Old Folks' Homes for Blacks During the Progressive Era

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This paper discusses the development of old folks' homes for Blacks during the Progressive Era. Churches, women's clubs, and secret societies played a major role in the development, funding, and operation of these institutions. These groups adhered to the doctrine of self-help and group solidarity which provided impetus for their charitable activities. The members of these organizations believed that leaving "worthy" indigent Black aged to live out their last years in almshouses was cruel and intolerable. This paper highlights some of the efforts and many of the homes that were established for the Black aged through the cooperation and material support of Black churches, women's clubs, and secret societies.

The history of institutionalized care for the Black aged is a little researched area and deserves more attention than it has been given by social welfare historians. The literature is isolated and difficult to locate, yet private archival holdings of some of the currently existing homes and records of women's clubs, fraternal orders, secret societies and churches may reveal useful information to further illustrate their divergent efforts to house indigent Black aged populations. Nonetheless any effort to uncover this material and to highlight the Black social welfare movement clearly reveals that establishing old folks' homes for Blacks was a major charitable activity during the Progressive Era.

Although numerous charitable efforts, such as the establishment of old folks' homes, emerged during the Progressive Era, the dominant trend of that period was a conservative triumph

(Kolko, 1963). Conservative solutions to the emerging problems of an industrial society were applied under nearly all circumstances. Business and political leaders shared the same basic belief on what was the public good. Their primary goal was to preserve the basic social and economic relations essential to a capitalist society. In sum, the goals of business and the rest of the public became synonymous. Business leaders defined the limits of political intervention in Washington, and specified its major form and thrust. Business control over politics, rather than political regulations of the economy was the significant phenomenon of the Progressive Era (Kolko, 1963). The glaring paradox of progress and poverty became quite apparent between the years 1890–1920 in American society.

The Progressive Era marked the beginnings of the Black persons' retreat from the soil, and their northern/urban migration, a phenomenon that pushed tens of thousands of rural Blacks to the growing urban cities of the North. This period also saw new manifestations of discrimination and the expansion of racial segregation in employment, housing, and transportation (Carlton-LaNey, 1984). The lack of socioeconomic progress and increasing impoverishment that Blacks experienced were the impetus for a proliferation of new social welfare organizations, spawned by Black secret orders and fraternities, and other racial institutions led and supported by middle class Blacks (Williams, 1905). The social welfare activities of the Progressive Era included the development and maintenance of institutions to house the indigent Black aged.

This paper examines the development of these charitable institutions during the Progressive Era. In an attempt to fill some gaps in Black Social welfare history and to highlight the doctrine of self-help among Blacks, I discuss specific homes as well as the roles that the Black churches, women's clubs and secret societies played in their establishment and maintenance.

The infirmities of old age accounted for the impoverished conditions of some Black aged, but their destitution can be traced to slavery and the brutalities of racism. Black women and men

> . . . from no fault of their own, were forced to spend the best years of their lives in the service of others, deprived of the right to make

a home for themselves, or to provide for the coming of old age and infirmities (DuBois, 1909, p. 75).

Their families often took the aged person into their homes rather than leave them to the unpleasant and harsh life of the almshouses (Reiff, Dahlin, Smith, 1983). Many aged Blacks, however, could not enter their old age secure in the knowledge that they would be cared for by their children since their children had their own family responsibilities and sometimes lived great distances from the elderly parents.[1] With both limited available living space, and limited economic resources, in-home care was often not a realistic option for the aged and indigent Black (Smith, Dahlin, Friedberger, 1979). Amos Warner (1918, p. 57) said of poor Blacks, ". . . they have a dread of being assisted, especially when they think an institution will be recommended." Despite this reluctance, institutionalized care often became a necessary resort for aged and informed Blacks during the late 1800s and early 1900s. W. E. B. DuBois (1909) described the establishment of homes for old people as the most "characteristic Negro charity." This "charity" also illustrated the pervasiveness of the doctrines of self-help and encouraged the ideals of racial solidarity among Blacks. Both self-help and racial solidarity were, in part, defensive reactions to White exclusions and hostility (Meier, 1969).

The segregationist policies of most old folks' homes, like many other social welfare services, excluded Blacks and demanded that the latter develop and rely on their own social welfare resources. These policies existed for a number of reasons including: (a) racism, (b) ethnocentrism, and (c) a desire to separate the worthy from the unworthy indigent aged. Even within the same racial or ethnic group, discrimination was practiced based on the categorization of the poor aged as "worthy" or "unworthy." The practice of categorizing the poor can be traced back to the English Poor Laws of 1601. One was considered worthy or unworthy according to personal merit which was determined by one's present or previous employability. Eligibility for assistance without stigma was determined by one's worth; and worth was defined as "thrift combined with the absence of notorious ill-conduct." In sum, those who could earn

and did not were reprehensible (Mencher, 1967). In general, the elderly were consideered worthy because of their inability to work (Haber, 1983), yet they were judged and assisted based upon their work history and their thrift during productive years.

Many Black social welfare organizations, like their White counterparts, accepted this definition of "worth" and committed their social service efforts to the worthy, but often indigent Black aged. These organizations were usually isolated from White society and eventually developed an indifference to social intermingling with Whites. Interracial activities were infrequent and for many Blacks almost unnatural (Drake and Cayton, 1962; Osofsky, 1963). This should not suggest, however that Blacks preferred and accepted segregation. On the contrary, Black leaders vehemently protested against segregation and its consequences (DuBois, 1963; Aptheker, 1968). As difficult as segregation was for Blacks, it may have served a useful purpose in helping Blacks strengthen their group consciousness and awareness. According to Lewis Coser (1964), conflict stimulates innovation and helps maintain out-group as well as in-group cohesion. Conflict also sets boundaries between groups within a social system by strengthening group consciousness and awareness of separatness, hence establishing the identity of groups within the system (Coser, 1964). The boundaries set by Whites excluded Blacks from full participation in society. Social distance accompanied by a variety of rules and enforcement mechanisms before the Civil War was supplanted after the Civil War with a system of physical distance that preserved the dominance that Whites enjoyed earlier under slavery (Farley, 1987; Woodward, 1957). While Blacks did rebel against these immoral and inhumane practices, they used their physical distance (segregation) to develop group solidarity and to promote both cooperation and efficiency (Broderick and Meier, 1965; Quarles, 1969; Osofsky, 1963).

Organizing For Self-Help

The almshouse, essentially identified as the sole province of the aged by the early 1900s, became an issue of grave concern to social reformers. Reformers found it difficult to tolerate the large number of worthy aged, of any race, who resided in

almshouses. Social workers who carried forth the ideals of humanitarian reform and social justice used the pages of *Charities* (1903) to urge the establishment of old folks' homes as an alternative to the almshouse. Homer Folks, speaking before the National Conference of Charities and Corrections (NCCC) in 1903, stated that, "proper respect for and care of the aged, who are rightly our charges, is a measure of civilization . . ." (Zimand, 1958). These ideals were further encouraged by state and city welfare legislators who offered strong endorsement and financial support to private ethnic welfare activities focusing on the establishment of old folks' homes. This was partly an altruistic response to the public outcries and admonitions of social reformers, but it was also a way for elected officials and overseers of the poor to supplement, rather than bear the entire cost of care for the indigent aged of any race. Where private funds were not available, race shaped the allotment of public funds for the segregated institutions. In Charleston, South Carolina, for example, the indigent Black aged were housed in the poorly managed and decrepit Ashley River Home, while Whites enjoyed a much safer and healthier public asylum. Records of mortality rates suggest the discriminatory practice which existed. The average annual death rate for Blacks was 40% and around 10% at the White asylum (Haber and Gatton, 1987).[2]

White racism, as illustrated above in the City of Charleston, is one indication that Black social welfare was not a priority particularly in the South where segregated institutions were prevalent. As Blacks observed and experienced such racial injustices, the need to develop their own social services was reinforced.

Cooperation among the various Black groups was a key element in the development of social welfare services. Yet, there were instances and occasions when competition interfered with the spirit of cooperation. Ministers, as heads of churches were often controversial in their role. Their motives and their commitment to the race were sometimes questioned by Blacks in the community. The church was nonetheless of major importance to most Blacks (Drake and Cayton, 1962). Ministers believed that secret fraternities were of less importance than the church. They questioned the quasi-religious nature of these groups and re-

sented their popularity especially when fraternal activities in-
terfered with parishioners' participation in church activities
(Dittmer, 1977). While these groups' activities were sometimes
in conflict with the church, they stressed racial unity and gave
strength and direction to the Black community.

Women's clubs echoed the philosophy of the secret frater-
nities adhering to their motto, "lifting as we climb." Their sin-
cerity as "race women" was seldom questioned because their
primary activities provided service to others. These women
usually worked cooperatively with both the church and secret
fraternities. They generally outnumbered men as church mem-
bers but their status as women gave them less opportunity to
exploit their position as leaders (Drake and Cayton, 1962; Ditt-
mer, 1977). Women's clubs successfully bridged class barriers
and functioned as liaisons encouraging churches, secret frater-
nities and other women's groups to work together to reach de-
sired goals (Lerner, 1974; Jackson, 1978).

The Black Church's Role

The Black church has always been able to marshal the forces
needed to move its people out of poverty and despair. Next to
the family, the Black church was the most important institution
and was also the center of social life. During the Progressive
Era, scholars of Black social welfare such as W. E. B. DuBois
(1909) observed that while a great share of the churches' wealth
had been allocated for mission work with a portion for prose-
lytizing, a larger portion went for benevolent and social better-
ment work. Others, such as George Edmund Haynes, maintained
that the Black church was ". . . at once the most resourceful and
most characteristic organized force in the life of the Negroes of
the Northern cities as it was in the Southern communities"
(Haynes, 1925).

As a center of systematic relief, the Black church took on the
role of caretaker for needy parishioners and nonchurch members
alike. The Social Gospel movement which helped to characterize
the Progressive Era added impetus to the Black churches' roles
as caregivers stressing that the church's main mission was not
to support itself, but to uplift the community and to ameliorate
hard conditions of the unfortunate (Carter's Old Folks' Home,

1906; Williams, 1905). The leaders of the Social Gospel move-
ment attacked labor conditions, corruption in politics, inequal-
ities in wealth and the existence of slums. This movement which
cut across all denominations, viewed reform as a social matter
rather than a personal one (Mencher, 1967). The historic role of
the Black church and the doctrine of the Social Gospel influenced
the development of a number of institutions including residen-
tial facilities for the elderly.

The Reverend Edward R. Carter, one of Atlanta's most prom-
inent ministers, took an early lead in establishing housing for
that city's indigent aged. With the support of his congregation
at Friendship Baptist Church, Reverend Carter established
Carter's Old Folks' Home in 1898. The home was a three-story
building adjoining the church. Reverend Carter and the church
members provided the majority of funds needed to operate the
home. The City of Atlanta made a monthly contribution to help
with the management of the home. The facility housed ten in-
mates[3] by 1906 with expectations of accepting five others upon
completion of the structure's third floor (Pollard, 1978). The
growing demands placed on the Carter Old Folks' Home re-
flected the growth of Atlanta's Black population which more than
doubled from 1890 to 1920 by which time nearly 63,000 Blacks
lived in the city (Dittmer, 1977).

As a rule, old folks' homes for Blacks grew out of identified
need and were located in areas which had large populations of
Blacks. While there were relatively few Blacks in the state of
Minnesota during the Progressive Era, the largest of the state
Black populations was mainly concentrated in St. Paul. Logi-
cally, that city was the site of the state's first old folks' home for
Blacks. Reverend James W. King, a Methodist minister, estab-
lished the Attucks Industrial School, Orphanage and Old Folks'
Home. The home was "designed for the betterment of the Negro
race, to provide a home for the orphans, the aged and the in-
digent." Reverend King and his wife opened the home about
1908. By July 1909, the facility was home to 11 men, women and
children. With the aid of several women's clubs such as the
Adelphia Club and the Arbutus Club, along with churches, in-
dividual donors, and fund raisers, the Attucks Home moved to
a new more adequate structure on December 9, 1916. The new

facility, previously owned by the all-white Home for the Friend-
less, was a two-story frame structure containing 20 rooms. The
building had twelve-foot ceilings and a stairway that led from
the front hall to the second floor. The home was said to ". . . look
like a home [with] many windows, light, pretty wall paper . . .
[and was] desperately clean . . ." The Attucks home remained
in its new location from 1916 until it closed in 1966 (McClure,
1968, p. 49).

Other homes started by Black churches and ministers in-
cluded the Negro Baptists' Old Folks Home in Richmond, Vir-
ginia, which was supported by both Black and White friends,
and the Negro Churches of Richmond. Similarly, the Lafon's Old
Folks' Home in New Orleans was maintained by the "colored
Methodist and Congregational" churches of that city. It was home
to an average of between 25 to 30 indigent males and females.
Thomy Lafon, a Black philanthropist of New Orleans, be-
queathed $11,000 to the home, and the city contributed $120
toward its support (it is not clear how often the city's share was
paid) (Dubois, 1909; Work, 1919).

Women's clubs

Black women's clubs were sometimes described as ". . . a
most forcible demonstration of the value of organization among
women . . ." Their activities included the development of self-
reliance, self-help and other elements so vital to the advance-
ment of Black people. The clubs' goals were to supply substantial
evidence of the moral, mental and material progress of the race
(DuBois, 1909). The scope of activities for social betterment
among women's clubs included support of hospitals, orphan
homes, kindergartens, and day care centers; the virtual absence
of social welfare institutions in many communities also led these
women's clubs to establish old folks homes—deemed an espe-
cially important activity.

Described as "noble" and "sacrificing," these women do-
nated time, money and organizational skills to protect the in-
digent aged from suffering and to bring a little "cheer" into their
lives. In order to provide a sense of direction, several women's
clubs organized themselves into various departments or stand-
ing committees such as the "Sick and Aged Committee." Women's

journals and newspapers reported the various activities of women's clubs throughhout the country providing a means of focus and lending dignity to their efforts. These clubs often consolidated their energies to reach a mutually agreed upon goal. In a broad community cooperative six women's clubs in Chicago joined the Triangle Inner Circle Club to give the Chicago Home for the Aged and Infirmed Colored People a New Year's present. They jointly sponsored a 50-cent-dance with all of the proceeds going to the "dear old folks" at the home (Drake and Cayton, 1962).

In Birmingham, Alabama, another women's club, the Semper Fidelis Club, made a yearly donation of money, clothing and other necessities to the Old Folks' and Orphans' Home of that city. The Ann Arbor Women's Club in Michigan sent canned goods, quilts, rugs, clothing, and money to Detroit's Phillis Wheatley Home. They also placed an inmate at the Home by paying the $200 admission fee. The Labor of Love Circle in Detroit also organized its primary charitable works for the maintenance of the ladies who resided at the Phillis Wheatley Home. Another of Chicago's women's clubs sponsored"Coal-fund Day" and "Canning Day" for the Home for Aged and Infirmed Colored People. In autumn of each year, the clubs' women arranged for collections at local churches solely for the purpose of purchasing fuel for the home; and during fruit season, they took fruit and sugar to the institution to provide a supply of preserved fruits to meet the inmates' needs during the winter months (DuBois, 1909; Jackson, 1978).

The club women's activities extended beyond charitable donations to existing homes for the aged. Their activities expanded to include establishing homes and sometimes taking over the responsibilities of maintaining a home when the home was at risk of closing, or the inmates were believed to be suffering. The Women's Twentieth Century Club of New Haven, Connecticut, took over the management and maintenance of the Hannah Gray Home for Aged Colored Women established in the late 1800s. When the club's women took over the home in 1903, the property was at risk of foreclosure because of a $200 delinquent tax bill. The club paid the back taxes, had the house painted and donated wood and coal for fuel. They also paid the burial expenses for

several inmates, employed an overseer and annually appointed a board of directors to run the home. The fifty-member club operated the home efficiently for many years on donations, gifts, and small sums paid by the inmates (DuBois, 1909).

As with the Women's Twentieth Century Club, the Women's Loyal Union of New Bedford, Massachusetts, assumed the responsibility for maintaining the New Bedford Home for the Aged of that city which opened its doors on March 25, 1897. Ten years later, during Old Home Week in 1907, the Loyal Union purchased a new twenty-one room facility at a cost of approximately $9,000. Several charitable organizations of the city contributed to the purchase and the maintenance of the old folks' home (Work, 1919). Sometimes labeled ". . . a set of butterflies on dress parade . . ." (DuBois, 1909), these women's records of establishing maintaining, and supporting institutions for the aged put to rest petty criticism, and reveal important work that has been seriously underestimated.

Secret Orders and Fraternities

Secret orders and fraternities began to flourish during the pre-Civil War era. Next to Black churches, the secret societies had the longest history of any voluntary organizations. By 1880, for example, Chicago contained over 40 secret societies. Many of these groups had women's auxiliaries which doubled their constituency. These organizations which were secret in procedure yet benevolent in purpose, offered opportunities for Black men and women to manage their own affairs and to rise to leadership positions—opportunities not afforded them in the larger society (Spears, 1967). These secret societies can be divided into two classes: the old line societies which included the Masons, the Knights of Pythias and the Odd Fellows, and the benevolent societies such as the National Order of Mosaic Templars, and the True Reformers.

The secret societies were the "conservers of tradition" and the bulwarks of organized middle class life in the Black community (Drake and Cayton, 1962). They were committed to ensuring the health and welfare of their membership. These societies obligated themselves to take care of the sick, to bury the dead and provide a certain amount of money to heirs upon

the death of a member (Williams, 1905). If an organization failed to live up to its agreement, the community stopped supporting it. Those societies that succeeded and faithfully lived up to their responsibilities won the community's confidence. Individuals often belonged to several secret societies in order to reap the benefits of each (Woodson, 1929). The care of old and needy members was one of several social welfare benefits available to members.

One of the most powerful secret societies, the United Order of True Reformers was organized in Virginia in 1881. From its beginning, this order looked beyond its mere secret organizational feature and grew to become a prestigious business organization. In addition to the True Reformers Bank, and a Commercial Department with a chain of stores, the United Order of True Reformers also established the Old Folks Home at Westham, Virginia. The home accepted both the aged and orphans from various parts of the country (Woodson, 1929). Although most of the secret societies were not able to compete with the diverse activities of the True Reformers, several maintained their commitment to care for their aged and infirmed members.

The Grand Lodge of Colored Free and Accepted Masons of Pennsylvania purchased a sixty-acre farm near Harrisburg to provide a home for aged and indigent Masons, their widows and orphans. The Grand Lodge of Colored Masons of Georgia also established Masonic Widows' and Orphans' Homes in Americus and Columbus; and the Knights and Daughters of Tabor established a Taborian Home for Aged and Indigent Members in Topeka, Kansas (Work, 1919).

The female secret orders were also active in developing social welfare institutions for the aged. The Grand United Order of Tents, organized in Norfolk, Virginia, in 1866, established an Old Folks' Home at Hampton in 1897. The home was founded to care for orphan children and disabled sisters of the Tents. The home was supported by contributions from the sisters who were not allowed to solicit aid from the public. They boasted of making no purchases on credit and prided themselves on their self-sufficiency. With a nine-member board of directors, the small Old Folk's Home at Hampton was caring for seven inmates by 1909. A tent Sisters' Old Folks' Home was also established in

Raleigh, North Carolina. This home, unlike its companion home in Hampton, was financed by both the sisters and public contributions. The inmates of the home paid no fees forcing the order to borrow $200 from a building and loan association, and to accept donations of food, furnishings, and clothing from various surrounding towns (Pollard, 1978).

Financing the Homes

Old folks' homes for the Black aged used admissions fees as well as various fund raisers to provide financial resources for the homes. In fact, the need for fund raising was the impetus for the establishment of several women's clubs. Much like their White counterparts, these women were usually college educated, in better financial condition than most Blacks, and married to prominent professionals. They used their influence in the home and the community to raise funds for the old folks' homes. In lieu of money, many gifts were provided which ranged from professional care by Black physicians to canned food and bedding.

It was not uncommon for the homes for Black aged to charge admission fees. Homes such as the Phillis Wheatley Home of Detroit charged a $200 admission fee by 1909. The Colored Aged Home Association of Irvington, New Jersey, collected a total of $400 in admission fees according to their annual report for the year ending December 31, 1908. The Chicago Home for Aged and Infirmed Colored People, according to its first annual report in 1898 charged a $100 admission fee; and the Home for the Aged and Infirmed Colored People of Philadelphia charged a $150 admission fee by 1900. Other homes such as the Tent Sisters' Old Folks' Home in North Carolina and the Home for the Aged run by the Little Sisters of the Poor were available to the indigent free of charge (Jackson, 1978; Haber, 1983; Dubois, 1909).

Some homes engaged in various small business ventures to provide added income. In 1909, the Colored Old Folks' and Orphans Home of Mobile, Alabama, for example, earned approximately $120 from the sale of pecans and pears. The literature suggests, however, that many of the homes discussed above were not financially stable. The financial condition of several

homes suggests that they were in a constant struggle to raise funds to keep their doors open. The overseers of the Colored Home Association in New Jersey, for example, stated that they were compelled to charge an admission fee to run the home but continued to have a shortage of funds. Another home described their financial condition as having gotten "on the toboggan and [gone] to the bottom," while another home reported experiencing "toils and conflicts." Several homes were willed to the city or town with stipulations that they be used to house indigent aged Blacks. In many cases, however, the property was left with no funds for maintenance and management. Homes such as these began their new role as institutions for the aged rift with funding problems. The Hannah Gray Home of New Haven, Connecticut, illustrates this practice. The home left in the hands of White trustees was to be used for aged colored females. There was no endowment with which to manage the Gray Home and no city nor state funds were forthcoming. The small sum that inmates paid for their rooms was insufficient, and tax payments in arrears threatened the home's existence until a local woman's club took management responsibilities for the institution.

Various efforts to raise funds were numerous, but their small scale resulted in limited profits for the homes. Fundraisers included an array of activities such as the 50-cent-dances sponsored by the Chicago women's clubs, rallies, fairs, chairty balls, and bazaars. Still other fund raising efforts required that individual members of the sponsoring organization tax themselves an annual fee. This was the rule of the Tent Sisters Old Folks' Home in North Carolina which required that each sister in the order give a pound of food per month and at least twenty-five cents per year to maintain the home.

In spite of financial hardships, several of these homes survived the depression years to continue to house the Black aged. The Home for Aged and Infirm Colored People in Philadelphia founded in 1864 by Blacks and Quakers continues to exist today. Renamed the Stephen Smith Home for the Aged in 1953 for the Black lumber mogul, philanthropist, and minister who endowed it, the home has since gained a national reputation and was the site for the founding of the National Caucus on Black Aged in 1971 (Pollard, 1980).

Analysis

Charitable activities devoted to housing the Black aged during the Progressive Era were varied and widespread. There was, nonetheless, a consistent theme. Churches, women's clubs and secret fraternities adhered to the idea of self-help which served as a foundation and major impetus for opening these old folks' homes. Another variable of importance is that, with few exceptions, churches, secret orders and women's clubs emphasized the "worthiness" of the old person as partial criteria for admission to the home. This suggests a belief and adherence to the work ethic. Work history was a valid indicator of worth, but continued work into old age was not an accepted and expected practice, especially for women (Reiff, et al., 1983). Leaving the worthy indigent aged to the almshouse was abhorrent to the members of these organizations (Williams, 1905). They believed that the indigent aged deserved a "home" rather than life in an institution.

Philadelphia's Home for Aged and Infirmed Colored People, like many other similar institutions, was initially established for "worthy and exemplary Blacks who in their old age from sickness or infirmity became more or less dependent upon the charities of the benevolent" (Pollard, 1980). Categorizing the Black aged as "worthy" or "unworthy" may initially seem contradictory given the discriminatory nature of most White homes for the aged. It may also appear somewhat surprising since most women's clubs and secret societies identified the "uplift of the race" as one of their goals. Yet many of these homes, like their White counterparts, desired to spare mainly worthy indigent aged from the almshouses.

Old age poverty and dependence were enduring social problems during the Progressive Era. The general population of elderly did not prepare for old age. Voluntary savings plans were rare; and the idea of compulsory savings was very unpopular. In addition, the amount of savings needed to prepare adequately for old age was greater than most workers could afford (Lubove, 1968; Fischer, 1977). Blacks, motivated by the fear of almshouses and pauper burials, nonetheless, made financial familial sacrifices to join "beneficial societies." Membership in these societies

offered some measure of psychological peace and satisfaction (Pollard, 1980). Membership in beneficial societies suggested that the indigent aged had been frugal and pious in their youth and were deserving of assistance in old age. These individuals were, therefore, categorized as "worthy." Many homes for the Black aged such as the Philadelphia Home for Aged and Infirmed Colored People specified in their policies that those who were pensioners of any benevolent institution or society were expected to have their pensions continued to assist in their support. The second woman admitted to the Home for the Aged and Infirmed Colored People in Philadelphia arrived with "full-fledged membership" in the Morris Brown (Benevolent) Society. This not only provided support for her, but attested to her status as both "worthy" and "exemplary" since she had worked and paid her association dues in preparation for old age (Pollard, 1980). It is suspected that the term "worthy" may have been a euphemistic way to suggest that the aged person have some means of financial support such as pensions from beneficial societies since "thrift" during years of employment was a quality held in high regard.

Other homes' policies were to accept only those residents who were referred by prominent individuals or groups. The Priscilla Brown Mercy Home of Selma, Alabama, for example, required that ". . . all persons coming to [them] be recommended by the pastor or officers of some church or officers of some society" (DuBois, 1909). These entry rules not only ensured that their inmates were of exemplary character and thus worthy, but further suggested that those organizations which recommended elderly persons felt some commitment to them which the Brown Home translated to mean "partial financial" commitment.

Few homes for the Black elderly reported any type of organized activities beyond those needed to provide spiritual fulfillment for the inmates. Several of the better endowed homes had chapels on the grounds. The New Orleans philanthropist, Thomy Lafon, donated money for the construction of a chapel at the Lafon's Home of the Holy Family before his death. The St. James Old Folks' Home of Louisville, Kentucky, "erected a handsome little chapel" on its grounds which comfortably seated

150 persons. Other homes such as the Carter's Old Folks' Home
of Atlanta were constructed on church grounds in close prox-
imity or adjoining the church.

There is little evidence to suggest that the inmates had any
other regularly scheduled activities. Even "Canning Day" spon-
sored by the Women's Clubs of Illinois for the Home for Aged
and Infirm Colored People of Chicago did not specify that the
aged inmates were involved. Instead the "Canning Day" activ-
ities appeared to be an opportunity for the club's women to
travel to the home and commit a day of their time to benevolent
work. The "dear old folks" were probably discouraged from ex-
erting themselves—reflecting the club women's patronizing and
sometimes missionary attitude in dealing with the poor.

The emphasis did not appear to be on activity during old
age. Instead the effort was to create a peaceful, comfortable and
sanitary environment ". . . in the truest and sweetest sense a
home," or "a place where the aged may pass their last days in
comfort." The inmates of the Home for Aged and Infirmed Col-
ored People in Philadelphia were encouraged to enjoy the
"pleasant outlook from the windows and porch of the Home . . .
[as] the birds and flowers cheer them up" (Haber, 1983).

In many cases the aged were expected to do little work in
service to benefit the homes because a commonly held belief
was that the elderly in general were not expected to work at any
task. Yet, as early as 1903, Homer Folks, Commissioner of Char-
ities of New York City, recognized the importance of activity for
the aged and encouraged "attractive" employment without re-
muneration. He believed that life for the aged and infirmed de-
pendent should not be simply a ". . . waiting for the end," but
should naturally round out the closing years with opportunity
for activity and a "measurable variety of things to interest and
occupy" (Folks, 1903).

In sum, housing indigent aged Blacks during the Progressive
Era was a major social welfare service and reflects a tradition of
support and self-help among Blacks. The cooperation required
of churches, secret societies, and women's clubs to establish,
fund and maintain these institutions is important both for
understanding the nature of self-help among Blacks and for iden-
tifying the specific private institutions which cared for that el-
derly population.

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Notes

1. The "great migration," as the exodus of over 400,000 Blacks from the rural South has been called, separated families often leaving support systems weak or nonexistent.

2. The average is taken from rates given for the years 1886, 1899, 1903, 1924 and 1928 of the *Charleston City Year Book*. The year book did not list the death rates for each year.

3. The term "inmate" was commonly used in reference to residents of old folks' homes. While the term may be jarring to us today, the term was used throughout the Progressive Era and well into the 1930s. A few homes were careful to remove the stigma which the term inmate connoted by referring to the elderly as "residents," "guest" or "the home family."