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# William Still, A Pioneer African American Social Worker

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*This article focuses upon William Still as an early modern day social worker who engaged in providing social work services to individuals/families, groups, and the community. The contributions of other African American pioneers are noted to demonstrate the legacy of service in the African American community. Still's life long dedication to social welfare and social work are highlighted. Covered is more than half a century of service to African Americans by this devoted man. African American contributions to social work is underscored through the life and time of William Still.*

## Introduction

African Americans in the Colonial Period engaged in service for themselves and others. Their consistent efforts were directed toward improvement and enhancement of the quality of life of Blacks in America. They developed avenues for the delivery of social work and social welfare services to the African American community. Many Black people who engaged in this type of endeavor have not been recognized as early social workers. Their contributions are often viewed from a descriptive historical point of view, rather than from a social welfare perspective (Aptheker, 1971 & 1972, Bennett 1988; Bennett 1975; Blassingame, 1972; Du Bois, 1969; Fishel and Quarles, 1967; Franklin and Moss, 1988; Herskovits, 1941; Quarles, 1968; Toppin, 1969; Woodson, 1922). Until recently, little had been written on African American contributions to social welfare. Hence, this social welfare, has been omitted from the wealth of material on the early social workers.

The history of services provided by African Americans to individuals, groups, and communities can be documented since

the Colonial Period. The paucity of acknowledgment has never deterred the propensity of Blacks to toil unceasingly toward community and self-help; the necessity was there and the need was met. Slavery was instituted by statute in Massachusetts in 1641. The initial informal/formal self help was by eleven Blacks in 1644 in New Netherlands, now New York, who were held beyond their time as indentured servants. They won their freedom, and parcels of land (Bennett, 1975, p. 28).

### Early Self Help By African Americans

Denied access to the goods and services of America caused Blacks to develop their own methods and systems of care. Survival forced Blacks, free and enslaved, to engage in efforts of self-help. There were legal petitioners like Paul Cuffe who sought the vote as a citizen in Massachusetts in 1780, citing taxation without representation was tyranny, and won the case in 1783 (Aptheker, 1971). Cuffe later paid passage for 38 African Americans to settle in Sierra Leone.

Welfare development in America, was based upon the Elizabethan Poor Laws of England, and not designed for the inclusion of Blacks, but rather their exclusion. Similarly, the Constitution of the United States of America in 1787 recognized chattel slavery, counted slaves as three-fifths of a person for taxation and representation, and prevented for 20 years congressional interference with the slave trade (McKissick, 1969, Toppin, 1969, p. 16).

This official relegating of African Americans to second class citizenship was reflected in their exclusion from welfare services. Denial led Blacks to create alternative ways of meeting their related social, civil, and liberation concerns. They incorporated the ways and means of the enemy into their lives, and avoided detection of their freedom intentions.

African Americans, regardless of their status, were not full citizens. The slave had no rights under law, was forbidden the right to marry and rear a family, prohibited from the right to education, bred for profit, and treated as a subhuman. Free African Americans were restricted by law in their functioning, and could readily be kidnapped and sold as slaves. A communal

adjustment to life was initiated, with a concern for and taking care of one's own. A communal code of conduct based upon humanitarian principles transferred from Africa took root. Children were cared for by the respected older slaves who passed on knowledge of the slave system, and how to survive and/or escape (Jackson, et al. 1973, pp. 7-9).

Free Blacks were engaged, as their time, money and knowledge allowed, in the development of organizations, i.e. churches, lodges, schools, conventions, mutual aid societies, etc. The first formal organization was the Free African Society of Philadelphia, April 12, 1787 founded by Richard Allen and Absalom Jones. These organizational activities were directed toward improving the bio-psycho-social quality of life for African Americans. They encouraged their people to be thrifty, loyal, conscious of each other's needs, to become educated, and to live by the golden rule.

#### African American Welfare After the Civil War

The two part Emancipation Proclamation, and the end of the Civil War (1865) did not see a distinct change in the status of African Americans. Prejudice and discrimination continued, with the addition of negative social attitudes and laws directed toward Blacks. Between 1865-1866, states enacted Black Codes which emasculated Black freedom. These Codes nullified the thirteenth, fourteenth and fifteenth amendments to the Constitution of the United States which abolished slavery, called for due process under the law, and the Black man's right to vote, respectively. These amendments were not enforced as were the Black Codes, which had behind them the reign of terror of the Ku Klux Klan, organized in 1865. Additionally, in 1883, the Supreme Court declared the Civil Rights Bill of 1875 unconstitutional. The tone of race relations for more than half a century was set in 1896; Jim Crow was established officially by the Supreme Court ruling in *Plessy v. Ferguson*, which dealt with state's rights and separate but equal treatment for Blacks (Woodward, 1969, Rabinowitz, 1974).

The first official recognition by the federal government of the plight of Blacks was demonstrated by the establishment of The

Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, known as the Freedmen's Bureau, established by Congress, March 3, 1865 and folded in 1872 due to lack of funding (Lindsey, 1952). The Freedmen's Bureau was headed by General O. O. Howard, and administered from the War Department. This was the initial Department of Health, Education, and Welfare or what is now known as the Department of Health and Human Services. The Bureau established hospitals, schools, and fed hungry Blacks and Whites as well as protected four million freed Blacks from the hostility of Whites (Bennett, 1988).

#### William Still—October 7, 1821 to July 14, 1902

The predecessors of modern day social work have usually been identified by social welfare historians as Caucasian with scant attention to African Americans as service recipients or providers. This has been further explicated in text books used in social work education. Rarely have 17th and 18th century African Americans been depicted as providers and organizers of social work and social welfare services (Johnson, 1991). A few have begun to assess this gap, and attempt to be more inclusive and/or explore African American contributions with focus mostly after the Civil War. African American social workers who have led the way in chronicling ante-bellum African American social work and social welfare services have been Class, et al. (1974), Cromwell (1976), Jackson, et al (1973), Johnson (1975 & 1977), and Ross (1978). Some others have recently begun to identify African Americans and their social welfare service in the latter part of the 19th and into the 20th century.

Pioneers in social work and social welfare have been Blacks and non-Blacks, the terms were not in use during their life times. However, because they provided services in the field of social welfare, they can be considered the predecessors of social workers. African American pioneers worked with and for their people; all contributed to a better way of life for Blacks. Jackson et al. (1973) cited such persons as Richard Allen, Absalom Jones, David Walker, Sojourner Truth, Harriet Tubman, and Frederick Douglass as having provided social services to Blacks. They also listed a number of persons whom they considered to be

pioneers and stated the primary endeavors of each. These persons include James Forten, Gabriel Pronner, Denmark Vessey, William Shipper, David Ruggles, Charles L. Redmon, Martin Delaney, Frances Watkins, and William Wells Brown. This list provides a different and needed perspective on the contributions of African Americans to the field of social welfare; they were the forerunners of African American social workers. One person not included in the list is William Still, who has all of the qualifications for inclusion, and was a contemporary of many of those listed.

Still is known for his book on the *Underground Railroad*, which provides first hand accounts given by fugitive slaves, which are often cited by historians. Still's work in social welfare is not well known though it covered over a half-century from 1847 to 1900. He was a man of many interests and talents, in addition to being concerned with the delivery of social welfare services. Still devoted his life to improving the conditions of the Black community as well as the wider society (Kahn, 1972 and Norwood, 1931). He can be described as "a social worker's social worker", skilled in casework, group work, and community organization. Though periled by danger as a worker in the Underground Railroad, Still did not waiver in serving his people. Perhaps, it was memory of his slave parentage, and their first hand accounts that inspired his dedication. "No black man could be free, in his estimation, if all were not" (Kahn, 1972, p. 9).

Still was born on October 7, 1821, on a farm in New Jersey, a free Black of ex-slave parents whose first four children were born in slavery. In their quest for freedom, the parents, Levin and Sidney (Charity) Still were forced to leave two sons in slavery, but brought out two daughters. Knowing that he had two slave brothers was a burning issue for Still. He and his free born siblings worked on the farm while they educated themselves and took advantage of any opportunity available. For example, the family subscribed to an anti-slavery newspaper, *The Colored American* which was edited by African Americans, and a brother, James Still, became a doctor (James Still, 1970).

At the age of 26, in 1847, Still began his contribution as a social worker in Philadelphia. He was employed by the Anti-

Slavery Society as a clerk and handy-man. On his own initiative, he began to record information about the fugitive slaves who passed through the office on their way to freedom. His first case record was that of William and Ellen Craft, widely referred to in the literature, and cited in Still's book, *The Underground Railroad* (Still, 1970). His eagerness, interest, and intelligence led to increased job duties to aid runaway slaves. Philadelphia was a main passage route for fugitive slaves and slave-catchers, and avoiding the slave-catchers was important for the fugitives' freedom.

Still's record keeping on fugitive slaves who passed his way, was his effort to assist relatives to contact them. Thus, Still was engaged in case finding, problem-solving, and social action. Still's attention to details of the many fugitives who came seeking help became known, and ensured that people in need could be brought to him. On August 1, 1850, a man in need of help was brought to Still. This man in the routine exploratory interview was identified as Peter, one of Still's brothers who had been left in slavery. Peter had purchased his own freedom for \$500, but his wife and three children were still in slavery. Peter's parallel story to his parents' escape received attention and rescue efforts to assist his family to freedom (Packard, 1856).

Still moved from clerk to administrator of the Anti-Slavery office. He became secretary of the Anti-Slavery Society, and in 1852 became chairman of the special Vigilance Committee, a group of four persons charged to see to the needs of the fugitives, raise funds, and keep records of expenditures.

Fund raising and community organizing as well as administration became an official part of Still's duties in the Anti-Slavery office. Indirectly, sanction was given to his record keeping of the fugitive slaves. Still did these duties, and continued to maintain case records of "clients" who passed through his office on their way to freedom. Other duties included acting as a nineteenth century Traveler's Aid Society for runaway slaves who passed through Philadelphia. Frequently, Still provided food and shelter in his own home when these were not available elsewhere in the community.

By reading the ads on runaways, Still was able to keep abreast of developments with his potential clients. This was

a method of case finding, which facilitated the policies of the Acting committee. Correspondence, in addition to case records, were kept on slaves with whom Still had contact. He received coded letters from others referring to fugitives. Moreover, slaves wrote to him about their new life of freedom and sought information about loved ones who were to follow them. The accounts of these narratives read very much like the present day intake exploratory interviews (Still, 1970).

Still's work brought him in contact with many others of that period who were concerned with slavery. Harriet Tubman (code name "Moses") brought slaves to Still. Several other of the pioneer social workers such as Watkins, Douglass, William Wells Brown, and other Black and non-Black abolitionists of the day were friends or acquaintances.

Still's work eventually caused him to be arrested for assisting in the escape of three slaves (mother and children) in 1855. The case received widespread attention, and Still's account of the incident was published in the *New York Tribune* on July 30, 1855. Still was acquitted for lack of evidence in the case; the slave, Jane Johnson, testified for him.

Still concerned himself with follow up of his "clients" because he was interested in how they were progressing, and in quieting the doubts raised by his fellow workers. Visits were made to settlements in Canada and other Northern cities of the United States, speaking to the landlords and employers of the migrants, to verify his observations of the fugitives.

The fugitive slaves were found worthy or "eligible" for the help which they received. Through case management in securing needed resources for "client use", and follow up after termination, Still was able to measure the success of his work with "clients". As the number of fugitives coming to the office increased, Still had to curtail his record keeping, but managed to record needed information which could be passed on to friends or relatives making inquiries at a later date. From December 1852, when Still began to chair the Acting Committee, until February 1857, more than eight hundred people, of which sixty were children, passed through his office (Kahn, 1972, p. 171).

Services initiated by Still include case finding, fund raising, social action, community organization, case management, and



follow up. Moreover, he engaged in policy making and program development to meet perceived needs. They were in his care for only a brief time, but Still instituted a training program for the fugitives. He instructed them in cleanliness and life styles to which they were unaccustomed.

Still was interested in the community in which he lived. He focused on the City of Brotherly Love, Philadelphia's discrimination against Blacks. On the city railroad cars Blacks were forced to ride outside with the conductors though they paid full fare. This practice was first assailed by Still in 1859. His eloquent letter denouncing this unsavory condition was published in the *North American and United States Gazette* and entitled, "Colored People and the Cars".

John Brown's attack on Harper's Ferry, October 16, 1859, and subsequent arrest put Still in jeopardy. Frederick Douglass, Still, and other abolitionists had met secretly six months prior to the ill-fated raid. Douglass went to Canada from Rochester when Brown was arrested, but Still remained in Philadelphia. His records were hid in the Lebanon Cemetery.

No connection was made between Brown and Still even though Mrs. Brown and her daughter, Annie, accepted the offer to stay in Still's home while awaiting Brown's execution. Still continued his work; he conducted a clothing drive and organized a boycott of slave-produced products. With the advent of the Civil War, and the expectation that the slaves would be immediately freed, Still focused more on African American conditions in Philadelphia. He continued his attack on the railroad cars of the city through petitions, and helped to organize the Social Civil and Statistical Association to dispel the belief of racial inferiority of Blacks (Norwood, p. 67). A lecture series was conducted by the Association with many of the abolitionists, but was only partly successful due to bad weather and other circumstances. The financial loss of this project was assumed by Still.

Still continued his fight against discrimination on the railroad cars. On December 15, 1863 he wrote a letter to the Philadelphia Press deploring the state of affairs and made reference to Judge Taney's Dred Scott decision. This letter was reprinted in the *London Times*. To care for his family, Still had begun

a business in coal. Nevertheless at the end of the Civil War, he took time off to take a job in a Black Camp as Post Sutler which involved supplying food to the commissary. Still maintained concern about the railroad cars and formed a coalition with others. He wrote to political candidates and those who responded positively received the coalition's vote and were elected with a large majority. These efforts resulted in an anti-discrimination bill passed by the Pennsylvania House of Representatives, March 18, 1867, which brought Still to political and social activism.

Still's success was affected by the criticism of fellow Blacks who became envious of his political and financial success. They feared his power, and attempted to boycott purchase of his coal. Still wrote a pamphlet in response, *A Brief Narrative of the Struggle for the Rights of the Colored People of Philadelphia in the City Railway Cars and a Defense of William Still, Relating to His Agency Touching the Passage of the Late Bill.*

Still continued to devote time, energy and money to the cause of African Americans. He was undaunted by criticism against him. In cooperation with the Anti-Slavery Society, he undertook several welfare projects and continued his work against discrimination. Through his efforts, the Home for the Aged and Infirm Colored Persons was given money; news was disseminated about the 15th Amendment; and voter education and registration were conducted.

In May, 1871, the Anti-Slavery Society of Pennsylvania unanimously passed a resolution recognizing Still's service to the Society, fugitive slaves, and record keeping. He was requested to publish his experiences about the Underground Rail Road (Kahn, 1972, p. 213). Still wrote his experiences with the help of his oldest daughter Dr. Caroline Still, a physician. The first edition of the *Underground Rail Road* sold 10,000 copies, and subsequent editions were published.

Still devoted the last twenty years of his life to the conditions facing Blacks. He headed the Constitutional amendments committee for Pennsylvania on anti-discrimination clauses relating to public facilities. He served on the Boards of civic and philanthropic organizations; the Home for Destitute Colored Children; The Shelter (home for children); Storer College in Harper's

Ferry, West Virginia; and the Pennsylvania Board of Trade. With his own money, he backed the publication of William Lloyd Garrison's newspaper, *The Nation*, and explored the possibility of the establishment of a Black bank. He took an active interest in encouraging Black authors in their work. Politically, Still argued that Blacks should support candidates who would be responsive to their needs, and not automatically vote Republican as was the trend at that time. This again brought him in conflict with existing attitudes of African Americans. His foresight was rewarded when the candidate backed by him and his coalition, acceded to the demand that Blacks be permitted to join the police force. Still encouraged Blacks to exercise independence rather than gratitude to any one political party. He lauded self-reliance, hard work, honesty, and communal elevation of the race (Kahn, 1972, pp. 221-222).

With Still's help, a democratic mayor of Philadelphia was elected, and he appointed three Black men to the police force. Still was instrumental in securing Liberty Hall to hold a reception for the three Black policemen. He assumed the financial responsibility for Liberty Hall when others were unable to follow through with their commitments.

Still was very active in seeing that the 30,000 Blacks of Philadelphia were represented at the 1876 Centennial exhibition. His book, *The Underground Rail Road* was displayed. As a member of the Central Presbyterian Church, he helped to start the Gloucester Presbyterian Mission which thrived and grew independent. He also helped to form a YMCA for Blacks. To help Blacks purchase homes at low rates, he supported the establishment of the Berean Building and Loan Association.

On July 14, 1902, Still died at his home. His death was reported in the *New York Times* as the Father of the Underground Railroad. He left an estate valued between \$750,000 and \$1,000,000, and a human legacy of social work and social welfare services of major importance.

### Summary

This has been a brief account of African Americans who were pioneer forerunners of social workers. Focus was on

William Still who can be called the first African American social worker who used modern techniques of service delivery. His more than half century of service spanned the careers of others who cannot be denied their place as early social workers. The need for African Americans to seek means of coping within a racist society by providing service to and for their own, was a challenge eagerly met by many, as was exemplified in the career of William Still. He and others made a commitment to improve the quality life for their people, and translated their beliefs into hard work. The exclusion of Blacks from social services in the wider society spurred Still and others to provide those services which were needed. They were dedicated to "doing the right thing". It is deplorable that these pioneers have been overlooked in their contributions to social work; especially since some, like Still, managed to establish a Department of Health and Human Services of their own. The pioneers directed their energies toward providing service in areas where acute need existed.

The contributions of Still and others of the pioneer era are the foundations of African American social welfare and of African American social workers. Still was engaged in thirty-four social work or social welfare service activities during his life. The pioneers recognized the need for active involvement and participation, individually and collectively. As an oppressed people, their agendas were broadly based as they were aware of the interface of civil, legal, and social rights. They sought liberation and justice to positively impact their bio-psycho-social needs.

#### THE SOCIAL WORK AND SOCIAL WELFARE ACTIVITIES OF WILLIAM STILL, 1847-1900

1. A caseworker, group worker, and community organizer in the Anti-Slavery Society office of Philadelphia. As an administrator did policy and program development.
2. Developed a 19th century Traveler's Aid Society and other community resources to aid the fugitive slaves in their flight to freedom.
3. Follow up field visits (to migration sites) after service to assess eligibility (worthiness) and use the fugitive slaves had made of service rendered.

4. Maintained case records on fugitives passing through which could be used by their relatives in locating them.
5. Provided the only account of the Underground Railroad from the participant viewpoint.
6. Provided information on the 15th amendment of the Constitution along with voter education and registration.
7. Initiated case finding, problem-solving, and social action activities within the Anti-Slavery Society Office.
8. Secretary and Chaired the Vigilance Committee of the Anti-Slavery Society whose responsibility was to provide service to fugitive slaves; served as a case manager.
9. Funds raised on behalf of fugitive slaves as well as to improve the life conditions of African Americans in Philadelphia and elsewhere.
10. Advocated against discrimination in the Philadelphia railroad cars.
11. Advocated against discrimination in public accommodations in Pennsylvania.
12. Supported reform and repeal of discriminatory laws.
13. Utilized the Anti-Slavery Society Office as a Community Fund Agency.
14. Wrote a book, letters to newspapers, and a pamphlet relating to African American concerns.
15. Helped to organize a boycott of slave produced products.
16. Organized a clothing drive for African Americans.
17. Chaired the Social, Civil, and Statistical Association which was founded to combat racial prejudice.
18. Became a Post Sutler to supply food to the commissary in an African American camp.
19. Formed coalitions to fight discrimination and elect political candidates.
20. Sought better education for African Americans.
21. Served on the Boards of The Home for Destitute Children, The Shelter (home for children), Pennsylvania Board of Trade, Storer College at Harpers Ferry, West VA.

22. Instrumental in hiring the first African American policemen in Philadelphia.
23. Participated in the 1876 Centennial Exhibition by putting his book on display representing African American progress.
24. Secured a building, Liberty Hall where African Americans could hold meetings.
25. Started the Gloucester Presbyterian Mission, a mutual aid society.
26. Established a YMCA.
27. Formed the Berean Building and Loan Association to help African Americans purchase homes at a low rate.
28. Provided his home as a meeting place for the Anti-Slavery Society free of charge.
29. Advocated that African Americans should support political candidates who were responsive to their needs.
30. Contributed funds to care for African American soldiers, the testimonial for William Lloyd Garrison, the Mercantile Library Company of Philadelphia, and *Nation*, a newspaper associated with Garrison.
31. Supported aspiring African Americans in their literary efforts.
32. Helped to organize the Berean Presbyterian Church and School.
33. Organized the Colored Soldiers and Sailors Orphan Home.
34. Established a small Department of Health and Human Services in the City of Philadelphia, and utilized these resources around the country as time and money allowed.

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