of intemperance and coarseness."[66] His disdain for dancing may have been primarily based on his suspicions about the lower classes, and older people as well as younger people are mentioned in his criticisms, but his disdain was also based on his suspicions about the young. Dancing was "the practice which has grown to such an extent among the young colored people of the city." His emphasis on young people reveals a fear of youthful independence, the common concern of an older generation for the (what seems to them) frivolity and indecency of the younger one. Similarly, a 1902 *Colored American* opinion essay about the laziness of young male workers lamented that "they report punctually and often at the barroom, the card table and dance hall" and shared an anecdote about men who are supposed to be working instead gossiping about the trials of a couple who attend a dancing class.[67] Here dancing was linked with drinking and gambling and considered a dangerous distraction from work to which the young and male were uniquely susceptible.

Interestingly, in both of these cases, dance was linked to alcohol, and there might have been a difference or perceived difference in alcohol consumption at dance events attended by different classes of people. For Waldron, dance led to "intemperance," which he might or might not have meant literally. For the essayist, the dance hall and the barroom were associated. Dance

[66] "War on the Dance," *Washington Bee* (Washington, D.C.) Jan. 29, 1910.
[67] "The-Man-On-the-Corner," *Colored American* (Washington, D.C.), Apr. 5, 1902.

was supposed by both the minister and the essayist to be a corrupting influence comparable to alcohol for young—working class—Black men. By this time, dance halls were "associated with crime, drinking, and illicit sex" in the minds of white and Black reformers.[68] With dancing and drinking, perhaps the one led to the other, or could, and perhaps they were to be found in the same establishments. Perhaps they were regarded as similar in their tendency to cause unrestrained behavior. Dance events at True Reformers' Hall, however, must have been dry. Even if the space was rented and the True Reformers were profiting indirectly, an organization born of the temperance movement would surely not allow for alcohol. There were dance events elsewhere that served alcohol, or were attended by people going to or coming from establishments that did, and dance events that did not, and there was a class distinction between those types.

Dance presented dangers not only for working-class young men, but middle-class young men as well. An examination of the relationship of students to dancing, as documented in the *Howard University Journal*, reveals that dancing was an activity extremely likely to have restrictions placed upon it in order for middle-class respectability to be maintained. Music was also held in high esteem by the editors, and they frequently praised performers and directors and encouraged the strengthening of Howard's musical programs, which does appear to have occurred over the decade.[69] Eventually plays directed, managed, and performed by students were reported on.[70] The writers of the *Journal* at this time appear to have been generally in favor of dancing, and dancing seems to have been popular with the student body. The Council of Upper

[68] Hunter, 168.
[69] "Work of the Musical Department," *Howard University Journal* (Washington, D.C.), Oct 16, 1908.
[70] "The Merry Wives of Windsor," "The Academy Play A Grand Success," *Howard University Journal* (Washington, D.C.), March 10, 1911.

Classmen, referred to as the CUC, gave "proms"; by 1910 it was two dances a year.[71] Other student organizations such as the Inter-Scholastic Athletic Associations gave dances to raise funds.[72] But when dancing appeared in the newspaper, it was often a complicated and limited activity.

The reputation of the university itself was risked by association with disreputable dancing. In 1911, "an Extraordinary Classy Dance by Baltimore's Medical Students of Howard University" was advertised in a Baltimore newspapers and on posters that circulated with student names signed to them.[73] Apparently some or all of the students responsible were musicians, and the *Journal* noted that they "pay their way through school by playing and giving such dances," which the writers found commendable. The *Journal* later reported on the working musicians among the students in a 1912 article titled "How Self-Supporting College Men Earn Money in Summer," describing how young men formed orchestras that would play in resorts and hotels.[74] The enterprise was not the issue, nor was the music. The issue was that the use of the name Howard University on an unaffiliated event risked the university's reputation. It was apparently the second time such a thing had happened, and the editors of the *Journal* wanted to comment, but they approached the matter with caution: "We do not know the nature of the dance and so unheard will not condemn it. We do not know that anyone could attend who had the necessary quarter... It might have been a creditable function, one that we could do well to recognize and claim as representative of this institution. Again, it might have been otherwise."

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[71] "C.U.C. Night," *Howard University Journal* (Washington, D.C.), Dec. 9, 1910.

[72] "Was the Athletic Association Justified in Its Action?" *Howard University Journal* (Washington, D.C.), Jan. 29, 1909.

[73] "Editorials," *Howard University Journal* (Washington, D.C.), Jan. 13, 1911.

[74] "How Self-Supporting College Men Earn Money in Summer," *Howard University Journal* (Washington, D.C.), Oct. 11, 1912.

The problem was not with dancing generally. The problem was that the dance might have been public, open to anyone with twenty-five cents, and Howard University's name would have appeared connected to an event with no restrictions on attendance, no guarantees that the behavior of the attendees would reflect positively on the university.

Descriptions of social events allude to tension between students who thought that dancing was appropriate in certain contexts and university authority figures who did not agree. Sometimes the writers of the *Journal* made a point of noting when a particular event had no dancing, which comes across as something of an indirect complaint. In 1908, they reported on a formal event held at Miner Hall, "a supper given by some of the young ladies of the hall in honour of Miss Ardelle Smith's eighteenth birthday." The article mentions the evening dress of hosts and guests, the decorations, the playing of whist, and, in its own paragraph, "Dancing was not allowed."[75] Later the same year, a social for new students featured mingling and discussion "while the Lyric Orchestra lightened the atmosphere with dreamy waltzes and fascinating two steps. Ofcoarse [sic] there was no dancing."[76] It hints at humor, or even disappointment—what good is dreamy and fascinating dance music without dancing? Or, why attend the party hosted by the young ladies if you were going to be prohibited from dancing with them? In 1911, writers described an event where both women and men were present and "conversation and a general social was held and the evening was whiled away with music, songs and—dancing(?), no."[77] In both cases there was an implied disagreement between the writers and whoever had decided against the propriety of dancing in a certain context. In 1909, a "W. L. J." wrote into a recurring *Journal* column called "Don't" and made this contribution: "Don't dance when you have been

[75] "A Birthday Supper," *Howard University Journal* (Washington, D.C.), March 25, 1908.
[76] "Faculty Reception to the Students of the School of Liberal Arts," *Howard University Journal* (Washington, D.C.), Oct. 9, 1908.
[77] "1912," *Howard University Journal* (Washington, D.C.), Nov. 24, 1911.

requested not to dance." It sounds like there may have been at least one rebellious dancer at one of these deliberately dance-less gatherings, and it annoyed another student enough that he submitted an admonishment to the paper.

When the writers at the *Journal* made suggestions for improving the university social life in 1910, they proposed more dancing. As previously discussed, hosting more dances at Howard was supposed to deter students from attending dances at True Reformers' Hall, but it was also supposed to increase opportunities for the male students to socialize with the female students. The women that the Howard University men were meeting at True Reformers' Hall were not Howard University women. Instead, they would be the women referred to in the *Journal* as "city friends" or "your city girl" (as opposed to "Miner Hall ladies" or "your Miner Hall girl"). To meet and successfully court Howard women, the Howard men believed their chances would be better with more dancing hosted at the university. In a description of how inadequate the social life at the university was, the complaint that "many girls come here and never get a chance to see and know something of other men before they become tied down to one young man" was pretty clearly written by one of the "other men" in question.[78] But it shows how dance more effectively circulated people than seated events did. "Perhaps we would get away from that narrowness of getting two chairs together against the wall and remaining in one seat the entire allotted time," they wrote. The way dancing paired people was more effective for the social interaction of men and women than the way chairs did.

In partnered dancing, the preferences of men were only ever half the story, and dancing appealed to women. Polite society warnings such as those appearing in the *Bee's* "Pointer for You" would have had no purpose if there had been no enthusiasm for dancing among middle-

[78] "Social Conditions at Howard," *Howard University Journal* (Washington, D.C.), April 8, 1910.

class or upper-class women. The *Journal* editorials share no women's voices, though we can imagine Howard women reading the *Journal* and discussing their agreement or disagreement with the editors, suggesting their own solutions for the improvement of university social life, or laughing at some of the comments made about themselves. University events or parties in private homes might have been the only places these women were permitted to dance. The opportunities to speak with many dance partners that the male students seemed to value were probably at least equally valued by the female students as well, seeing as their contact with male students seems to have been highly monitored and mediated by older adults. We don't know if Miss Ardelle Smith would have wanted dancing at her birthday party, but we know that women must have enjoyed dancing and found in dancing enough freedom to cause concern.

Outside the university, working women found their own version of freedom and expression in dancing. Black women domestic workers in Washington, as elsewhere, were experiencing a great transition between living and laboring in the homes of their employers and "living out," only going to their employer's homes to work.[79] "Living out" meant more time of a domestic worker's time was her own. A retail, trade, or government worker could have had her evening hours to herself as well. This meant that Black working women attending dance events were exercising a new privilege to use their time as they preferred, to take themselves to the places they wanted to be and enjoy moving in the ways they wanted to move. Hunter writes that Black working people in the years after slavery danced to "reclaim their bodies from appropriation as instruments of physical toil and redirect their energies toward other

[79] Thomas, 71-72. Hunter, 58-59.

diversions."[80] It also meant the argument that dance hall activities interfered with the productivity of young Black male workers was also made about young Black female workers.[81]

The dancing itself was not described in the press, so we have to turn to histories of American social dancing to imagine what kind of movement was happening at Howard University and True Reformers' Hall in 1903 and beyond. The 1910s are considered a period of great change and growth in social dance with the rise of ballroom exhibition teams, popular performers who introduced new partner dances to the public. Dances like the tango and the foxtrot burst onto the American scene in this decade. Julie Malnig describes a transition between nineteenth-century social dancing and twentieth-century social dancing as one between the more coordinated "group movement" of couples in circles and lines and the less coordinated improvisational movement of couples moving separately from one another.[82] The dancing classes and other dance events of early twentieth-century Washington may have been either type or somewhere in the middle of that transition.

Another factor to consider is by 1903, the crossover and hybridization of Black vernacular dance forms into white dance spaces and onto white dancers was well underway. Beginning with the cakewalk in the 1890s, the dance forms developed by Black Americans to be danced to ragtime music were being danced by white Americans, too.[83] Danielle Robinson describes the reinvention of ragtime dancing in the 1910s, the professionalization of a vernacular dance form to make it suitable to the tastes of middle-class white America. She argues that ragtime dancing before this shift had "timing changes…much more uneven and sudden, floor

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[80] Hunter, 178-179.

[81] Hunter, 179.

[82] Julie Malnig, "Two-Stepping to Glory: Social Dance and the Rhetoric of Social Mobility," *Etnofoor* 10, no. 1/2 (1997): 129-130.

[83] Danielle Robinson, "The Ugly Duckling: The Refinement of Ragtime Dancing and the Mass Production and Marketing of Modern Social Dance," *Dance Research: The Journal of the Society for Dance Research* 28, no. 2 (2010), 180.

patterns more unruly, and level changes more pronounced" than later when it was being danced and taught by white ballroom professionals.[84] Both ragtime dancing and what Robinson calls modern dancing were improvisatory forms, where the unit of the dance, the number of people who had to be coordinated with each other, was the couple rather than the group. Black and white Washingtonians alike were dancing to ragtime music, among other kinds ("dreamy waltzes and fascinating two-steps"—two-steps being rags). The question is where.

Dances with improvisation presented more risk to a person's reputation than dances with instruction. If young men and women moving in pairs together, making acquaintance in close proximity that could not be strictly supervised, already induced anxiety in authority figures in schools and churches, how much worse would that anxiety have been when the movement itself could not be prescribed or predicted? Like uncontrolled attendance, uncontrolled movement had the potential to be disreputable. The dancing class was more controlled than other dancing events because participants were being told what to do. The presence of the instructor in the dancing class, who could tell people where and how to move, is one indication that the dancing classes at True Reformers' Hall and elsewhere may have produced dances in more of the nineteenth-century, group-movement type. But there is nothing to say that dancers could not have been instructed in forms that treated the couple as an individual unit, or that there could not have been an intermediary step where some dances were fully instructed and others were not. The exuberant, expressive dancing that Robinson describes as ragtime, however, seems unlikely to have been danced at True Reformers' Hall when it first opened, especially as in 1900 the *Reformer* newspaper announced it "shall always condemn professional cake-walks as not in keeping with decency and morality."[85] But this is something that is likely to have changed over

[84] Robinson, 185.
[85] "The Reformer shall always condemn," *Reformer* (Richmond, Va), Jan. 27, 1900.

time, as new dances tend to become less shocking and more normal over time. Reading backwards from expressed anxieties, we can guess that the most improvisatory dancing took place in the most criticized venues and among the most criticized people.

Repute: Dance and the True Reformers

Repute is not something that is either totally present or totally absent, nor is it a hierarchy, nor is it a one-dimensional scale from the less reputable to the most reputable. It may be useful to think of different axes of repute that together form the status of one dance event in relation to another dance event. Proximity to or permissibility of alcohol consumption might be one axis, with greater or easier alcohol consumption lowering the status. The amount of instruction versus the amount of improvisation might be another, with instruction creating a safer environment and improvisation a riskier one. The character of the participants might be yet another axis, with exclusivity to higher social classes scoring higher points. Even the community standing of the people who stand to make a profit from the event might have some bearing on the social acceptability of attending: the ownership of the space could lend respectability to the events that took place there.

Understanding this diversity of factors, we can see that the dancing classes of True Reformers' Hall in the early years of the building's existence had serious claims to respectability. They were probably dry and probably well-instructed, and they certainly contributed to the separate economy of Black Washington rather than sending money into the pockets of outsiders and segregationists. But they may have varied in exclusivity and class character. Admission costs must have been prohibitive to at least some people, and certain clubs might have had limited memberships. Maybe they were full of people who were considered

superior to the dancers that so theoretically alarmed ministers in other neighborhoods, but were considered inferior to the dancers in the student body at Howard University. It could have been just simply different event to event, class to class, and it was helpful that the building could accommodate different groups who did not wish to share space.

Enough people lived in the city, and those people had enough money, that Black Washingtonians could create many forms of entertainment for themselves to enjoy. Because True Reformers' Hall did not rely upon white financial institutions or white patrons for its continued existence, it was reliant on its neighbors and neighborhood visitors. True Reformers' Hall was a place where people converged, to meet each other, to enjoy their time, to spend their money in a business which treated them respectfully and benefitted their community. It was the pattern for future buildings in the area which served similar social purposes by providing meeting space and entertainment space. The Twelfth Street Y.M.C.A. designed by William Sidney Pittman (1912) and the Prince Hall Masonic Temple designed by Albert Irvin Castle (1922) were two such buildings that repeated some of True Reformers Hall's firsts.

The True Reformers did not make it very far into the next decade in their most powerful form. Mismanagement ended their famous financial stability, and the bank closed in 1910, taking most of the business operations down with it, though the True Reformers continued to issue insurance until 1934.[86] The building, in its prime location with its functional space, stayed in operation under the original name. When the swing era arrived, with Washington native Duke Ellington at its fore, True Reformers' Hall was there to host a fresh kind of music and dancing. The infrastructure was ready for new movement when it came.

[86] Watkinson, 395-396.

Today the True Reformer Building, as it is called, is owned by the Public Welfare Foundation. The Public Welfare Foundation is a grant-making organization which "supports efforts to advance justice and opportunity for people in need. These efforts honor the Foundation's core values of racial equity, economic well-being and fundamental fairness for all."[87] The organization emphasizes the progressivism of the True Reformers when discussing the building, which helps them connect their own work to the history of the location. Its auditorium, which has been named for John Anderson Lankford, is available to rent, as are a few other rooms. A mural of Ellington adorns the side of the building, passed every day by tens of thousands of people who are making their way from the metro station to bus stops or the businesses and residences that still exist along U Street. Even if passersby do not know exactly what the connection is between the building and the musician, the mural impresses viewers with the sense that the building has been a musical place—if they look up to see it.

True Reformers' Hall was extraordinary for its independence. The True Reformers set a standard that was difficult for other organizations to reach and eventually difficult for themselves to sustain. But the building endured as a place of freedom and fun. It was a place that inspired arguments about reputation and revealed the ways different classes and generations of Black Washington perceived each other. A new institution for a growing and changing city, True Reformers' Hall was the result of an ambitious and enjoyable vision for Black Washington's future.

[87] "About Us," Public Welfare Foundation, accessed May 25, 2024, publicwelfare.org/about-us.

Chapter Two — The Twelfth Street Y.M.C.A.: Support and Belonging

It's Wednesday, May 22, 1912, at the Twelfth Street Y.M.C.A.

There is a commotion on the street as hundreds of people, mostly Black and some white, are gathering to enter the building. This is only the third chance the public will have had to see the inside, so some who have already seen it are describing it to those who have not yet seen it. Passing through a narrow entrance between four granite columns and a small vestibule, we enter a rich, spacious interior, embellished with oak wainscoting and paneling. The crowd is moving slowly so everyone can admire the lobby, and the slow pace is contributing to the crowding on the street, but our destination is just through the double-doors at the end.

All the events of this opening week were meant to occur in the gymnasium, but if you had come to the building on Sunday hoping to see it, you would have been disappointed. President Taft was supposed to dedicate the building, but even though he sent Secretary of War Henry L. Stimson instead, there were still far too many spectators to fit inside and the Secretary spoke to the assembly in front of the building. But now the people get to see not only the gymnasium space, but the gymnasium and the swimming pool facilities in action.

Through the double-doors, we enter a two-story, thirty-foot-high space with balconies on its second level, one of which is a running track. This space can be converted into a thousand-seat auditorium, but today it is configured as a gym because the purpose of tonight's event is to demonstrate its athletic uses. We see dumbbells, hurdles, and parallel bars ready to be handled by the athletes who are just warming up. All are men. Some of them are white athletes from a team put together by the city's central Y.M.C.A., the white organization who refused membership to Black people but have partly funded this separate branch. There are also Black athletes present who will demonstrate some sports, including swimming. After the white Y.M.C.A.

athletes show off their "apparatus exhibition," including gymnastic and track skills, they will depart, and we will see some additional exhibitions by the Black athletes: a relay race or a basketball match.

Next the assembly will need to move downstairs to view the aquatic segment of tonight's events, a swimming race. As everyone jostles each other on the way down, there's some relief being expressed in the conversations. This is an impressive building to have been constructed in four years. But there were times in that four years when the completion of the building as planned seemed impossible, and the sight of the fifty by twenty foot swimming pool feels like witnessing a miracle. The pool occupies the center of the basement level, and if tonight's events hadn't started at 8pm, there would still be sunlight coming through windows in the roof. As it is, the electric light is doing the job, spotlighting this wonderful new asset to the Black community.

There will be several more evening events to round out the opening week, each day focused on a different population who has a claim to the Y.M.C.A. building: ministers, educators, athletes, members of the military, members of fraternal orders, and finally, women—those affiliated with men in the Y.M.C.A. and those who are members of the Y.W.C.A. Each evening will bring curious visitors with their own ideas about what can be done in this building.

Young, Men's, Christian, Association

Late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century Black Washington had many organizations which contributed to conversations about contemporary issues, with members and guests speaking their perspectives either in print or from a podium. Many, but not all, took action on the contemporary issues they discussed as well. The 1901 *Union League Directory* lists five of "the

most widely known" literary societies, acknowledging that there were others.[88] Of these, the most influential over several decades was the Bethel Literary and Historical Society. Founded in 1881, the society brought speakers on a variety of contemporary subjects to address its audiences, which could number in the hundreds. The Colored Woman's League was founded in 1892 and eventually merged with other women's clubs to become the National Association of Colored Women in 1896.[89] Their service focused on caring for women and children, especially the poor and new arrivals to the city. The 1901 *Union League Directory* lists them under the heading "Philanthropic," along with the Union League itself.[90] This was also the period when the first Black sororities and fraternities emerged, with the founding of Alpha Kappa Alpha and the establishment of the second chapter of Alpha Phi Alpha occurring at Howard University during the 1907-1908 school year. They promoted racial solidarity and service to their communities.[91]

Organizations such as these assembled various segments of Black Washington for the exchange of ideas. Some organizations drew their membership from only a particular social group, such as elite women or male university students, but others had a broader base. Women met in their own clubs, like the Colored Woman's League, where they began to create the foundation of Black feminism. But they could also join or even address mixed groups and bring their priorities and perspectives to audiences which included men. Students founded and ran university associations that centered on their academic and social interests. But they could also attend the activities of non-student societies away from campus and make connections between

[88] Andrew F. Hilyer, *The Twentieth Century Union League Directory* (Washington, D.C.: The Union League, 1901), 148-150.

[89] Jacqueline M. Moore, *Leading the Race: The Transformation of the Black Elite in the Nation's Capital, 1880-1920* (Charlottesville, Va.: University Press of Virginia, 1999), 162-165.

[90] Hilyer, 155-156.

[91] Moore, 114-118.

their education and the city around them. This mix composed the center of Black intellectual life in Washington in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.

The Young Men's Christian Association was one of many organizations through which ideas about politics, economics, religion, and society were put up for discussion in Black Washington. The Y.M.C.A. was an English movement that took hold in the United States in the 1850s with the mission of promoting Christian values among young, urban, working-class men. A chapter was created in Washington in 1851, the second ever in the United States, but like so many other nineteenth-century social organizations, its membership was limited to white people. A separate chapter for Black people was established in Washington in 1853, the first of its kind, by a formerly enslaved man named Anthony Bowen. It was not formally incorporated until March 1891, at which point it seems to have been revived in earnest, with such distinguished leadership as Reverend J. M. Waldron who presided over the installation of the first set of officers and Reverend F. J. Grimké who gave one of the addresses.[92]

Through this period the religious and social intentions of the Y.M.C.A. were central: to reach young men in urban environments and keep them engaged with Christian life and values. In the words of Richard M. Duke, Jr., a law student writing in the *Howard University Journal* in 1905, "The designs of the Association are to encourage the Christian spirit among the young men and strengthen their ambition for the highest and noblest things of life."[93] Y.M.C.A. meeting attendees would be exhorted by ministers and other leaders who spoke on scripture, self-improvement, and society. Titles of Y.M.C.A. lectures given at Howard University, where there was a separate college chapter, cover the range of topics with which the Y.M.C.A. was most

[92] "Locals," *Washington Bee* (Washington D.C.), June 7, 1891. "Young Men's Christian Association," *Washington Bee* (Washington D.C.), Oct. 3, 1891.

[93] "The Importance of the Y.M.C.A.," *Howard University Journal* (Washington D.C.), Jan. 20, 1905.

concerned. Some speakers focused their talks on the Bible ("The Greater Wisdom," "The Seamless Robe," "The Man and the Book," "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself").[94] Others emphasized qualities and actions of the individual ("Self Master," "Courage," "Opportunity").[95] Addressing, as they were, a group of students, many chose to speak on the roles and responsibilities of young Black men in the modern world ("The demand for young men," "The Possibilities of Young Manhood," "The College Man," "The New Negro and the Old Religion," "Why Am I Here?").[96] The Y.M.C.A., at Howard and in the city, was a venue where people met to discern what Christian life and leadership could look like for themselves and their communities.

It was a practical intellectual life that the Y.M.C.A. wanted its members to pursue. Hearing ideas and receiving encouragement from a man standing at a lectern would help members attain the objective, but lecture attendance was not the objective itself. The objective was a moral, conscientious, healthful life. As one speaker reminded Howard students, "Don't be a man of theory, but a practical liver."[97] Living practically required civic responsibility. Howard Y.M.C.A. attendees heard not only about the need to overcome personal trials and temptations, but also about the need to address material issues in their city. They were presented with the struggles of alley life in Washington, in a lecture described as "simple, practical, and very

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[94] "Y.M.C.A.," *Howard University Journal* (Washington D.C.), Nov. 19, 1909. "Y.M.C.A. Notes," *Howard University Journal* (Washington D.C.), Oct. 14, 1910. "Howard Day at the Y.M.C.A.: Dr. Thirkield Speaks," *Howard University Journal* (Washington D.C.), Nov. 4, 1910. "Y.M.C.A. Notes," *Howard University Journal* (Washington D.C.), Dec. 16, 1910.

[95] "The Y.M.C.A.," *Howard University Journal* (Washington D.C.), Dec. 11, 1908. "The Y.M.C.A.," *Howard University Journal* (Washington D.C.), April 2, 1909. "The Y.M.C.A. Reception," *Howard University Journal* (Washington D.C.), Oct. 14, 1910.

[96] "The Y.M.C.A.," *Howard University Journal* (Washington D.C.), April 2, 1909. "The Y.M.C.A.," *Howard University Journal* (Washington D.C.), May 14, 1909. "Y.M.C.A.," *Howard University Journal* (Washington D.C.), Feb. 4 1910. "The Y.M.C.A.," *Howard University Journal* (Washington D.C.), April 30, 1909. "Y.M.C.A.," *Howard University Journal* (Washington D.C.), April 12, 1907.

[97] "Societies: Y.M.C.A.," *Howard University Journal* (Washington D.C.), April 27, 1906.

effective" that was given when the Y.M.C.A. was "about to launch out into the real uplift and betterment of the less fortunate people of the slum and alley districts of the city."[98] Living practically also required physical discipline and strength. In his address "The Control of the Fighting Instinct," which was printed in the *Howard University Journal* afterwards, Howard graduate Dwight O. W. Holmes argued for the virtues instilled by college athletics: "But I do know that if you practice daily the vigorous virtues directly resulting from a clean athletics and apply them in your future life; if you are honest and kind, altruistic and loyal, and withal an efficient fighter for the right—men will love and honor you, and you in turn will enjoy happiness in great abundance in the life that is."[99] Holmes was addressing the male students, and although he was not addressing the Y.M.C.A. specifically, he encouraged listeners "to apply these thoughts to the spirit of the Y.M.C.A." Physical ability would help carry out the work that needed to be done, which was work for the good of the race.

The appeal of participation in the Y.M.C.A. was in its practical goals and service orientation, but the appeal of leadership in the Y.M.C.A. was additionally in its social status. The organization was seen to be successful in achieving its mission. The *Journal* declared in 1908, "The Y.M.C.A. is the organization that is doing things in the world."[100] But beyond doing things in the world, the Y.M.C.A. was the organization where one could be seen doing things in the world. Jacqueline Moore argues that the Black elite were attracted to working with the Y.M.C.A. because within it they could attain leadership positions, work with each other in a non-discriminatory environment, and raise their sons to have leadership qualities.[101] Additionally, she

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[98] "The Y.M.C.A. Meeting: A Very Practical Lecture," *Howard University Journal* (Washington D.C.), Feb. 21, 1913.

[99] "The Control of the Fighting Instinct," *Howard University Journal* (Washington D.C.), Dec. 22, 1911. "The Control of the Fighting Instinct," *Howard University Journal* (Washington D.C.), Jan. 19, 1912. In 1937, Holmes became the fifth president of Morgan State College, now University.

[100] "Y.M.C.A.," *Howard University Journal* (Washington D.C.), Oct. 9, 1908.

[101] Moore, 172-173.

describes how the Y.M.C.A. was not an organization that confronted racism directly, which was also attractive to a segment of the Black elite who strove to avoid antagonizing the white elite.

It was as a forum for Christian life and leadership that the Y.M.C.A. functioned as a component of Black intellectual life, and it did this for many years without a designated physical location. In our century we tend to think of "the Y" as a location, probably as a gym with a pool where kids (like me) learn to swim or a youth hostel where "you can hang out with all the boys." And the Twelfth Street Y.M.C.A. building, when it was eventually established, had these familiar features: rooms for residents, space for exercising the body.[102] But prior to the opening of the building at 1816 12th Street, the "colored" branch of the Y.M.C.A. was not so much a place as an entity that operated in many places. There were Y.M.C.A. activities in churches like the Metropolitan A.M.E., in venues like True Reformers' Hall and the Howard Theatre, and at Howard University where a large population of young men were conveniently gathered. (The Y.M.C.A. at Howard was actually a college-specific branch with its own officers and activities, but its popularity still reflects the strength of the other city branch. If there were no Black Y.M.C.A. in the city, it might not have been possible to garner such support for a college branch at Howard.) True Reformers' Hall is considered to have been the home of the Y.M.C.A. in the years 1903-1912, but once the Howard Theatre opened in 1910, that spacious, high-capacity venue clearly became a prime location for its larger meetings. The Y.M.C.A. was not unique in this situation; many organizations did not have a designated building. Nineteenth Street Baptist Church hosted the conventions of the Nation Association of Colored Women, for example.

[102] Laura Harris Hughes and Laura Trieschmann, "National Historic Landmark Nomination: Twelfth Street Young Men's Christian Association Building" (United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service, 1994), 4.

But even as successful as it was, for decades its leaders had wanted the Y.M.C.A. to be a place, for the organization to have a building to its name where it could carry out its activities of Christian community-building and self-improvement. A building would take the ideals of the organization from discussion to reality, from the lecture hall to the street. In 1891, the year of formal incorporation, leaders began making moves toward the acquisition of a building known as the "Forest City Hotel" somewhere along 11th Street.[103] Then there was the move to the meeting rooms of True Reformers' Hall when that building opened. But perhaps guided by the example of True Reformers' Hall, the organization began in earnest to plan for a new building of its own. Fundraising began in 1906, construction began in 1908, and the doors finally opened in 1912. The resultant building contained assembly halls, dormitories, a café and a barbershop, a gymnasium and a swimming pool, and more.[104] The project was large and ambitious, and all the building's different spaces indicated some way in which Y.M.C.A. leaders and members wished to represent or enact the organization's ideals.

"A Public Affair"

In a time period when the creation of Black-owned spaces was newly possible but perpetually risky, control over the development of the Y.M.C.A. building served as a proxy for control of Black public intellectual life in Washington. The establishment of a physical location for the Y.M.C.A. was slow-going, marked by tensions over the decision-making process and spectacular successes and failures in funding. These struggles were consequences of the particular relationship that this Black branch had to the broader segregated organization. Other

[103] "Young Men's Christian Association," *Washington Bee* (Washington D.C.), Oct. 3, 1891.
[104] "Many Meetings Held At Colored Y.M.C.A.," *Evening Star* (Washington D.C.), May 24, 1912. Hughes and Trieschmann, 4.

organizations which provided platforms for Black intellectuals were far less entangled in the business of white organizations. It would be a mistake to imagine an entirely separate world of thought. Howard University had white faculty and a white president until 1926, the NAACP was an interracial organization from its outset, and even the Bethel Literary and Historical Society hosted a very few white speakers.[105] But many meetings held by other Black organizations had an internal quality to them, that is, the issues surrounding democracy, business, progress, and discrimination that were relevant to Black people were being spoken about by Black speakers for Black audiences and were reported on by the Black press. These organizations primarily provided a platform for Black intellectuals, but sometimes white speakers were invited to bring ideas about race and race relations, as well as ideas about church, government, family, and society, to the organizations that composed the Black intellectual world of Washington.

To understand the stakeholders in the development of the Y.M.C.A. building, we need to understand that the "colored" Y.M.C.A. maintained a relationship with the overarching (white) Y.M.C.A. and Black participants saw themselves as part of the same organization as white participants. This was unlike the True Reformers, who had been born of a rejection from an all-white temperance society in their distant past and had no counterpart white organizations, and unlike Black fraternities like the Prince Hall Freemasons or the Improved Benevolent and Protective Order of Elks, who had little to no interaction with the white Freemasons or the (obviously unimproved) Benevolent and Protective Order of Elks once they established themselves in defiance of the discriminatory body. When William Jennings Bryant was scheduled to speak to the Y.M.C.A. at the Howard Theatre, the *Bee* described him as "a devout Y.M.C.A. man," which placed him simply as a member of the organization he was addressing:

[105] Kim Roberts, "The Bethel Literary and Historical Society," *Beltway Poetry Quarterly* 11, no. 2 (2010) washingtonart.com/beltway/bethel.html.

the Y.M.C.A., with no distinction. When the English ambassador was scheduled, the *Bee* explained that the Y.M.C.A. movement had its beginnings in England, with no mention that the "colored" Y.M.C.A. had its beginnings in Washington. There is a sense in that description that, though segregated, the Black branch was no different to any other branch. It was not a separate movement.

This is not to say that segregation in the Y.M.C.A. was accepted peacefully. Segregation in Y.M.C.A. rankled just as badly as it did elsewhere, if not more, because discrimination within religious organizations was depicted by the Black press as particularly offensive. While arguments against discrimination in theaters and other entertainment spaces could be made on the basis of equal talent, equal merit, or equal money, when the conversation turned to religious organizations, an argument was made on the basis of equality before God. In 1910, local Black Sunday School classes were barred by local white organizers from participating in a parade at an event titled the World's Sunday School Convention.[106] The *National Forum* termed this a "fiasco," possibly because the prohibition was unanticipated, and the incident sparked strong denunciations. On the subject of the incident, Dr. I. N. Ross of the Galbraith A.M.E declared, "for heaven's sake remove that golden wedge, American prejudice, out of the Sunday School Convention."[107]

W. Calvin Chase, ever true to his principle of not supporting that which he could not attend or join, found the Y.M.C.A. worthy of some public shaming. In 1894 he objected to being asked to contribute to the Y.M.C.A., that is, the international, white-controlled organization. "If our money is good enough for you, certainly our presence among you ought to be better," he wrote. "When you get religion enough to know that a negro is as good as his money or that he

[106] "Now That It Is Over" and others, *National Forum* (Washington, D.C.), June 4, 1910.
[107] "Bishop J. W. Hood," *National Forum* (Washington, D.C.), June 4, 1910.

can do you as much good as his money invite him to your meetings and he will not have any hesitency [sic] in contributing to your association."[108] Failure to admit Black members was a failure to practice the religion the Y.M.C.A. claimed. In 1907 Chase found it necessary to criticize both the discrimination of the white Y.M.C.A. and what he saw as the complacency of the black Y.M.C.A. members. "The Bee believes in that religion that knows but one God, one worship, and as many churches as may exist, but it doesn't believe in that religion that the white Christians follow,—a separate worship." Here, as Dr. Ross did later, Chase suggested that racism itself was the religion of white Christians. On the segregation of the Y.M.C.A., the *Bee* did not hold back: "The Bee wonders if there will be a 'Jim Crow' department in h—l!"[109]

The strength of the affiliation with the broader Y.M.C.A. goes a long way to explaining why, in 1906, one John D. Rockefeller, Sr. pledged $25,000 toward the construction of a building for Washington's "colored" Y.M.C.A. It was a white man, Samuel W. Woodward of the Woodward & Lothrop department stores, who was presiding over the Washington Y.M.C.A. at the time and who sought the donation from John D. Rockefeller, Jr.[110] The Y.M.C.A. was an organization with name recognition, whose mission was well-understood and embraced by white people. Donating to the Y.M.C.A. was donating to a white-controlled organization, even if the funds were to benefit the Black branch. John D. Rockefeller, Sr. had made contributions to the Y.M.C.A. since the 1870s, and Nina Mjagkij argues that his affinity for the Y.M.C.A. came from his belief "that success resulted from personal determination" and that the Y.M.C.A. could help

[108] "Why Negroes Will Not Aid," *Washington Bee* (Washington, D.C.), March 31, 1894.
[109] "Jim Crow Religion," *Washington Bee* (Washington, D.C.), July 27, 1907.
[110] Nina Mjagkij, *Light in the Darkness: African Americans and the YMCA, 1852-1946* (Lexington, Ky: University Press of Kentucky, 1994), 69-70. Hughes and Trieschmann, 13-14.

people "strengthen their bodies, overcome their weaknesses, and achieve success."[111] This would be the first Rockefeller contribution to a Black branch of the Y.M.C.A.

The gift was remarkable, but the funds came with stipulations. The amount was half of what the building was estimated to cost, and it was proposal of Woodward and other members of the white Y.M.C.A. that Rockefeller require matching funds to be raised.[112] It is very hard to imagine that $50,000 meant much to one of the richest men in the history of the United States, but Woodward's request was probably designed to appeal to the individualistic worldview of Rockefeller, Sr. The decision also gave Rockefeller, Jr. power. His pledge encouraged or, more cynically, coerced other pledges. If his conditions were not met, he had not obligated himself to pay. This was probably very stressful for Woodward, not to mention Black Y.M.C.A. leaders who needed to mobilize their membership and supporters or lose the promised gift. But it probably also allowed Woodward and other white Y.M.C.A. leaders to pressure the Black Y.M.C.A. members and supporters for more money than they were perhaps prepared to give. Mjagkij writes that the hope of white Y.M.C.A. leaders was for Rockefeller's funds to inspire donations from white supporters, but she also notes that they were very aware that white Y.M.C.A. members and supporters had recently funded their own building—for $350,000—and would hesitate to fund another.[113]

White philanthropy toward Black institutions raised concerns about autonomy and control, an undercurrent of paternalism ever present. The Rockefellers' interest in supporting Black institutions was not unique among white philanthropist robber barons. The same page of newsprint that announced the groundbreaking at the new site of the Y.M.C.A. building also

[111] Mjagkij, 69.
[112] Mjagkij, 69-70.
[113] Mjagkij, 70-72.

announced a gift of $50,000 from Andrew Carnegie to Howard University for the purposes of building a library.[114] The *Bee* praised the gift and credited the president of the university, William Thirkield, saying the donation "shows that Dr Thirkield has begun to do some good work." Here was a similar situation to Woodward and Rockefeller, with one locally powerful white man soliciting funds from a very rich and powerful white man for the benefit of a Black institution. In a stratified and segregated society, it seems that it took a white social network to move this money into Black communities. Through such philanthropy, white people made decisions about what Black communities needed. Carnegie thought Howard should have a library building, probably after hearing a pitch from Thirkield, and Rockefeller could be convinced by Woodward that there should be a building for the Black Y.M.C.A., as an alternative to the "saloons, dance halls, gambling dens, and the open allurements of sin" where young Black men might otherwise spend their time."[115] The fact that these things were desired and beneficial should not obscure the fact that the wealthiest white Americans needed to believe in their value in order for them to be built.

This was also the case when wealthy white Americans funded projects in white communities as well: one group of powerful people deciding what is best for another less powerful group, with or without their input. But the initial funding of the Y.M.C.A. building shows how the realities of segregation make the tyranny of the fundraisers more severe. The deals were being done by the people who enforced discrimination, the people who continued to make it so there had to be a separate-but-not-equal branch in the first place, people who had made a religion out of segregation. Woodward was active in civic life but was no great champion

[114] "Carnegie's Gift," *Washington Bee* (Washington, D.C.), Dec. 7, 1907. "MacFarland Speaks," *Washington Bee* (Washington, D.C.), Dec. 7, 1907.

[115] Quoted in Mjagkij, 70.

of racial equality. To add further insult, the funds were not entrusted to a Black leader in the Y.M.C.A., for which Chase scolded the organization: "There are several hundred intelligent colored men connected with the Annex sufficiently competent to handle these funds, but instead of selecting one, we find Mr. John Joy Edson holding the funds of the colored association, and intelligent colored men have subscribed to this."[116] In typical Chase fashion, he was also holding accountable the Black leaders he saw as complicit. But at the heart of his criticism was his dislike for white control over the finances of Black organizations.

However, the belief of philanthropists in the social value of a building was not the first necessary condition for something to be built. The first necessary condition was the desire of existing population who would use the space. There had to be people who would, in the future, populate a new university library, or a new lecture hall and gymnasium facility, for such ideas to be even considered. In the case of the Y.M.C.A., the people who attended meetings and participated in the religious and physical activities of the organization were the foundational reason for the development of the new building. The plan began with their needs and goals, even if the plan was realized with intervention from outside the community. The crowds that filled True Reformers' Hall and later the Howard Theatre for Y.M.C.A. events believed in the possibilities of a Y.M.C.A. building first. The strength and size of the membership even influenced the dimensions of the building.[117]

Because Rockefeller only made half the initial investment, the other half of the investment was made by people who were locals and insiders, people who attended and supported the activities of the Black Y.M.C.A., and it was an investment in both the financial and emotional senses. Modern donors who require matching funds are usually looking for

[116] "Fixing Their Status," *Washington Bee* (Washington, D.C.), May 25, 1907.
[117] Mjagkij, 73.

evidence of community buy-in, confirmation that the project they are sponsoring actually has homegrown support. Rockefeller may have had such an intention, and Black Washingtonians quickly furnished that evidence by pledging their money to the campaign with enthusiasm.[118] But the public fundraising required had an effect that went beyond confirming support; it gave the public a sense of ownership in the building. Or, at minimum, it gave Chase the opportunity to make the case that the public should have a voice in the decisions being made about the building.

Before the *Bee* turned its critical eye on the development of the Howard Theatre, it applied similar pressure to the development of the Y.M.C.A. building. In May 1907, under the entirely sarcastic title "What Does This Mean?" the newspaper noted that the proposed architects were white men, as was the purchaser of the land, and the advisement to purchase land at that location had also come from the white Y.M.C.A.[119] Chase may or may not have been correct about this, but it is a course of events very much in line with how the rest of the building's development had been handled, that is, with the active roles being played by white Y.M.C.A. leaders. He called for the Y.M.C.A. to "give the colored people at least a chance of competing for the plans, designs, and erection of this building," his logic being that because Black Washington would capably finance the building, it should have an active role in its creation. While making a brief argument that "Mr. Rockefeller has not and will not object" based on his history of philanthropy to Black communities in the South, Chase called the development of the Y.M.C.A. building "a public affair" because it was being paid for by the public. And not just any public, but "the Negroes at the Capital of this great nation" whom Chase believed deserved to have an active role in creating the spaces that were meant to be theirs.

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[118] Mjagkij, 72.
[119] "What Does This Mean?" *Washington Bee* (Washington, D.C.), May 4, 1907.

The claim that the Y.M.C.A. building was a public affair raises questions about the meaning of belonging. A building could be imagined as belonging to the people who financed the construction, the people who advocated for its being built at all, the people who will run the daily operations or the people who will use it the most. When it comes to the Twelfth Street Y.M.C.A., even defining the financial backers and advocates is challenging. Whose financial contributions should be weighed more heavily, one man who gives much or a majority group of men who each give a little? And in terms of advocacy, can such a building be said to belong to the white members who will not allow Black members in their spaces and financially contribute to an annexation instead of an integration? Or should it be said to belong to the Black members who will use the space themselves and financially contribute to an annexation so that they can have any such facilities at all? There is no percentage breakdown that can satisfy questions of whose building the Twelfth Street Y.M.C.A. was or was supposed to be, no clear way to categorize a gift that never really leaves the hands of the givers but could not exist without the past, present, and promised future participation of the recipients.

The "Architect of the Race"

The standard set by the True Reformers and John A. Lankford in 1903 was still challenging to meet in 1907, but the Y.M.C.A. achieved it with William Sidney Pittman. There must have been a few others who agreed with Chase or expressed a similar point of view because there was evidently enough pressure applied to the Y.M.C.A. that they did select a Black architect for the new building.[120] Pittman had arrived in Washington in 1905 at the age of thirty and was sufficiently established in Black elite society that in 1907 he married Portia Washington,

[120] "Mr. Pittman Wins," "Pittman Wins Again," *Washington Bee* (Washington, D.C.), June 22, 1907.

daughter of Booker T. and Fannie Smith Washington.[121] When it was announced that Pittman would design the new Y.M.C.A. building, the *Bee* was highly complimentary of both the man and his work. A full profile on Pittman appeared on the front page of an October 1907 issue, describing his humble origins, his education, his social ascent, and his professional success.[122]

The profile, written by the Black journalist Richard W. Thompson, depicted a man of genius and discipline, the "premier" Black architect who reflected well on his race in both his artistic ability and his commitment to his own progress. First it tells a story of higher education and social mobility in Black America. The youngest child of formerly enslaved parents, Pittman was educated in Montgomery and Birmingham and entered the Tuskegee Institute at age seventeen. His training there was in "wheelwrighting and structural work," but Tuskegee then sent him to Drexel for further architectural studies in order that he could return to Tuskegee to teach. This could be construed as an example of success or failure for Tuskegee's manual training curriculum. It gave a poor but smart and ambitious seventeen-year-old Pittman a place to start, but it could not take the twenty-two-year-old Pittman to the heights to which he aspired and which would ultimately benefit Tuskegee. Thompson, the writer, was a sometime enemy of W. Calvin Chase who had until a few years previously edited the *Bee's* rival paper, the *Colored American.* He was a close ally of Booker T. Washington. Pittman was a shining example of what Washington's institution could produce, and eventually, Pittman would be Washington's son-in-law. The effusive praise of the profile came from a man for whom it was a foregone conclusion that Pittman's success represented Tuskegee's greatness, not its shortcomings.

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[121] Moore, 148. "Pittman-Washington," *Washington Bee* (Washington, D.C.), Sept. 21, 1907. R. W. Thompson, "W. Sidney Pittman: Architect of the Race," *Washington Bee* (Washington, D.C.), Oct. 12, 1907.

[122] R. W. Thompson, "W. Sidney Pittman: Architect of the Race," *Washington Bee* (Washington, D.C.), Oct. 12, 1907.

Subsequently the profile described his work, praising his skill in a way that emphasizes his individual accomplishment. Pittman's recent triumph was the Negro Building at the 1907 Jamestown Exposition, a fair in Norfolk, Virginia that celebrated the three hundredth anniversary of the colony's founding. The building contained exhibits about the progress of Black Americans, including a working branch of the True Reformers' Bank, and the idea and fundraising for the building began with Richmond's business community.[123] When Thompson later described Pittman as "the architect of his own good fortune," it framed him a singular, hard-working hero, rather than the product of his community and the beneficiary of their commissions.

At the Jamestown Exposition, Pittman used visual language that inserted the story of Black American progress into the overall story of America. In his design, Pittman was apparently inspired by diverse styles, or at the very least Thompson perceived such inspiration:

> From the stately colonial type to the Spanish Renaissance is a far cry, but on the Negro reservation Mr. Pittman has blended in true artistic fashion the prevailing features of the Greeks and of the Elizabethan era and the quaint castle of Queen Isabella, with here and there an example of Wesleyan simplicity, and not forgetting a dash of the Oriental in the various concession booths with which the place so abounds.[124]

Most of these aesthetics refer to different aspects of Americanness, and their inclusion in the "Negro Building" illustrates some tensions between American ideals and the status of Black Americans. Greece evokes democracy, a system from which Black Southerners were newly

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[123] Lauranett L. Lee, "Giles B. Jackson (1853–1924)," *Encyclopedia Virginia* (Virginia Humanities, 2020), accessed October 23, 2024.

[124] R. W. Thompson, "W. Sidney Pittman: Architect of the Race," *Washington Bee* (Washington, D.C.), Oct. 12, 1907.

barred. Queen Isabella and Queen Elizabeth evoke two eras of European colonization, the voyage of Columbus and the founding of Jamestown, episodes in the history of the Americas which traditionally glorified white colonists. The Wesleys, the English founders of Methodism, evoke faith and piety, and though the African Methodist Episcopal church was a large and powerful denomination, its existence was born from segregation and prejudice in the Methodist church. On the inside, the building contained examples of Black American achievement. On the outside, the building was itself not only an example of Black American achievement, but also a claim to being part of the greater American story.

Pittman was congratulated for being self-made, highly-educated, well-connected, and above all, successful. But he was also congratulated for his loyalty to his race. This profile included that Pittman "takes the greatest pride in stating that colored real estate men, lawyers, contractors and builders have been the chief means of support of the office from its beginning." Chase had called not only for a Black architect but also Black-owned construction companies to have the chance to compete for the work, and the inclusion of that sentence suggests that part of being a good Black architect was working with other Black professionals and businesses, creating opportunities for each other. The 1901 *Union League Directory* includes twenty contracting or building businesses, plus dozens of additional bricklayers and carpenters, so there were options from which to choose within Black Washington.[125] The sub-headline of the profile, "Architect of the Race," suggests a greater mission for Pittman than making beautiful, modern designs. He was depicted as someone whose job was not only to create buildings that represented the artistic and professional achievements made by Black Americans but also to create buildings that promoted racial progress.

[125] Hilyer, 27, 29, 37.

Pittman's design for the Y.M.C.A. expressed the role that the organization envisioned for itself: a center of culture and ideas. Architectural historians Laura Harris Hughes and Laura Trieschmann, in their description of the building for the National Register of Historic Places, connect the building's aesthetics to its mission.[126] Design elements "derived from Italian Renaissance palazzi" were popular with organizations like the Y.M.C.A. which made both intellectual and practical contributions to their communities. The "Renaissance Revival" elements that Pittman incorporated into the Y.M.C.A. building included "rusticated limestone on the first floor, brick banding to mimic stone rustication on the upper floors, the strong horizontal divisions marked by brick string course and watertable, the large dentils on the projecting cornice, single light sash, and the balustraded cornice." The Y.M.C.A. had been shaping, and would continue to shape, the public discussion around the improvement of self and society. Therefore it was suitable that its exterior evoked "a period particularly rich in intellectual investigation and invention." As he had done for the Negro Building for the Jamestown Exposition, Pittman designed the Y.M.C.A. in an architectural language that connected Black Americans to a historical era to which they had traditionally not been able to claim association.

The *Bee* charged Pittman with creating "a monument to posterity," and in retrospect we can see that it was fitting that he chose a "Renaissance" style for a building that would be part of the landscape when a new kind of "Renaissance" arrived.[127] But for a small hint as to how the style might have been received in its time, before the invention of the phrases Negro Renaissance or Harlem Renaissance, we can look to the *Howard University Journal* description of their Carnegie Library. A writer in the *Journal* encouraged his fellow students to admire their new library building, including the architectural style, which like the Y.M.C.A. was "Italian

[126] Hughes & Trieschmann, 4.
[127] "Mr. Pittman Wins," *Washington Bee* (Washington, D.C.), June 22, 1907.

Renaissance which gives the structure a certain richness and simplicity not commonly seen."[128] He insisted that the value of the library was not just in the books it held, but in the design qualities of the library itself: "This, too, is culture." He does not share an interpretation of the style and does not say why the style is significant, only that it is. But he speaks of the building possessively, as if it belongs to the students, who should pay attention to it. Perhaps such an argument was being made elsewhere about the Twelfth Street Y.M.C.A., that the people to whom the building belonged, should appreciate the cultural value of the design. The building, conceived as belonging to the entire Black public of Washington, D.C., as it had been paid for with their money, set a high standard for what could be achieved within its walls.

The President and the Cornerstone

Before there was an impressively large Italian-inspired four-story building at 1816 12th Street, there was a "breaking of the dirt" in November or December of 1907 and a laying of a cornerstone in November of 1908. At both ceremonies, a white politician took the role of the primary speaker. At the ground-breaking ceremony, it was District Commissioner Henry B. F. MacFarland who addressed the assembled audience. MacFarland had been appointed to the three-member Board of Commissioners by President William McKinley in 1900, and he was a powerful and familiar figure in city politics. He praised the fundraising efforts of "the colored men…of Washington" and declaring he had seen nothing so impressive from any other part of the Y.M.C.A. organization.[129] At the stone-laying ceremony, it was the President of the United States, Theodore Roosevelt, who spoke. Roosevelt had not sought re-election in 1908 despite his

[128] "Some Points of Interest about the Library," *Howard University Journal* (Washington D.C.), Nov. 10, 1911.

[129] "MacFarland Speaks," *Washington Bee* (Washington, D.C.), Dec. 7, 1907.

enormous popularity, and at the time of the event, William Howard Taft had already been elected to succeed him. Taft was a Republican like Roosevelt, had served in Roosevelt's cabinet as the Secretary of War, and was Roosevelt's choice, so the actions of Roosevelt in this period are those of a leader who is not concerned with winning support for himself but still concerned with maintaining support for his policies.

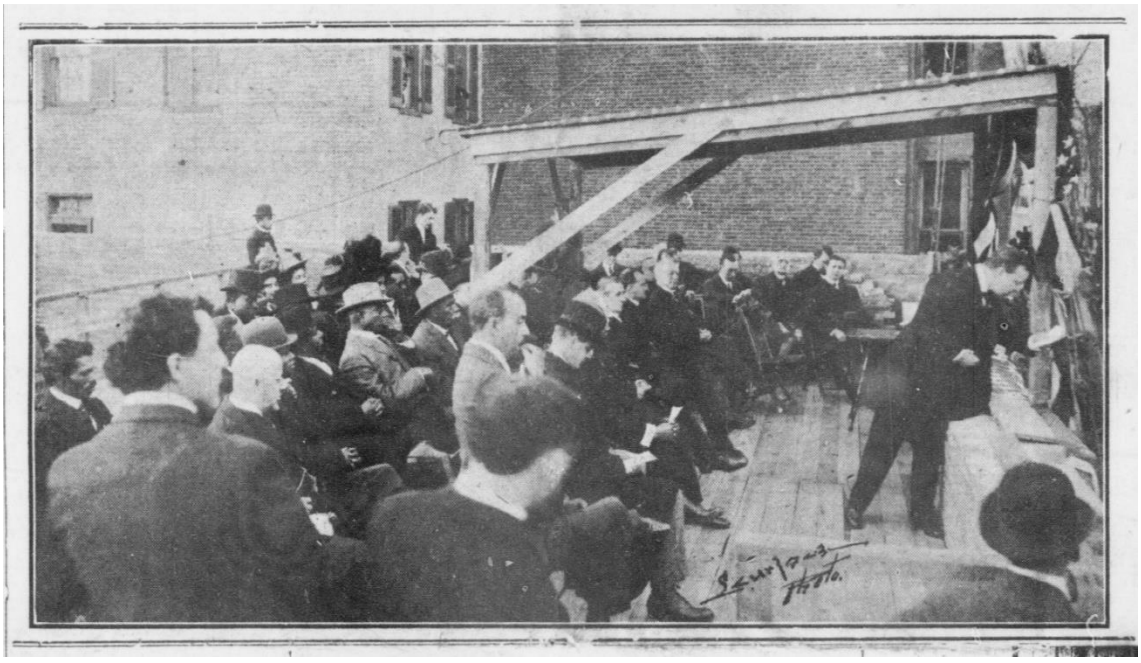
The people of Washington, D.C. have always had a unique relationship to the federal government. What happened between the executive branch of the federal government and Black Washingtonians was sometimes a positive model that boded well for the future and sometimes a warning sign for trouble to come in the relationship of Black people to the federal government everywhere. The involvement of politicians, particularly presidents, in the development of the Twelfth Street Y.M.C.A. building, was another way that white leaders were at the forefront of a process that had little to do with them. But it also represented a path to a possible future in which events of significance to Black communities were honored by white leaders.

On December 5, 1908, the top-left headline on the first page of the *Bee* read, "President Lays Stone."[130] It went on to list a few actions taken by the president of the United States of America on Thanksgiving afternoon: "Wields Trowel at New Colored Y.M.C.A. Building. Shakes Mason's Hand. Tells Workmen He Likes to Meet the 'Men Behind the Gun.' Speaks to Large Crowd." It is a sequence of events that squares with the jovial, progressive, masculine image we tend to have of Theodore Roosevelt in our time. After addressing a crowd of "several thousand residents of the National Capital," he met the mason who was "directing the lowering" of the ceremonial cornerstone, whose name was Levi Adams, and told him he wanted to shake his hand. Adams, who was Black, "hesitated a minute as he wiped the stone dirt from his

[130] "President Lays Stone," *Washington Bee* (Washington, D.C.), Dec. 5, 1908.

fingers," and then shook Roosevelt's hand. Roosevelt spread the mortar under the suspended stone, and, supervised by Adams, the stone—which contained a Bible and a copy of Roosevelt's speech—was lowered. The president was then whisked away in a carriage, presumably for other Thanksgiving Day responsibilities, and the ceremony continued with other speakers.

A photograph of the event appeared on the front page, which suggests the importance of the event to the *Bee*'s readership. Images like this were actually quite rare in the *Bee*. The front page often featured a photograph, but it would be a portrait photograph of a relevant person, or a publicity photograph of a location or event, and sometimes not a photograph at all but an illustration. Pittman's portrait, for example, was printed fairly regularly when he was the subject of an article. It was not very usual to see an action photograph of the particular news item being reported. The photographer probably would not have been employed by the *Bee*, but since Chase was one of the men on the platform, perhaps he made sure someone was there. Or maybe the photographer was furnished by the White House, and Chase later made arrangements with him.



President Roosevelt, right, addresses an assembled crowd at the site of the Y.M.C.A. Seated behind him on the platform are assembled government and civic leaders. (Washington Bee.)

Information in the image's content and composition hints at the event's status and particular significance. The photograph seems lined up to capture not so much the president and his actions but the assemblage of people on the platform. Roosevelt is standing, hatless, looking down, perhaps inspecting his future or completed task, or perhaps addressing a crowd that is below him. He is far to the right side of the image, not even occupying a third of the frame. Behind him on the platform are two or three dozen seated men, with more standing around, both white and Black in what might be roughly equal numbers. These are the famous and important people of both Black and white Washington, not to mention visitors associated with the greater Y.M.C.A. Readers probably knew some of those faces, either from other newspaper photographs or from life, and could match them with the list of names in the text below the image.

The presence of the president at this event, and the mutual honor afforded both the president and the segregated chapter of the local Y.M.C.A., are representative of the relationship that the Black elite of Washington had to the federal government in the Progressive Era. There was a sense of access or closeness brought about by proximity. Theodore Roosevelt, and William Howard Taft after him, was the president of the United States of America, but he was also a neighbor. He could spend part of this Thanksgiving Day just north of U Street, shaking hands with a local laborer and also all the local elites who had joined him on the platform, before being driven elsewhere. A decade or more before presidents began to address the nation by radio, the people of Washington, of any race, had opportunities to hear presidents speak. And Roosevelt and Taft, who regarded the Black upper class of Washington as valued supporters even though they could not vote, would address the Black community specifically, in places where the Black community had power.

The end of local governance for Washington, D.C. in 1874 was not the end of local politics. Black Washingtonians, and some white, continued to fight for suffrage. Local politics for Black Washingtonians could not include running for city offices but still included fighting for city contracts and appointments to city and federal positions, which became scarcer under Congressional rule.[131] Patronage systems for filling many government jobs were still active into the early twentieth century, even as the merit system was ascending.[132] Many more members of the Black elite sought patronage positions than there were such positions available, and having connections—especially connections to Booker T. Washington—was essential.[133] A few prominent Black Washingtonian men like Robert Terrell had expectations of reward for their vigorous public support of Presidents Roosevelt and Taft in their elections.[134] Terrell was an educator and lawyer who was appointed justice of the peace by Roosevelt and appointed to a federal judgeship by Taft.[135]

Non-elites too had a relationship to the federal government as civil service employees and had done so for a long time. Anthony Bowen, the former slave and Y.M.C.A. leader, worked for the Patent Office before the Civil War. Roosevelt, who had been the Civil Service Commissioner from 1889 to 1895, espoused merit-based employment in government jobs as president from 1901 to 1909. During his presidency, the competitive civil service more than doubled in size from 110,000 to 235,000 employees, and the percentage of competitive jobs in the civil service overall increased from 41.5 to 63.9.[136] According to the 1901 *Union League*

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[131] 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, 2019), 173.

[132] United States Civil Service Commission Office of Public Affairs, *Biography of an Ideal: A History of the Federal Civil Service*, 4-5, 45-46.

[133] Moore, 152-153.

[134] Joan Quigley, *Just Another Southern Town: Mary Church Terrell and the Struggle for Racial Justice in the Nation's Capital* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 67-68.

[135] Asch and Musgrove, 207. Moore, 134, 149.

[136] United States Civil Service Commission, 56.

Directory, there were 1,200 Black employees in "the Executive Departments at Washington, of the Washington Post-Office, and of the Government of the District of Columbia," though that figure excluded "the Census Bureau, Navy Yard, and Capitol employees" probably because those were temporary or lower-status jobs.[137] Notably, the civil service, though not free of discrimination, was not entirely segregated during the Roosevelt and Taft administrations. Full segregation came later, when the Woodrow Wilson administration made further concessions to Southern interests than the Roosevelt administration had.[138]

Looking at the reaction of Black Washingtonians to the planned segregation of the civil service under Wilson reveals something of what civil service meant to Black Washington in the years prior. In or around 1913, Professor Kelly Miller of Howard University wrote, "The negroes at present constitute less than 5 per cent of the Federal employes. There is not discernible indication of an increase in this ratio. For forty years the Negro has entered the civil service of the Government on the basis of his merit."[139] This suggests that by 1912 a small but stable population of civil service workers was the status quo in Washington, that Black Washington expected to be represented in the federal workforce, and that civil service was part of the acknowledged history of Black Washington.

A non-segregated civil service at the turn of the twentieth century benefitted the Black community of Washington by providing a livelihood to workers and opposing by example the idea that segregation at workplaces was acceptable. The section on public employees in the 1901 *Union League Directory* includes many references to how much money they earned, as if to emphasize their status by noting their salaries. In that year a Class III clerk had a salary of $1,600

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[137] Hilyer, 111-112.
[138] Asch and Musgrove, 220-221.
[139] Kelly Miller, *Segregation: The Caste System and the Civil Service,* (Washington, D.C.: Howard University, 1913), 7.

a year, a Class II clerk a salary of $1,400. The estimated total earnings of the 1,200 Black employees mentioned above was $875,000, though the writers admitted it was not a precise figure.[140] On the subject of segregation, Miller went on:

> To the casual observer the assignment of space in a government building to a handful of colored civil service employes would seem to be matter of trivial importance. But closer inspection reveals a deeper significance. It is but the thin blade of the wedge whose entrance threatens to split the log asunder. Should the National Government adopt this seemingly simple provision, it would thereby sanction all of the discriminatory legislation on the statute books of the several States and would suggest and justify all such enactments in the future.[141]

To rhetorically downplay segregation, Miller referred to it as merely "the assignment of space." But he insisted that the assignment of segregated space was the enforcement of inequality. To Miller it was the expression of equality on the national level against inequality on the state level. He opposed bringing the nation and the city in line with the South. The power that assigns the space allows or instigates other inequalities. Equality in the employ of the federal government was a synecdoche for just treatment under the law. Inequality in the employ of the federal government was an endorsement of ill treatment and a harbinger of worse treatment to come.

When Roosevelt laid the cornerstone, he provided another symbol of a beneficial and respectful relationship between Black Americans and the federal government. There was a reason that the *Bee* printed that photograph when such things were not its usual practice and it must have taken significant extra effort and cost to do so. The photograph showed city leaders, Black and white, seated together on the same platform—a model for equality in an era of

[140] Hilyer, 111-112.
[141] Miller, 11.

segregation. It showed the most powerful man in the country taking the time to address a local audience—a model for Washington's importance in an era without the vote or home rule. The accompanying story depicted the president glowingly as a man unafraid to cross color lines and class lines. Whether Roosevelt was truly a president who served Black Washingtonians well or not, and the Black press frequently criticized his policy decisions, the coverage of the event suggested a possible future where such erasures of unfair distinctions could become ordinary. The fact that he was literally laying a foundation carried a lot of metaphorical weight.

Leading Men, Words, and Deeds

After construction began with a ceremonial dedication by President Roosevelt, the *Bee* addressed a remark from Dallas's Black newspaper, the *Express*. The *Express* had criticized Roosevelt by comparing Rockefeller's financial contribution to Roosevelt's merely verbal contribution: "Here's a type of the two men. One is full of words—the other of deeds."[142] Under the headline "Got What Was Asked," the *Bee* disagreed with that assessment. Chase offered praise for Roosevelt's speech, saying that it met the need of the situation, and reminded the *Express* that Rockefeller's gift was conditional. Here, in a short exchange, were two Black newspaper editors holding two very powerful white men up to a critical lens. The president of the United States may have been sincere and supportive, but was he truly doing enough for Black Americans, perhaps especially for those who endorsed him, or those who were able to vote and voted for him? The wealthiest person in the United States may have offered a substantive, community-changing gift to the Black people of Washington, but was he wrong to have attached

[142] "Got What Was Asked," *Washington Bee* (Washington, D.C.), Jan. 9, 1909.

"a string on to his gift," i.e. the requirement of the matching funds, when the amount of money in question would mean almost nothing to one so rich?

The varied conflicts over the Y.M.C.A. building generally concerned elite men. There was a web of accountability with threads running between white elites and Black elites; between the Black upper, middle, and lower classes; between the press, the government, and organized religion. People in this web tried to enforce deeds to match words, not only in the Y.M.C.A. but throughout the city and the nation.

The matching fund that was so efficiently raised in 1907 was not a collection of money but rather a collection of subscriptions, and when the time came to pay, the money was slow in coming. Here was another sense of words and deeds: subscriptions versus actual funds. Enthusiasm for the cause did not translate smoothly into success for the campaign. In February of 1909 the *Bee* reported that only "one-third" of the subscribers had actually paid what they had promised.[143] No source was given and the figure may have been based on hearsay—as previously discussed, Chase had a certain disdain for ardent supporters of the segregated branch and was uninterested in flattering them—but the problem was serious.

While insisting that the *Bee's* position had not changed, that the newspaper yet opposed segregation in religion, Chase also insisted that subscribers pay. He suggested naming and shaming in their churches those who had not followed through. The leaders of white Y.M.C.A. attributed the problem to the fact that most subscribers were working-class people whose incomes were not necessarily reliable, but the people Chase was scolding were of his own upper class.[144] Of the event at which Roosevelt laid the cornerstone, he wrote, "the small fools and the big fools occupied conspicuous seats upon the stage," and you might very reasonably recall that

[143] "The Colored Young Men's Christian Association," *Washington Bee* (Washington, D.C.), Feb. 6, 1909.
[144] Mjagkij, 72.

Chase was also sitting on the stage and seemed to have taken pride in it by publishing the photograph. But Chase argued for the integrity of his own position and seemed to think that his opponents were failing to act with integrity when it came to their position. "Now that they have asked for a separate Young Men's Christian Association let them support it," he concluded.[145] In this editorial, Chase wanted the subscribers to match their deeds to their words in the sense of paying what they had said they would. But Chase did not give up on his ideal of the churches and the Y.M.C.A. matching their deeds to their words in the sense of acting like all people are equally worthy in the estimation of God.

There was another problem, too, one that would not have been solved by making every subscriber honest. The Twelfth Street Y.M.C.A. was an ambitious project, and the budgeted fifty thousand was not enough to complete the building, which should have been predicted before construction even began. The white Y.M.C.A. building had cost $350,000, and Rockefeller, Jr. had questioned the $50,000 figure presented to him at the time of the $25,000 request. The justification he received, and accepted, was the Black branch did not need as large and sophisticated a building as the white branch.[146] But the fact of increasing membership in the Black branch during the initial fundraising convinced the white leadership that the building needed to be larger.[147] The white leadership did not succeed in convincing Rockefeller, Jr. of the necessity of the change in plan, however, and he would not give more money. He even tried to take back the money he had already given.[148] Construction eventually stopped while a new round of fundraising was forced to begin, and in 1911, a repeat of the 1906-1907 situation was arranged. Again it was Woodward seeking a large donation, this time with the involvement of

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[145] "The Colored Young Men's Christian Association," *Washington Bee* (Washington, D.C.), Feb. 6, 1909.
[146] Mjagjik, 70-71.
[147] Mjagjik, 73.
[148] Moore, 173. Mjagjik, 73.

President Taft and a different representative of Gilded Age wealth, Julius Rosenwald of Sears, Roebuck.

Julius Rosenwald was Jewish, and his interest in the Y.M.C.A. was not in its Christian mission but in how it could help Black Americans help themselves.[149] His first Y.M.C.A. contribution of $25,000 was made in Chicago, and he promised a gift of the same size to any community who wished to build a Black Y.M.C.A., with restrictions that would have seemed familiar to those in Washington.[150] An individualist with a similar charitable philosophy to Rockefeller's, Rosenwald expected additional money to come from each Y.M.C.A. as a condition of his gift. But for Washington, he promised and delivered $25,000 with the intention of getting a floundering, overdue project back on track, and apparently gave the money even when the additional fundraising was falling short. [151] Interestingly, Chase puts that failure on the *white* Y.M.C.A.: "although the white Y.M.C.A. fell short about $4,000 in raising the $15,000 required, Mr. Rosenwald sent his check on notwithstanding, upon reassurances that they would raise it before March 1." Rockefeller never contributed to a Black Y.M.C.A. again, but after Chicago's and Washington's, Rosenwald contributed to twenty-three others.[152]

The story of the development of the Twelfth Street Y.M.C.A. is a largely story of leading men: their collaborations and conflicts, their goals and failures. It began with the prominent Black ministers like Reverend Waldron and Reverend F. J. Grimke who revived the organization at the beginning of the 1890s. There was Samuel Woodward and the other white leadership of the Y.M.C.A. who solicited and controlled funds, and the black leadership of Y.M.C.A. who

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[149] Mjagjik, 76.
[150] Mjagkij, 76-77.
[151] "Y.M.C.A. Receives $25,000 From Julius Rosenwald," *Washington Bee* (Washington, D.C.), Dec 30, 1911.
[152] Moore, 173. Mjagkij, 82.

subscribed and campaigned for subscriptions. There was W. Sidney Pittman whose assignment was to create a design that would represent, inspire, and bolster racial progress. The existence of the building was truly made possible by the Rockefellers, whose contribution and stipulations both jumpstarted progress and held it back, and Julius Rosenwald, whose contribution jumpstarted progress when it was needed again. Its importance was publicly acknowledged by District Commissioner MacFarland who spoke at the groundbreaking, President Roosevelt who laid the cornerstone, and President Taft who worked to bring the project to the finish line. Throughout all of this, W. Calvin Chase narrated the story, consistently picking his fights with the white people who would interfere with Black autonomy and the Black people who would surrender it.

But beside all the important men giving speeches, moving money around, and arguing in the newspaper, there was a population of ordinary people who also made the Twelfth Street Y.M.C.A. possible. There would not have been plans made for such a large building had there not been a large membership who would make good use of that space. Meetings drew crowds, and the active participation of those crowds in Y.M.C.A. activities was the reason a building was needed at all. Then, of course, there was Levi Adams and the laborers like him who constructed the building, using their knowledge, skill, and man-power to take the building from a design to a reality. And not all the money for the building came from the upper classes, either. Rosenwald was reportedly moved by the story of a man called H. W. Chase, described as "a laborer, in the Government service, an ex-slave."[153] He had given five hundred dollars, an amount that was surely much more to him than twenty-five thousand was to Rockefeller or Rosenwald. Lost in discussions of the troubles with subscriptions and the conflicts over discrimination was the

[153] "Y.M.C.A. Receives $25,000 From Julius Rosenwald," *Washington Bee* (Washington, D.C.), Dec. 30, 1911.

importance of the ordinary people who were involved with the organization. We don't know their words, but we do know their deeds.

The journey to the opening of the Twelfth Street Y.M.C.A. was slow and unsteady. It had been fifty-nine years since the founding of the first Black branch. It had been twenty-one years since the revival and formal incorporation, five years since the fundraising had begun and four years since the construction had commenced. During all this time of waiting and preparation, meetings were held, lectures attended, charity practiced, and good deeds recognized by the Black branch of the Y.M.C.A. It did not need the building to meet its primary function, to contribute to the public intellectual life of Black Washington. But a population who would benefit from the amenities provided by the building was present and active. The money just was not quite there.

The status of the Black Y.M.C.A. as an affiliate, or an "Annex" of the white Y.M.C.A. meant that white leaders on the city level and national level were very involved in the development of the building. It was a recognizable, familiar organization for white philanthropists to contribute to, and it was organized in such a way that the funds stayed in white hands until they were handed over to contracted workers from the architect to the laborers. Sometimes the involvement of these figures was interpreted as generous and genuine, other times as controlling or insincere. The active role played by white leaders was inherently questionable and a source of tension because the building was supposed to belong to the Black community. Black Washingtonians claimed that ownership by advocating for the selection of Pittman and conducting their own fundraising. Pittman made a statement about the present and future of the U Street community in his design.

The Y.M.C.A. in Washington is still very much alive, though not at 1816 12th Street. The old Y.M.C.A. building still functions as a community center, restored and reopened in 2000

under the name of the Thurgood Marshall Center for Service and Heritage.[154] The new Y.M.C.A. building in the neighborhood is at 1325 W Street, a ten-minute walk from the old. Since 1972, the branch has borne the name of Anthony Bowen, the formerly enslaved man who made the first bold step of starting the organization for people like him in Washington, who died two decades before its revival and formal incorporation, nearly four decades before the President of the United States laid a cornerstone and the richest men in the country pledged tens of thousands of dollars to the institution he first founded.

The Twelfth Street Y.M.C.A. was a product of coexistence, not independence. It was made possible by tense cooperation between users, funders, and advocates. This tension inspired discussions of what constituted effective support for a community and what claims of belonging Black Washingtonians had to the building. A home for deeply-held values of self-improvement and community service, the Twelfth Street Y.M.C.A. was a promise to contribute to the future welfare of the city and its Black community.

[154] "About The Thurgood Marshall Center for Service and Heritage," Thurgood Marshall Center Trust, accessed Dec. 3, 2024, tmcsh.org/about.

Chapter Three — The Howard Theatre: Dignity and Profit

It's Friday, September 9, 1910 at the Howard Theatre.

Outside on the street we see the signs. There are two lying flat against the sides of the building, seven by nine feet, which read: "HOWARD THEATRE | VAUDEVILLE | DRAMA | MUSICAL COMEDY." The performance we are attending tonight is a musical comedy. There is also a sign that hangs from the corner of the building, twenty-four feet high and thirty inches wide, resting sixteen feet above the sidewalk. It has the name HOWARD descending vertically, and it is illuminated with 136 incandescent lights.

This is a racially intermingled crowd, so unlike other theaters in this city we see Black and white patrons going through the front door and taking their seats in all sections of the house. This is a popular show, so many people have been anxious to secure their seats and have purchased their tickets in advance by calling ahead to Manager Smith. There is a mix of social classes here. Some bought their tickets for 25 or 50 or 75 cents or one dollar. And some have purchased whole boxes, with six seats, for 4 or 5 dollars. So if you can afford to attend a dance at True Reformer's Hall, you can afford to see a show at the Howard, but the best seats belong to those who can pay a little or a lot more.

Tonight, and for this weekend and next, the fifty-member comedy troupe the Smart Set, led by S. H. Dudley, is taking the stage. This is the first engagement after the opening night of the Howard in August, which was a vaudeville program, and it's fitting since the Smart Set might be the biggest thing in Black musical theater right now. The play is called "His Honor the Barber," about a man named Raspberry Snow who aspires to shave the president of the United States. Getting equal billing to Dudley is the dancer and choreographer Aida Overton Walker. Overton Walker is performing with the Smart Set these days because the company she had built and

performed in with her husband, George Walker, is no longer touring. In 1910, George is dying. But Aida is still performing, and many in the audience are her fans and are undoubtedly here to see her in particular. She might be performing her cakewalk dance, for which she is especially famous to both Black audiences and white audiences.

There is excitement in the packed house. Upwards of twelve hundred can sit and more are standing. Many have seen the Smart Set before, as the company frequently comes to Washington, but previously they had to go see the company at the Lyceum, where discriminatory seating practices were only temporarily suspended. They agree that the atmosphere is much nicer here at the Howard. There are people finding their seats in the orchestra who have never been permitted to sit in that section. There are people in the balcony marveling at the sightlines and the space, comparing this balcony to the crowded balconies where they have been forced to sit in other venues. There are a thousand electric lights in this building, and when the curtain goes up, the lights on the audience will be lowered and the lights on the singers and dancers of the Smart Set will shine.

Theater Attendance in the Segregated City

In 1910, Washington D.C. was still in need of a certain kind of theater. It was not that the city did not have theaters, it had many, but for the combination of a certain type of audience and a certain type of show, the right venue did not yet exist. It was imagined, by reviewers and editors, when those two intertwined needs—of patron and performance—went unmet. In 1910, the first attempt to create such a theater was made. The Howard Theatre was not the first Black-operated theater in Washington, nor was it the first Black-owned theater in Washington. In fact, it was not Black-owned when it initially opened. But it survived many years in a precarious

industry to become an abiding theatrical institution on U Street from the 1920s through the 1960s. It was established to present Black artistry and serve Black patrons and to do so in an environment that was aesthetically impressive. But not everyone wanted the same thing from the Howard Theatre. Depending on who was commenting, the theater was meant to serve several varied purposes: to preserve the dignity of Black patrons, to rival white institutions, to impress aesthetically, to keep profit within a Black community, and to showcase the best and latest in Black performing arts. These diverse goals for the Howard Theatre represent the many aspirations of the Black residents of Washington.

At the turn of the century, Black Washingtonians were not well-served by Washington's theaters. A 1900-1901 Baltimore & Washington Business Directory lists six theaters in the city of Washington, all of which were south of H Street and roughly clustered around Pennsylvania Avenue.[155] Some of these, like the National Theatre, were segregated in the sense that they simply refused admission to Black patrons altogether.[156] Those who could pass for white might attempt to do so but ran the risk of being denied entry after purchasing a ticket or being forcibly removed after entering. Some theaters, like the Academy of Music and the Grand Opera House, admitted Black patrons but were segregated within.[157]

Theatrical management could use many techniques for separating patrons. Segregation within a theater is like an array of containers with controlled access points. Different areas of seating might be restricted by race: seats in the front versus seats in the back or seats in the level

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[155] Mercantile Directory Company, *Business Directory and Mercantile Register of Baltimore, Washington, Hagerstown, Frederick, Alexandria, Annapolis, Centerville, Chestertown, Cambridge, Easton, Crisfield, Salisbury, Pocomoke City, Westminster and Intermediate Towns, 1900 and 1901* (Washington, D.C.: Mercantile Directory Company, 1900), 375.

[156] Tamara Brown, "Lingering Lights from America's Black Broadway: Negro Renaissance to the Black Arts Movement, African-American Concert-Theatrical Dance in Washington, D.C.," (PhD diss., Howard University, 2004), 108.

[157] Brown, 61.

above versus seats in the level below. Different tickets perhaps at different prices were meant to allow patrons entry only to the places they were assigned to be. Different doors or stairs would provide limited entry to these different areas. Alternatively, tickets for the same area might be sold at different times. A 1909 review in the *Howard University Journal* refers to a theater in Baltimore "where no colored man is allowed to purchase his ticket in the orchestra circle until they have all been picked over by any and every white person."[158] The logistics of such an arrangement could have been separate lines or a holding area, inside the theater or on the street outside. Even if the orchestra seating contained both Black and white patrons, there would have been some distinction made in the space before entering in order for the discriminatory ticketing scheme to be carried out. Furthermore, the spaces and entrances of a theater might not have been divided the same way all the time. There might have been different seating policies for different shows, meaning that theaters could change their rules to be more open to Black audiences when Black performers took the stage.[159] Enforcement of these practices would have been made by ticketing agents, ushers, managers, bathroom attendants, and others.

The experience of Nelson Weatherless is illustrative of how segregation strategies worked to control and embarrass Black patrons. At a November 1899 performance by the Williams and Walker company at the Grand Opera House, a thirty-nine-year-old lawyer and high-school physics teacher named Nelson Weatherless was refused entry to the orchestra section, despite having purchased a ticket for a seat there.[160] Fifteen others were similarly refused. When Weatherless was refused entry to the orchestra, he was not directed upstairs to the

[158] "Reflections on seeing 'The Red Moon,'" *Howard University Journal* (Washington, D.C.), May 7, 1909.

[159] Marya Annette McQuirter, "Claiming the City: African Americans, Urbanization, and Leisure in Washington, D.C., 1902–1957," (PhD diss., University of Michigan, 2000), 89-91.

[160] Brown, 62.

balcony through the inside of the theater but was directed to an entirely different entrance to the building, meaning that he would have to turn around in full view of everyone watching this encounter, depart from the building into what might have been cold weather, and enter through the "colored" entrance, all under the watchful eyes of theater staff and fellow audience members. In this case, discriminatory ticketing was not enough to enforce segregation, and enforcement fell to the usher, who confiscated Weatherless's ticket. When Weatherless grabbed the usher who had taken his ticket, the manager of the theater played his role in enforcement by calling the police and having Weatherless arrested and charged with disorderly conduct. It is hard to imagine that Weatherless, a Howard University graduate who had been living in Washington for a decade at this point, did not know the segregation policy of the Grand Opera House, though if seating rules had previously been show-dependent at this theater or even at another theater, there is some possibility for confusion. He must have bought the ticket from somebody, after all, who had let him do so. But as he entered the main entrance and made his way to the orchestra section, he must have been acutely aware of a dearth of Black audience members and of being surveilled.

Some Black patrons had counter-strategies they could use to enter spaces forbidden to them, but these were exceptionally limited and precarious. They might work, they might not, and they were certainly not accessible to all people. One was simply to ignore directions not to enter and hope for the best. Seating areas were the most obviously contentious place for conflicts over discriminatory patron treatment to play out, but they were not the only places within a theater where a patron could be harassed. During the run of the same Williams and Walker production, a Black woman patron was told by a bathroom attendant to not use the bathroom at the same time as white women patrons. She ignored this warning and brought her experience of this

discrimination to the *Washington Bee*.[161] Mary Church Terrell recalled a strategy by which her fair-skinned daughter would purchase two tickets and be the one to hand both tickets to the collector as she led her darker-skinned friend by the arm. According to Terrell, this combination of white-passing and solidarity was effective.[162] Terrell also recalled a time when a darker-skinned companion of hers feigned a foreign accent—one wonders what it sounded like—to convince an usher that she was of some other ethnicity. Again, it happened to work. But the risk of violence was ever-present, must have been on the minds of everyone making these attempts to defy strategies of segregation.

Segregation was a policy of theatrical management enforced by staff members acting on those policies, and defiance was made possible or impossible depending on the reactions of these staff members to the person making the attempt. In all these cases, a different usher or attendant, or the same usher or attendant on a different night, might have made a different choice to say something or not, take the ticket or not, call the manager or not. The person defying segregation made choices in the moment, too, deciding what they were willing to risk and what they were willing to tolerate. Terrell's daughter made herself the one interacting with the enforcers because she knew her complexion made her safer from their actions than her friend was, but the gambit required courage from both young women. The patron using the bathroom apparently made a judgment call that the enforcer was unlikely to pursue her once she made her choice and that the white women patrons already in the bathroom could not deter her. In this case, the attendant was Black, which might have affected the patron's calculation of how much retaliation she risked by disregarding the message. Faced with the theft of his ticket, Weatherless escalated to a physical

[161] Brown, 61.

[162] Jacqueline M. Moore, *Leading the Race: The Transformation of the Black Elite in the Nation's Capital, 1880-1920* (Charlottesville, Va.: University Press of Virginia, 1999), 58.

altercation with an enforcer. He probably knew what James Weldon Johnson knew, recounting his story of being confronted by an usher in a Broadway theater, that if he had let the usher take the tickets "he would have rushed off with them to the box office, then come back and told us there had been a mistake about the tickets and that we would have to give up our seats."[163]

A non-segregated, Black-managed theater was a solution to the indignity and potential violence of Washington theatergoing. Washington audiences who risked trying to enter white-designated spaces, who were pushed into less pleasant Black-designated spaces, who registered their complaints about such practices, were people who wanted to see shows. Sometimes they may have wanted to make a statement, but sometimes they would have wanted to have an enjoyable evening, and poor treatment at a theater ruined their enjoyment. In the same account of being harassed by an usher at a Broadway theater, James Weldon Johnson wrote, "I was so blind with anger and resentment that I did not see the first act."[164] Such experiences, and running the risk of such experiences, were the opposite of entertaining.

Additionally, middle- and upper-class Black people wanted their treatment to be determined by their class status, regardless of race, and the non-segregated, Black-managed theater met that need as well. Weatherless was a man who earlier in 1899 had just been named head of the department of physics at the High School of the District of Columbia and who by 1910 would rise to the head of science in the Black D.C. public school system and the highest position in Black D.C. Masonry.[165] At the time of the incident he was a middle-class, middle-aged man on the rise to prominence in his community. Terrell had been born into one of the

[163] James Weldon Johnson, *Along This Way* (New York: Viking Press, 1933), 200, quoted in Allen L. Woll, *Black Musical Theatre: From Coontown to Dreamgirls* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1989), 52.

[164] Johnson, 200, quoted in Woll, 52.

[165] "Prof. N.E. Weatherless, Director of Science, Public Schools, D.C., Installed Most Worshipful Grand Master F.A.A.M. for District of Columbia," *Washington Bee* (Washington, D.C.), Jan. 1, 1910.

wealthiest Black families in the country and occupied a uniquely esteemed position in Washington society.[166] A graduate of Oberlin College, she began her teaching career at Washington's M Street High School, where she met Robert H. Terrell. They married in 1891, but her marriage in no way removed her from public life. She reached a national audience with her writings and her speeches, using her privileges to advocate for Black people, especially Black women. Weatherless and Terrell were of the kind of people who believed that by any measure that was not the false ranking of race—manners, education, wealth—they were equal or superior to white audience members.

Newspaper reviewers and editors expressed disdain for the class of white people with whom Black people were grouped in discriminatory establishments. Writing of a theater in Baltimore, Howard University student R. G. Doggett wrote, "The irony of the situation never dawned upon me until I saw scattered through the audience and in front of all the Howard students, some white people who, although their white skins had secured for them the best seats, were, to say the least, such as would not do credit to any race."[167] The desire of middle- and upper-class Black theatregoers was not really for equal treatment, but for treatment commensurate with their class, rather than race, status.

A New Era of Theaters

The years 1909 and 1910 were busy ones for the opening of theaters for Black audiences in the U Street neighborhood. The distinction of being Washington's first Black-owned and

[166] 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, 2019), 206. Briana A. Thomas, *Black Broadway in Washington, D.C*. (Charleston: The History Press, 2021), 73.

[167] "Reflections on seeing 'The Red Moon,'" *Howard University Journal* (Washington, D.C.), May 7, 1909.

Black-operated theater might belong to the Maceo, which was built in 1909 on the corner of 11th Street and U Street. In April of 1910, several months before the Howard Theatre opened, the *Washington Bee* reported that management of the Maceo was being taken over by J. Arthur Davis and C. T. T. Porter, who were Howard university graduate students in the fields of law and pharmacy respectively. It had been built and was probably still owned by a Mr. Childs, whom the *Bee* proclaimed "deserves the credit of the community for building a playhouse of his home, thus putting his people upon an independent basis in a city where there is so much color prejudice."[168] Marya McQuirter argues that the Maceo was "one of the truly democratic spaces in the city" because it "was probably the first theater in the city with such an open seating policy" that Black and white audience members could sit wherever they wanted.[169] The Hiawatha, slightly north of U Street on 11th Street, is another possible contender for the title of first Black-owned and Black-operated, as in January of 1910 the *Bee* mentioned it in the same sentences as the Maceo to praise its management and say it was "up-to-date" and non-discriminatory in its ticketing and seating practices.[170] Additionally in 1910, composer and pianist Ford Dabney acquired and started running a theater, which he straightforwardly named Ford Dabney's Theatre, on 9th Street where U Street becomes Florida Avenue. McQuirter also mentions a short-lived Dunbar Vaudette on 12th Street.[171]

It was the new popularity of movies that caused this proliferation of new theaters, but live performance remained an essential draw for them. The offerings at these four theaters in the U Street neighborhood, and similar small theaters opening elsewhere in the city, were a combination of film and vaudeville. These were small theaters that often occupied only part of a

[168] "The Maceo: Successful Young Men," *Washington Bee* (Washington, D.C.), April 9, 1910.
[169] McQuirter, 93-94.
[170] "An Object Lesson," *Washington Bee* (Washington, D.C.), Jan. 15, 1910.
[171] McQuirter, 92.

building. For example, the Maceo could seat three hundred, after its expansion, and "was located in a two-story building that shared space with a six-room apartment, an office suite, and a store room."[172] The small size of this type of theater made segregation a challenge, but segregationists persisted, devising partitions and separate entrances, and thus it was still necessary to create spaces where Black audiences could be treated fairly.[173] When Howard University sociologist William H. Jones classified the theaters patronized by Black Washingtonians in 1927, he listed most theaters under the title of "Photoplay Houses" and grouped them by status into three "classes." By 1927, there were some theaters exclusively showing movies, but some still had vaudeville in their programming as they had in 1909-1910.[174] The particular theaters mentioned above had been replaced by different theaters by 1927, but the Foraker, which had likewise opened in 1909, was still in existence and still presenting vaudeville. Jones considered it a "Class B," positively evaluating its middle-class clientele and relative cleanliness and neutrally-to-negatively evaluating its programming.[175]

Unlike other theaters in the 1909-1910 boom, the Howard Theatre was its own building, designed as a home for live theater rather than a divided or multi-purpose space. On the 1904 Sanborn Map, the future site of the Howard Theatre appeared as a conspicuously empty lot on a fairly dense block. It faced T Street to the north, and was bounded on the east by Wiltberger Street, which bisects the block, and on the west and south by alleys that quarter the block.[176] According to the research of Howard University professor of music Doris McGinty, the lot upon

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[172] "The Maceo: Successful Young Men," *Washington Bee* (Washington, D.C.), April 9, 1910. McQuirter, 93.

[173] McQuirter, 87-88.

[174] William Henry Jones, *Recreation and Amusement among Negroes in Washington, D.C.; a Sociological Analysis of the Negro in an Urban Environmen*t (District of Columbia: Howard University Press, 1927), 112-120.

[175] Jones, 115. "The jokes are always within the universe of the discourse of the class of patrons who attend."

[176] Sanborn Map Company. *Washington DC: Volume Two.* (New York: Sanborn Map Company, 1904), 128.

which the Howard was built was, in 1902, owned by the Capital Traction Company, which ran the street car lines along 14th Street and U Street.[177] That year, Capital Traction president George T. Dunlop deeded the land to Hannah T. Donovan. In 1909, Hannah T. Donovan sold the land to the National Amusement Company.[178] The application for permit to build was granted on February 25, 1910. It lists the owner as the National Amusement Company, the architect as J. Edward Storck, and the builder as Henry L. Maas of Baltimore. On February 25, 1910, having paid a deposit of $206 and a fee of $36, the National Amusement Company was granted "permission to erect one 2 story brick + concrete theatre" at 622 T Street, NW.[179] According to the permit, the building would be heated with steam and wired for electric lighting, with a width of 80 feet and a depth of 126 feet on a lot that measured 96 feet by 126 feet. On the form, the question "Nature of business to be conducted?" was answered, "Theatrical." Jones listed it under "Playhouses" rather than "Photoplay Houses" in his survey.[180]

Placed where they could be seen by all, theater buildings generated publicity with their design. Theater buildings were designed to be artistic, eye-catching, and imposing.[181] Two features of the Howard Theatre's architecture, which required additional paperwork to build, drew attention to the building. A form titled "Special Applications for Projections Beyond the Building Line" was necessary for the addition of a colonnade eighteen feet and four inches wide,

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[177] LeRoy O. King, *100 Years of Capital Traction: The Story of Streetcars in the Nation's Capital* (College Park, Md.: Taylor Publishing Company, 1972), 19.

[178] "HT Land History," Doris McGinty Papers, Box 2, Folder 22 Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.

[179] "Application for Building Projection, No. 4639"; Feb 21 to 26, 1910; Permits 4568 - 4686; Building Permits. February 17, 1877 – June 30, 1915.; Record Group 351, Records of the Government of the District of Columbia 1791 – 1978; National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.

[180] Jones, 119.

[181] Laura V. Trieschmann, Anne Sellin, and Stephen Callcott, "National Register of Historic Place Registration Form: Greater U Street Historic District" (United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service, 1998), 5.

projecting five feet off the front of the building.[182] This would have drawn the attention of people looking at the building from the front and people approaching the building from the side. The 1998 National Register of Historic Places Registration Form for the Greater U Street Historic District, prepared by architectural historians Laura V. Trieschmann, Anne Sellin, and Stephen Callcott, describes the Howard Theatre as "reflecting a variety of fashionable styles…largely influenced by the Italian Renaissance Revival style with Spanish Baroque and Beaux-Arts motifs." Describing the colonnade in more detail, the form mentions "a massive central arched entry, flanking side doors, imposing tympanum, and heavy broken cornice." As for attracting attention to the building, "both the cornice and tympanum of the brick building were originally embellished with exposed electric light bulbs, a feature typical of theater architecture during this period."[183] The form similarly describes the Minnehaha, another theater built solely for theatrical purposes, as having a "highly detailed façade." The theater "reflects the Renaissance Revival style with a grand semi-circular arched window opening, stepped parapet, molded cornice, and engaged pilasters."[184] Theatre buildings were meant to be beautiful and visually impressive and to suggest their own importance to the people looking at them.

Theater buildings also attracted attention from pedestrians with signage. Two forms titled "Application for Permit to Erect Sign" were needed for the addition of three signs to be attached to the Howard Theatre building before its August 1910 opening. One was an enameled steel sign, secured with iron brackets and side grips, measuring twenty-four feet high and thirty inches wide, projecting forty-two inches, resting sixteen feet above the sidewalk.[185] A sketch of the sign

[182] "Application for Building Projection, No. 4639."
[183] Trieschmann et al, 5.
[184] Trieschmann et al, 5.
[185] "Application for Permit to Erect Sign: Permit No. 280," July 18, 1910, Box 2, Folder 22, Doris McGinty Papers, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.

shows the name HOWARD descending vertically, which should be familiar to people who have seen the theater or images of it in the present. A version of that sign is still on the building today, hanging on the northeast corner of the building at T Street and Wiltberger, a few feet from Florida Avenue. Its placement near a spot where streets almost triangulate maximized its visibility. The other signs were of galvanized iron and, secured with hooks, lay flat against the sides of the building.[186] They measured seven by nine feet and read, with each word or phrase on a new line, "HOWARD THEATRE | VAUDEVILLE | DRAMA | MUSICAL COMEDY." With one of these signs on each side of the building, every part of the building that could be seen from the visible street was labeled. (The exception would have been the alley-facing back of the building.) The Howard Theatre expressed its purpose to everyone who saw it.

The inside of the building was also designed to be aesthetically impressive and had features that opposed the state of affairs in segregated theaters. John H. Wills of the *National Forum* issued high praise in his "Vanity Fair" column: "This is the neatest, best equipped and furnished house in this city and will rank first among the theatres of its kind in the entire industry... The entire house is most carefully designed and constructed and elegantly furnished, though one might say the mural decorations and the frescoes a trifle gaudy."[187] He mentioned the eight proscenium boxes, a type of seating previously inaccessible to Black patrons. According to Bettye Thomas and Bettye Gardner, who wrote the 1970 essay that supported the Howard Theatre's inclusion on the National Register of Historic Places, the main auditorium of the Howard had thirteen entrance-exits.[188] Having thirteen ways to enter a theater house regardless

[186] "Application for Permit to Erect Sign: Permit No. 923," Aug. 22, 1910, Box 2, Folder 22, Doris McGinty Papers, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.

[187] John Wills, "Opening of Howard Theatre," *National Forum* (Washington, D.C.), Aug. 27, 1910.

[188] Bettye Gardner and Bettye Thomas, "The Cultural Impact of the Howard Theatre on the Black Community," *The Journal of Negro History* 55, no. 4 (1970): 254.

of one's race must have felt very different from having one way to enter one section only. "The balcony is the most artistically proportioned of any I have viewed," wrote Wills, who would have experienced or at the very least heard of balconies in segregated theaters with terrible sightlines and acoustics. He continued, "the seats are wide, comfortable and pleasant, well-proportioned and with plenty of room space between and in front of them, so that the tall and the fat may sit in comfort and persons may pass in and out with ease." As for being up-to-date with the times, "the stage is thoroughly equipped with every modern device for safety and utility. It is all steel, brick and cement, the only wood being the floor. The flies are fifty feet, and all curtains and scenery are fire-proof."

Because of its size, the Howard could host a type of performance that the Maceo and the Hiawatha could not. Capacity numbers for the theater vary, but at the time of its opening, the *National Forum* reported that the Howard could seat around 1250 with standing room for 300 more.[189] Compare this to the Maceo's 300 seats after its expansion in the spring of 1910.[190] Wills had reported a month before the opening of the Howard that it would have "a stage large enough to produce any of the traveling productions of coming seasons."[191] Upon the opening, he reported the numbers: "a stage 28 by about 58 feet, being 32 feet before the footlights."[192] There was supposedly also dressing room space for a hundred performers, a kind of volume that was not necessary for theaters that primarily showed film and small vaudeville acts.[193] It was the kind of volume that was necessary for theaters that wanted to program a new genre on the rise: the Black musical.

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[189] "Opening of Howard Theatre," *National Forum* (Washington, D.C.), Aug. 27, 1910.
[190] "The Maceo: Successful Young Men," *Washington Bee* (Washington, D.C.), April 9, 1910.
[191] "The New Playhouses," *National Forum* (Washington, D.C.), July 23, 1910.
[192] "Opening of Howard Theatre," *National Forum* (Washington, D.C.), Aug. 27, 1910.
[193] Gardner and Thomas, 254.

An Artistic Home for an Artistic Movement

Innovations by Black composers, writers, and performers beginning in the 1890s gave rise to a new genre of performance. Slowly leaving behind the constraints of minstrelsy, the first version of what could be called a Black musical emerged, a coherent story with original music and an original libretto that match each other, created and performed by Black artists.[194] Historian Allen Woll reminds readers of the issues surrounding the terms "Black musical," stating that it "has changed so abruptly and so often since the turn of the century," but the works of the era represented the first incarnation.[195] The year 1898 saw the New York City premieres of two musical comedies featuring all-Black casts and creative teams: *A Trip to Coontown* by Bob Cole and Billy Johnson, and *Clorindy, the Origin of the Cakewalk* by Will Marion Cook (a Washington native) and Paul Laurence Dunbar (a then-new Washington resident). By this time, the comedic vaudeville duo of Bert Williams and George Walker had been performing together for several years, and they came to cross paths with Cook and Dunbar to produce *In Dahomey* in 1902. Other musicals from Cook, and from Cole, gained attention and momentum throughout the decade. After *In Dahomey* came Cole and J. Rosamond Johnson's *The Shoo-Fly Regiment* (1906) and *The Red Moon* (1908), and Cook's *Abyssinia* (1906) and *Bandanna Land* (1908).

In this first era of the Black musical, the performers and creators were Black and the majority of audiences were white. Woll argues that "the boom in Black musical comedy from 1898 to 1910 obscured the fact that these entertainments were primarily intended for white audiences," but on Broadway as in Washington, Black audiences had great difficulty seeing these shows.[196] Black audiences wanted to see these performances, would travel from

[194] Woll, 3-6.
[195] Woll, xiii.
[196] Woll, 50.

Washington to Baltimore at some expense and inconvenience to experience these shows, or would risk public humiliation and physical altercations to get seats with better sightlines and acoustics to better enjoy these shows. These musicals were marketed to white audiences, and Black artists would have been very aware of their white patrons, but they would have been aware of their Black patrons, too. Black audiences were there, with money in hand, waiting for their chance or forcing the opportunity. The creators of the Black musical did intend for their work to be seen by Black audiences, but the limitations of segregation meant that it was challenging to reach them.

In Washington in 1899, *A Trip to Coontown* played in the Grand Opera House. The theater that could accommodate the show could not fairly serve the audience who wanted to see it. Almost a decade later, in 1908, Washington audiences completely missed out on *Bandanna Land*, which played in Baltimore but not in Washington, save for the five hundred people estimated to have made the trip to Baltimore.[197] "No Engagement in Washington," read the advertisement in the *Bee*, which also included the fare for the train ("electric cars") to Baltimore ($1 roundtrip after 4pm except Saturdays).[198] An editorial from the same issue cast a harsh judgment on the theaters of Washington. In Maryland, it said, "first-class colored American artists are not barred from first-class theaters; that is to say, they are permitted to perform in them" (as opposed to attend performances in them, from which they may still be barred, of course). "But in the city of Washington, where prejudice and discrimination seem to be in the very atmosphere, will not permit respectable colored Americans to enter their toilet room, five-cent monkey shows."[199] Baltimore's atmosphere was probably not as free of prejudice and

[197] "The Week in Society," *Washington Bee* (Washington, D.C.), Aug. 22, 1908.
[198] "Academy of Music," advertisement, *Washington Bee* (Washington, D.C.), Aug. 8, 1908.
[199] "Great Actors," *Washington Bee* (Washington, D.C.), Aug. 8, 1908.

discrimination as implied, but in 1908, Baltimore had something Washington did not: a theater large enough to accommodate a production on the scale of *Bandanna Land* whose management would both recognize the merits of a Black performing company and permit Black audiences to attend.

The following year, a Howard student named R. G. Doggett lamented a similar situation. This time, the production was Bob Cole and J. Rosamond Johnson's *The Red Moon,* and like *Bandana Land* it played in Baltimore with no Washington engagement. Doggett and many other Howard students had gone to Baltimore to see the show, and Doggett had nothing but praise for the performers and creators, but reserved criticism for those who had allowed *The Red Moon* to pass Washington by:

> I also wonder how much longer senseless race hatred will keep such meritorious performances out of Washington, a city with the greatest Negro population in the country, and some of the most cultured and refined people, although Negroes, in the world… I think it is time that some of the white managers of Washington were waking up and wiping the skim of race hatred from their eyes, and recognizing merit wherever merit is found.[200]

In this case, the theaters in Washington that had the capacity to host *The Red Moon* had managers who were blinded to the value of such a show by their racism. The Black musical was ascending. It was gaining in popularity, improving in quality, establishing a new type of theatrical experience. And in Washington D.C., home to more Black Americans than any other city in the country, there was nowhere for it to be seen by Black Americans.

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[200] "Reflections on seeing 'The Red Moon,'" *Howard University Journal* (Washington, D.C.), May 7, 1909.

Doggett was eventually proven wrong. *The Red Moon* did come to Washington a year later and was presented at the Lyceum Theatre, on 11th Street and Pennsylvania Avenue, in April and May of 1910. The Lyceum had been operating since at least 1890 and had a history of presenting performances by Black Americans. In 1896 the *Bee* credited the manager of the Lyceum, a Mr. Kernan, with being "the first man in the city that has given colored talent an opportunity to show itself."[201] In 1910 Kernan received similar praise from the *Bee* for providing what was apparently the only possible place for *The Red Moon* to be shown in the city. He was once again "the only generous-hearted white man to throw open his theater to colored Americans."[202] But Kernan's Lyceum was not quite the theater that Doggett and others wanted Washington to have.

Reliance on the generosity of the white managers meant that Black audiences had no control over their theatergoing environment. The *Bee*'s efforts to entice patrons out to the Lyceum were apparently successful, but there was a defensive tone that anticipated there would be some kind of unwillingness to visit: "The people...should not hesitate to go to the Lyceum Theatre. It is one of the cleanest theatres in this city and so far as the former customs are concerned, they have been suspended for two weeks or during the stay of Cole and Johnson."[203] Here the phrase "former customs" might have referred to segregation but probably referred to indoor smoking and possibly referred to alcohol consumption, as an advertisement in the following issue explicitly states "during this engagement smoking and serving of refreshments positively not permitted."[204]

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[201] "Amusements," *Washington Bee* (Washington, D.C.), Oct. 17, 1896.
[202] "The Lyceum Theater," *Washington Bee* (Washington, D.C.), May 7, 1910.
[203] "Red Moon," *Washington Bee* (Washington, D.C.), April 30, 1910.
[204] "The New Lyceum Theatre," advertisement, "Amusements," *Washington Bee* (Washington, D.C.), May 7, 1910.

In addition to an unwholesome atmosphere, the Lyceum sometimes offered some less-than-wholesome entertainment. In May of 1909, while Washingtonians traveled to Baltimore for what some thought would be their only opportunity to see *The Red Moon*, Kernan's Lyceum presented The Smart Set, premier Black comedians helmed by S.H. Dudley, followed the next week by The Octoroon Burlesquers.[205] Most of what the Lyceum advertised in the *Bee* were burlesque groups. The *Bee* did not seem to have any moral condemnation for the Lyceum fare and was generous with its praise of the various burlesque companies that performed there. Kernan seems to have been a good and reliable business partner, buying advertisements in the paper, which may have influenced this praise. But the fact that the Lyceum had to alter their usual atmosphere to attract the crowd that would have liked to attend *The Red Moon* indicates a difference in the preferred theater-going environment among attendees. Interestingly the 1909 advertisement for the Smart Set specifies, "note -- the colored people will be admitted to all part of the house."[206] Whether this was specially noted because this was an unusual practice for this theater or noted because it was an unusual practice in the city is not known. Given the changing of the smoking and drinking policies for the Cole and Johnson run, it is not out of the question that the Lyceum could have changed its seating policies for the Smart Set run, not to mention the Cole and Johnson run.

What the run of *The Red Moon* at the Lyceum reveals is the uncomfortable reliance on white theater managers to bring the theatrical productions to Washington that Black audiences wanted to see. This was perhaps a belated engagement, one that could have occurred immediately before or after the Baltimore engagement in 1909 but for some reason did not. Who can say why Kernan booked *The Red Moon* when he did? He was obviously well-versed in the

[205] "Lyceum Theatre," advertisement, *Washington Bee* (Washington, D.C.), May 15, 1909.
[206] "Lyceum Theatre," advertisement, *Washington Bee* (Washington, D.C.), May 8, 1909.

popularity and profitability of the Black musical acts he booked. He knew how to advertise to the city of Washington. There might have been logistical issues on the side of *The Red Moon,* or simple scheduling conflicts between show and venue, or a fear of competition with the show in a city that was very near and reachable. Or Kernan might have initially decided against booking the show based on personal taste or financial matters lost to time. Reliance on one man, as "generous" as he was, for this production to have any option for playing in Washington at all, was unstable. It was a stopgap measure and not a plan for the future.

"Theatres of Their Own"?

Doggett wrote of the awkward discriminatory ticketing in the Baltimore theater that "this may always be true until Negroes in Washington and cities of like population run theatres of their own."[207] But there are two versions of "of their own": Black-owned theaters and Black-operated theaters. Black-operated theaters served the Black community by providing a theater-going experience without the denigration of segregation. They solved the issue of discrimination in public space. Gone were the tiresome ticketing practices, the checkpoints and expulsions, and the delineated containers in the audience space. The Black-owned theaters did the same, but the profits remained in the hands of local Black businessmen. From the *Howard University Journal* in 1910: "It has been rumored (I cannot say how true) the plans for erecting a colored theatre on T Street between Sixth and Seventh streets is well on the way. Now, that is good. It is also rumored that a Jew is the main stock holder and that he will be the number one. Now that is

[207] "Reflections on seeing 'The Red Moon,'" *Howard University Journal* (Washington, D.C.), May 7, 1909.

bad."[208] This, of course, refers to the Howard Theatre, which was built in that year and did begin its existence as a white-owned, Black-operated theater. So why "bad"?

This point of view did not subside even when the Howard Theater opened. Opening night press from the *Washington Bee* was uncritical and boosterish, with little to indicate discontent of the kind suggested by the *Howard University Journal* article, but press from the *National Forum* was more even-handed and even slightly doubtful. Both were favorable on the subject of the theater itself, its modernity and safety, capacity and quality. All the *Forum* dared to suggest was that some of the décor was "a trifle gaudy." The *Bee* was uncritical of the programming, a mixed bill with a variety of acts from both Black and white performers, only devoting a few lines to praising the best acts. The presence of certain members of Washington society formed a larger portion of the account than the review of the programming.[209] The *Forum* was more detailed and discerning, distinguishing which acts were good and which were not up to standard, even calling the orchestra "inadequate."[210] Both newspapers reported on the speeches made by three prominent Black men of Washington and Baltimore: Municipal Court Judge Robert H. Terrell, Auditor of the Department of the Navy Ralph W. Tyler, and Baltimore City Councilman Harry S. Cummings. Notably, the *Forum* saw fit to inform its readers that "the owners, Rosenthal and Benedict, are white men." But it also quoted Robert Terrell as saying, "I am glad to see that there is at last a theatre where all men and all women may come without fear of humiliation or discrimination."[211] The *Bee* did not quote Terrell directly, simply summarized his speech and the two others as "filled with encouragement of a bright future for the colored people of the National Capital, and their appreciation of what Messrs. Rosenthal and Benedict have done for the colored

[208] "Editorials," *Howard University Journal* (Washington, D.C.), Feb. 4, 1910.
[209] "The Howard Theater," *Washington Bee* (Washington, D.C.), Aug. 27, 1910.
[210] "Opening of Howard Theatre," *National Forum*, (Washington, D.C.), Aug. 27, 1910
[211] "Opening of Howard Theatre," *National Forum*, (Washington, D.C.), Aug. 27, 1910

Americans in erecting such a playhouse to the people." It seems from this uncritical tone and emphasis on appreciation that the *Bee* was devoted to the Howard Theatre as to a cause, whereas the *Forum* may have been more skeptical.

This phrase, "the people," was a flexible one. The Howard Theatre advertised in both Black and white publications and billed itself as "the theater for the people" in both. "This is the people's theater," W. Calvin Chase announced before the opening, "because there will be no discrimination. Everybody will be entertained alike."[212] In this usage, "the people" meant all the people of Washington, regardless of race. It was a democratic ideal. But the same the article declared that "the people will appreciate Messrs. Benedict and Rotherthal [sic] for their liberality in giving the people such a playhouse." In this usage, "the people" did not mean everyone, it meant the Black people of Washington, who suffered in discriminatory theaters. Once, Chase even clarified that "the people" did not mean everyone, writing that the Howard was "a place for the people of Washington. The *Bee* means all the people of respectability."[213] If the Howard was in one way for the people (all) and in another way for the people (Black), it was additionally for the people (respectable).

Despite an apparently welcoming reception and successful inauguration, the Howard faced criticism from within the Black community almost immediately. A minister speaking at a Republican Party political meeting in early September turned to the subject of the Howard Theatre and apparently "denounced the men who erected the Howard Theater and said that the colored people could not be fooled etc. That he wanted to see a theater built by the colored people with a colored manager in deed and in fact."[214] This recounting comes from the *Bee*,

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[212] "The Howard Theater," *Washington Bee* (Washington, D.C.), Aug. 20, 1910.
[213] "At Last," *Washington Bee* (Washington, D.C.), Aug. 13, 1910.
[214] "Independent Political Movement," *Washington Bee* (Washington, D.C.), Sept. 10, 1910.

which took the minister's criticism neither well nor seriously. The *Bee* mounted a few ad hominem attacks against Reverend Ross for being an unskilled orator with poor English, even making a bizarre remark about his skin color which was probably intended to accuse Ross of color prejudice but rather makes the editor appear prejudiced instead. "Does Rev. Ross mean to infer that Mr. W. H. Smith, the manager of the Howard Theater, is not a colored man? Does he want the owners of the Howard to appoint a man as Black as he (Rev. Ross) is to satisfy his vanity?"[215] Given the concern in the *Journal*, and the pointed sentence in the *National Forum*, it seems that Ross may have been giving a voice to a real concern in his community. Not that Smith was "not a colored man," of course he was, but that he was not "a colored *manager in deed and in fact*." That is to say, that he was not really in charge of what happened at the Howard. The *Bee* continued to scoff, "The great trouble with some Black colored men, as well as some half-white colored men, is they continue to make faces at one another. What has the independence of the colored man in politics got to do with the Howard Theater and its manager?" Theater management may not have had anything at all to do with dissatisfaction with the Republican Party, but it did have something to do with the independence of Black business from white interests, and that may have been a connection that Ross was attempting to make. Judging by the viciousness of the *Bee*'s rebuttal, it may have been Chase's intention to shut down that line of criticism early and hard. But it wasn't a line of criticism that went away.

There was some early evidence to suggest to Black Washingtonians that the Howard would serve as the center of Black entertainment in Washington. Some of the acts that subsequently performed at the Howard illustrated the new role of the Howard as destination for touring premier Black acts. The first act to take the stage after the opening was the Smart Set,

[215] "The Independent Movement," *Washington Bee* (Washington, D.C.), Sept. 10, 1910.

with their musical *His Honor the Barber*.[216] No longer would the Smart Set play in the Lyceum, with its questionable atmosphere and seating policy that had to be altered and clarified. They had a suitable home in Washington now and would indeed reward faithful and enthusiastic audiences with their returns to the Howard twice in the following year of 1911.[217] Also in 1910 and again twice in 1911, Sissieretta Jones, known as Black Patti, performed at the Howard with her company. Previously she had performed at the Academy of Music and even the White House, but now there was a place that accommodated the Black audiences who wanted to hear one of the most famous musical stars of their own race.

In addition to the reception of the touring acts, the Howard Theater also provided an opportunity for the creation of work in the Black musical theater genre. Its management, space, and funds made this possible. Almost immediately following the opening of the theater, it was announced that a stock company based at the theater would be forming.[218] The Howard Stock Company gathered talents from the casts of Williams & Walker and Cole & Johnson shows, which were on the decline by 1910. George Walker had fallen ill in 1909 and eventually died in 1911, and Bob Cole had similarly stopped creating due to illness and also died in 1911. But many of the people who had worked in these performances were still working, and it seems that the manager of the Howard had an idea of collecting some of them and continuing to produce shows. This plan must have been in the works prior to the opening weekend, and perhaps it was such a scheme that lured the manager from the theater he was managing in Chicago to Washington in the first place. But it seems that the announcement needed to wait until the

[216] "Howard Theatre," advertisement, "His Honor the Barber," *Washington Bee* (Washington, D.C.), Sept. 3, 1910.

[217] "Howard Theatre," advertisement, *Washington Bee* (Washington, D.C.), March 11, 1911. "Howard Theatre," advertisement, "The Howard," *Washington Bee* (Washington, D.C.), Aug. 5, 1911.

[218] "The Howard Theatre," *Washington Bee* (Washington, D.C.), Sept. 17, 1910.

opening went smoothly and "Manager Smith is satisfied that the people of this city want musical comedy."[219] Of course they did—in previous years they had traveled far and endured discrimination to get their musical comedy, and now they could have it in a comfortable space.

It wasn't only the greatest in Black entertainment that was shown at the Howard. Early in the Howard's existence, some programming hinted at the troubles with operating an integrated establishment and making money doing so. Between the announcement of the stock company and their first performance, a touring production of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* came to the Howard. The *Bee* was positive about this initial appearance of what must have been a controversial play. *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was characterized as "a moral classic" which "argues for two of the greatest themes that can engage the mind—human liberty and the immortality of the soul."[220] The white newspapers took different angles on the promotion of the production, describing the theatrics instead of the morality. "The cotton-picking scene in the ever-popular production... is said to be the facsimile of an ideal home on the Red river," reported the *Evening Star*.[221] The *Washington Herald* reported that the play contained "a thrilling, realistic chase after fugitive slaves with the aid of a specially trained pack of ferocious man-eating bloodhounds… purchased from Sheriff Carleton, of Kosciusko, Miss."[222] How could that theatergoing experience not be unpleasant and distasteful, if not traumatic, to an audience for whom slavery was a personal memory or recent family history?

But it was apparently popular and therefore profitable, possibly for a variety of reasons. The Howard's non-discriminatory seating policy was probably still a draw for Black audiences, *Uncle Tom*'s nineteenth-century version of brand recognition probably helped sell tickets, and

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[219] "The Howard Theatre," *Washington Bee* (Washington, D.C.), Sept. 17, 1910.
[220] "At the New Howard Theatre," *Washington Bee* (Washington, D.C.), Oct. 8, 1910.
[221] "Howard," *Evening Star* (Washington, D.C.), Oct. 9, 1910.
[222] "The Howard," *Washington Herald* (Washington, D.C.), Oct. 06, 1910.

descriptions of the production's quality in the various newspapers probably inspired some patronage. Probably many people, both Black and white, did regard the play as the *Bee* had described it, a story about the triumph of liberation and morality. The *Star* asserted that there was "a large patronage" for the production "that appeals strongly to the patrons of the Howard Theater," perhaps referring to Black audiences.[223] But it is hard to say if that were true and how the play was received.

The *Bee* was consistently distressed over a lack of support for the Howard, and expressed distress in condescending terms that belied elitism. Before the theater opened, the *Bee* was confident that patronage for the Howard would exist, or at least expressed confidence as an advertising or promotional measure, to inspire confidence in others: "The *Bee* believes that the people of Washington will support a first-class theater."[224] But it may have been a misplaced confidence. The *Bee* continued to gripe about Black Washingtonians who frequent segregated establishments, like theaters, while there were non-segregated establishments available and plenty. By 1910 the Black newspapers were advertising many establishments (the Maceo, the Hiawatha, the Minnehaha, the Blue Mouse), but the theater sections in, for example, the *Evening Star* reveal the richness of Washington theater scene denied to Black audiences. With this disparity in mind, we can be understanding of the Black patron of the Jim Crow theater. There might have been a certain act or film that one wanted to see, perhaps, at a certain time, or there was a venue closer to a home or a workplace than a *Bee*-approved establishment. But the *Bee* was universally disparaging toward these people. On September 10: "Some are never happy, no matter what you may do for them... It is this common class of colored people who are never

[223] "New Howard Theater," *Evening Star* (Washington, D.C.), Oct. 11, 1910.
[224] "Howard Theater," *Washington Bee* (Washington, D.C.), July 30, 1910.

happy unless they humiliate themselves by going where they are 'Jim Crowed.'"[225] Two weeks later, on September 24, the same complaint: an observer could "see some of our fine young colored ladies and young men sitting in the peanut gallery" or "watch dozens of colored men and women standing in line to a separate entrance."[226] The accusation is not only of political inaction but ingratitude. In this interpretation the white owners, the Black manager, even perhaps Chase himself have "done" something ("no matter what you may do for them") and in return deserve patronage. The targets seem to be lower-class people and younger people, who were not acting as the *Bee* believed they should.

The Howard Stock Company made its debut, and apparently "society turned out strong" for the premiere of their musical *My Friend from Dixie*, but it was not enough.[227] In November 1910, just three months after the opening, the Howard changed hands from a Black manager to a white manager. Misinformation swirled around the change. The *Bee* first reported that "nothing but white shows will be presented to the public" and repeated the claim the following week when it elaborated on the race of the new management, and then the week after that published a correction that the policies and programming would remain the same.[228] The stock company ended their run of *My Friend from Dixie* and departed for Chicago.[229] It is possible that this move to Chicago was Smith's design all along, and may have been the idea that lured him to Washington in the first place, as the theater with whom he had contracted the Howard Stock Company was the theater he had previously managed. It is also possible that the move was a straightforward attempt to make a profit, if the financial support from Washington was not

[225] "Discontented Negroes," *Washington Bee* (Washington, D.C.), Sept. 10, 1910.
[226] "The 'Jim Crow' Negro," *Washington Bee* (Washington, D.C.), Sept. 24, 1910.
[227] "At the Howard Theater," *Washington Bee* (Washington, D.C.), Oct. 29, 1910.
[228] "Howard Theater," *Washington Bee* (Washington, D.C.), Nov. 26, 1910. "The Howard Theater," *Washington Bee* (Washington, D.C.), Dec. 3, 1910.
[229] "The Howard Stock Company Will Leave for Chicago," *Washington Bee* (Washington, D.C.), Nov. 19, 1910. The *Herald* reported that the company was soon to be in Europe. I'm not sure why the difference.

forthcoming as anticipated, or an escape from the new management of the theater, if Smith had known he was about to lose his job. Whatever the true reason for the change in management, and it may well have been a lack of financial success, Chase blamed the people he had always blamed: the people who patronized segregated theaters.[230]

The People and the Profit

There was some truth to the claim that the programming would not change under white management, and Black shows continued to find their home at the Howard, but so did other programming indistinguishable from that of the white theaters. Black Patti's Troubadours performed and returned, the Smart Set returned, and another J. Leubrie Hill production, *The Blackville Corporation*, arrived.[231] But other productions appeared to have all-white casts or were at the least star vehicles for white actresses: *Missouri Girl; St. Elmo; Anita, the Singing Girl; A Girl's Best Friend*. The write-ups in the white newspapers change little over time, but the *Bee*'s attitude toward the Howard noticeably cooled. Compare the *Bee*'s October 1910 coverage of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* to how the *Bee* reacted when the same production returned to Washington a year later, in September 1911. At this point, Chase was frustrated with white management and changed his perspective or, more likely, showed his true colors on the subject of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*: "Uncle Tom's Cabin is an old rusty play, and it has outlived its usefulness."[232] Lacking the motivation to promote what he perceived as a good in the community, Chase mounted no defense of the play. This sentiment about *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was expressed in a paragraph actually calling for a boycott of the Howard. It went on to say,

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[230] "Howard Theater," *Washington Bee* (Washington, D.C.), Nov. 26, 1910.
[231] "Blackville Corporation," *Washington Bee* (Washington, D.C.), Dec. 31, 1910.
[232] "Negro Manager," *Washington Bee* (Washington, D.C.), Sept. 23, 1911.

> What the people of this city want is a first-class show. It must not be presumed that the colored people in this city will be satisfied with old things placed in this theater. A colored manager or no support. No more advertisements will be placed in this paper for that theater until there is a Negro manager, and all Negro help placed in this city. The people are requested to act accordingly.

About a year after the Howard opened, Chase decided that the Howard was failing the people—the Black people of Washington, the respectable people of Washington—with its management and its programming, its business practice and artistic practice.

But the *Bee* was not the first to call for a boycott. The former theater manager of the Maceo, J. Arthur Davis, wrote his opposition to the Howard Theatre in his essay *The Missing Link and the Howard Theatre* which was published in May 1911. Davis objected to white people profiting from the Black community's desire to have their own spaces where they do not experience discrimination. His argument was that legal segregation enforced by whites made separation desirable because in separate spaces no one experiences indignity from racism. But the unfortunate result was that white people could then make money by owning those separate spaces. It is a sort of sleight-of-hand by which a situation that is undesirable to a Black community (white business owners profiting from segregation) is disguised as desirable (having a space in which Black audience do not experience the indignity of segregation). To the collegiate staff of the *Howard University Journal*, and to Davis, who was a Howard graduate, Black-operated was insufficient. An absence of discriminatory treatment was not enough if the profits were in the wrong hands.[233]

[233] J. Arthur Davis, "*The Missing Link" and The Howard Theatre* (Washington, D.C.: Murray Bros. Press, 1911).

That had not been the position of the *Bee* back when it was excoriating Reverend Ross in September 1910, but by September 1911, Chase had apparently come around. When *The Missing Link and the Howard Theatre* was published, it was quoted and promoted in the *Bee*, including Davis's recommendation of a boycott, though it was not directly endorsed at that point.[234] And a few months later, he was prepared to put his money where his mouth was and stop running advertisements for the Howard in his paper.[235] He also sued National Amusement Company.[236] In one sense, the *Bee* was terribly consistent—the primary enemy was always Jim Crow—but there seems to have been a realization that a seating policy was not the true solution. Black management was essential. Black shows were essential. Black staff were essential. This is the argument traceable from the *Howard University Journal*, to Reverend Ross, to J. Arthur Davis, and eventually to W. Calvin Chase.

Chase won his suit, and the Black theatergoers of Washington won their boycott. The Howard was restored to Black management by October or November 1911, though misinformation surrounded this change as it had the previous change in management.[237] The *Bee* reported on November 4 that although the Thomas brothers who were managing the Minnehaha were confirmed to be the new managers, the real manager (in deed and in fact, as it were) was one Sidney Bieber, a white man known to have operated Jim Crow theaters elsewhere in the city. The *Bee* then corrected itself on November 11, reporting that Andrew J. Thomas would, in fact, be the manager and Sidney Bieber had nothing to do with it.[238] Thomas was not only the

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[234] "Writes Masterpiece on Discrimination," *Washington Bee* (Washington, D.C.), May 20, 1911. "'The Missing Link,'" *Washington Bee* (Washington, D.C.), June 10, 1911.

[235] "Howard Theater," *Washington Bee* (Washington, D.C.), Sept. 16, 1911.

[236] "Howard Theater Suit," *Washington Bee* (Washington, D.C.), Sept. 30, 1911.

[237] "The Bee Wins!" *Washington Bee* (Washington, D.C.), Oct. 7, 1911. "Howard Theater," *Washington Bee* (Washington, D.C.), Oct. 7, 1911.

[238] "Howard Theater," *Washington Bee* (Washington, D.C.), Nov. 4, 1911. "Bieber Not Behind Howard," *Washington Bee* (Washington, D.C.), Nov. 11, 1911.

manager but the lessee, which suggests an assumption of more risk for the potential of more reward. He could make money on the Howard, or he could lose money, but either way he was paying the National Amusement Company six hundred dollars a month.

The social progress indicated by fully occupying certain spaces is not the same as the social progress indicated by ownership of the spaces and retention of the profit generated in the spaces. This is the true meaning of Black Broadway, not yet realized in this period of time: spaces that would be not just Black-operated but Black-owned, entertainment that would be not just Black-created or Black-performed but Black-patronized. The Maceo and its like were one kind of step, to desegregation and ownership, and the Howard was another kind of step, toward desegregation, and not ownership, but a new kind of access for audiences. The Howard was meant to give Black Washington the best: the most artistic, the most fashionable, the cleanest and the safest, the most respectable. It fell short in its first year of operation, but the achievements were enormous, as was the potential.

Now the Howard Theatre is perhaps associated with a sense of loss. Its heyday was in the 1930s and 40s, and it declined through the 50s and especially the 60s, but it was the 1968 riots that dealt the most terrible blow to the Howard and other U Street institutions.[239] Gardner and Thomas, who were doctoral students at the George Washington University in 1970, wrote in the direct aftermath of the 1968 riots.[240] They wrote with the intention of proving the importance of the Howard, of creating a historical record that could be cited by the 1974 National Register of Historic Places inventory nomination form. They wrote against the threat of ignorance or even demolition. But the theater, though it languished for decades, still exists. It was renovated around

[239] Gardner and Thomas, 261-262.
[240] Gardner and Thomas, 253.

its hundredth birthday, and it has been open since 2012, but it has struggled to become profitable since. In some ways the 1910s were too early for the Howard, and the 1960s may have been too late. It is not clear what the future will hold, and the questions of who will own, attend, and play the Howard are still open. But it remains there, even when everyone around it is unsure of what it will become.

The Howard Theatre was neither independent nor coexistent; in fact, it was dependent on white business. Its great triumph was that, while there, Black people could be treated as they desired and experience leisure without fear. For some, the value of dignity was so great that Black management was sufficient. But for others, the value of profit was so great that misplaced profit could undermine the value of dignity, and only Black ownership would be enough. The Howard Theatre was the arena in which these evaluations were made. An enterprise which was much needed and much contested, the Howard Theatre was the partial realization of the potential that Black Washington had as a home for excellent art and appreciative audiences.

Chapter Four — U Street: Business and Meaning

It is morning on U Street, 1910. On the street there are people walking, horse-drawn carriages and wagons, the electric streetcar, bicycles, and a few automobiles. All are busy with different tasks and travels. They are going to buy flowers or stationery or hair products; they are going to get their shoes shined or their suits tailored. As they pass restaurants and caterers, they might be thinking about going out to lunch or getting ice cream later. They are carrying the Washington Bee *or the* National Forum *to read while they wait for or ride the street car.*

Some of them are headed to jobs in the federal government, perhaps at the treasury, the postal service, or the courts. Some of them are headed to other people's homes, to work as domestic servants during the day. Some of them are students from nearby Howard University, training to be doctors or ministers or teachers. As they move down the street together, or stand together outside shops and homes, they might be talking about baseball and boxing or about politics and world events. They might be talking about the latest remarks by President Taft, W.E.B. Du Bois, or Mary Church Terrell.

At the end of the work day, where will these people go for an evening's entertainment? If they are from a higher socioeconomic class, they might have been invited to a literary meeting or a society dinner. If they are from a lower socioeconomic class, they might spend their time in a simple restaurant or pool hall. Anyone might attend a concert, recital, or lecture, perhaps held at the Twelfth Street Y.M.C.A. or one of the city's prestigious churches or Howard University's chapel. Maybe there would be a dance, perhaps one of many held at True Reformer's Hall. They could see a play or variety show or film at one of Washington's theaters, many of which are only a few years or a few months old: the Maceo, the Hiawatha, the Minnehaha, and Ford Dabney's Theater for smaller-scale vaudeville and films, the Howard Theatre for larger-scale productions.

Some of these people who are out and about on U Street this morning have primary or secondary employment in the entertainment sphere. They are actors, comedians, theater managers, bandleaders, orchestra musicians, chorus dancers, newspaper reviewers, ticket sellers, ushers, and janitors, and they will be hard at work tonight.

The street looks different now than it looked ten years ago, and different again from how it looked twenty years ago. Everyone but children will remember the time before automobiles, and most adults will remember the time before the streetcar ran on electricity. There are more businesses here now, and more of those businesses have Black proprietors. New buildings, some of which stand out impressively for their size and style, have filled in empty lots along the roads. The landscape has changed so much, and it is not hard to imagine the neighborhood continuing to grow and flourish in the future.

Street as Monument

In the first decade of the twentieth century, the U Street area was in the process of becoming a monument to race progress. Where there had been vacant lots, there were more and more new buildings. Where people had needed to venture farther for goods and services, they could now get those goods and services closer to where they lived, from people who would not discriminate against them. Andrew F. Hilyer's Union League Directories were records of Black business development in Washington, D.C. which were updated every few years: 1892, 1894, 1895, 1901. The fourth directory reported that the first two directories were "bound together and placed in the Library of Congress and in the Washington City and other libraries," as the fourth probably was also, forming an accessible body of evidence for the growth of Black business.[241]

[241] Andrew F. Hilyer, *The Twentieth Century Union League Directory* (Washington, D.C.: The Union League, 1901), 3.

But the built environment of the city was a record that was constantly updating itself, viewed by all. Year over year, even month over month, the development of business on the street was observable to residents and visitors. New buildings each had their own individual significance that was defined by the intentions behind their creation and the uses to which they were put, but together they had a collective significance defined by a collective witness.

Historic maps show the extent of development and the density of dwellings in the U Street area, which together suggest in 1903-1904 that it was a robust neighborhood with opportunities for expansion. In the early twentieth century, Washington, D.C., like many other cities in the United States, was mapped by the Sanborn Company for use by fire insurance firms. One volume was published in 1903, and a second volume showing additional areas was published in 1904.[242] At the turn of the century, the U Street neighborhood was not fully built out, and there was space for the physical creation of new institutions to serve specific purposes. There was not only undeveloped land on the outer edges of the neighborhood, but also on the highly trafficked corridor of U Street itself. The maps show narrow, residence- or storefront-sized empty lots and larger, squarer empty lots, especially west of 12th Street. There were narrow empty lots along 14th Street, W Street between 13th and 15th, and U and V Streets between 13th and 14th. Some of the large empty lots lay on 13th and 11th between U and V, 12th between S and T, U between 14th and 15th, T between 14th and 15th, and the corner of T and 13th. In terms of theaters, the 1910 locations of the Hiawatha (2006 11th Street), the Minnehaha (1213 U Street, now Ben's Chili Bowl), and the Howard (622 T Street) were undeveloped lots in 1903. There was land upon which to build in the U Street neighborhood for those organizations, companies, and individuals who had the means to acquire it.

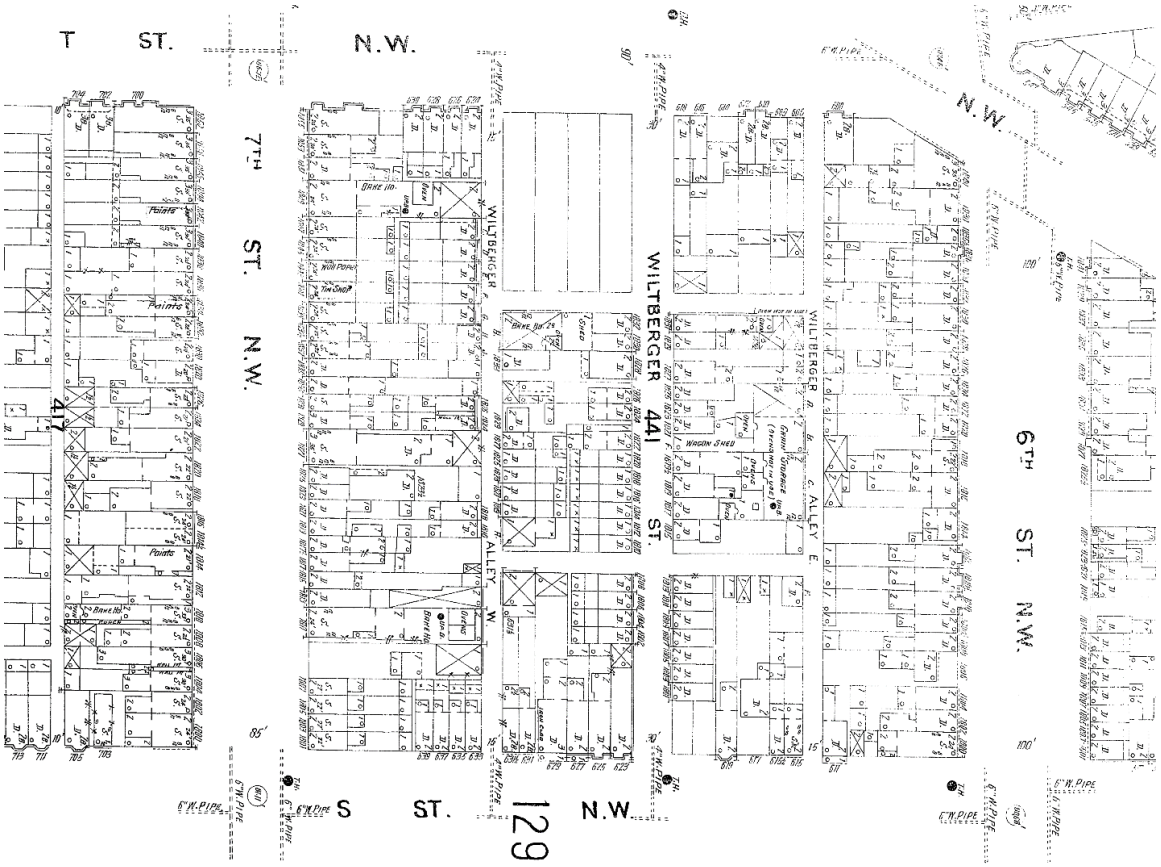
[242] Sanborn Map Company. *Washington DC: Volume One.* (New York: Sanborn Map Company, 1903). Sanborn Map Company. *Washington DC: Volume Two.* (New York: Sanborn Map Company, 1904).

The labeled buildings on these maps were public institutions like churches, schools, hospitals, and government offices, as well as businesses. Residential buildings with the word "apartments" or "flats" in their names were also labeled. The unlabeled buildings on these maps, which are the vast majority, were probably also residences, or else they would have been labeled as something else. There is also the possibility that the labeled buildings were also, in part, residences. People could have lived above or behind the public business that appeared on the map. In 1903-1904, residential development diminished as one headed toward 16th Street in the west and toward a curving Florida Avenue in the north.[243] (Until 1890, Florida Avenue had been called Boundary Street, and it had marked the edge of the original design for the city. U Street roughly converges with Florida Avenue when it crosses 9th Street.) Along U Street itself, and T Street and V Street, there were a few empty lots.

The hierarchy and organization of streets in the area meant that there was a visible neighborhood along the main thoroughfares and an invisible neighborhood along the alleys. There are three types of street represented on the 1903-1904 Sanborn Maps, with a hierarchy of size and visibility. With its faithful scale of fifty feet to an inch, the Sanborn Maps show just how varied the widths of roads were. The main streets, typically numbered or lettered or named for states, were the widest. Then there were minor streets that ran between those main streets which were noticeably smaller but still labeled in the same typeface as the main streets. And then there were alleys, which were even smaller, and may or may not have been labeled. The block containing the future site of the Howard Theatre had examples of all three. The block was formed by the wide main streets of T Street, S Street, 7th Street, and 6th Street, which is clipped a little by the equally wide Florida Avenue. The block was bisected north-south by a narrower

[243] Sanborn Map Company, *Volume One*, 34-36, 46-48.

Wiltberger Street, and then quartered north-south by an even narrower Wiltberger Alley West and Wiltberger Alley East. It also contained unnamed alleys running east-west. There appear to have been residences on all alleys, plus a wagon shed and grain storage.[244] This diversity of street types was typical of the area, even if this particular block was organized in a more standard way than most blocks.



The block containing the future site of the Howard Theatre in 1904. Bounded by S and T Streets and 6th and 7th Streets, with Florida Avenue cutting the northeastern corner. The Howard Theatre is now located where there are empty lots on T Street.

While the visible neighborhood represented progress in Black Washington, the invisible neighborhood represented progress yet to be made. When Washington's alleys were built they

[244] Sanborn Map Company, *Volume Two,* 128.

were essentially access roads for buildings on the main streets and were not intended to be sites of housing, but in a crowded and increasingly populous city, alley living was the unideal but practical solution for sheltering the poor.[245] There were Black and white alley dwellers, but in the same time period as other city streets became segregated, alleys did, too. Black people may have always made up the majority of alleys dwellers, as the alley population had exploded during and after the Civil War, but they were apparently close to ninety percent of alley dwellers in the 1880s and 1890s.[246] In describing race progress, Hilyer wanted to emphasize how "the colored people of Washington have made the most progress in the acquisition of homes, lands and houses."[247] He wanted to draw attention to the fifteen percent of Black Washingtonians who owned their homes in 1890, as well as those who did not own their homes but nevertheless lived in "good homes, surrounded by many of the evidences of comfort in modern home life, books, pictures, newspapers, magazines, pianos, etc." But a quarter of Black Washingtonians lived in alleys, in the opposite of comfort and modernity.

Buildings on alleys face inward, away from the main streets, and because alley buildings may not be visible from the main streets the alleys are sometimes called blind alleys. Before improvements could be made, the conditions of life in the invisible neighborhood had to be brought to view for the more privileged classes. A "Very Practical Lecture" on the subject was brought to a meeting of the Howard University Y.M.C.A. in 1913, likely one of many such lectures given to similar organizations over the previous decade.[248] Charity workers from the Black elite, affiliated with the Associated Charities or another church or civic organization,

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[245] 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, 2019), 179.

[246] Asch and Musgrove, 179.

[247] Hilyer, 170.

[248] "The Y.M.C.A. Meeting: A Very Practical Lecture," *Howard University Journal* (Washington, D.C.), Feb 21, 1913.

visited poor people in their alley homes and observed the severity of poverty for the first time.[249] The 1901 *Union League Directory*, while acknowledging that charity efforts were largely too informal to be listed effectively, noted a few Black charitable organizations which served alleys: one called "Alley Missions," headed by a man, another called "Willow Tree Alley Mission," headed by a woman, and two alley missions connected to a Zion Baptist church.[250] On the city and national level, outside the Black community, the photography and reporting of Jacob Riis prompted government action on the issue. The Board for Condemnation of Unsanitary Buildings (1906) and the President's Homes Commission (1907), during the Roosevelt administration, brought publicity to the alley problem.[251]

Alleys were the frequent target of Progressive Era reformers, who sometimes pursued an agenda of destruction as a cure for the deprivations of alley life. Black reformers saw themselves as having a racial responsibility to Black alley dwellers, but white reformers saw themselves having responsibility either to the poor regardless of race, to the white poor specifically, or to the image of the city.[252] The destitution of alleys, as hidden as it was, reflected badly on Washington, and many reformers did not imagine solving the alley problem with administering relief to the poor but with eradicating alley housing entirely.[253] Eventually, after decades of legislation, the Progressive vision of a city minus its alleys won. The area still has some of its in-between roads, and inward-facing buildings on those in-between roads, but many that appear on the 1903-1904 maps have long disappeared.

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[249] Jacqueline M. Moore, *Leading the Race: The Transformation of the Black Elite in the Nation's Capital, 1880-1920* (Charlottesville, Va.: University Press of Virginia, 1999), 170.
[250] Hilyer, 137.
[251] Moore, 169.
[252] Moore, 169, 171. Asch and Musgrove, 179, 202-204.
[253] Asch and Musgrove, 201-203.

Although the invisible neighborhood was public, its poverty and invisibility kept it separate from the visible neighborhood, which formed monument to race progress. Each block of U Street (and T Street and V Street) from 16th Street to 7th Street had some kind of minor street or alley or both.[254] The Sanborn maps appear to confirm that most of the buildings to which alleys provided access were residences, though there were some publicly used buildings like businesses or churches at an alley entrances. Only seven businesses and one church in the 1901 *Union League Directory* list an alley address. Four were listed under "Colored Eating Houses and Cook Shops," which seems to be the socially lowest level of restaurant establishment Hilyer included, and the other three were a grocer, a carpenter, and a plasterer.[255] Blind alleys, dense with residences, tucked into the interiors of blocks, may not have been seen by people walking the main streets. It would have been possible to disembark from a streetcar, walk along U Street to a restaurant or hotel or theater, and see only a few alley entrances but no alley life, or see no alleys at all. But alleys were certainly known and traversed by the people who lived on them. Some may have functioned as shortcuts for people who did not live on them. They would have been visited by the people trying to reform them. Even invisible, they were public spaces, but they would not have been used by the entire public.

What made the visible neighborhood into a monument was the public. Walking down the visible street by day, the public would have formed a constant witness to the growth and prosperity of the neighborhood. The buildings on the main streets would have made a daily impression on the public who traversed those streets, both in specific and as a collection. Someone visiting just one or two buildings would pass by other buildings on his way, and

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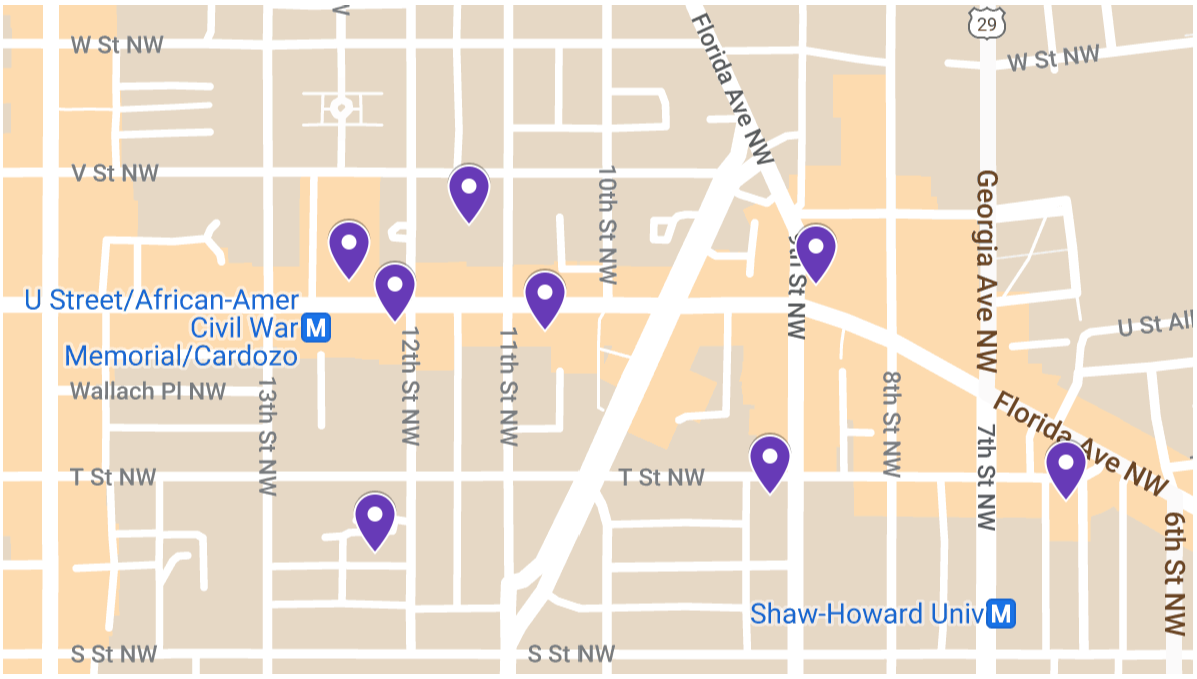
[254] Sanborn Map Company, *Volume One*, 19-20, 24-26.

[255] Hilyer, 29, 48-49, 54, 87, 102, 142. Of the seven business addresses counted, four include the word "row" and three include the word "alley."

probably the same ones regularly, noticing changes along his route over time. Those who lived in the neighborhood for many years would watch development happen, the passing of time marked by empty lots becoming construction sites becoming new buildings. U Street was a visual record of the economic progress of Washington's Black community for the residents and visitors who saw it change over the years.

The businesses that existed at the turn of the twentieth century were more or less essential to the functioning of urban life. From the 1903 Sanborn Map, we can see on 14th Street between V Street and T Street there was a plumber, an upholsterer, a tailor, three laundries, three drug stores, a boarding house, a dairy, a tin shop and print shop, another tin shop, a hay and feed store (or storage building), and a coal and wood store (or storage building).[256] It is a fairly representative sample of the types of businesses which appear elsewhere in the neighborhood, though not often in such a concentration. Interestingly, the only business on these two blocks of 14th Street that appears on both the 1901 *Union League Directory* and the 1903 Sanborn Map is the boarding house. The *Directory* also lists three barbers on those two blocks (actually just one block), but no other businesses.[257] Some of the businesses on the 1903 Map may have been Black businesses that did not exist in 1901 or did not exist at that address in 1901. But undoubtedly some were just not Black-owned. There were also some neighborhood fixtures that were not businesses but still part of an ordinary city landscape. At the ends of the street, U Street had a fire station and pumping station west of 17th Street, and a police station at 9 ½ Street.[258]

[256] Sanborn Map Company, *Volume One*, 25, 35.
[257] Hilyer, 19, 20, 25.
[258] Sanborn Map Company, *Volume One*, 47, 19.



Locations of cultural institutions in the U Street neighborhood founded between 1903 and 1912. Starting in the northwest, proceeding clockwise: Minnehaha Theater, True Reformers' Hall, Hiawatha Theater, Maceo Theater, Ford Dabney's Theater, Howard Theatre, Washington Conservatory of Music, Twelfth Street Y.M.C.A.

What was new in the U Street neighborhood in the twentieth century were the institutions that served not the needs for clothing and shelter, food and fuel, but the needs for engagement with culture. There was True Reformers' Hall and the Washington Conservatory of Music in 1903; the Minnehaha, Hiawatha, and Maceo Theatres in 1909; Ford Dabney's Theatre and the Howard Theatre in 1910; and the Twelfth Street Y.M.C.A. in 1912. Some of those locations were empty lots at the time of the Sanborn Maps (Minnehaha, Hiawatha, Howard, Y.M.C.A.).[259] Other locations had buildings that were serving different purposes (Ford Dabney's, Maceo).[260] The construction of new buildings or the repurposing of old buildings would have changed the visual experience of the street, making the neighborhood appear as a place for music, theater,

[259] Sanborn Map Company, *Volume One*, 24-25. Sanborn Map Company, *Volume Two*, 128.
[260] Sanborn Map Company, *Volume One*, 19. Sanborn Map Company, *Volume Two*, 127.

dance, entertainment, and culture. Not every building had the same symbolic value, and not every person would have reacted in the same way to the same building, but taken together their creation indicated a new cultural era.

The proximity of residences to businesses and other institutions indicates that the various people who lived in this area would have walked easily to their destinations within the neighborhood. The distance from the intersection of U Street and 14th Street to the intersection of Florida Avenue and 7th Street is about half a mile. Measuring from the intersection of U Street and 14th Street, a point at which there were five buildings of flats in the block south and a boarding house in the block north, it would be a less than a quarter mile to True Reformer's Hall and two-thirds of a mile to the Howard Theatre. Measuring from the circle at T Street and 3rd Street, a location central to the area labeled LeDroit Park on the 1904 Sanborn Maps, the distance to the Howard Theatre is one-third of a mile and to True Reformers' Hall is not quite three-quarters of a mile. Depending on where one starts within the Howard University campus, it might be a half-mile southward walk to the Howard Theatre on T Street and a slightly longer westward walk to True Reformers' Hall or another U Street location. These are reasonable distances for walking, and the people who lived along U Street, T Street, Florida Avenue, from 7th to 14th or even beyond, could have walked to the places they patronized.

Because of the transportation network existing in Washington at the turn of the century, the U Street neighborhood would have been accessible even to people who did not live in the area and could be a place of assembly for people all across the city. In 1862, the Washington and Georgetown Railroad Company began operating both a 7th Street line, which terminated at Boundary Street, and a 14th Street line.[261] These horse-drawn car routes supported migration to

[261] Laura V. Trieschmann, Anne Sellin, and Stephen Callcott, "National Register of Historic Place Registration Form: Greater U Street Historic District" (United States Department of the Interior, National Park

the neighborhood. In 1893, Rock Creek Railway extended its U Street line "to about 150 feet east of 7th Street."[262] In 1895, the two companies merged into the Capital Traction Company.[263] These original transit patterns form part of how the Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority's Green Line runs today: along 7th Street, across U Street, and continuing a short way on 14th Street before turning northeast. There were other Black neighborhoods in Washington, such as Hell's Bottom (northwest, near what is now Logan Circle), Foggy Bottom (northwest by the Potomac), H Street (northeast), the Island (southwest, east of 4½ Street), Bloodfield (southwest, near what is now Navy Yard), and Anacostia (southeast, across the Anacostia River).[264] Residents of those neighborhoods might have liked to visit U Street to meet their friends or to support businesses there. People who lived in other Black neighborhoods could get to an entertainment venue on U Street, as could people who lived in white neighborhoods.

Another enormously visual change at this time was electrification. Beginning in the late nineteenth century, electrification started to transform the main streets into spaces that were truly visible at night. The electrification of the 7th and 14th Street transit lines began in 1890, so at least the most trafficked streets would have been wired for electricity at that time.[265] Recall that the 1903-1904 Sanborn Company Maps were maps for risk assessment, not personal navigation, and the mapmakers paid a lot of attention to the things that can catch fire (coal and wood yards) and noted how large buildings were heated (furnace or steam) and lit (gas or electric). But even though the concern of the maps was the likelihood of fire, not the experience of people, they

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Service, 1998), 6. LeRoy O. King, *100 Years of Capital Traction: The Story of Streetcars in the Nation's Capital* (College Park, Md.: Taylor Publishing Company, 1972), 3-4.

[262] King, 28.

[263] King, 24.

[264] Asch and Musgrove, 179. Mentions Hell's Bottom and the Island. "War on Dancing," *Washington Bee* (Washington, D.C.), Feb. 5, 1910. Mentions Bloodfield and Foggy Bottom. Fitzpatrick, 49. Mentions H Street, Anacostia, Foggy Bottom, and 4 ½ Street.

[265] King, 19.

reveal something of the infrastructure of early twentieth-century urban life: a mix of technologies providing a more comfortable indoor environment and increased nighttime visibility, at least in some significant buildings. Walking down the visible street by night, people who had lived in the city before electrification would have been reminded of how modern their lives were now, and people who had moved to the city from rural areas would have been reminded of how urban their lives were now.

People traveling the visible neighborhood together would have had an impression of busyness. Traffic on the main streets would have included horses pulling wagons and carriages. The Sanborn Map indices reveal the locations of a dozen "carriage factories" and "wagon works" that built and serviced the vehicles that moved people and goods around the city.[266] The 1901 *Union League Directory* lists "Blacksmiths & Horse Shoers" as well as "Bicycles—Renting and Repairing."[267] Walking down the street would have involved some maneuvering around animals pulling wagons, and judging by the other types of businesses prevalent in the indices, these wagons could have been filled with ice, lumber, and coal. Traffic could have also included cyclists and possibly motorists. Even in 1903, in the very early years of mass production in the automobile industry, there were automobile repair and storage facilities in Washington, though not in this neighborhood.[268] So perhaps it would have been very intriguing or alarming to be passed by a car driving down U Street in 1903 but would not have been wildly unusual to be passed by a car driving down U Street by 1910, though horse-drawn vehicles still would have been far more familiar and common to share the road with.

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[266] Sanborn Map Company, *Volume One*, Sheet 0b. Sanborn Map Company, *Volume Two*, Sheet 0b.
[267] Hilyer, 23.
[268] Sanborn Map Company, *Volume One*, 8, 12, 42.

The impression of busyness might have led to an impression of greatness. If there were many people on the streetcar going toward U Street, it showed that it was an important destination where significant things happened. People entering and exiting the space of the street from various businesses were evidence of commerce and from churches and schools were evidence of devotion and education. If there were large numbers people on the street itself, heading in all different directions, it showed that there were many different locations within this neighborhood that were interesting enough for people to want to be.

Doing Business on the Street

The demand for Black businesses in the U Street neighborhood had both practical and philosophical origins, and the expanding number and type of businesses was propelled not only by the need to surmount the material challenges of segregated society but also by the belief that having a secure and diverse array of Black business would benefit all Black people. This is what Andrew F. Hilyer and others called "the new business movement," the idea that Black people should create their own businesses and patronize businesses owned by other Black people, so as to support their own community with their money and not rely on white-owned businesses where they might be ill-treated or where their money would benefit the people who had the power to ill-treat them.[269] In this framework, starting a business was a service to the race and patronizing a Black business was a political responsibility. Looking primarily at the Union League directories, Michael Fitzpatrick finds that starting in the 1890s the number and variety of Black-owned businesses increased dramatically in Washington and especially the neighborhood he calls Shaw. By 1910, the Shaw neighborhood included "major commercial thoroughfares" on U Street, 7th

[269] Hilyer, 10-12. Michael Andrew Fitzpatrick, "'A Great Agitation for Business': Black Economic Development in Shaw," *Washington History* 2, no. 2 (1990), 50.

Street, 11th Street, and 14th Street.[270] This development was a sign of the business movement's popularity and efficacy and the willingness of Black Washington to spend its time, money, and energy making U Street into a place for themselves.

The challenges to those who wanted to develop Black businesses began at the very foundation of the financial system. Acquiring real estate or raising enough capital to launch new business ventures were no simple matters in a financial system that was capable of totally excluding Black people and usually did. In the 1880s and 1890s, the first Black-run financial institutions in Washington were created "to relieve the most debilitating problems faced by the black community—a scarcity of loans, capital, and insurance" resulting from the unwillingness of white-run financial institutions to deal with Black customers and the overall lack of Black wealth relative to white wealth.[271] The development of a parallel financial system was slow and sometimes unstable. The Capital Savings Bank failed in 1902 and the Industrial Savings Bank did not arise to replace it until 1913, for example. Cooperative organizations, some as large as the United Order of True Reformers but many much smaller, filled gaps in financial systems when they could.[272] The separate world of Black business in Washington had to be built from the ground up by the efforts of an entire community.

This is not to say that everyone in that community made consistent, coordinated, or equal efforts toward the success of Black business. Black elites in Washington and elsewhere faced criticism for their lack of financial commitment.[273] Washington had a Black elite as well as a

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[270] Fitzpatrick, 59, 62.

[271] Fitzpatrick, 51, 59-60.

[272] Elsa Barkley Brown, "Womanist Consciousness: Maggie Lena Walker and the Independent Order of Saint Luke," *Signs* 14, no. 3 (1989): 616. Shennette Garrett-Scott, *Banking on Freedom: Black Women in U.S. Finance Before the New Deal* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019), 4.

[273] August Meier, *Negro Thought in America, 1880-1915: Racial Ideologies in the Age of Booker T. Washington* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1966), 149.

robust Black middle class, but that elite was nowhere near as entrenched or as powerful as the white elite, and their interest in developing Black-run businesses and financial institutions was inconsistent. Fitzpatrick argues that of all industries to develop in Black Washington at this time, real estate and finance held the most prestige, and the Black elite were therefore most likely to involve themselves there.[274] Jacqueline Moore characterizes the involvement of the Black elite in this sector as stemming from personal interest, "a voice in the management of their money," as well as a sense of paternalistic responsibility toward the lower classes, a "characteristic sense of noblesse oblige."[275] But they did not always elect to risk their own money in these ventures. In 1901, Chase complained in the *Bee* of "rich negroes in this city," saying, "We have a firstclass [sic] colored bank here, but not one of these big rich negroes deposits one cent in this bank."[276] He may or may not have been factually correct about this, but his dissatisfaction points to class tension between the elites and the middle class on the subject of community support for Black business. Placing money in financial institutions outside of the mainstream might have been perceived as coming with greater risk.

According to the Black press, the responsibility for the success of Black business was shared between entrepreneur and customer. Without imagination and investment on the part of the entrepreneurs, and participation and loyalty on the part of the customers, this world of business could not exist. Newspaper editors encouraged both sides to commit to the concept. The *Journal* article cited above encouraged the initial establishment of businesses: "It is here the man with brains that are real brains, can live and prosper. A man who has a job netting him a fair income could in a few years invest in a good paying business."[277] The potential investor

[274] Fitzpatrick, 60.
[275] Moore, 137-138.
[276] "Why We Fall," *Washington Bee* (Washington, D.C.), Aug. 3 1901.
[277] "Editorials," *Howard University Journal* (Washington, D.C.), Feb. 4, 1910.

imagined here is not a wealthy man but an ordinary wage-earner, and with intelligence, he can turn the available local capital into a profit for himself. The *Bee* article cited above, in the pattern of hundreds if not thousands of arguments from the hand of Chase, encouraged the patronage of Black businesses. He claimed that in the U Street area "reside a community of law-abiding and loyal people who willingly support our business men in whatever first-class business they may enter."[278] It was an expression of the cooperation that was needed between the two sides of commerce. Both the entrepreneur and the customer were agents of change.

There were consequences of transmuting customer loyalty into racial solidarity and entrepreneurial investment into racial progress. Rhetorically, those equivalencies made everyone in the Black community responsible for the success of Black businesses and culpable for their failure. "The Bee appeals to its readers to get busy, to utilize their best energies for furthering centralized colored business interests in this community," wrote Chase. "You street, between 7th and 14th Sts. must be made a great thoroughfare and promenade center of attraction to advantage business interests." U Street must *be made,* and the people promenading on the thoroughfare would be the ones who had to make it and maintain it. Both Black customers and Black entrepreneurs faced criticism from leaders who needed both types of people to behave in certain ways that aligned with how they perceived the economy of Black Washington.

When Black leaders repeatedly exhorted their audiences not to patronize certain establishments that discriminated, they revealed a widespread and persistent disagreement and disengagement with their priorities. Hilyer declared in 1901 that "colored people themselves only have to overcome certain adverse conditions in their own ranks" to be successful. The "conditions" were the resistance of Black customers to patronize Black businesses. He claimed

[278] "Business Center," *Washington Bee* (Washington, D.C.), April 23, 1910.

that "it is the almost universal testimony of colored men in those classes of business in which they must compete with white merchants, that as a rule, *the people of their own race shun them*."[279] This claim of Hilyer's, as exaggerated as it probably was, legitimized his call to action. If the greatest barrier to the success of the Black business owner was truly the Black customer, then the problem could be solved by changing the habits of the Black customer. Hilyer was optimistic these "conditions" would improve. But Chase asked in 1910, "Why will the citizens of this city continue to be 'Jim Crowed'? Why do these continue to support these 'Jim Crow' five cent theatres on Seventh street that makes them go in and out different doors. When they have their own up-to-date theaters? So it is with their own drug stores. There are enough colored people in this city to support them all."[280] By this time, there were better options on and around U Street that people seemed to be refusing, when according to Chase they should be embracing them both for their own dignity and the financial success of the institutions.

Customers were not the only ones who could fall short of the ideal. Entrepreneurs had to hold up their end of the arrangement, too. The *Bee* or the *Forum* or the *Journal* could not honestly direct customers to an establishment that was in some way lacking. The incessant iteration of the word "first-class" by newspaper editors to describe existing or potential Black businesses shows the standard to which the press held entrepreneurs. It was high quality establishments they wanted to promote. Moore writes that Black businessmen "invoked racial solidarity to ensure the patronage of the black community" in cases where they could not compete with white businesses on other terms.[281] Invoking solidarity shifts some responsibility for success from owner to customer, and people like Chase certainly engaged in that tactic. But

[279] Hilyer, 3-4.
[280] "An Object Lesson," *Washington Bee* (Washington, D.C.), Jan. 15, 1910.
[281] Moore, 132.

Hilyer and others did not let owners go without criticism, either. Hilyer observed while compiling his 1901 *Directory* that "many colored persons in business are lacking in politeness, civility and the disposition to please their patrons... I have often been startled by the attitude of coldness, hostility and utter indifference, which many proprietors would show toward their customers."[282] This is harsh coming from an optimist who believed that business success was the most promising path for the Black people of Washington to better their lives, and once again reads like an exaggeration from an upper-class man with very high standards. But Hilyer wanted the deficiencies he perceived to be improved, and he clearly felt it necessary to report what he and his team of volunteers experienced, "a lack of evidence of the spirit of business enterprise, energy and 'push,' accompanied oftentimes by untidyness and sometimes uncleanliness." His complaints were part of his expression of hope for improvement.

Despite social tensions and periodic failures, Black businesses put available capital to use and produced remarkable growth along and around U Street. Chase attempted to estimate the investments made in the U Street neighborhood in 1908-1909. "Anent such a logical trend of circumstances colored people in the past two years, have either built, bought and contracted for, fully one hundred thousand dollars' worth of property for business purposes in the above vicinity," he wrote. After listing what this estimate included (four theaters, seven other businesses) and did not include (the new YMCA not yet completely built, True Reformers and other well-established businesses, "and many other business interests that space does not allow us to mention now") Chase estimated the total value of neighborhood investments at "nearly half a million dollars."[283] A student editorialist at the *Howard University Journal* wrote in 1910, "We wonder whether the colored people of Washington ever do realize the great advantages this city

[282] Hilyer, 104.
[283] "Business Center," *Washington Bee* (Washington, D.C.), April 23, 1910.

offers to them. It is here that Negro capital is at premium."[284] The Black capital in the capital city was what made Washington such a promising place for Black business, a situation that the writer thinks his audience may have taken for granted and not considered seriously enough

A commitment to supporting Black business did not correspond with a particular attitude toward integration. As the True Reformers built their world of business, they explicitly remained uninvolved with any anti-segregation activism. The goal of the Union League was to convince promote Black business among Black Washington, and the actions or inactions of white customers and white businesses were not within their concern. Chase, however, spent decades declaring the benefits of Black business in the Washington Bee, and he was never shy about directly antagonizing white people. He censured the white Y.M.C.A. and white religious leaders, criticized city and federal government officials, and challenged the National Amusement Company to the point of a lawsuit, which he won. August Meier writes that a belief in the value of Black business "was not necessarily held to the exclusion of agitation for civil rights and political activity."[285] Taking any type of integrationist position did not preclude leaders from advocating for Black business because developing the separate world of Black business could be seen as a temporary step, a solution which would drive further progress, rather than a final state of segregation. Business development was "usually regarded as being a tactic in the struggle for ultimate citizenship rights."[286]

Advocates for Black businesses employed different justifications for the same hope of Black business success. Hilyer professed a belief "that the line of racial resistance is least along this line," that is, business success would be the least difficult means by which to better the

[284] "Editorials," *Howard University Journal* (Washington, D.C.), Feb. 4, 1910.
[285] Meier, 55.
[286] Meier, 50.

community.[287] Chase's attitude was not that Black business was the best or least difficult path to progress, but that if a white business could not meet a certain standard of quality and fairness, his Black community should create it for themselves. To justify their stance, advocates for Black business could draw upon a variety of popular reasons, what Meier calls "a larger complex of ideas involving self-help, race pride, and group solidarity."[288] Adherence to one of these ideas did not require adherence to any of the others, and these supporters were not necessarily aligned on other aspects of how racial progress should be attained and what racial progress was even supposed to look like.

The News of the Street

Being on U Street was a social and interactive experience. Many different kinds of people existed alongside each other. Some had walked onto the street from the alleys on which their homes sat; some had no reason to walk down an alley, ever. Some came from houses, some from apartments, and some from dormitories. Some disembarked from the streetcar. Some were rich, some were poor, and most were neither rich nor poor. Everyone on foot would have been on the same level, dodging the same wagons and watching the same carriages or automobiles, hearing the same sounds of wheels and doors, smelling the same smells of horses and fuel. They would have had the everyday interactions that occur between people moving within the same space. People who otherwise would not have crossed paths literally crossed paths in the street. They would have been close enough to each other to hear conversations between people outside their social class or to engage in a conversation with someone outside their social class.

[287] Hilyer, 3.
[288] Meier, 50.

People walking down U Street and interpreting the sites around them were not doing so without input. How people understood U Street and its development was shaped by the Black press. Publications produced by the Black community advertised and advocated for U Street establishments. There were the directories of the Union League (1892, 1894, 1895, 1901), and following the 1902 dissolution of the Union League there was the monthly paper of the successor business organization, the Washington Negro Business League *Herald* (1909). There were also the newspapers published by Black editors for Black readers such as the *Washington Bee* (1884-1922), the *Colored American* (1899-1904), and the *National Forum* (1910). The *Howard University Journal* (1903-1917) was the main campus publication of the Howard student body at this time. Advertisements in these newspapers offer a survey of what types of businesses operated in this time period: drug stores, general stores, stationers, cleaners, painters, caterers, tailors, milliners, undertakers, even pool halls and clairvoyants, and, of course, theaters. This list suggests what community needs were, what one needed to purchase to be a professional or a social success, to raise a modern family or keep a modern home. It also suggests what community desires were, what purchases might be fun or entertaining or aspirational.

In addition to reporting what people were doing and thinking in the street, the press was shaping—or trying to shape—what people were doing and thinking in the street. As discussed above, the press was a driving force in the development of the separate Black economy. Editors profiled business owners, vouching for the quality of their work or their product. They called upon people to patronize certain establishments and boycott others, in tones more or less frustrated. Their endorsements and criticisms were informed by consumer behavior and in turn influenced consumer behavior, generating either interest in patronizing an appropriate business or shame for patronizing an inappropriate one. The press, alongside the society meeting and the

pulpit, was a key place where the social or even moral value of spending one's money at a Black-owned business was promoted.[289] When Chase declared that certain work should go to a Black architect, or a Black contractor, he probably was not introducing that idea to the public, but he was magnifying and circulating it. Newspapers were mouthpieces of their editors, but the editors were not coming up with ideas at a remove, they were having conversations with their communities.

Beyond the exchange of money, the press was also a driving force in the conceptualization of a cultural center. Advertisements were key. People knew what events were occurring in which venues because they read about them in the newspaper. Social columns that detailed who was seen where would have influenced where people might have wanted to go or the kind of activities in which they wanted to engage. Attending an event like a dancing class that the newspaper declared to be high-quality, or full of high-quality people, would be attractive to someone trying to be seen as a high-quality person. Participating in an event like a theatrical performance that was covered in the newspaper would make a person part of what was new and exciting in city life. Editors could declare which institutions were superior ("first-class") and modern ("up-to-date") and accordingly created narrative around the meanings of institutions.

Black newspapers, in addition to advertising Black businesses, and reporting and commentating on Black businesses, were Black businesses in themselves**.** A newspaper does business with two customers: its readers, and the advertisers who want to reach those readers. Gerald Baldasty describes how in the nineteenth century industrialization "made advertisers a major constituency of the American press" and "businesses thus came to rely on the American

[289] Fitzpatrick, 55-56. Hilyer, 3.

newspaper as a vital link to the consumer."[290] He emphasizes the need of the newspaper to be marketable to the dual audience of advertiser and reader.[291] Julia Guarneri describes how newspapers at the turn of the twentieth century created brands: "They sold a newspaper to readers; they also sold their readers' attention to advertisers."[292] Newspapers beholden to advertisers attempted to craft their audiences to appeal to advertisers, and one consequence of such crafting was the entrenchment of the racial exclusivity of the white press. Fred Carroll argues that newspapers made for an industrializing American society excluded Black Americans from the narrative of aspiration and prosperity in the new industrial age.[293] Excluded from the coverage of white-run newspapers, which were financially supported by advertisements for businesses that would not serve Black customers, the Black community of Washington produced and supported its own Black-run newspapers.

Black newspapers noticed the gravitational pull of U Street, and one fully responded to it. In August of 1910, the *National Forum* moved its offices from F Street (at 7th Street, Northwest) to U Street (at 11th Street). The stated reason was that "the center of the business interests of the Negroes of Washington is fast drifting this way," which is supported by evidence even from within this issue.[294] The *Forum* listed the locations, with addresses, where it could be purchased.[295] Eight of the fourteen locations were in the general U Street area. Of the remaining six, three were clustered further south, around H Street and 4th Street, within walking distance of

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[290] Gerald J. Baldasty, *The Commercialization of News in the Nineteenth Century* (Madison, Wis.: University of Wisconsin Press, 1992), 52.

[291] Baldasty, 113-116.

[292] Julia Guarneri, *Newsprint Metropolis: City Papers and the Making of Modern Americans* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 21.

[293] Fred Carroll, *Race News: Black Journalists and the Fight for Racial Justice in the Twentieth Century* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2017), 21-22.

[294] "To Our Many Friends and Subscribers," *National Forum* (Washington, D.C.), Aug. 20, 1910.

[295] "Where the Forum Can Be Bought," *National Forum* (Washington, D.C.), Aug. 20, 1910.

the publisher's old F Street offices. But the new U Street offices were immediately beside one of the advertised locations: Davis & Smith, sellers of "Cigars and Tobacco, Stationery and Periodicals, Confectionery and Toilet Articles" and the *Forum*.[296] The newspaper was relocating itself to where the majority of its business was taking place. The editors further explain that "desiring to be where we could best serve the public and most readily be gotten at by our people, was the only motive" for the move.

The *Forum* wanted to be accessible to its readership, which reveals something of the nature of early twentieth-century newsgathering. They needed to tap into conversations that were happening in a certain part of town in order to report effectively to the people having those conversations. The editors announced that "the latch string of 'The Forum' door is always on the outside. Come and sit down with us and tell us your joys and sorrows, and we will cull them, giving to the public the part you desire and locking the others safely in our sanctum sanctorum." They wanted to have personal connections and conversations, and face-to-face interviews, because that was how they would collect information that was useful and interesting to its readership. U Street was where a newspaper could make that happen.

The importance of the location change can be narrated in terms of theaters. When the *National Forum* moved into a space where Black businesses were establishing themselves, it moved away from a place where segregation reigned. The F Street offices were a block and a half from Casino Theatre, a venue owned by a Mr. Mayer, which admitted only whites. Earlier in 1910, when the theater had been open for a couple months, the *Bee* took this Mr. Mayer to task both for instituting the policy in the first place and for absolving himself of responsibility by using the language of a "cold-blooded" business decision. Mayer argued that his decision was

[296] Advertisements for Davis & Smith appear throughout the run of the *Forum* in 1910.

based purely on business, "as he regards the theatre as a social institution on the order of a restaurant or barber shop, and must operate his house with proper regard for the local race customs in vogue in the District of Columbia."[297] This was completely typical, and the *Forum* decided it was at a disadvantage being stuck in this kind of business environment.

The U Street offices were in the same building as the Maceo Theatre, a strong contender for Washington's first Black-owned and Black-operated performance venue, which had recently opened in 1909. The fare presented by the Casino and the Maceo was not markedly different—a combination of film and vaudeville—but the ownership, management, and policies were directly opposed to each other. The staff of the *Forum* found that being nearer to the latter would help them get the information about Black city life about which their readers wanted to know.

You Street

What about U Street in the first decade of the twentieth century inspired the creation of cultural institutions, and what gave this neighborhood the potential to become an enduring theater district? It was a combination of many factors such as homes, lots, transit, architecture, electricity, capital, and newspapers. And it was the people of U Street who created U Street: the people who lived there, the people who visited, the initiators and users of parallel financial systems, the believers in a better economic outlook for Black people, the advocates for spending money in socially beneficial ways, the editors who drew the attention of the public, the artists who designed beautiful buildings or gave interesting performances, the audiences who wanted to go out and add amusement and enjoyment to their lives. From the presence of cultural institutions we can extrapolate diverse crowds, late nights, spending on non-essentials, shared

[297] "The Jew and the Negro," *Washington Bee* (Washington, D.C.), March 5, 1910.

cultural conversations, and pure enjoyment: experiences of city life we may not be able to draw out from the presence of caterers, laundries, or banks.

The connective tissue between the buildings was not so much the street itself but the people who used the street. The U Street neighborhood was more than an aggregation of important building sites. It was the cohesion of those important sites and the connective tissue between them. To populate the early twentieth-century U Street neighborhood in our imaginations, we must think about the people not only inside the buildings but on the street itself. The cultural center was made just as much by the people moving around the sites of making art and participating in artistic practices as those sites themselves. Their visual and social experiences traversing U Street and the streets around, mediated by their interactions with the press, formed the identity of the neighborhood in their minds. It is U *Street* that became "Black Broadway," but the street itself was nothing without the people moving through it. U Street was where they went, when they went there, how they got there, what they said, what they thought.

Conclusion

U Street is still a busy residential and commercial neighborhood, still full of apartments, houses, and business, still hosting daytime and nighttime activities for the people who live there and the people who visit. What were streetcar lines are now bus lines and train lines, but they bring people from all over the city to U Street in just the same way. Pedestrians are confined to sidewalks now, spilling out into intersections at crosswalks, and the street belongs mostly to constantly-honking cars with no carriages, wagons, or horses in sight. But on foot and on bicycle, people still traverse U Street at all hours. True Reformers' Hall, the Twelfth Street Y.M.C.A., and the Howard Theatre are still standing and still in some kind of use, thanks to the public and private funds that made their restoration and maintenance possible and to the efforts of researchers who worked hard to earn recognition for the cultural significance of the buildings and the neighborhood itself.

When travel writers and guidebook authors try to explain U Street today, they invoke its liveliness and its legacy. The neighborhood's true cultural relevance is understood to be in the past, and the street gets stuck forever in the 1930s and 1940s, a black-and-white image of a Black cultural celebration whose ending is never really explained. For all its present busyness, the culture being created and enjoyed on U Street today is not fully continuous with the culture that was created and enjoyed on U Street prior to the 1960s. U Street is no longer a Black neighborhood, and the reasons for its decline and eventual gentrification are understandably much more complicated than, say, a restaurant guide can handle.

This project really began with the question of why the Howard Theatre opened in 1910. Taking for granted the "Black Broadway" narrative that U Street was at its most important and strong in its neighborhood identity post-1920, the year 1910 made little sense. But in this decade

of 1903-1912, there were powerful creative visions for the neighborhood. It was an earlier stage of art and entertainment than is conventionally recognized in histories of Black performing arts in Washington, D.C. and elsewhere in the United States. When the "Black Broadway" era began, much of the infrastructure was already in place. And it was in place because in the previous era there was enough space, money, desire, and imagination to spark that creation.

This was the Progressive Era of American history. It was a time when people in the United States were trying to figure out how to live well in an increasingly urbanized and industrialized society. Cities were changing the way people related to each other and structured their lives, and that social change could be inspiring and alarming. Washington, D.C. was a city of newcomers, a place to make new acquaintances and pursue new opportunities. On U Street there were competing visions for what it meant to be independent, to be reputable, to support an institution, to belong to an institution and have an institution belong to you, to have your dignity respected, to make a profit. True Reformers' Hall, the Twelfth Street Y.M.C.A., and the Howard Theatre were not products of a unified vision for the neighborhood's future. The first embodied full autonomy, the second experimented in fraught partnership, and the third veered between compromise and conflict. But all three made their contributions to the cultural significance of the U Street neighborhood.

The public conversations of this era resonate loudly today. We are still asking questions about the relationship of business and art and questions about the people who get credit and access. Who turns a profit on the making of art? Who turns a profit on the enjoyment of art? Who owns our entertainment landscape, our entertainment infrastructure? If there's a racial disparity between those who profit and those who create or those who enjoy, does it matter? Would such a racial disparity be possible to fix, and what would we need to do to fix it? Do

communities have places to meet and discuss issues that are important to them? Do communities have places to gather and enjoy themselves? If not, why not? What forces are preventing that?

These are not easy questions. Profit and ownership can be very difficult to determine when faceless companies control vast sections of real estate. Entertainment and leisure are more placeless than ever, but even without buildings to question, there are media and online environments about which the same kinds of inquiry can and should be made. And there are still plenty of buildings to question. The need for shared physical space should not be forgotten. A rising cost of rent and ownership makes it not only difficult to find housing but also difficult to participate in cultural activities. Just as people need places to dwell, they need places to dance, or if not dance, to join other people in some shared experience that makes them part of the same community or the same city.

At the turn of the twentieth century, there was potential on U Street: the True Reformers saw it in 1903, the Y.M.C.A. saw it in 1908, Mr. Childs of the Maceo saw it in 1909, the writers of the *Howard University Journal* saw it in 1909 and 1910, J. Arthur Davis and the editors of the *National Forum* and Benedict and Rosenthal of the National Amusement Company saw it in 1910. Concluded W. Calvin Chase: "Let us have a fashionable and up-to-date business center and thoroughfare in this You street vicinity!"[298] It was time.

[298] "Business Center," *Washington Bee* (Washington, D.C.), April 23, 1910.

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