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# Social Work Services and Social Work Training for African Americans in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania 1900–1930

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*The longstanding presence of African Americans in Philadelphia explains the establishment of social welfare institutions and agencies by more affluent African Americans in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The Armstrong Association of Philadelphia and Women's Christian Alliance are two of the more prominent and enduring efforts initiated by African Americans to serve their own. Both also provided a vehicle for training for African Americans who desired to join the new profession of social work.*

Near the turn of the century, Philadelphia boasted the oldest and largest African American population of any northern city, according to E. Digby Baltzell in his introduction to W.E.B. DuBois's *The Philadelphia Negro* (DuBois, 1967). Africans had been brought, by the Swedes and the Dutch in 1634, as slaves, to the area surrounding what would become Philadelphia, prior to William Penn's establishment of the English colony of Pennsylvania in 1682 (DuBois, 1967; Blockson, 1975; Green, 1975; Higginbotham, 1978).

Although slavery was not part of the legal code established in the colony, the practice of slaveholding became an integral part of the social and economic fabric, according to Leon Higginbotham (1978). During slavery and the time of gradual emancipation, many of the freemen (those who had never been in bondage) and freedmen (those who had previously been enslaved) made great progress and established themselves as contributing citizens. The names of Absalom Jones, Richard Allen and James Forten stand out as advocates for the betterment of the conditions for African Americans in the Philadelphia area (DuBois, 1967; Blockson, 1975; Green, 1975).

Such a long history of African American presence in Philadelphia explains the existence of social welfare services among

them as early as the 1850s. The earliest efforts were initiated by Euroamericans who were interested in the social betterment of African Americans (*History of a Street*, 1901; Hillman, 1960). Later, in the 1860s, as was the case with most other groups, African Americans of means set about providing needed services for their own. Social settlements, medical facilities, schools and child welfare agencies were established for and by African Americans. (*The Philadelphia Colored Directory*, 1910; DuBois, 1967; Billingsley and Giovannoni, 1972) The different service organizations and institutions allowed for the training of some African Americans in the field of social work.

The particular time period, 1900-1930, was chosen because it includes two very significant developments which are also connected. Between 1900 and 1930 America experienced the most massive and continuous movement ever of people within its boundaries, the Great Migration. The period also marks the inception of professional social welfare services during the Progressive Era. Those two historical facts had serious implications for services to African Americans in the Philadelphia area at the turn of the century.

This article explores the establishment and work of two social service organizations in Philadelphia at the turn of the century. Both efforts, the Armstrong Association of Philadelphia and Women's Christian Alliance, were initiated by African Americans in part or in whole. Both had a social welfare orientation and were started in direct response to problems generated by the sudden influx of African Americans from the South into the urban North. The inception and work of the two organizations will be described, with some emphasis on the opportunities for training in social work through both.

#### *Philanthropic Organization*

The organization of prominence in Philadelphia during the Progressive Era which kept the needs of African Americans to the fore was the Armstrong Association of Philadelphia. It was an interracial effort that was initiated in 1907 (Emlen, 1945) by members of the Armstrong Association and prominent African Americans. According to Richard R. Wright, Jr.(1965), an African American who was pursuing his doctorate at the University

of Pennsylvania, he met with John T. Emlen who had been described as a "young colored man from Hampton Institute" by Wright's advisor at the University of Pennsylvania. In his autobiography, Wright describes his surprise when he discovered that Mr. Emlen was a wealthy white Quaker who was dark in complexion. Emlen was an architect and a banker who had taught at Hampton Institute and was committed to the cause of training African American tradesmen. As they talked about Wright's dissertation, Emlen was interested in the preliminary findings that many skilled African American tradesmen among the southern migrants had been unable to secure jobs in their fields. In fact, most had been forced because of discrimination to take domestic service jobs.

Emlen informed Wright of the existence of a philanthropic effort, the Armstrong Association, which was named for Samuel C. Armstrong. Wright described the Armstrong Association as "organized in memory of General S.T. (sic) Armstrong, founder of Hampton Institute, for the purpose of raising funds for Hampton and Tuskegee Institutes, a loose association of white Philadelphia philanthropists" (Wright, 1965, p. 158). Wright appealed to Emlen to ask his association to expand their interests to include improving conditions for skilled laborers among African Americans in Philadelphia. The members accepted the challenge and began a separate arm of the organization to include African American members. Although the official name of the organization was the Armstrong Association of Philadelphia, it was regularly referred to as the Armstrong Association. Both names will be used in this article.

In his autobiography, Wright describes the start up of the organization. Positions were mandated along racial lines to insure African American leadership. The president was a prominent Euroamerican minister, Rev. Carl E. Grammer. There were four vice presidents, two African Americans and two Euroamericans, Rev. W. A. Creditt, Rev. Charles A. Tindley, Dr. Talcott Williams and W. W. Frazier, respectively. The other officers were Emlen, Secretary, Frazier, Treasurer, and Wright, Field Secretary. Many more people were involved in the launching of the organization, including two women (Armstrong Association, 1957).

Although Wright is credited, in the fiftieth anniversary historical account (1957), with establishing the organization's approach to expanding economic opportunity for African Americans, there are not records available from that early time to verify Wright's position and work. In correspondence with the Philadelphia Urban League, Dr. Wright was informed that there was no correspondence, reports or other documentation of his contributions to the Armstrong Association (Wright, 1959; Carter, 1959). According to Emlen, he was the Executive Secretary for the first fourteen years of the life of the organization and gave no credit to Wright (*Emlen Papers, Vol. I, p.6*). Emlen stated in a letter, "I was in charge of the work, and afterwards, President of the Board of Managers for many years. At the present time the Executive Secretary and the President of the Board are both Negroes, which I think is the best plan" (1945).

Wright states that the founding group determined that the offices of Field or Executive Secretary and industrial Secretary would be filled by African Americans. The Executive Secretary was the official representative of the organization and worked with the board to develop and monitor relevant programs. The Industrial Secretary's role was to establish work placements for African American skilled laborers (1965).

The stated purpose of the Armstrong Association of Philadelphia appears on the cover of the Sixth Annual Report of the organization. The organization was "working in a practical way for the Colored people of Philadelphia, and endeavoring from year to year to supplement some of the community needs which (were) not being met by other organizations" (1914). In the annual report for 1915, work of the Association is further described as helping "the colored people to self help in meeting the community needs in this their newly found problem of city life" (p. 1). Then, in the history section of an undated brochure, the role of the original organization was defined as "developing greater opportunities for the satisfactory advancement of colored people along the economic and social lines" (Armstrong Association, undated 1). So the objectives of the Association were broad enough and yet specific enough to allow

it to serve many purposes. During its first eight years of existence it provided services which ranged from athletic leagues to neighborhood gardening in New Jersey and Swarthmore and Media, Pennsylvania to investment counseling.

With Richard R. Wright as the first Field Secretary, the group appointed Alex L. Manly as the first Industrial Secretary. Together they were able to gain jobs for the migrants in areas that had not been open to African Americans previously (Wright, 1965). Manly also devised an effective strategy for replacing African Americans with their own kind instead of letting positions revert to white workers (Armstrong Association, 1914).

In the souvenir booklet for the fiftieth anniversary of the Association (1957), a summary of the 1911 Third Annual report is included. Through the Armstrong Association job opportunities for African Americans were expanded. The Association evaluated the quality of the work done by the laborers whom they placed, in order to inform the broader community about their abilities and dependability (Armstrong Association, 1914).

Although the Association was primarily engaged in work to place migrating skilled laborers, it also identified professionally with the developing field of social work. It served as a training ground for sociology students from Lincoln University, a historically black university in Pennsylvania. Students from the University of Pennsylvania School for Social and Health Work used the Association as a practicum setting. Students from Temple University who were interested in the work of the Association were also trained there. Later, the Association served as a worksite for the volunteers with the Works Progress Administration and the National Youth Administration (Armstrong Association, undated 2). The Armstrong Association of Philadelphia provided scholarships over a period of five years to eleven Lincoln University graduates to attend the University of Pennsylvania School of Social and Health Work (Armstrong Association, undated and untitled). Finally, the 1914 Annual report cites the placement of three social workers in jobs.

Another important and innovative service provided by the Armstrong Association of Philadelphia was the placement of a home and school visitor at the Durham School which had a

totally African American student body. Miss Abigail L. Richardson, according to the account in the fiftieth anniversary souvenir booklet (*Emlen Papers, Vol.I*), made the job a profession. Beginning in 1912 she worked at the Durham School and by 1915 was visiting the Reynolds, Logan and Stanton Schools. She would follow up on truants and children with discipline problems. She would visit homes to determine the whereabouts of the children and their living conditions. Since the children were excluded from neighborhood recreation centers because of racial discrimination, Miss Richardson conducted a recreation center from the Durham School. She also supervised showers for the children at the school. Miss Richardson sponsored the Second Annual Working Women's Conference where the Girls' High School principal discussed occupations for women (Armstrong Association, 1914).

As an outreach effort to parents, Miss Richardson established a Social Club for Women where sewing and needlework were done. She organized a Little Mother's League at the Durham School which was designed to teach the little girls proper behavior. Her primary effort was to keep children in school and to have home support for proper behavior and good scholarship.

Starting in 1914, the Association advised agencies and institutions on a case-by-case basis about the appropriate handling of African Americans through the newly formed Bureau of Information. The Bureau conducted investigations and fed its findings to organizations which requested or which demonstrated the need for such information. Studies were conducted to determine the relationship of African Americans with trade unions. Another study documented the conditions of African Americans in the Philadelphia suburbs and in New Jersey. Still another study reported the number of children in Philadelphia who were poor and neglected but who were not part of the social welfare services network and who were in need of vocational education.

Yet another area in which the Association ventured was housing. In 1914 it joined with other groups to start the Remedial Loan Company. The loans were designed to assist poor people in purchasing homes.

The Armstrong Association of Philadelphia affiliated with the National League on Urban Conditions Among Negroes in 1914. Along with the Association for the Protection of Colored Women, another racially integrated effort, it formed the Philadelphia wing of the national organization.

After fifty years of existence, the overarching theme of the Armstrong Association of Philadelphia continued to be "whenever possible to prevent duplication of work and the creation of new social agencies by having existing agencies take care of the problems arising from the increase in the Negro population. Where this is impossible, the Armstrong Association demonstrates the value of the work needed by actually carrying it on until an agency equipped for the purpose takes over, or a new agency is created" (Armstrong Association, 1957).

The Armstrong Association operated on limited funds provided by Emlen and his associates until 1921 when it received an allocation from the newly formed Welfare Federation of Philadelphia. In 1923 the Armstrong Association named a new Executive Director, Forrester B. Washington. Washington was an African American who was a graduate of Tufts College. He had also been a National Urban League fellow at the Columbia University-affiliated New York School of Philanthropy from which he was graduated in 1916. Washington had been director of the Detroit Urban League where he had developed programs to address the settlement issue of African American migrants. The League engaged in job finding, locating of housing, work habit training, crime prevention through collaboration with the police and the provision of recreational activities for the migrants (Burwell and Carlton-LaNey, 1985).

When Forrester Washington arrived in Philadelphia, he changed some of the activities of the Association. He negotiated with the Philadelphia Public School Board to have that system adopt the home and school function. Targets of activities became the settling of the African American migrants and the ever increasing delinquency rate. Through the Community Organization Secretary, Marcella Beckett, neighborhood clubs were reinstated to ease the tension between the old established residents and the newcomers (Emlen, 1945). Such clubs had been included in the work of the Association as reported in the



1913 Annual Report, but it had not been continuous (Armstrong Association, 1957).

According to an excerpt from the 17th Annual Report of 1925, the Association opened community houses, similar to the social settlements, since none had been established with African Americans as the heads in Philadelphia. The houses served as demonstration projects since the Association did not have funds or staff to run them. Volunteers were used to show the city how effective such services could be, trusting that the city would develop such programs (Armstrong Association, 1957). In fact, in 1931, the first African American settlement house with an African American director, Wharton Centre, was finally opened in North Philadelphia. A graduate of Howard University, Claudia Grant, was the appointed director (Hillman, 1960; Grant, Personal Interview, 1988).

Washington brought with him a commitment to professional education and training. He was active in the professional social work arena, making presentations at conferences and meetings. In 1924 at the 3rd All-Philadelphia Conference on Social Work, he presented "What Professional Training Means to the Social Worker." He discussed the need for training so services would be systematic and scientific.

Important to note is the fact that after four years of leading the Armstrong Association of Philadelphia, Forrester Washington became the second director of the School of Social Work at Atlanta University, succeeding E. Franklin Frazier (Platt and Chandler, 1988). The school which was started in 1920 was steered quite successfully by Washington until 1954 (Yabura, 1970).

The Armstrong Association continued to make a significant contribution to the life of Philadelphia under the able leadership of African Americans Wayne L. Hopkins for twenty-three years and Lewis Carter for fifteen years (Bunkley, 1949). The Armstrong Association of Philadelphia changed its name to the Philadelphia Urban League in 1956. (Armstrong Association, undated 3)

*Child Welfare Services*

Now standing as the oldest child welfare agency of its kind, started by African Americans specifically to serve African Americans, Women's Christian Alliance (WCA) has a rich history. Unfortunately preservation of documents has not been as consistent for WCA as is the case for the Armstrong Association of Philadelphia. Recent agency brochures, some archival materials and personal interviews were used to fashion what follows.

WCA grew out of an initial effort by women of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, meeting at Allen A.M.E. They wanted to provide a safe dwelling place for African American females who were entering the city of Philadelphia from the South. After WWI the influx of African American girls and women was so great that Dr. Melissa E. Thompson Coppin saw the need to "aid young Black women migrating from the South who were in dire need of wholesome living quarters . . . and to offer charity to Black families in need of temporary care" (WCA brochure, 1988). The group of A.M.E. women met in 1919 and before the end of the same year had opened a shelter for African American women.

Its founder, Dr. Melissa E. Thompson Coppin, was a graduate of Women's Medical College, now Medical College of Pennsylvania, and the tenth African American woman to earn a medical degree in America. She was the wife of Bishop Levi J. Coppin, one of the most prominent ministers in the Philadelphia area.

The shelter was opened in a house in South Philadelphia. According to the most recent agency brochure (1988), the property was ready for occupancy on December 26, 1919. Over a two-year period the shelter housed over 100 young women. Housing for homeless mothers and children was provided as well as daycare for the children of working mothers. Staff gave assistance to those who were seeking employment. Finally, the shelter provided care for convalescents.

After only two years of operation, a judge of the Juvenile Division of the Municipal Court appealed to Dr. Coppin to consider expanding the services of WCA. There was an

increasing need for placements for dependent and neglected African American children (WCA brochure, *Urban League Papers*, undated). The group agreed to enter the foster placement arena and placed the first four children, a family group, in May 1921. Within eighteen months WCA had provided foster home placement for 120 children. In early 1926, WCA was chartered by the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania as a child-placing agency. The group added a nursery and a small shelter for temporary care. Service was provided out of the same building for thirty-four years, when the volume of the agency's work necessitated a move to its present location in North Philadelphia (WCA brochure, 1988).

Dr. Coppin's sister, Dr. Syrene Elizabeth Thompson Benjamin, was involved in the early life of the agency, however, there is some disagreement about how long and in what capacity Dr. Benjamin served. Dr. Benjamin's presence in Philadelphia has been verified through a self-published family history account by Minnie Simons Williams (1990). According to Mrs. Ada B. Carter Harris, Dr. Benjamin was the first person to carry out the social work function at WCA (1988, 1989, 1990). In that capacity, one of her tasks was to represent the agency in court. Further evidence as to the nature of her involvement is needed.

By 1927 the sisters confronted a major disagreement about the direction of the agency, according to Harris. The result was a split, with Miss Benjamin forming her own agency, the Bureau for Colored Children (The Bureau). Williams sets the start up year for the Bureau as 1921 (1990). Just as WCA had done, The Bureau also placed African American children, solely. Miss Ada B. Carter became Dr. Benjamin's assistant and later, after her death, Executive Secretary and Director of the agency. The Bureau operated from 1927 to 1967.

Dr. Coppin hired Miss Sarah Sinclair Collins to direct the social work department. Collins became the official representative for the agency, appearing at gatherings and participating in conferences. She developed a staff of social workers who served hundreds of children and their families. Miss Collins became Executive Director of WCA in 1940 after the death of Dr. Coppin (WCA brochure, 1988).

Although Miss Collins did not have a social work degree, she was keenly aware of what was needed for good and effective casework. WCA became a virtual training ground for African American social workers. Miss Collins was known as a tough supervisor, according to former worker, Ms. Daisy Gordon. Ms. Gordon worked at WCA prior to earning her M.S.W. at University of Pennsylvania. Like many others she did not return to the agency because of the lack of competitive salaries; however, she credits Miss Collins with encouraging her to pursue professional education (Personal Interview, 1988). A contemporary of Miss Collins, Miss Claudia Grant of Wharton Centre fame, stated that Miss Collins paid portions of workers' expenses, sometimes using her personal funds, to insure their ability to enroll in school (Personal Interview, 1988).

WCA and the Bureau for Colored Children became the primary agencies to provide child welfare services for African American children. According to Billingsley and Giovannoni (1975), the Bureau became the largest child-placing agency for African American children in Philadelphia, followed by WCA. The Bureau is no longer in existence, but has left a legacy in terms of the names of African American social workers who staffed it (Coleman, 1988; Meek, 1988; Carter, undated). WCA continues to grow and is comprised of a dedicated professional staff of African American social workers.

### *Conclusion*

The existence of the Armstrong Association of Philadelphia, Women's Christian Alliance and the Bureau for Colored Children guaranteed services for African Americans by African Americans. They were a fertile ground at the turn of the century for producing participants in the new profession called social work. Older Philadelphians in the social work field attest to the impact had by all three organizations. The Armstrong Association of Philadelphia, started in 1907, stands forth as a major social welfare organization and a prototype of the National Urban League which began in 1911.

Much more information is needed about services and training at WCA and the Bureau for Colored Children. Many African American social workers began their careers at those settings,

but how and when must be determined. The nature of those services must be adequately documented. Effort must be made to establish the two agencies in their rightful place in social welfare history.

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