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“WE, TOO, ARE AMERICANS”: AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN, CITIZENSHIP, AND CIVIL RIGHTS ACTIVISM IN DETROIT AND RICHMOND, 1940-1954

by

Megan Newbury Taylor Shockley

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A Dissertation Submitted to the Faculty of the
DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY
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2000
As members of the Final Examination Committee, we certify that we have read the dissertation prepared by Megan Newbury Taylor Shockley entitled "We, too, Are Americans": African American Women, Citizenship, and Civil Rights Activism in Detroit and Richmond, Virginia, 1940-1954 and recommend that it be accepted as fulfilling the dissertation requirement for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

Dr. Karen Anderson

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Final approval and acceptance of this dissertation is contingent upon the candidate's submission of the final copy of the dissertation to the Graduate College.

I hereby certify that I have read this dissertation prepared under my direction and recommend that it be accepted as fulfilling the dissertation requirement.

Dissertation Director Dr. Karen Anderson
STATEMENT BY AUTHOR

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SIGNED: Megan Taylor Shockley
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ABSTRACT

This dissertation explores the activities of middle- and working-class African American women during and immediately after World War II in Detroit and Richmond, Virginia, in order to examine how World War II enabled African American women to negotiate new state structures in order to articulate citizenship in a way that located them within the state as contributors to the war effort and legitimated their calls for equality. This study provides a new understanding of the groundwork that lay behind the civil rights activism of the 1950s and 1960s. By looking at African American women’s wartime protest and exploring how those women created templates for activism and networks for the dissemination of new discourses about citizenship, it reveals the gendered roots of the civil rights movement.

This study uses a cross-class analysis within a cross-regional analysis in order to understand how African American women of different socioeconomic levels transformed their relationship with the state in order to use state structures to gain equality in diverse regions of the country. Class and region framed African American women’s possibilities for activism. In both Detroit and Richmond, women’s class positions and local government structures affected how African American women constructed claims to citizenship and maintained activist strategies to promote equality.

This study finds that the new discourse and programs of middle-class African American women, linked with the attempts of working-class women to gain and retain jobs and better living conditions, contributed to a new sense of militancy and urgency
within the civil rights movement of the 1940s and 1950s. By attempting to claim their rights based solely on their status as citizens within the state, African American women greatly contributed to the groundwork and the ideology of the more aggressive civil rights campaigns of the 1950s and 1960s. African American women's initial forays into desegregating restaurants, jobs, transportation, and housing created the momentum for the entire African American community's struggle for equality.
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

In 1943, Detroit erupted into a race riot that paralyzed war production for two days. While men comprised the majority of rioters both white and black, 4.5 percent of the participants were African American women who took to the streets to protest the prejudicial hiring practices of Detroit’s employers.¹ After witnessing the violence perpetrated by women, local members of the historically black sorority, Delta Sigma Theta, decided to construct a settlement house in the Detroit ghetto to provide material and moral assistance to young lower-class black women who had taken their grievances to the streets since they had nowhere else to turn for help.² Two years earlier, in Richmond, Virginia, Mrs. Helen Johnson had also “taken her grievances to the streets.” After enduring countless indignities on the city’s segregated bus system, Johnson finally had enough. She slapped a white man who had kicked her, and, as a result, suffered blows from other white male passengers before the bus driver threw her off the bus.³

These two cases raise important questions about the nature of class differences among African American women activists, their use of and relation to white-dominated and black-run institutions, and the new political possibilities presented by civilian

¹ Dominic Capeci and Martha Wilkerson, Layered Violence: The Detroit Rioters of 1943 (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1991), 69, 169. The authors derived their numbers from arrest records and eyewitness accounts.


mobilization during World War II. The context of Roosevelt's "V for Victory" campaign—victory for democracy abroad—presented new political and discursive possibilities for African American women. Encouraged by traditional black institutions like the NAACP, the National Council of Negro Women (NCNW), and the Urban League, African American women fought for "Double V for Victory," victory over fascism abroad and racism at home. This gave African American women a new way to articulate citizenship, as they called upon the government to recognize them as waged and volunteer workers in the wartime state deserving of the full rights of citizenship. African American women created a conditional claim to citizenship, based on their contributions to the state. From 1940 to 1954, black women asserted their right to full citizenship by attempting to challenge racism, poverty, and underemployment in various ways. Their strategies ranged from traditional—creating settlement houses to "uplift" poor women—to the militant—directly challenging social prejudice by rioting and fighting in the streets when their demands for equality went unheard.

Central Questions

This study provides a new understanding of the groundwork that lay behind the civil rights activism of the 1950s and 1960s. By looking at black women's wartime protest and exploring how women created templates for activism and networks for the dissemination of new discourses about citizenship, it reveals the gendered roots of the civil rights movement. This study will also help to articulate how marginalized groups can use state structures in order to promote their own interests and maintain autonomy in the face of an oppressive dominant society. It analyzes African American women's efforts to
define and claim citizenship within the American state from 1940 to 1954 in Detroit, Michigan and Richmond, Virginia, cities that were typical of northern and southern cities at the time.

This study uses a cross-class analysis within a cross-regional analysis in order to understand how African American women transformed their relationship with the state in an attempt to use state structures as a tool to gain equality. Detroit and Richmond were two very different cities, in two diverse regions of the country. While Detroit typified the Midwestern World War II boom city as auto manufacturers geared up for massive production increases. Richmond was a typical upper-South city that benefited from the war by converting its chemical, textile, and tobacco industries to wartime production. In Detroit, a massive labor shortage resulting from the stepped-up production enabled black women to engage with employers and unions in order to claim new wartime jobs. In Richmond, manpower shortages were not as great and legalized segregation kept many black women out of wartime factories.

Black women of different socioeconomic levels found the possibilities for their activism framed by the city in which they resided. Middle-class women experienced many of the same issues in Detroit and Richmond: being educated, they tended to hold jobs with social services departments and as teachers; being elite, they tended to affiliate with national organizations that had similar agendas in both cities. Middle-class women faced different problems in each city, however, based on the racial structures that operated in the North and the South. Women in Richmond faced daily indignities resulting from the state-supported system of segregation. While Detroit had no legal segregation, blacks were still
constrained by white social norms that maintained separate restaurants, neighborhoods, and job opportunities for African Americans; in its failure to enforce the civil rights law, the state tacitly supported de facto segregation. Working-class women, on the other hand, faced different challenges in each city as a result of segregation practices within industries and within residential spaces. Their more localized activist efforts reflected the various parameters of each society. Richmond's laws designated separate spheres for African Americans and whites, which made the structure of oppression more visible, as it was a state-sponsored structure, whereas in Detroit, a civil rights law existed but was ignored by the white population, which led to the black community's struggle to get the law enforced. In each city, women's class positions and local government structures affected how African American women constructed claims to citizenship and maintained activist strategies to promote equality.

My primary questions are: how did African American women construct a new discourse of citizenship based on their participation in the vastly expanded wartime state? How were discourses constructing citizenship affected by gender, class, and regional differences? How did African American women balance their historical distrust of state institutions with community-wide efforts to desegregate state-run voluntary associations and other war-based organizations? This study suggests that during and immediately following World War II, African American women redefined citizenship based on their real or potential contributions to the wartime state. They entered into negotiations with the state over the meanings of equality. Their actions put them at the vanguard of the modern civil rights movement.
Gender, Race, and Citizenship

In order to understand how African American women redefined citizenship in a specific moment of change during World War II, it is important to historicize the meanings of citizenship in America. Key feminist scholarship asserts that capitalist states construct the meanings of citizenship around a masculine norm in order to promote patriarchal family structures and to privilege men’s status as leaders in the state. The state is an amalgam of the interests of the dominant class, and, according to Philip Corrigan and Derek Sayer, the state’s primary goal is establishing its own legitimacy. By constructing normative gender ideologies, the state can link the maintenance of the patriarchal family with social order and the stability of the state.¹

Chantal Mouffe, Caroll Smith-Rosenberg, Linda Kerber, and others argue that as white men became the model for citizenship in the state, women and peoples of color found themselves marginalized and relegated to the position of supplicant for state services from the paternalistic state. As they created a new political system, white men framed their claims to citizenship in juxtaposition to women, African Americans, and American Indians. Each of these groups had no electoral power, and the state placed them in positions of supplication to the state, either to husbands, masters, or the national government in the case of American Indians. Citizenship in the state is crucial to gaining benefits which go far beyond participation in electoral politics. State services, including

¹ My definition of the state relies on the analysis of Philip Corrigan and Derek Sayer, The Great Arch: English State Formation as Cultural Revolution (London: Basil Blackwell, Inc., 1985). Corrigan and Sayer argue that the state is a fluid entity that orders social relations from the highest levels of government
the protection of free speech and property and the right to a fair trial, were some of the
guarantees given by the Constitution to American white male citizens. In the United
States, where the state was present at every level of society, including in education,
industry, welfare systems, and the justice system, women and peoples of color were at a
distinct disadvantage when trying to make claims on the state in order to receive the
benefits normally reserved for white male citizens.

Feminist theorists have considered the impact of state needs on its definitions of
citizenship for women. Because the state does not represent all members of the society, it
constantly needs to shore up its claims to power in order to stave off challenges from
those under its purview. The state is not a hegemonic construction that is fixed and
ahistorical, but rather a broad center of power in which ideologies and polity are fluid and
constantly tested by the population. Still, the state’s needs order all levels of society, from
the federal government to “private” family life, and thus the state defines relations between
men and women in order to advance its goals. Vicky Randall argues that the state’s three
goals: promotion of economic prosperity and growth, securing its international position,
and maintaining internal order and stability, play out in its policies towards women. The

through the smallest families in order to maintain its polity. The state must always work to legitimize
itself through perpetuating cultural norms and standards that support it.

5 Works discussing the role of citizenship as it is traditionally gendered male include: Chantal Mouffe,
"Feminism, Citizenship, and Radical Democratic Politics," in Feminists Theorize the Political, ed. Judith
Butler and Joan Scott (New York: Routledge, 1992), 369-384; Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, “Dis-Covering
the Subject of the ‘Great Constitutional Discussion,’ 1786-1789,” Journal of American History December
1992, 841-873; Linda Kerber, No Constitutional Right to Be Ladies: Women and the Obligations of
Citizenship (New York: Hill and Wang, 1998); Suzanne Mettler, Dividing Citizens: Gender and
state promotes population growth and stable family constructs as the means to its ends.⁹ Because the state needs stable and productive families to support its goals, it constructs white women as domestic reproducers while supporting men’s claims as laborers and breadwinners. Kerber suggests that the state defined women as subordinate citizens and reproductive laborers and subsumed women’s obligations to the state under their obligations to husband and family, enabling men to maintain the state by perpetuating family stability.⁷ Nowhere is this more apparent than in the United States government’s policy from the mid-1800s to the 1920s in naturalizing all wives of American citizens, not to give them citizenship within the state, but to enable the state to support the husband’s control over the family. In fact, when women received the vote in the 1920s, the state revoked this automatic citizenship; as Candace Bredbenner suggests. “Derivative citizenship could no longer function exclusively as the agent of marital solidarity and patriarchal power if it also served as married women’s pathway to achieving an autonomous political voice.”⁸ Because the state defined women’s citizenship as subordinate to men’s and dependent upon their reproductive labor within families, state policies blurred any lines between public and private concerns.

The state, then, constructs relations of power that are outside of its official “public” purview by defining women as service workers for the state. Because black women are further marginalized by the state by nature of their race, they often have to

⁷ Kerber, 11.
perform more servicing work than white women because they receive fewer benefits from the state. Anne Showstack Sassoon maintains that the success of the capitalist state depends very much upon women’s unpaid labor providing services that the state will not. She claims, “From a social point of view, a fundamental assumption of the welfare state has been that the family/women will provide fundamental services. The welfare state will only provide what cannot be provided elsewhere.”9 Women’s service work, then, becomes important to the survival of themselves and their families as they piece together public assistance and private help from kin and community networks. Women are essential to state survival but are relegated to service workers for the family, a crucial but subordinate position to male wage earners.10

The federal government also maintained distinctive levels of citizenship for women, people of color, and white men, which greatly affected black women during the New Deal. Suzanne Mettler maintains that the federal government privileged white men as breadwinners and, during the New Deal, categorized welfare recipients by their gender and race. For example, the federal government was reluctant to put black or white women on its payroll, and so it relegated them into “welfare” programs, in which they received small amounts of money but did not participate in official government work projects in

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10 Laura Balbo, “Crazy Quilts: Rethinking the Welfare State Debate from a Woman’s Point of View,” in Women and the State. 65-66.
return. This welfare became stigmatized, as it paid little and appeared to be a handout with no reciprocal benefits, when in fact, the recipients had to spend much of their time working to piece together sustenance for their families on the meager sums of money. The federal government endowed white men with national citizenship, so white men benefited from federal government programs like the Work Projects Administration, which had more money and standardized distribution policies that superseded local and state welfare programs. Women and people of color remained defined as state citizens, so they were prey to capricious state officials, poorly-funded state programs, and local racist and sexist policies. In effect, Mettler argues, the federal government policies "institutionalized" the unequal social status of women and minorities by marginalizing them in the federal polity. The federal government’s willingness to ascribe state citizenship to women and African Americans suggests their willingness to concede regulation of their labor, their safety, and their livelihoods to state governments, which had demonstrated hostility to minorities. In addition, the federal government’s refusal to grant national citizenship to African Americans reveals its general program of collusion with the states in sanctioning employment discrimination, which, as we shall see, did not end with the Fair Employment Practices Commission (FEPC).

Middle-class white women had begun to claim power within the state through the construction of social welfare policies, but while they solidified their position within state governments, they did not make much progress in gaining federal citizenship. During the

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11 Mettler, 1-6, 9-20, 214.
Progressive Era, from 1880 to 1920, white middle-class women began to make claims on
the state as maternalist reformers seeking to protect young citizens, poor women, and
racial/ethnic minorities from the excesses of a corrupt government. In order to
"domesticate politics," and align themselves with the men in power, these women had to
define women's work within the normative gender roles of woman as caretaker and man
as provider, which retained a white, middle-class version of domesticity. While social
constructions of gender had always been linked with race—white women did not work,
black women worked; white women had the potential for virtue if surveilled and
constrained by authority figures, black women’s bodies were sexualized in order to justify
rape—white maternalist reformers further distorted race/class differences in order to gain
legitimacy for themselves within the state. Gwendolyn Mink argues, for example, that
when middle-class women as maternalist reformers idealized normative structures of white
motherhood in order to define motherhood as an important component to citizenship and
to gain welfare benefits for women, they constructed the typical recipient as a widowed
white woman who had the potential of sinking into poverty and sin if she did not get
money to stay at home with her children. This created a standard that eliminated black
women from benefits, as white society had already eliminated black women from the
possibility of having any virtue to protect. In order to enter into negotiations with the
state, white middle-class reformers used race as part of a definitional category with which
to set standards of good vs. bad mothering, and thus good vs. bad citizenship. 12

In order to enter into negotiations with the state over issues of segregation and inequality, African American women had to construct a new discourse to position themselves as citizens within the wartime and postwar state. African American women worked from multiple locations that defined their own lives and their relationships with others. Maxine Baca Zinn and Bonnie Thornton Dill suggest that "multiple systems of domination" situate women of color in state-structured gendered categories of overlapping and connecting inequalities that are mediated by economic location, regional identity, and sexual orientation. Karen Anderson contends that because women of color "experience multiple oppressions simultaneously," their identities cannot be split into mutually exclusive categories because these identities result from their interrelated positions within different economic, social, and ideological frameworks. African American women experienced multiple oppressions in the U.S., because their gender and race placed them far from state centers of power. Where a woman was located within her own community, and in relation to the state, depended very much on social and geographical location. For example, a middle-class African American woman had the resources to create national networks of opportunity to contest domination on a large-scale level, whereas a working-class woman would often have to use individual resistance.

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and kin and neighborhood networks, which would keep their activism more grounded on a local level. Moreover, any African American woman in the North experienced racial oppression differently from women in the South, as Jim Crow segregation was not as prevalent, and was not usually written into legal code in northern states.

**Class, Race, and Different Conceptions of Citizenship Within the Black Community**

Middle-class African American women rose to defend themselves by creating their own discourse in order to attempt to claim citizenship on the same terms as white middle-class women. The white community had historically constructed black women as impure and sexually available, justifying both white men's exploitation of black women and the exclusion of black women from new constructions revolving around white motherhood and citizenship. In response, middle-class African American women attempted to negotiate the sexually charged terrain of power by creating a politics of respectability. Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham argues that from 1880 to 1920, African American women promoted equal rights, suffrage, antilynching laws, and resistance to racial oppression by creating a politics of respectability within the church. They shared the belief that "'respectable' behavior in public would earn their people a measure of esteem from white America, hence they strove to win the black lower class's psychological allegiance to temperance, industriousness, thrift, refined manners, and Victorian sexual morals."

Believing that the race could rise no further than its women, middle-class African American women created clubs and sororities in order to form the vanguard of uplift in

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their own communities. In this early period, the National Association of Colored Women's Clubs (NACW) became the umbrella organization which represented all of the smaller organizations and which coalesced around the ideologies of respectability and uplift. Within this context, African American women politicized gender as they promoted the importance of women to reform efforts. By constructing themselves as intrinsically crucial to community uplift by nature of their gender, African American women claimed space within community uplift programs as they attempted to promote race progress and equality. They did so, however, within the confines of normative gender relations, maintaining the ideology that women were first and foremost mothers and reproducers for the race. This role often put them at odds with their public roles as reformers and leaders, and many middle-class women struggled to maintain balance between their domestic roles and their public activities.

Middle-class women were often at odds with working-class women and men over the meaning of citizenship and the strategies employed by which to gain equal status as citizens. While middle-class women constructed citizenship as a set of abstract rights that included equal representation in society and in the electoral process, working-class blacks focused much more on economic issues in their bids for citizenship. Kevin Gaines discusses the struggles black women endured over trying to balance their public activities with their self-constructed normative roles in *Uplifting the Race: Black Leadership, Politics, and Culture in the Twentieth Century* (Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 231-232.
contends that middle-class African Americans often viewed the behavior of the working class as pathological, determined by their poor education and social dislocation and exacerbated by economic hardship. Middle-class women set out to change this behavior, which they believed was a detriment to the progress of the entire community, through uplift programs that taught good mothering, nutrition, and personal hygiene skills. Higginbotham posits that “The zealous efforts of black women’s organizations to transform certain behavior patterns of their people disavowed and opposed the culture of the ‘folk’—the expressive culture of many poor, uneducated, and ‘unassimilated’ black men and women dispersed throughout the rural South or newly huddled in urban centers.”

Much of the problem with the politics of respectability resulted from its failure to address labor issues. According to Molly Ladd-Taylor and others, since African American women reformers saw the necessity to work as a given in a society that underemployed all African Americans, they focused their efforts on personal and community uplift through health programs, clean homes programs, and other personal development efforts. Club women chose to privilege domestic programs because they understood that poor women had to work, and that government benefits were inadequate for providing the women’s families with decent care. Middle-class women tried to close the gap between women’s labor and scant government welfare services by providing child care, health exams, and cooking/conservation programs. While these programs attempted to help poor women

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18 Gaines, xv-xxi; Righteous Discontent, 15.
learn to care for their children more efficiently and to train them for future waged service work, they did not focus on helping poor women break into industries that were closed to them. Perhaps during this time, middle-class black women believed that training for better-paid service work was a more realistic goal for poor African Americans, given employers’ hostilities towards desegregating other workplaces.\(^\text{19}\)

While the programs of middle-class organizations were progressive, given the oppressive climate under which they operated, many groups failed to advocate direct protest activities, which created a schism between groups like the NAACP and NACW, and more radical organizations like the Communist Party and the United Negro Improvement Association. At the turn of the century, the NACW and the NAACP were the vanguard of protest, offering an alternative to Booker T. Washington’s accommodationist uplift programs by protesting inequalities in educational and other public facilities. The NAACP and NACW sponsored programs that instilled race pride, and they created uplift programs in an attempt to provide financial support to black economic and social institutions. Many middle-class African Americans, however, were uncomfortable with demonstrating publicly against inequality. The NAACP, for example, clashed with the Communist Party over the former organization’s failure to bring more pressure on the city of Scottsboro for the infamous rape trial of nine young black men in 1937. Middle-class African American women also tried to focus more on economic

opportunities for professional women and service employees by lobbying for protective legislation rather than by using direct protest movements. Deborah Gray White maintains that middle-class African American women’s commitment to maintaining respectability and to promoting the reform of the working class without understanding the real needs of poor women led to the failure of black women to effect a cross-class alliance and eventually helped to cause the decline of the NACW in the 1920s.20

Working-class women constructed their own meanings of citizenship from the period immediately following emancipation and continuing through the Great Depression. Because waged work was absolutely vital to women in the lower economic strata of black society, they often framed their constructions of citizenship around equal opportunity to employment and control over their own labor. Tera Hunter contends that from the 1870s to 1920, black women’s attempts both to thwart oppressive employers and to achieve liberation and justice came out of their understanding of the importance of controlling their own labor, which is one of the main tenets of American citizenship. White male laborers had historically connected their control over the labor process with their citizenship. In the late 1700s when men lost control over the crafts trades as skilled journeymen positions transformed into unskilled piece work positions, the men called upon the state to defend them against losing control over their work product, citing their ability to control their own labor as one of the characteristics of white male freedom in a democratic society. This construction of free labor as a right of male citizens continued

through the nineteenth century, as working men juxtaposed their position against unfree slaves when protesting factory conditions. In the late nineteenth century, unions also connected white men’s abilities to control their own labor with citizenship, as they strove to connect the right to bargain with democratic ideals. Ava Baron suggests that printers’ unions drew upon the privileges of white male citizenship to protest the use of unskilled immigrant boys in the business. She claims that “Drawing on images of freedom, patriotism, and nativism, the union articulated a version of masculinity in which white, working-class, native-born sons were the heirs to true manhood... ‘Americanism’ was incompatible with the indignities and penalties being imposed on ‘free men.’” Like white male citizens, black women in Atlanta attempted to control their own labor as they negotiated with employers for better wages and working conditions, created benefit societies to help each other financially, and even struck together for control over the laundry trade so that they could set their own hours and wage standards.

While working-class African American women did not have the means to organize on a national level prior to the 1960s, they still created an oppositional culture that rejected the dominant ideology about race and class while they used their segregated work

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and residential spaces to create collective resistance. Robin Kelley claims that workers on the margins, without strong political groups, still struggled to push against the oppressive racial and economic structures that threatened their autonomy, both in collective and individual struggles. Working-class African American women were affected by many different power structures. First, region greatly affected how these women would be treated in their jobs, what their wages would be, and in which non-service jobs the women could work. In Detroit, working-class women met with less resistance in lucrative war industries than in Richmond, where factories maintained strict segregation. In addition, working-class women were affected by city living. Unlike their counterparts in the country, who often had fewer job choices, these women could quit their jobs at any time to look for new jobs. Hunter and Kelley both see this as the ultimate statement of control over the labor process. Women in cities could choose from more employers and different types of jobs, although their choices of jobs were of course constricted by the structural racism that kept them in low-skilled jobs.

Gender also played a key role in how African American workers saw the terrain of power relations. As Gregg Kimball and Elsa Barkley Brown assert, working-class African American women traversed the city as they moved from their homes to the homes of their employers as domestics or laundresses. They understood how power structures operated and how to exploit them. Hunter discusses the willingness of women to wear their client’s clothes and to “pan-tote” leftovers home as a form of both activism and survival, as their

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incomes could not stretch to support families. White women understood and tacitly enabled these activities to go on, citing their powerlessness to do anything about the situation. This acceptance of black women's taking compensation in the form of goods silently reinforced black women's ideology that their labor allowed them certain rights, which included supplementing their income with material items from the employer. To working-class African American women, citizenship meant equal access to jobs and welfare benefits, fair treatment on the factory floor, and control over their own labor. During World War II, women took the opportunity to merge claims for equal opportunity with demands for recognition as citizens who bought war bonds, voted, and participated in other homefront activities. To these ends, they negotiated the terrain of welfare officials and employers, substandard housing and segregation in public places in order to claim citizenship for themselves.

**World War II and the Possibilities for Citizenship**

Most historians agree that World War II created a watershed moment for the civil rights movement. Deborah Gray White, David R. Goldfield, Merl E. Reed, Neil Wynn, and others argue that the disruptions in southern agriculture, together with the mass movement of millions of people to urban centers across the country, the increase in federal government programs that focused on helping peoples of color get hired in war industries, and the rhetoric of a war fought for democracy abroad enabled African Americans to

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claim rights and opportunities previously held only by whites. The government also tripled in size, and its focus on food and metal conservation, neighborhood defense blocks, and other local wartime programs brought the federal government in contact with the smallest units of the state—the family. In addition, changes wrought by mass mobilization, which included the necessity of all civilians to work for victory on the homefront enabled African American women specifically to claim civil rights based on a new definition of citizenship that enabled them to enter into negotiations with the state.

Wartime shifts in polity and ideology enabled African Americans to step forward and actively claim rights, but the state and others often viewed their activities as suspicious because of the state’s need to repress social conflicts during the war. The state had to call upon all Americans to support the war, which included women and people of color, in order to mobilize the entire homefront. The state’s support of a mass movement of women into industry provided an impetus for black women to press for equality, but at the same time, the state was suspicious of any activities that would threaten social peace. Because the Roosevelt administration wanted to put off dealing with race and class conflict until the war was over, it had policies that cut two ways—first, it did give concessions to black organizations and labor; then, it maintained controls over both groups in order to suppress any activities considered subversive. For example, while the

administration supported labor organizations, it imposed a no-strike pledge that angered many workers. Those who violated the no-strike pledge, however, were considered dangerous to the wartime goals of the state. Then, the administration did concede to black concerns by creating the FEPC, but it also surveilled black organizations, namely the NAACP and the Urban League's magazines and newsletters, and partially blamed the black press for the 1943 riots in Detroit and Harlem which hampered the unity of war efforts.

World War II enabled African Americans to claim rights based on the wartime rhetoric of fighting to preserve democracy in Europe. In order to justify entering the war, the Roosevelt administration created the “V for Victory” campaign. Roosevelt called upon all citizens to support the war both in the field and on the homefront. Encouraged by the wartime rhetoric, the Pittsburgh Courier created the “Double V Campaign”—victory for democracy abroad and at home. It was easy for African Americans point out the hypocrisy of fighting to preserve democracy abroad when so many peoples of color faced discrimination and oppression at home. Neil Wynn maintains that “From the very beginning, the duties and the privileges attached to citizenship were thus linked together and demands for participation in the war effort were coupled with specific demands relating to civil rights.”

Organizations like the Urban League, the National Association

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29 Wynn, 101.
for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and the National Council of Negro Women (NCNW) converged to promote equality by claiming citizenship based on black participation in the wartime state.  

African Americans participated in the Double V campaign to redefine citizenship based on their participation within a state that professed liberal democratic principles. By promoting the war effort while at the same time highlighting the hypocrisy within the "democracy" that they defended in the war, African Americans could redefine their own citizenship with the same intensity and urgency that Roosevelt used in his war rhetoric. Moreover, African Americans positioned themselves within the state as they worked or volunteered in the theaters of war or on the homefront and became part of the mobilized American total war machine. In this atmosphere, African Americans had to tread lightly when promoting civil rights; nevertheless, they worked hard to take advantage of government concessions and press for full citizenship within the state.

While many historians have acknowledged the positive impact of World War II on the civil rights movement and the establishment of full citizenship for all African Americans, they have largely ignored the impact of black women on the redefinition of citizenship, focusing instead on the experiences of black soldiers. Wynn, Goldfield, Charles Payne, and others argue that soldiers learning to understand equality in Europe, staging sit-ins on bases, and rioting against injustice in segregated camps redefined citizenship in the black community. These historians suggest that for black leaders, war

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duty equaled citizenship, and that returning veterans formed the vanguard of the civil
rights movement as they demanded their rights based on their obligations to defend their
country. Most scholars see World War II as the prelude to the modern civil rights
movement, as it enabled veterans to redefine citizenship for African Americans based on a
new reciprocal relationship with the state.

While these historians depict an important component of the redefinition of
citizenship, they obscure the actions of black women in an attempt to equate military
service with citizenship. In her work on women and the obligations of citizenship, Linda
Kerber explains that taking up arms to defend the country at war is normally reserved for
men, thus excluding women as citizens if one considers bearing arms a quid pro quo for
citizenship. According to Kerber, the state granted citizenship to women on a
conditional basis, by offering citizenship for the obligation of obeying the family head, thus
subordinating women's interests to those of men within the state. In times of war,
however, women become vital to the operation of the homefront state. During World
War II, African American women became involved in gendered efforts to redefine
citizenship, because they had established community networks to spread information and
broaden understandings of their relationship to the state. As a result of opportunities
opening up for all women on the homefront in both paid and voluntary work, African
American women became part of the vanguard of the civil rights movement by claiming

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31 Wynn; Goldfield; Payne; Scott and Womack; Richard Dalfiume, Desegregation of the United States

32 Kerber. 248-260.
citizenship for themselves and their communities based on their real and potential contributions to the wartime state.

African American women “en-gendered” the Double V effort by applying the tenets of the program to their own efforts to equalize social relations. For example, while women could not bear arms and “prove” their patriotism, they demanded to be included in all homefront war efforts on an equal basis with white women. They criticized racist policies of groups like the Red Cross and USO that often kept black women’s participation at a minimum in order to maintain strict segregation and minimize the costs of supporting black troops. They also called into question the hiring practices of industries that, despite facing tremendous manpower shortages, were still reluctant to hire black women. Black women used the Double V program to redefine the goals of citizenship for themselves as volunteers and as potential war workers for the state.

African American women still based their new constructions of citizenship on a notion of reciprocity. They agreed to serve the state, but they demanded that they be granted full citizenship based on their participation in the wartime state. In this way, their goals were similar to the goals of men, but their methods of achieving full citizenship—based on gendered contributions to the state—were different, in that they focused on homefront activities rather than military service. The conditional basis of citizenship put tension on the tenets of race progress and the ideology of unquestioning service to the
state, in that it required African Americans to support a state that did not guarantee them equality.  

World War II enabled women to claim jobs in industries previously closed to them, but the state worked to limit their tenure in war industries. By 1944, over 7 million women worked in war industries. The number of women employed belies a reality that maintained strict gendered categories of work. Karen Anderson, Susan Hartmann, Ruth Milkman, and Maureen Honey maintain that while women did make gains in industries formerly dominated by men, industries segregated the women into “gendered” jobs. The state undercut their tenure in the workforce by constructing public images of women sacrificing domestic roles for the war and waiting for the day men would return so that they could go home again, and the state and industry colluded in firing women when returning veterans re-entered the factories. In addition, most women in the workforce were the women who had worked previously; the image of a middle-class Rosie donning overalls to support her husband or boyfriend in the field did not match the reality of working-class women upgrading their jobs in the face of a massive manpower shortage.

Moreover, only 600,000 of the 7 million women in war industries were black women. Only 18 percent of black women worked in production jobs during the war.

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33 Gaines discusses the ambivalence of blacks during World War I, when DuBois called upon all African Americans to stand behind the administration that segregated government workplaces by supporting the war. This caused a debate between what was appropriate support for the state, 154-156.

34 Wynn, 56.
years. Black men gained jobs in the factories, partly because they had already established footholds in production jobs like the auto industries prior to the war. White society’s construction of black women as disreputable and oversexualized creatures, however, created barriers in the workforce when African American women attempted to gain lucrative wartime jobs, because white women workers did not want to be in close proximity to black women. Some employers used the excuse that white women could not or would not work in close proximity with black women, and so hiring black women would impede war production. Faced with employer objections, African American women continued to seek jobs, sought assistance from federal agencies and civil rights organizations in securing workplace opportunities, and created a new definition of citizenship based on their potential importance as workers for victory in order to negotiate with the federal government and gain the right to work.

African American women who attempted to enter the factories had to engage with the state in order to bolster their power. While repeated visits to hiring gates sometimes wore down employers, the women still needed the power of institutional structures in order to coerce industry to equalize hiring practices. In her study of women in the United Auto Workers’ Union, Nancy Gabin finds that African American women were often much

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more willing than men to employ the power of the state and the union in order to break into factory work. She suggests that because African American women were the last hired and faced the most resistance from employers, workers, and union locals, they were much more militant than men in trying to gain entry onto the factory floor.37

African American women had new institutional structures which bolstered their negotiating power. Franklin Roosevelt created the Fair Employment Practice Committee (FEPC) to investigate claims of unequal hiring practices after staving off a march on Washington threatened by A. Phillip Randolph, noted black leader of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters. Interestingly enough, while elite black leaders denounced the March movement, only the actions of a working-class group effected change, not the pressure from the NAACP or other elite groups.38 Although it was wracked with the problems of bureaucracy—namely slow procedural policies and a lack of enforcement power—the FEPC proved especially useful for African American women. While industries became increasingly willing to hire black men by 1942 as the worker shortage reached nationwide crisis proportions, they remained steadfastly adamant about refusing to employ African American women. More women than men actually made complaints to the FEPC because neither unions nor black organizations seemed to be able to help the women gain a foothold in industries. In fact, in Detroit, the first FEPC probe in 1942 specifically addressed African American women's complaints. According to a


national newspaper, the women "were being refused employment even by those firms which employ colored men." The women pointed out the fact that these same industries had sought out white women for employment, even as African American women stood by the gates waiting to speak with employment officers. African American women workers used their potential as war workers in an attempt to define themselves as citizens who had the right to equal employment.

The fact that women's work became an important component of the new gauge to equality contradicted traditional gendered uplift efforts by taking the focus off of domesticity. This shift in focus to working rights resulted from the formation of the FEPC, which placed workers in a different relationship with the state, and in so doing, made work-related issues more central to definitions of inequality. The old understandings of woman's work existed in an uneasy tension with the support of women's entry into heavy factory work, especially for middle-class women, who came to recognize the importance of equal opportunities for working-class women as intrinsic to the advancement of civil rights. In effect, the new focus on women's paid labor created a tension between the politics of respectability and the politics of responsible patriotism, which middle-class women tried to alleviate by taking control of the labor issue through promoting opportunities for others while they continued to make discrimination in volunteer work central to their own understandings of social inequality.

39 "FEPC Probe Given Funds to Probe Job Discrimination in 5 Cities," Richmond Afro-American, 5 December 1942, 12.
Middle-class African American women also faced discrimination during the war. Because they provided most of the volunteer services needed to keep up troop morale and to produce clothing and medical supplies for troops overseas, they were at the forefront of the fight to desegregate voluntary associations. Barred from certain Red Cross and USO facilities as a result of nationwide segregation in the volunteer homefront organizations. African American women who volunteered sought to point out the inequalities they faced as they helped to work for victory and legitimized state goals by showing their willingness to sacrifice their husbands and sons for the war effort. Both the Red Cross and the USO justified segregation by locating units in neighborhood centers, since virtually every community in the country experienced residential segregation. For example, Mrs. Price, head of Richmond's Red Cross sewing units, commented that "There's a nice spirit of democracy in the knitting groups that does [sic] Red Cross work. All churches and schools are represented. Knitters are all ages and live in all sections of town. . .Girl reserves at Maggie Walker and sub-debs at St. Catherine's both work for the Red Cross." In 1942, no African American women attended the exclusive West-end St. Catherine's prep school, and Maggie Walker High was situated in the heart of the black district. Local residential segregation enabled the Red Cross to maintain the appearance of equality by providing everyone with a place to volunteer while still retaining strict racial barriers.

National sororities and the recently-formed National Council of Negro Women contested the discrimination found in voluntary organizations as a symbol of the discrimination practiced in larger society. They constructed a discourse of responsible patriotism in order to claim positions within the state and fight for civil rights. African American club women demanded the right to volunteer, so that their services would define them as citizens by nature of their important contributions to the wartime state. For example, in 1940, Dorothy Boulding Ferebee, national president of Alpha Kappa Alpha (AKA) sorority wrote: "War contributions must not be thrust aside because we are women or because we are Negroes." The tone of Ferebee marks a subtle break within the ethic of service espoused by women during the Progressive era. African American club women were no longer willing to be anonymous and invisible when supporting their community and their country—instead, they sought compensation in the form of equal treatment. Middle-class African American women’s organizations had begun to move towards a more fully articulated citizenship that went beyond maternalism in the 1930s as the NCNW formed with the goals of lobbying for black women’s economic and political advancement. Deborah Gray White contends that Mary McLeod Bethune, the founder of the NCNW, believed that the federal government could be the black community’s best advocate in the fight for equality, and thus the NCNW focused on obtaining protective legislation for domestic workers and equal opportunity for all women workers, as well as


42 “President’s Message,” Ivy Leaf 18:3 (August 1940). 3.
petitioning the government to hire more black professionals in federal positions. They used their networking skills to lobby for change at the highest levels of government. Although middle-class reformers had been active in making claims on the state prior to World War II, the war gave a sense of immediacy and urgency to their struggle.

As they claimed the responsibilities of citizenship by demanding to be included in volunteer efforts, middle-class African American women politicized the nature of respectability by bringing it into negotiations with the state. The expanded wartime state made the boundaries between public and private permeable, and African American women recognized that the state could not achieve its purposes without their contributions of unpaid labor. They agreed to supply their labor to the state, legitimizing the war in the process, but they demanded compensation for their labor through their discourse of responsible patriotism. While African American club women's discourse of responsible patriotism included demands for electoral participation, equal pay, and equal opportunity in the workforce, they also maintained a sense of class status and power in their abilities to become leaders in the black community and represent the interests of disadvantaged women. Paula Giddings, for example, argues that during the war, Delta Sigma Theta sorority members decided to use their leadership abilities to educate workers, to give "advice and guidance" to potential employees, and to use their influence to highlight inequalities to a national audience. National president Mary McLeod Bethune claimed

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43 White, 148-152.

44 White, 155-157.
that "‘our intellect, our abilities, and our strength must now be used in a supreme effort of giving maximum service to the nation and in preserving those values which make democracy worth fighting for." Their gendered volunteer efforts, which included knitting and sewing for the Red Cross, servicing and comforting soldiers in the USO facilities, and providing food through canteen services reinforced the values of domesticity and respectability. These actions became quite subversive, however, when they were coupled with the demands for equality that emerged through their discourse of responsible patriotism. African American women threatened to overturn Jim Crow practices by demanding equality in volunteer organizations, and, in addition, they suggested that African Americans were willing to contest the state at a time of national crisis in order to promote their own interests.

Middle-class and working-class African American women took advantage of new wartime rhetoric and new wartime structures in order to redefine themselves as active citizens within the state based on their contributions to the homefront. While each group chose to define citizenship in a different way, based on either their voluntary or paid work experiences for the state, they maintained a militant fight against inequality on the homefront throughout the war. In addition, they maintained their claims to citizenship long after the war was over, and they bolstered their discourse with actions, including staging sit-ins in restaurants and stores and making complaints to unions and the FEPC in order to carry out civil rights programs from 1940 to 1954.

45 Paula Giddings, 199.
Race, Region, and Citizenship

Race, class, and gender are not the only factors that shape definitions of citizenship. Prior to the Civil Rights Act of 1964, citizenship for African Americans included different meanings in the North and the South. This study examines Detroit and Richmond, cities representative of their regions during and immediately following World War II, in order to understand how different structures of racial oppression defined citizenship in each region. In addition, a local study of two representative cities enables us to understand how national policies from groups like sororities, the NCNW, the FEPC, and unions played out in women's locally organized campaigns for equality. While Detroit and Richmond shared the characteristics of residential and commercial segregation and a wartime boom based on contracts to pre-existing industries, their racial structures diverged from that point and defined the parameters within which African American women struggled to define the rights of citizenship.

Richmond and Detroit experienced massive in-migration during the 1940s. Between 1940 and 1950, Richmond's black community grew by over 20% to a total of 73,087, or approximately 32% of Richmond's total population. Detroit experienced an even greater in-migration of African Americans as a result of the war. Its black population grew 48% between 1940 and 1943, and by 1950, 300,506 African Americans lived in Detroit. They numbered 16.2% of the total population.\footnote{Christopher Silver, *Twentieth-Century Richmond: Planning, Politics, and Race* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1984), 121-122; “Tension Files, Detroit,” Records of the Office of Community War Services, RG 215, MLR Entry 37, Box 448, Labor File, National Archives, Washington, D.C.: Thomas} These numbers were significant
in both cities, as mass mobilization of the black community affected the politics in each city.

The similarities between Richmond and Detroit end with the massive influx of African Americans resulting from manpower shortages during the war and residential segregation. Richmond was representative of the possibilities a New South city could achieve; boosters promoted its tobacco and iron foundry industries and boasted about its benign race relations, but their words belied the reality of a strict racial hierarchy enforced daily by rituals of racial etiquette and maintained by segregation laws. Prior to World War II, Richmond was the most industrialized city in the South, with a growth rate second only to Atlanta, and a producer of more tobacco products than all of the North Carolina factories combined. It also was home to several light industrial factories, such as textile and chemical manufacturers and the famous Reynolds Aluminum company, a corporation that began as a byproduct of the tobacco industry. Richmond claimed that its racial tensions were eased by concessions like an all-black adjunct city council, which basically promoted black business ventures, and black voting participation, but in reality, Richmond was one of the most stratified cities in the South.47


47 Background information on Richmond can be found in Frances Earle Lutz, *Richmond in World War II* (Richmond: Dietz Press Inc., 1951); Raymond Gavins, *The Perils and Prospects of Southern Black Leadership: Gordon Blaine Hancock, 1884-1970* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1977); and Scott C. Davis, *The World of Patience Gromes: Making and Unmaking a Black Community* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1988). Gavins and Davis offer two different looks at the black community. While Gavins finds that the fortunes of black leaders rose with the increased political power of blacks during the 1970s, Davis concludes that the politics of the sixties and seventies destroyed poor black homeowners’ communities through slum clearance policies and lackluster police enforcement of drug-related crime problems in the black neighborhoods.
Richmond maintained laws that ensured strict racial segregation. In his study of Richmond city planning, Christopher Silver maintains that "Efforts to sustain white hegemony in social and political relations also guided planning concerns throughout the twentieth century." African Americans lived in three areas: Jackson Ward, Fulton, and the 17th Street Bottom area. In order to keep African Americans from moving beyond the borders of the black district, the city council studied each block of the city and zoned it black or white by city ordinance, creating institutionalized neighborhood segregation. African Americans felt the brunt of city "improvements" during the Progressive era, when the city moved its landfills to Jackson Ward. Moreover, the Richmond city council refused to pave or improve neighborhoods in black districts, which was a problem in many black districts in southern cities, including Atlanta and Memphis. During the New Deal, when other southern cities like Atlanta prevailed upon the federal government to build low-cost housing projects for African Americans, Richmond leaders could not decide where to put such a project in order to halt black advancement into white neighborhoods, and black homeowners fought against the destruction of their homes for the housing projects in a move that represented class conflict between homeowners and subsidized housing recipients. Finally, in 1941, the city moved hundreds of African Americans from Jackson Ward in order to build Gilpin Court, its first housing project, constructed solely for black Richmonders. A problem arose, however, when war rationing threatened the

48 Silver, 11.

acquisition of materials for the project, so city officials turned it into a black war worker housing project. Only 25 of the original families moved from their homes qualified for occupancy in the segregated project under this new statute, since at this early date, most Richmond industries refused to hire African Americans in factories engaged in war production. Later in the 1940s, African Americans became the victim of clearance efforts once again as the city planned freeways through the heart of all of the black districts. Residential segregation enabled Richmond city leaders to weaken the power of the black vote and to maintain the racial codes of the city.

Richmond's hierarchy extended beyond residential segregation. Virginia constructed its Jim Crow laws fairly late in the twentieth century: leaders enacted a ban against interracial marriage in 1924, against integrated seating at all functions in 1926, and against integrated seating in public transportation in 1932. Moreover, Richmond's industries were segregated: while African American women did work in the tobacco factories, they worked far from the white women, both spatially and in terms of their jobs. Black women had the dirtiest, lowest-paid jobs, including tobacco stemming and hauling. White women worked in the lighter industrial areas of the plant, including packaging and shipping. Although Richmond was an anti-union city, it did experience unionization in the 1930s under the leadership of the American Federation of Labor

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50 Silver, 144-154.

51 Gaines, 42.

52 Elsa Barkley Brown and Gregg Kimball, “Mapping the Terrain of Black Richmond,” 94.
The Tobacco Workers' International Union, an AFL affiliate, gained footholds in several factories including the American Tobacco Company and Larus Brothers. The TWIU maintained strict segregation within its locals by creating black auxiliary locals within each factory. The AFL was widely known for its discriminatory policies, and despite pleas from A. Phillip Randolph and other black leaders, it refused to pass any anti-discrimination policies during its wartime conferences.\(^5\)

While black Richmonders could in theory change racial practices through the vote, prohibitive poll taxes that accrued yearly with each non-payment discouraged the majority of the black population from voting. In 1936, only 1,527 African Americans voted in Richmond.\(^5\) Of course, African American women had the hardest time registering to vote because they were the lowest-paid group of workers in the city, as they found themselves in domestic work and tobacco factories. Even the better-paid middle-class teachers made far less than white teachers in twentieth-century Richmond. Richmond's system of spatial segregation and economic and political oppression constructed narrow parameters in which African American women could create definitions of citizenship and promote equality.

Richmond's oppressive racial structure shaped class relations within the African American community. Elsa Barkley Brown and Gregg Kimball maintain that the structured segregation of neighborhoods placed middle-class professionals in close

\(^5\) Wynn, 51-52.

\(^5\) Silver and Moeser, 58.
proximity both to poor blacks and to illicit and less than respectable amusements in
Jackson Ward. The middle class was large; Virginia Union University was one of the
most respected black universities in the country, and the number of black businesses in
Richmond prior to World War II was second only to Durham. Sororities and social clubs
flourished in the middle class, but so did poverty and dislocation among the poor. Middle-
class club women could not help but see the suffering of many poor African Americans,
and their social clubs maintained programs to step in and help where they could. For
example, the Order of St. Luke, founded by Maggie Walker, encouraged poor African
Americans to deposit whatever savings they had into St. Luke's black-owned and
managed bank. The Urban League and the NAACP worked to help African Americans
find jobs, and during World War II, middle-class women took the lead in trying to
promote job opportunities for working-class women. While these institutions had tried to
help working-class women secure positions in the past, the majority of opportunities had
been in domestic work. The war opened up possibilities for middle-class organizations to
help train working-class women for skilled positions in industries. Both the middle and
the working class women in Richmond had a propensity for civil action in promoting
equality; middle-class women in Richmond fought for the survival of black institutions and
the destruction of black codes in the 1930s, while in 1939 working-class women struck
against Liggett and Meyers Tobacco Company alongside white women, got pay raises,
and then voted to become part of the CIO-affiliated United Cannery. Agricultural,
Packing, and Allied Workers of America (UCAPAWA) after the strike. While middle-
class women tended to see working-class behavior as proof of their inability to become
respectable citizens prior to World War II, and, in large part, failed to see problems with employment and pay structures, club women in Richmond tried on many occasions to address working-class issues during and after World War II, with varying degrees of success. The war made middle-class women understand even better how racial restrictions in the hiring process hurt poor women looking for jobs. Although they became more sympathetic to the plight of working-class black women, club women still could not understand the depths of racism within factories, including the problems with unions and unequal pay structures, so they could not converge completely with working-class views on work and equal opportunities. Despite the restrictions placed on all African American’s lives in Richmond, black women became leaders in the struggle for citizenship and equality.  

While Detroit suffered many of the same problems as Richmond, including rampant segregation in public facilities and in neighborhoods. Detroit African Americans had more opportunities to contest the racial hierarchy of the city for a number of reasons. Detroit’s neighborhoods were racially constructed, with most African Americans living in the Paradise Valley area west of the main boulevard, Woodward Avenue. African Americans also moved out towards the periphery of the city as they created suburbs in Conant Gardens, the Eight-Mile/Wyoming area, and the West Side around the Ford River Rouge plant. As in Richmond, New Deal policies hurt black homeowners by classifying

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black residential areas as unsuitable for home loan aid. In addition, real estate agents and residents colluded to keep African Americans out of all-white neighborhoods with written or implied covenants. These covenants were not enforced by law, but by rituals of selling only to whites and protesting black encroachment. Thomas Sugrue argues that while whites became very violent about African Americans moving to white neighborhoods, and often police were ambivalent about protecting African Americans who tried to break color barriers. African Americans did move in on many white-dominated blocks, which led to much white flight in the post-1940 era.\textsuperscript{56} The difference between Richmond and Detroit as far as spatial segregation was concerned revolved around each city's methods of enforcing racial structures. Richmond's city council legalized segregation by constructing and forcibly maintaining blocks for each race. In Detroit, whites informally maintained segregation by ritual, which actually enabled African Americans to stake claims in white neighborhoods, as long as they were willing to endure the violent outbreaks and continuous hostility that inevitably followed their actions.

Detroit's African Americans enjoyed more freedom because the state did not codify racial structures. For example, while Virginia constructed Jim Crow laws to enforce strict racial structures, Michigan passed the Diggs Civil Rights Act in 1918, which technically outlawed racial discrimination in public areas. Although this did not mean that African Americans in Detroit enjoyed total freedom from segregation from 1940 to 1954, it did enable African Americans to challenge the \textit{de facto} segregation in restaurants and

\textsuperscript{56} Sugrue, 33-55, 57-89.
other public facilities from a place within the state, in that the state had already struck
down legal segregation. This allowed many African Americans to take their claims to
equality to court in order to get the state to uphold a pre-existing law. Moreover, African
Americans in Detroit could vote with no restrictions, giving them a benefit of citizenship
denied to most African Americans in Richmond. Detroit did experience major problems
with segregation and prejudice, which coalesced in 1943 and erupted in a riot during the
summer of that year, but African Americans had institutional structures in place that could
uphold claims for democracy and legitimize their fight for equality.

Workers in Detroit also had the benefit of the unions and the FEPC in their fights
against discrimination. While Richmond had few powerful unions and the AFL practiced
blatant discrimination, the United Auto Workers' Union, a Congress of Industrial
Organizations (CIO) affiliate, claimed to practice complete integration and representation
for its black members. August Meier and Elliot Rudwick argue that the UAW worked
hard to recruit African American members, who were reluctant unionists as a result of
their loyalty to the employers who hired them and because of the hostility of some union
locals to integration. While the UAW leadership promoted equality, African Americans
often faced hostility from the locals when they tried to join or address grievances. By the
1940s, the UAW had several African American staff members, and it passed many non-
discrimination clauses at its conferences. The UAW finally won over the black (and
predominantly male) population in the 1939-1941 period, and blacks had an ally from
which to fight discrimination in hiring practices and on the factory floor.\textsuperscript{57} Moreover, the FEPC had a suboffice in Detroit, and the Mayor created the Detroit Commission on Community Relations to investigate racial problems. Each of these institutions enabled African Americans to make claims against Detroit’s white society from a position within the state. Again, African Americans had to work hard to get the equality they were promised by the UAW and the FEPC, but the structures that enabled them to claim equality were already in place.

It is important to note that working-class African American women in Detroit faced many of the same impediments as the women in Richmond. Nancy Gabin argues that while the UAW might have been sympathetic to the plight of black male workers, it was quite hostile to women workers in the 1930s, because it privileged male workers as heads of households who needed the protection of the union for seniority and better benefits. The UAW endorsed discriminatory practices such as gender-typing jobs and maintaining separate seniority lists for men and women. During World War II, as the UAW realized that it had to address the issues of women who had entered the workplace in such large numbers, it became more responsive to women.\textsuperscript{58} African American women could not break into Detroit industries until they received help from both the FEPC and the unions, but once they did enter war factories, they remained spatially segregated and in


\textsuperscript{58} Gabin, 1-11, 64-78.
the worst jobs in the factories. African American women had to fight to make gains in the factories, and they did have the support of the UAW against hate strikes that erupted when black women were upgraded. In this way, the women in Detroit had a better structure in place to support their claims to equal work and equal pay, which women in Richmond did not have, but they still faced considerably more segregation and discrimination than did black men in the same factories. Gabin argues that “The effort of black women first to gain access to defense jobs and then to attain the same jobs held by white women earned them a reputation for assertiveness and militancy.” Their militancy situated African American women at the forefront of the civil rights campaign in the working class.

Class relations among African Americans were not always tension-free in Detroit. The spatial distance between middle-class and poor neighborhoods led to ideological distance on many issues. This distance resulted, in part, from the historic alliance middle-class blacks sought with white elites, which caused them to ignore many issues important to the working-class community. For example, black ministers, the Urban League and the NAACP fought against the entrance of black workers into unions. Meier and Rudwick suggest that the UAW threatened the close relationship black leaders had with employers at Ford and other factories by criticizing management policies, but that leaders

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59 “Last Hired, First Fired.”

60 Gabin, 88.

61 Gaines and Gilmore discuss both the problems and the benefits of black elites allying with white sympathizers in order to gain more political and social power.
finally did embrace the union when it proved its loyalty to black workers during the 1941 Ford strike. In addition, Sugrue finds that the middle class actually joined whites in protesting the construction and then the entry of African Americans into the Sojourner Truth housing projects, because the movement of low-income blacks to Conant Gardens threatened black owners’ property values. While this evidence does not mean that the middle- and working-classes were constantly engaged in an antagonistic relationship, it does suggest that the classes were not as likely to work together closely for change. In fact, during and immediately following World War II, working-class African American women had to fight for the NAACP and the Urban League to recognize their problems, and middle-class African American women often misunderstood working-class culture as pathological, which led them to ignore some of the economic problems faced by the women. Still, like the middle-class women in Richmond, Detroit’s club women tried to connect on some level with working-class women from 1940 to 1954, and, as in Richmond, they met with varying degrees of success.

The different racial structures of these cities affected how African American women in particular shaped concepts of citizenship from 1940 to 1954. In Richmond and Detroit, women provided the leadership for the gendered volunteer work that supported the Double V movement and the discourse of responsible patriotism by running the USO and Red Cross programs. In Richmond and Detroit, working-class women had to fight

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62 Meier and Rudwick. 43-86.

63 Sugrue. 73.
harder than men to gain entry into lucrative war jobs, enabling them to become the militant vanguard for working-class rights. Each city had strong NCNW and sorority chapters, but while Richmond women had to define citizenship as the achievement of rights denied them by the city and state government, Detroit women fought for the implementation of the rights of citizenship already granted to them by the government, but not enacted by the larger, dominant society. The fact that they had to fight to get rights already granted to them by the state reinforces the point that the state is a center of competing power relations that is not necessarily dominant in the face of popular dissent against its laws.

In addition, northern states set more barriers to integration than their laws suggest, by either their inability or their unwillingness to enforce laws that would upend cultural norms of segregation. Each city had unions for its major industry and the federal FEPC to help working-class women, but in Richmond, women had to work within a segregated union environment in which black workers’ concerns remained an afterthought. Detroit women found the UAW much more open to their concerns about equality. The FEPC did not maintain an office in Richmond, and investigators there seemed reluctant to upend the racial segregation that characterized the city. The FEPC in Detroit took many complaints from African American women and helped them to negotiate for the right to work. In short, in Richmond, women defined citizenship as the achievement of equality and the gaining of rights owed to them but denied by government structures. In Detroit, women defined citizenship as the overturning of social structures through the enactment of state legislation already in place but weakened by employer practices and societal rituals and norms constructed to maintain de facto segregation.
African American women provided the leadership, the community networks, and the template for activism which influenced the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s. While Charles Payne locates black women's activism primarily in their organizing efforts, Belinda Robnett suggests that black women acted as formal leaders and "bridge leaders," local leaders who brought their communities into networks of activism. She claims that "women's power was largely derived from autonomous pioneering activities," like their sorority, church, and community club efforts. Robnett, Karen Brodkin. Paula Giddings, and others locate the abilities of women to create, mobilize, and operate networks as crucial to the civil rights efforts, and because women took up leadership positions on the homefront, they formed the front lines of activism at this time.

National leaders like Ferebee and Bethune redefined citizenship in a way that placed women in a crucial position to negotiate with the state. Local leaders supported unions and canvassed for voting registration and NAACP memberships. According to Harvard Sitkoff, a woman actually suggested the March on Washington Movement, which Randolph then supported with his large organization. Working-class women also became very active in promoting equality of opportunity through their work with the

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FEPC and the unions, and by resisting oppressive racial constructs at the hiring gates and within the factories. They used both individual resistances, community networks of resistance, state agencies, and historically black institutions to further their goals of equality. Given the activities of women in the 1940s and early 1950s, it is necessary to place them at the forefront of civil rights efforts in this period. Their efforts launched the more militant phase of the civil rights movement.

**African American Women, Citizenship, and Civil Rights**

From 1940 to 1954, African American women provided strong leadership in the fight for citizenship and civil rights, continuing their struggles from decades past in a new wartime environment that expanded the possibilities for definitions of citizenship. Middle-class women had networks in place, with national organizations that created the discourse of responsible patriotism and backed their language with programming designed to challenge inequalities in volunteer and paid work, as well as in electoral politics and in public accommodations. Local club chapters used this discourse and enacted the programming that challenged the racial structures of their cities. Working-class women continued fighting for better work and better pay, taking advantage of whatever manpower shortages they could, and using institutional structures like the NAACP, unions, and the FEPC to support their claim to citizenship. Their definition of citizenship focused on job opportunities, desegregation in the factories, and better benefits. African American women of all socioeconomic classes in Richmond and Detroit formed the base of activism by maintaining civil rights activities and negotiating for more freedom in their own lives. This study will show that because they were the leaders in their community
networks and in labor struggles, African American women formed the vanguard of the modern civil rights movement from 1940 to 1954.
CHAPTER 2: ENGAGING WITH THE STATE: MIDDLE-CLASS WOMEN AND RESPONSIBLE PATRIOTISM, 1940-1945

In an address to her fellow Alpha Kappa Alpha (AKA) sorority sisters, President Dorothy Boulding Ferebee urged black women to promote civil rights. She argued that African American women's most important contribution to homefront defense "...is the all-out effort to make America know that we as American citizens want to taste democracy for ourselves while we are making it safe for all. We want to know and feel that real democracy means human freedom, unqualified and unshackled." She emphasized that African American women were very important to the creation of positive race relations, as they were prime participants in homefront defense. She claimed that "Negro women have a unique opportunity to participate in this education of America by utilizing every moment to gain information to become broad and articulate, and actively insistent on the correction of this travesty on democracy." Ferebee warned, however, that simply pointing out inequalities was not adequate in the new Double V movement. Women had to enroll in homefront organizations like the Office of Civilian Defense, work for better living conditions for other African Americans, and help the black community to attain equality.

Ferebee and other African American women leaders created a new phase in the civil rights movement. They used war discourse—that this war was to save democracy, that all citizens had to be involved in winning the war—to lay claim to rights as political

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1 Dorothy Boulding Ferebee, "Negro Women in the National Crisis," *Ivy Leaf* 19:3 (September 1941), 3.
citizens in a free democracy. While African American women's groups had already begun to move towards employing a discourse of citizenship in the 1920s and 1930s, the urgency of winning World War II for the democratic allies enabled middle-class women to give their discourse a sense of immediacy and power that was unavailable to them before 1940. The Roosevelt administration's specific call for women to be participants in the war, both in industrial and voluntary capacities, enabled black women's organizations to engage actively with the state to negotiate new freedoms. As they became a vital part of homefront defense strategies and they made themselves invaluable to the government, African American women simultaneously demanded concrete equal rights, such as the power to vote, the opportunity to take better-paying jobs, and the right to have a voice in the government as contributors to the wartime state. Middle-class African American women worked as volunteers for homefront defense, as civil rights activists, as teachers and social workers, and as advocates for the working class in order to achieve equality.

African American women's organizations, traditionally a haven for middle-class women, had always been on the forefront of equal rights movements. Prior to World War II, middle-class black women had asked for equal rights by employing a discourse that focused on their position as respectable Christian women who were just as morally upstanding as middle-class white women. Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham argues that from 1880 to 1920, African American women promoted equal rights, suffrage, antilynching, and resistance to oppression. These women created identities within the black church that

\[\text{Ibid.}\]
reflected a belief that "respectable" behavior in public would earn their people a measure of esteem from white America, and hence they strove to win the black lower class's psychological allegiance to temperance, industriousness, thrift, refined manners, and Victorian sexual morals. At the same time, black female writers and intellectuals used ideologies that the dominant culture normally associated with the white middle class in order to create oppositional discourses that enabled them to gain autonomy in the creation of the NACW and other "uplift" oriented groups. The politics of respectability highlighted middle-class African American women's class consciousness. These women saw themselves as the natural leaders of community uplift, in believing that they had the money, the education, and the correct moral upbringing as Christian women and mothers to head the equal rights movement. They also believed that their leadership abilities and moral values would enable them to meet more easily with middle-class white women in order to promote better race relations.

While the discourse of respectability based claims for equality on African American women's behavior, it did not have any way to define African American women's citizenship beyond working for the African American community. The language of universal citizenship, which the National Council of Negro Women developed in the 1920s and 1930s and made concrete in the 1940s, gave black women a chance to promote a new kind of discourse that focused on the responsibility of women to be both patriots for the

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country and warriors for equality. Black women did not abandon the traditional discourse of respectability; rather, they reshaped it in order to give it a political immediacy that it did not have prior to 1940. Middle-class women still believed in the power of moral suasion, but they shifted their focus from Christian sexual purity to political responsibility towards a war-mobilized state. Rather than arguing that they deserved equality based on their womanhood, middle-class African American women insisted that their gendered war contributions as volunteers for the state gave them the right to full citizenship.

Ferebee defined a new discourse of "responsible patriotism" as she addressed her fellow members:

we recognize Democracy as the way of life which offers to us, as to all mankind, the greatest vehicle for human freedom. ... We have prepared ourselves to make contributions to our civilization comparable to those of any group, and we hold as a fundamental principle that these contributions must not be thrust aside because we are women or because we are Negroes. And we as women, must aid Democracy in casting off its defects. Of course, we know that realistically we cannot expect overnight transformations—but never has there been a time in our history when there has been a greater need for the renovation of our institutions, nor a time when it was more important that we strive to salvage the good in them in rejecting their evils, nor when these things required accomplishment with greater dispatch.5

In this speech, Ferebee identifies women as crucial to the movement for equality, because it was women who were the guardians of society. Her demand for compensation for volunteer work suggests that middle-class women understood the power in their unpaid labor.

5 "Message from Dorothy Boulding Ferebee," Ivy Leaf 18:3 (September 1940), 3-4.
War gave a strong sense of immediacy to the struggle for civil rights: women claimed that for democracy to be successful abroad it must be instituted at home now, because a disunited homefront would never help to win a war for freedom. The discourse of responsible patriotism involved several different demands. First, middle-class black women fought for the simple right to volunteer for homefront organizations. They promoted the power of womanhood and traditional reproductive labor as they cared for the soldiers and citizens in this country. Once they had proved that their unpaid labor was indispensable to the prosecution of the war, black women fought hard for political, social, and economic equality. While they worked for the Red Cross and USO, black women signed up members for the NAACP and registered voters, helped to instill the values of citizenship in children, and challenged government and industry to desegregate vital war jobs.

The discourse of responsible patriotism placed the onus on middle-class black women, as educated and historically leadership-oriented people, to demand equality immediately. Adherents to this new discourse believed in the power of black womanhood to command respect. Black women would no longer appear to the state as supplicants, but as active participants in a war for democracy on the homefront, expecting the government to answer their calls for equality. They believed that as they were essential to the fabric of their own communities, they were also essential to the functioning of the entire wartime state. Since their contributions as women volunteers enabled the government to maintain a homefront defense. Mary McLeod Bethune, president of the National Council for Negro Women and Delta Sigma Theta, argued that "America is our
home. We have fought for her in every battle, we have worked for her, we are willing to walk the last mile in defending her.”^6 African American women leaders argued that as patriots, it was their duty to make certain that democracy functioned at home. Bertha Black, president of Sigma Gamma Rho Sorority, suggested, “Let us fight with our country. May we not lose an opportunity to correct the injustices that are heaped upon us. Let us not wait until the war is over.”^7 Fighting the war and fighting for immediate social and political equality became inextricably intertwined in the discourse of responsible patriotism. In fact, the discourse of responsible patriotism demanded that middle-class women, as patriots, fight to gain the rights denied to their community.

“Responsible patriots” kept many of the tenets of the earlier focus on respectability intact, especially those involving the power of womanhood to change the course of history. African American women believed that their morality could command respect, and that they should continue to situate themselves at the forefront of the equal rights movement. Marjorie Mackenzie, a Washington, D.C. lawyer, told a convention of NCNW members:

Colored women, particularly, need to work toward the post war goal of a single standard democracy. . . A task which confronts all colored women is to obliterate the idea among white people that colored people need to prove themselves. . . We are not on probation in the human race. . . and colored women should constantly be on guard to offset the insidious sabotage of our best efforts based on the prevailing idea that as a group

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^6 “The President’s Message,” Aframerican Women’s Journal, Winter 1941, p 1 (Can be found in NCNW Papers, Series 13 Box 1 Folder 9, Mary McLeod Bethune Council House, National Historic Site, Washington, D.C. Hereafter NCNW.)

^7 “President’s Message,” The Aurora, XVII: 10 (Spring 1942), 10.
we are lazy, unreliable, and stupid.\(^8\)

African American club women realized that white women had been historically more receptive to opening up race relations with the black community, and they believed that if they could get through to white women by working with them on the homefront, then perhaps women as a whole could effect changes in the social structure of the country. Bethune argued that "Through our united effort with the women of the world we can transform prejudice into tolerance, tolerance into appreciation, appreciation into cooperation, and cooperation into brotherhood."\(^9\)

The wartime appeal also borrowed ideas about class privilege from the traditional discourse of respectability. In fact, the language of responsible patriotism could not extricate itself from certain aspects of the Victorian discourse. Club women were self-described middle-class activists. They believed that membership in sororities, exclusive clubs, and certain church affiliations signified membership in the middle class. Moreover, they suggested that homemaker status or certain college-required professions were evidence of a woman's middle-class lifestyle. For example, the YWCA Business and Professional Girls' Clubs only allowed teachers, stenographers, librarians, and social workers into their circles. All other professions fell under the Industrial Girls' Clubs.\(^10\) Middle-class African American women claimed that "As women who are privileged

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\(^9\) Report from Bethune, NCNW Annual Report 15 October 1943, NCNW, Series 2, Box 1, Folder 18.

\(^10\) "YWCA Unit Will Meet at Forum," *Richmond Afro-American*, 3 October 1940, 4.
beyond the average of our race, we have responsibilities.”’ They considered themselves specially appointed to deal with the problems of their race, believing that they had superior minds and enhanced status in the community. Bethune told Deltas at a conference of sorors: “You sorors are in positions of leadership. You have trained minds and splendid abilities.”’ Middle-class women also acknowledged that not everyone could be accorded their status, and, consequently, they understood that their status enabled them to help lower-class black women. Bethune warned the Deltas: “Do not be satisfied with your own success but go out into the highways and byways where your less fortunate sisters reside, and endeavor to show them the light and lift them up. . . . to continue this fight of making democracy share its privileges and opportunities, as well as hardships, with all persons living under this democratic form of government.”’

Sometimes, middle-class women struggled with the paradox of speaking out for democracy from organizations that excluded vast numbers of lower-class African Americans. Often, these black women would try to justify their position in society as leaders—when they were able to raise their own status, the entire black community would benefit. Beulah Whitby, Detroit’s Wartime Welfare Commissioner, Secretary of Detroit’s Interracial Commission, and National AKA President, pointed out that historically, sororities had been organizations that promoted stringent standards of conduct, making them part of middle- and upper-class culture. She claimed, however, that AKA had

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11 “Message from the Editor,” National Notes, 1:1 (October 1941), 1, 4.
13 Ibid., 4.
always been socially conscious with its scholarship program, cultural contributions.

Mississippi Health Project, and Non-Partisan Council. She asked members at a national
congress "Are we willing to give up our C+ and B average requirements, and our rigid
black-balling based on whether a candidate conformed to middle and upper class
standards?" The answer was an unequivocal "no." Later in an interview, when asked if
leadership of black organizations were only interested in the middle class. Whitby
answered:

It was very necessary that the leadership should come from
trained people. In response to the feeling that many people
used to have that in the middle class when a person got
educated...he forgot about the common people...if it had
not been for these people who had some advantages of training
being willing to give of themselves in leadership. I think that the
Negro group as a whole would be in a much worse position.

Volunteer Work

Middle-class women, as volunteers, could provide the force behind the civil rights
movement because they could claim compensation from the state for their unpaid labor.

Advocates of the discourse of responsible patriotism believed that volunteer work on the
homefront would be the key to African American women's entry into negotiations with
the state over civil rights. They believed that once they insisted on being included in
patriotic efforts to fight the war, the wartime state would have to listen to their demands
for equality on all fronts. Bethune urged Deltas to push hard for the right to volunteer on

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14 "Beulah Whitby, "The Increasing Awareness of our Social Responsibility." Minutes of the 23rd Annual
Boule, 36. Box 1. AKA Archives, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center. Howard University.

15 Beulah Whitby Interview, 36, Oral History Collection, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Walter P.
Reuther Library, Wayne State University.
the homefront: "We must insist that we be given the opportunity to serve, to use our talents and abilities to the utmost during the time when the national welfare requires sacrifice from all of its citizens."\(^{16}\) As contributors to the war, African American women believed that they had the right to demand equal treatment on all fronts, especially in the right to volunteer to help the country win the war. Antoinette Bowler, Zeta Phi Beta member, Second African Baptist Church member, Richmond's NCNW president, lifetime resident of Richmond and Virginia Union University Graduate, wrote to the NCNW that "Much has been in the papers requiring volunteer service on the part of women. We have failed to see where Negro women have been asked to participate. We accepted that as our first issue to work on. . ."\(^{17}\) By 1942, Bowler was head of the senior hostesses group, or head chaperone, of the new black USO.

While women of all classes participated in volunteer services, club women believed it to be their special, primary duty to make an impact on society in this way. Many had more time to devote to volunteer services, because they were housewives or teachers, and they believed that their prominence in the black community made them more visible to whites as they performed their patriotic duty. Whitby wrote to her sorors:

To support the War Effort becomes a responsibility of major importance to us. This would include the Bond-Stamp Programs, Drives, and Rallies, the USO programs, the varied Red Cross activities, Canteen Service. . .Alpha Kappa Alpha with the hundreds in its ranks equipped to render a vigorous leadership should lead the attack on the Home Front for a complete victory. We must be a vital, contributing part of every fight in every local community

\(^{16}\) "Delta Sorors Hear Women's Challenge," *Detroit Tribune* 3 January 1942, 4.

\(^{17}\) Letter from Antoinette Bowler to Mrs. Norman, 19 March 1941, NCNW Series 4 Box 1 Folder 18.
where Negroes are attacking those things which destroy true democracy.  

Club women across the country responded to their leaders' calls. In 1941, Richmond's African American women registered in large numbers to volunteer for knitting, sewing, library work, motor corps, canteen work, group leadership, case work assistants, and dramatics with various defense agencies. In 1943, with Whitby as Director, Detroit's African American women created the Women's Agency for National Defense through the auspices of the NCNW. Bethune was the General of the organization, and although it was open to women of all races, it was created to counter discriminatory practices in volunteer groups throughout the country: "The WANDS will serve a great need, and especially in areas where our women are not permitted to serve through other existing agencies." It worked to force openings in other organizations by giving black women experience in voluntary homefront activities. The NCNW modeled it after the OCD and Red Cross programs, right down to the "snappy uniform with insignia for members who have earned them by rendering some volunteer service in the war program."

African American club women involved themselves in many activities to support the war. Raising money for and purchasing bonds and war stamps tied African American


20 Women's Army for National Defense Summary, NCNW Series 18, Box 8, Folder 9.

21 Ibid.
women to the state by linking the women directly to the financing of the war. African
American women’s fundraising work made them indispensable to the prosecution of the
three billion dollar war, and they were aware of the important nature of this work.
Nationally, sororities and clubs spent thousands on war bonds. In 1942, Zeta Phi Betas in
the mid-Atlantic region had purchased $4000 in stamps and bonds to add to the large
contributions of other regions at their annual convention. The Order of Eastern Stars
pledged to buy $10,000 in war stamps and bonds by 1942. AKA and Delta each invested
$25,000 in war bonds by 1943. Locally, chapters worked hard to buy bonds as well.
Deltas in Detroit raised enough to buy a $500 war bond and the Women’s Benevolent
Club in Richmond purchased a $1000 bond.22

Although investing in bonds was an important activity for club members. African
American women provided the bulk of the labor in the black community for war bond
selling. After honing their fundraising skills for scholarships, church building, and
community uplift efforts, African American women had community networks in place as
they turned to support the government’s efforts. Raising money for war bonds was
merely an extension of their previous uplift efforts, although the benefits were directed
towards waging war. As early as 1940, Mrs. W.H. Hughes, Mrs. Henrietta Segear, and
Miss Marion Bell commandeered Maggie Walker High in Richmond as their Headquarters
for a massive fundraising effort for the Red Cross Colored Division for War Relief. They

22 “128 Delegates Attend Zeta Regional Session,” Richmond Afro-American, 16 May 1942, 16; “Eastern
Stars to Buy $10,000 U.S. Bonds,” Richmond Afro-American, 8 August 1942, 19; “Delta Bond Investment
Now $25,000,” Richmond Afro-American, 8 March 1943, 16; “AKA’s Purchase $25,000 in Bonds,”
Richmond Afro-American, 15 May 1943; “Detroit Deltas Win Northwest Trophy,” Detroit Tribune 2 May
1942, 4; “Club Invests in War Bond, Richmond Afro-American, 31 October 1942, 9.
set up booths in theaters and other public places, and they raised thousands for humanitarian aid. Richmond’s AKA chapters led one of the most successful and creative war bond drives in the history of the city’s seven war loan drives. During the Third War Bond Rally in 1943, AKAs held a Jamboree to kick off the drive. They had picnics and sold stamps and bonds from booths in the black neighborhoods. They then featured an event at Skateland Roller Rink featuring skits and talent shows by servicemen, with music provided by the Ninth Regiment Band. Admission was, of course, the purchase of stamps. By the end of the drive, just two weeks later, the thirty-nine members of AKA were able to double their expected projections by selling $10,000 worth of bonds and stamps.

Club women in Detroit were also active in raising funds for the war. For example, the Molly Pitcher Club got into the patriotic spirit by dressing up in colonial costumes and staging a contest on “Molly Pitcher Day.” The fifteen club members, in full Molly Pitcher dress, then went to the streets to collect war bond money. At the end of their campaign, they had raised over $20,000. In 1944, members of the St. John CME Gallant Club staged a valiant effort to sell bonds and stamps. Mrs. Alberta Campbell received a certificate for selling $11,625 in bonds and $3,472 in stamps. Other members of the group sold $7,650 in bonds and $33.75 in stamps.

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African American women's assistance in bond drives to support the government had important implications. As if they were holding stock in a company, these women were buying stock in the government, and could argue that they deserved a voice in the way the government "conducted business," or created policies. African American club women proved themselves indispensable in raising money very quickly for the costly war. They raised the stakes of citizenship by providing a direct link between the black community's money and the government's financial needs.

African American club women also provided service work for the Red Cross and the OCD as part of the implementation of the responsible patriotism program. This work, although harboring traditional roots, was part of the radical program called for by national club leaders. Their knitting and sewing, rolling bandages, and participating in first aid and home nursing classes meshed nicely with their ideology of respectability, in that this type of work upheld the normative gender role of woman as comforter and caretaker.

Although not every woman working in voluntary services was middle-class, the bulk of the women who provided these crucial services were homemakers or teachers, since becoming certified in the classes necessary to participate in the programs was very time consuming and often costly. As editor Frances Leonard explained, "They are doing their bit cheerfully, quietly, unostensibly, but albeit with real courage and merit...They are the home front morale boosters...the knitters, the homemakers...the element that helps to...

maintain some semblance of normalcy in this upside down chaotic world."^25 Taken in context with African American women leaders’ calls to participate in order to prove their patriotism and thus legitimize their demands for equality during the war. these actions were part of a program that was subversive. While the activities were awash in traditional constructions of respectability, the fact that middle-class women participated in state activities and criticized state policies was radical, given that the government expected full participation in the war but no criticism of the country’s social or economic structures.

Although many club women simply attended official Red Cross units set up in Richmond and Detroit, others easily translated knitting and sewing units into social activities. Throughout the war, Richmond women met at the Community House to sew garments for war relief. By 1942, several had expanded their knowledge by taking knitting classes so that they could send sweaters overseas. Since the work was voluntary, all women were accepted into the group, but the time of the meetings—Thursdays from 11 am to 3 p.m., dictated that most working women could not attend. From June-September 1942, thirteen women formed the core group of regulars, while others dropped in periodically to help. AKAs volunteered to roll bandages as a group project at St. Phillip’s Hospital, to be used both on site and in the war. Detroit’s American Beauty Social Club held potluck dinners while they sewed dresses and other garments in members’ homes throughout the war, and the Lucy Thurman YWCA held sewing classes for both war relief garments and for “emphasis on remodeling and restyling for wartime

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The ladies in this class must have been both stylish and popular with the rationing board.

The Red Cross considered Home hygiene, First Aid, and Volunteer Nursing courses all a part of women’s domain, and each was vital to the war effort. African American women took advantage of classes to train themselves to make the homefront a safer place, and again to prove themselves a vital link in the national defense chain, especially in the face of a severe shortage of medical personnel caused by war recruitment. As with knitting and sewing units, classes were technically available to all women, but the fact that most courses ran four to six weeks and that all volunteers had to pay for their own uniforms prohibited many lower-class women from joining. For example, a Volunteer Nurses’ Aide course in Richmond required a high school education, a six month course, and $30 for a registration fee on top of the purchase of books and uniforms. Not only was the cost quite high by 1943 standards, but the time and educational requirements were aimed at attracting a middle-class group of women.

African American women in both Richmond and Detroit volunteered in great numbers for Red Cross classes during the war. In 1941, 76 women quickly filled the first Home Hygiene course offered by the Red Cross for Richmond’s black community. One month later, 27 women qualified as home nurses and waited to be called for defense...

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service after they passed their course at the recreational center. Nursing was such a popular course that Richmond's Phyllis Wheatley YWCA sponsored another class in 1942 in which 39 women prepared for "possible emergency service." Classes in Richmond ran continuously throughout the war—the last class of seven home nurses graduated in 1945. While nursing courses seemed to draw the most volunteers in Richmond, first aid and nursing were equally popular among women in Detroit. In Detroit, 29 women spent 20 hours learning CPR, first aid, and setting broken bones in order to become members of the Red Cross Hospital and Receiving corps. In 1942 alone, 21 women received advanced first aid and 75 women received standard first aid certificates. The Red Cross set up two home nursing "schools" for Detroit's women, especially for "Homemakers who are anxious to do the best possible job of taking care of their families." Sixty women enrolled immediately. Apparently hoping to make their own homes more secure by doing their best to take care of their own families, the Order of the Eastern Star organized a class for its members in 1944.

Like medical courses, nutrition classes were an important part of the program of wartime service. By participating in the government's nutrition awareness campaigns.


African American club women showed how as homemakers, they were crucial to the rationing effort. Moreover, by sponsoring nutrition seminars, club women could publicly display their identities as skilled mothers and housewives. African American women attempted to use the nutrition program to “uplift” poor women as they taught those less fortunate how to prepare nutritious foods on a budget.

Both Richmond and Detroit’s club women participated in sponsoring nutrition programs in neighborhoods throughout their respective cities. AKAs in Richmond sponsored several nutrition awareness programs in Jackson Ward, the historically black district with many low-income residents. They started by practicing good nutrition in their own meetings, and then made presentations to local schools. They also furnished prizes for the best essays on nutrition from each school. Zenobia Gilpin, AKA president, chaired a local committee which sponsored a federal nutrition program in Jackson Ward. She helped organize courses like “Meats for Victory Meals,” in which teachers discussed how to prepare what middle-class women considered a decent dinner on a limited budget, which included as much meat as a housewife could get from the rationing board. Other club women directed their efforts towards the Fulton district, another neighborhood that housed many low-income African American families. In cooperation with the Federal Security Administration, the YWCA organized nutrition classes at the neighborhood’s Bethlehem Center. Eighteen women enrolled for the first class. Moreover, the Fulton
Garden Club and Mother's Club of Bethlehem Center sponsored a series of lectures and canning demonstrations through the summer of 1943.  

Detroiters did not sponsor as many nutrition and canning classes as Richmond, perhaps because the city was not bordered by farms as Richmond was and did not have the residential space within the city to grow gardens. Still, club women did seek to enlighten the community about healthy eating during the war. Detroit's Adult Group of the Lucy Thurman YWCA showed movies on "nutrition and the war" in 1943, which helped teach better nutrition to teenagers. The Detroit Association of Women's Clubs gave nutrition classes throughout the war at its club house. Later, five African American nutrition instructors went to five canning centers for six weeks in order to teach food conservation across the city.  

In addition to providing information about nutrition, several groups in Richmond and Detroit focused their attention on how to explain the often confusing guidelines of the ration board in order to make sure that women in their communities got their fair share of rationed items. Richmond's Association of Ministers' Wives sponsored a talk by a rationing specialist with the Office of Price Administration. The OPA officer traveled to black neighborhoods across the city in order to explain point rationing and meat pricing to


women at different neighborhood centers. The Detroit Housewives' League trained women to use rationing stamps, taught OPA regulations, and sponsored consumer education classes throughout the war both at their headquarters and at neighborhood centers across the city. While club women were attempting to spread the government's message that conservation and good nutrition could win the war, evidence suggests that there was a class element in the demonstrations and classes given in both cities. By sponsoring rationing and nutrition courses, African American club women told women of lower-classes how to best prepare foods for their families. This sent a message to lower-class women that the meals that they had been cooking appeared inadequate to middle-class observers. By teaching cooking skills to working-class women, club women also proved to the general population their own knowledge and skill at homemaking tasks, a main feature of earlier uplift programs.

While learning first aid, nursing, and sponsoring nutrition awareness and rationing sessions all reflected club women's belief in responsible patriotism, serving African American troops was the linchpin of club women's efforts. By sponsoring canteens, USO dances, and care packages for soldiers, African American club women provided unpaid labor that was absolutely essential to feeding and housing troops, as well as maintaining troop morale. Moreover, by volunteering in the segregated and often highly inadequate black USO and OCD facilities, African American women could point to concrete effects of segregation on troop and civilian morale while they demanded equality for the black

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35 "Women Given Rationing Aid by Specialist," Richmond Afro-American, 17 April 1943, 16; "History of Detroit Housewives' League," p 3, Housewives' League of Detroit Collection, Box 1, History File, Burton
community. For example, in 1941, Jeanetta Welch Brown, AKA's legal representative to its lobbying committee, the Non-Partisan Council, wrote to the Director of Recreation, Health, Welfare, and Defense that 600 black soldiers had no facilities for recreation at a Texas base but white soldiers had an air conditioned rec hall, paid senior hostesses, a movie theater, and a library. She emphasized that "Our organization is intensely interested in seeing that Negro soldiers are accorded adequate recreational facilities...It is also only fair that equal recreational facilities should be provided for Negro and white soldiers alike." In addition, African American women could express disgust in the often shoddy treatment they received from national and local USO and Red Cross personnel. Nowhere is this more apparent than in a written memo by the local Richmond USO Colored Division Director, Ada Burroughs: "Red Cross of Richmond refused to convey Negro hostesses to McGuire [base] although taking white hostesses. After many conferences between special services and them, the Henrico County Red Cross consented to transport them once a week, eight hostesses to McGuire in a small station wagon...Red Cross needs Christianity."

African American women found themselves in the position of not only providing all of the necessary unpaid labor for the USO Colored Division Staff, but for even finding

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36 Letter from Jeanetta Welch to Mark McCloskey, 13 November 1941, Records of the Joint Army and Navy Boards and Committees, RG 225, Entry 18, Box 1, Negro Problems File, National Archives, Washington, D.C.

money to provide facilities for soldiers at all. However frustrating it was, helping with the USO gave black women a real center of power by actually enabling them to provide the important infrastructure for the housing and entertainment of millions of troops. Since the USO and Red Cross had already considered black troop morale an afterthought in their recreation programs, black women raised money to start troop centers in their own cities. The government was well aware of the work that African American women did for the soldiers, and this provided a strong negotiating point for responsible patriots. Richmond women managed to secure $30,000 from the Federal Works Agency to upgrade their dormitory facilities for soldiers, as a typical weekend saw over 100 soldiers turned away from the 150-cot OCD center. The black community raised another $5,000 to put gyms and showers in the center. In Detroit, club women enabled the expansion of both the city’s main center, the John R. USO, and USO rooms at surrounding bases. The Deltas gave $100 and Mrs. Hester Wilson gave $250 for upgrading the USO, while the Goginnette Social Club sponsored a bridge party to raise $275 for a club room at Fort Brady. Other women’s clubs raised $1200 for Fort Brady rooms. In fact, a national consultant for the USO praised the Detroit volunteers’ ability to raise their own funds and “plan and execute” their own programs in accordance with the national USO’s wishes.38

While Detroit’s black community raised enough money and received enough funding from the national USO to create a separate USO structure for troops, Richmond had to house its USO centers in the YMCA and at an old high school. The city council’s unwillingness to construct new facilities for black troops suggests the pervasiveness of southern segregation practices, in which blacks had to deal with receiving castoffs from the white community or make do with inferior facilities. In this context, the servicing work of USO women became even more important as they struggled to bridge gaps between inadequate funding and entertaining thousands of troops.

While African American club women stressed the importance of serving the troops, there was no way of getting around the fact that having eighteen- to twenty-year-old unmarried women provide entertainment for the troops called into question the tenets of “respectability.” While club women stressed the patriotic duty provided by these young women, the fact remained that USO and OCD junior hostesses literally provided their bodies for men’s pleasure at dances and parties. The National USO staff, for example, praised Richmond Girl Service Organization (GSO) members “for the service they have rendered the agency, which is devoted to providing comforts for service men.”

Although senior hostesses were very cautious chaperones who monitored just how much “comfort” GSO members provided for service men, the sexual undercurrent of having teenagers dancing with servicemen could not be ignored. Richmond’s USO actually held a “Kiss Dance,” in which servicemen were invited to dance with hostesses with the promise

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of receiving a kiss at the end of each dance. At the close of each dance, hostesses gave
the men Hershey’s kisses, but later in the evening, a lottery determined which lucky soldier
could get a kiss from his choice of hostesses lined up for his pleasure. Interestingly
enough, the soldier chose to kiss a senior hostess whose husband was overseas in the
war.⁴⁰ Both Richmond and Detroit’s USOs put junior hostesses’ bodies on display with
numerous contests, in which “popularity and beauty were qualifications for queenhood.”⁴¹
Detroit’s USO went so far as to mail “pin up” pictures of young women to soldiers in
camps who would judge the winner based on “beauty, charm, and shapeliness.”⁴² One
cannot help but wonder how soldiers could accurately judge young women’s “charm” by
merely viewing their pictures.

Moreover, since the dominant society already constructed black women as sexually
available, the discourse surrounding the young women’s service work played into a
normative societal definition that African American women had tried hard to dislodge
from the cultural consciousness. Sociologists, scientists, and military experts were all
concerned with the virtue of young women who worked (and played) with soldiers, and
they tried to come up with ways to surveil girls’ activities. Given the concern at the time
over white women’s activities, it is understandable that black women would be particularly
concerned with maintaining the “respectability” of the young women in their community.

⁴⁰ “Leigh St. USO Notes,” Richmond Afro-American, 14 October 1944, 10.
⁴¹ “USO Hostess Club Will Crown Queen,” Richmond Afro-American, 29 April 1944, 12.
African American women used a discourse of conventional respectability in order to solve this sticky problem with the junior hostesses. Their first solution was to publicize the strong moral character and purity of the junior hostesses. Senior hostesses chose GSO members based on stringent qualifications, almost as if they were conducting a sorority rush. In fact, in both the senior and junior hostess divisions, women had to apply for membership, which the incumbent group then decided to accept or reject. A reporter for the *Detroit Tribune* concluded that:

> We learned in our visit to the servicemen's center that the young women known as junior hostesses are only selected after careful and painstaking appraisal by Mrs. Carrington... they undergo a training which consists of lectures on personality, appearance, topics to be discussed and those to be avoided by the hostesses when in conversation and in general only those things expected of a member of the GSO serving as hostesses.

At least one young woman in Detroit, Miss Laura Shumake, determined that a letter from her minister might help her chances of acceptance. Reverend R. L. Bradby, minister of the oldest African American church in the city, assured the director of the GSO that Shumake had "fine character... good family background... [was a] college graduate... and is very talented." By casting the teens and young adults as beyond reproach, African American women attempted to halt any negative publicity about GSO members' activities.

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45 Letter from R. L. Bradby to Mrs. Ardenah Stephens, 8 December 1943, Second Baptist Church Collection, Reel 3, Michigan Historical Collection, Bentley Library, University of Michigan.
Senior African American hostesses also publicized their own respectability and prominence in the community. In addition, they focused on the power of chaperones to control the behavior of the young people. Many club women involved themselves in the chaperone program—for example, Antoinette Bowler and Rosa Gragg were the head chaperones in Richmond and Detroit. Women's editor of the *Michigan Chronicle* Frances Leonard suggested that the average soldier “is in the presence of decent young women and under the watchful eye of the women who serve as senior hostesses and directors” so parents of the young women did not have to worry about their daughters’ reputations.

In Richmond, answering a call from the USO entertainment committee urging “all social clubs in the community” to become members of the Defense Service Unit, the Sisterhood of the Second Baptist Church, Zeta Phi Beta, AKA, the Delver Women's Club, YWCA homemakers’ clubs, and the Servicemen's Wives' Club all provided many senior hostesses for various functions. In Detroit, members of many clubs, including the Detroit Sophisticates Club, War Widows' Club, Sapphire Club, and the Entre Nous Club chaperoned USO functions. The importance of the visibility of senior hostess chaperones in the community was so great that when Richmond's GSOs went to a

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47 “Defense Service Unit to Be Host,” *Richmond Afro-American*, 9 May 1942, 12.


function in Petersburg. Richmond’s black newspaper assured the community that the girls were “chaperoned by prominent matrons from that city.”

African American club women who sponsored the USO functions made sure to keep the entertainment light—most parties and dances resembled sorority functions, and in keeping with the prominence of both junior and senior hostesses, chaperones reported the finite details to the newspapers in order to be published in the society pages. Richmond’s and Detroit’s USOs each held many theme dances, in which GSOS appeared in costumes after decorating the halls according to the theme of the night. They wore white and green and danced in shamrock-bedecked halls on St. Patrick’s Day. They held “barnyard frolics.” “kiddie parties.” Game nights, Garden Parties, and Halloween Dances. In Richmond, the “Sweater Girl” dance saw junior hostesses dressed in the popular (and rather tight) sweater sets of the day. Not surprisingly, this dance drew the highest attendance of servicemen to the USO to date in Richmond.

Several of both Richmond’s and Detroit’s hostesses came up with clever ideas to host servicemen and help to contribute to the war in other ways. Richmond’s senior

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50 “USO Plays Host to Hill Troops,” Richmond Afro-American, 30 May 1942, 5.

hostesses sponsored a scrap dance, in which GSO members had to bring scrap paper for admission to the dance. They also held a dance to collect cigarettes for men overseas. Each junior hostess had to bring two packages of cigarettes, and the senior hostesses decorated the dance hall with various cigarette brand displays from Richmond companies. Detroit's Co-Ette club sponsored a Christmas party for the soldiers to which all participants had to bring groceries for the poor or cigarettes for soldier care packages.52

Although hosting soldiers in USOs remained a relatively safe activity, club women worked hard to protect the reputations of the young women who traveled hundreds of miles a year to attend dances at army bases across Virginia and Michigan. Hundreds of young women from Richmond attended holiday dances, picnics, parties, formals, and garden parties at Camp Lee, about 45 minutes outside of Richmond. Army bases held dances at least once a week, but in two weeks they actually managed to hold seven dances for men about to go overseas. Detroit's GSOs gave shows and sponsored game days, teas, and dances at numerous camps throughout the south Michigan area, including at Fort Brady and the Grosse Ile Naval Base.53 In order to make sure that nothing untoward happened at the bases, dozens of chaperones accompanied each trip. Mrs. Othelia Brown, Executive Secretary of the colored division of Richmond's OCD, made sure that enough


chaperones signed up for each trip as she planned the parties with military personnel. As the Richmond Afro-American explained it, "The chaperones see to it that the girls are properly supervised at these dances." Moreover, the chaperones worked with the military to ensure the safety of the girls—in a report of activities at Fort Eustis, The Afro American reported that: "Mom and Pop don't need to worry because their Nell volunteered to become a hostess at a dance for soldiers, if this and other camps follow the army's general pattern." Chaperones insisted on an armed guard unit to accompany their busses full of women to the recreation halls, where the military police then kept the men and women in the halls during the dance. Soldiers remained in the halls until the MPs escorted the women safely off the base. Again, African American club women refused to take any chance regarding reputation and respectability.

While chaperoning and hosting USO dances remained an activity of the younger African American club women set, older middle-class women found plenty of ways to comfort soldiers. By serving food, helping to find housing, and generally "mothering" soldiers in their cities, Richmond and Detroit's club women reinforced the power of respectable womanhood in helping to wage war by maintaining troop morale. The Afro-American recognized that middle-class women were acting as stand-in mothers of a sort.


“Monroe Center Makes Soldiers Feel at Home in Richmond,” Richmond Afro-American, 10 October 1942, 5.

when it called Mrs. Othelia Brown "mother" to the hundreds of men who have availed themselves of the facilities of the [Monroe] center...\(^6\) Hundreds of women from church and civic groups turned out every weekend to make and serve breakfast to the men, help the men find rooms for the night, sew buttons and mend clothing, and staff the USO lounge which provided cigarettes, candy, and cookies to soldiers passing through Richmond. The Homemakers’ League and the Women’s Unit of the Fifth Street Baptist Church were particularly instrumental in providing this unpaid reproductive labor. In addition, the Red Cross canteen unit sponsored an enormous and elaborate Christmas dinner for hundreds of soldiers stationed around Richmond. Mrs. Walter White, wife of Richmond’s NAACP President, was in charge of the canteen unit.\(^7\)

Detroit’s club women simply did not have the volume of soldiers to service, so they did not focus as much on providing for soldiers in the city, but rather, they turned much of their attention to caring for the soldiers in the bases around Michigan. Deltas, the Choicettes, the War Widows, and the American Beauty Social Club all spent the Christmas holidays during the war packing boxes for soldiers. Deltas sponsored a massive city-wide book drive for soldiers at Selfridge Air Base. The Lucy Thurman YWCA Girl Reserves held a fashion show and collected books as admission. Ultimately, the two groups netted 210 books, well above the expected quota. Under the guidance of Mrs.

\(^{6}\) "Monroe Center Makes Soldiers Feel At Home."

Jones and Mrs. Witt, the Girl Scouts of Ebenezer Baptist Church gave cookies and candy to men at the USO. Deltas volunteered at the Red Cross Canteen, which served 400 soldiers at a concert on Belle Isle in one day and a total of 2,000 soldiers in several months during 1943. The Housewives’ League of Detroit, the Berea Church Ladies’ Society, and the Sapphire Club all provided food to soldiers staying at the USO.\(^8\)

African American women’s unpaid labor had a phenomenal effect on the power of the USOs, which gave them power within the state to determine how the soldiers could best be supported. It also enabled them to position themselves within the state as important homefront volunteers who filled a tremendous need to house and feed the soldiers by performing traditionally gendered work. In Richmond, 480 women clocked enough hours to be listed on the honor roll of the Leigh Street USO. In Detroit, 43 clubs staffed the USO and chaperoned over 200 junior hostesses.\(^9\) These women put in countless hours to service the African American soldiers whose needs had not been addressed adequately by either the USO or the military. African American women’s reproductive labor—cooking, entertaining, sewing, comforting—nicely meshed the

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traditional ideology of respectability with the new discourse of responsible patriotism. By maintaining traditional gender roles in their volunteer work, African American women protested against inequalities as respectable women who deserved a voice in the wartime state.

**Civil Rights Work**

At the same time that they were creating a new definition of responsible patriotism and were proving themselves invaluable to the wartime state, black women focused on how to secure their rights. As they demanded the right to volunteer in the prosecution of the war, African American women wrote to the government to get blacks on wartime administrations and committees, sponsored panels dealing with racism, raised money and recruited members for the NAACP, exhorted their fellow African Americans to vote, and demanded equal job opportunities for themselves as professionals and for working-class women. National organizations created civil rights programs which club women worked to implement on a local level.

In their program to promote civil rights nationwide, sororities and other national groups looked to reduce discrimination against blacks in national government. African American club women's prominence enabled them to be heard by whites in power, even if Roosevelt's administration ignored their demands. In 1941 and 1942, AKA's 147 chapters sponsored several campaigns designed to get prominent blacks appointed to federal positions. Chapters across the country flooded both Roosevelt and Frances Perkins, Secretary of Labor, with telegrams and letters demanding that black women be appointed to the Women's Bureau. When Women's Bureau Director Mary Anderson
wrote back to the chapters claiming that it had no more money to hire anyone, and that it had temporarily employed several African American women as clerical workers. AKA took their story to the black newspapers. This enabled the women to secure the support of the national black community, which could then pressure the government to change the policy. The women charged Perkins with personally snubbing the prominent sorority members, as the AKAs were fully aware of the fact that the bureau was, in fact, hiring new workers and that it had passed over qualified African American women already employed in other government bureaus. The sorority called the situation "ridiculous." AKAs then wrote to Roosevelt, urging him to appoint both blacks and sympathetic whites to the War Manpower Commission. AKA's Non-Partisan Council challenged Roosevelt's seriousness about changing race relations. Jeanetta Welch Brown reminded Roosevelt of his previous Executive Order 8802 and made it clear that AKAs expected him to keep his word:

WE REALIZE: 1. That you, too, are most anxious to demonstrate to the world that democracy can be made to work in America. 2. That a step was made in that direction when you issued Executive Order 8802. 3. That in order to make democracy work, members of every race must feel that they share fully in all places of their government.61

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60 Telegrams and Letters from AKA Chapters, 1941, Records of the Women's Bureau, RG 86, Entry 17, Box 1, AKA File, National Archives, Washington, D.C. (Hereafter Women's Bureau); Form Letter from Women's Bureau, Women's Bureau, Entry 36, Box 22, Negro Organizations File; "Charge Secretary Perkins Snubbed AKA Job Request," Richmond Afro-American, 1 November 1941, 17.

61 Norma Boyd and Jeanetta Welch to FDR, 1 April 1942, Records of the President's Committee on Fair Employment Practices, RG 228, Entry 25, Box 210, AKA File, National Archives, Washington, D.C. (Hereafter FEPC)
Like AKA, the NCNW took an active role in attempting to make both its own position and the position of black women in general more secure by negotiating with the government for more representation. Bethune sent a "stinging rebuke" to Henry L. Stimpson, Secretary of War, for being "Deliberately snubbed by the women’s interest section of the bureau of public relations of the War Department," when the NCNW found itself among the many black women’s groups not invited to participate in a council on soldiers’ welfare. She fumed: "... We are not blind to what is happening. We are not humiliated. We are incensed! We believe what we have asked is what we all desire—a unity of action, thought, and spirit. We still seek this end and urge you that colored representation be included in this advisory council." Bethune was a master at using the discourse of responsible patriotism. In this statement, she accused the War Department of promoting disunity by continuing racism within its own administration, thus hampering the war effort.

National African American women’s groups also sought to educate white Americans about the persistent inequalities faced by middle-class black women and the black community as a whole by using a non-confrontational model of protest designed to appeal to white citizens. By creating programs to "enlighten" whites, African American women were able to list all of the racial problems in the nation without blaming whites directly for creating the problems. The NCNW held a "We Serve America Week" right after the Detroit, Harlem, and Mobile riots in order to show the daily humiliations faced by

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their community, and what their community had contributed to the war despite its
skepticism about American society in general. The NCNW called upon all “Negro wives
and mothers” to telegram FDR to request formal investigations of the riots and to
promote interracial meetings in their cities in order to educate white society about
discrimination.°°° Richmond’s NCNW chapter took up the national headquarters’
challenge by parading in their volunteer uniforms, sponsoring mass meetings and teas to
protest discrimination, and holding interracial programs to promote better race relations.°°°
AKA also sponsored a “Listen America Week” to make whites aware of the black
community’s feelings. They spoke about fighting discrimination in government agencies
and overturning white supremacist myths. Thomasina Johnson, legal representative to the
Non-Partisan council, concisely spelled out the desires of all African Americans in her
interpretation of the week’s message:

...the test of democracy in America is a test of color... We are still being discriminated against in war industries... we don’t want to be lynched...we are tired of exploitation and disfranchisement, and inferior schools and being politically lynched.°°°

The organizations sponsoring these weeks effectively spread the messages to the entire
country by advertising in newspapers and most importantly, on the radio, in a determined,
but not accusatory, manner. This policy of low confrontation was tied to concerns with

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°°° Letter from Mary McLeod Bethune to Antoinette Bowler, 11 June 1943, NCNW, Series 17, Box 28, Folder 3.

°°° “Listen America Week Planned to Show Other Side of Picture,” Richmond Afro-American. 21
November 1942, 16.
responsibility and wartime citizenship. Their criticism of American social relations could be construed as divisive to a state that demanded unity on the homefront, and so they moderated their message with a less aggressive tone.

National women's organizations also concerned themselves with maintaining the FEPC as a legitimate and powerful committee. Throughout the war, they urged Congress to make it a permanent commission, rather than a subcommittee of the War Manpower Commission, destined to end with the end of the war. Deltas poured money into their Committee to Establish a Permanent FEPC, and Sigma Gamma Rhos also sponsored members to go to Congress to lobby for FEPC continuance. Beulah Whitby went to Congress to testify for the FEPC; as Detroit's Commissioner of Wartime Welfare she was eminently qualified to speak of the economic climate in her city. Before the House, she argued that economic insecurity and unfair competition for jobs created a racially antagonistic climate for black workers that could be tempered only by a permanent and powerful FEPC.⁶⁶ The fact that Whitby was able to testify in front of Congress in 1944 suggests that African American women were, in fact, gaining some power within the state as a result of their actions during the war. In reality, Whitby was continuing a trend started by Mary McLeod Bethune in the 1930s, when her close relationship with Eleanor Roosevelt enabled her to engage with state officials at the highest level. Black women had

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come far in those few years, because Whitby held a captive audience of white men in a Senate hearing, and so her negotiations reached the center of American state power.  

Richmond and Detroit’s local sorority chapters and clubs continued their national organizations’ fights by promoting improved race relations and citizenship issues in sponsored panel talks, helping with NAACP membership drives, and registering voters. Richmond’s Queen Esther Temple, auxiliary of the Elks, sponsored a “civil liberties day,” with music and NAACP speakers. Teachers brought Virginia Union professors to talk to students about interracial cooperation in industry. The YWCA held a citizenship rally which addressed abolition of the poll tax, teachers’ pay equalization, and “local legislation to prevent the denial of civil rights in national defense.” The DuBois Circle Women’s Club brought in the Dean of Women from Howard University to speak to a large audience about the role of women in promoting civil rights. AKA sponsored lectures by Jeanetta Welch Brown and Thomasina Johnson at Virginia Union and Leigh St. Methodist Church, respectively. Each spoke about current legislative issues, education, and democracy in general.  

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Deborah Gray White discusses the growing power of black women within the state during the 1930s and attributes it to Bethune’s networking abilities in Too Heavy a Load: Black Women in Defense of Themselves (New York: W. W. Norton, 1998).

"Civil Liberties Program Held By Local Elks," Richmond Afro-American, 13 January 1940, 24; “Schools Take Lead in History Events, Richmond Afro-American, 17 December 1940, 4; “Citizenship Rally Scheduled at YW,” Richmond Afro-American, 17 December 1940, 6.

Detroit's club women began to promote civil rights and race relations panels and public meetings in 1943, when the outbreak of riots that paralyzed the city in June of that year brought a barrage of programs for the general populace. Detroit's YWCA Homemaker's Club sponsored United Auto Workers' representative Geraldine Bledsoe to speak on "Women's Place on the Home Front," and its Business and Professional Girls' Clubs created an interracial series dealing with how to promote better race relations. Delta held a forum on how to alleviate racial tensions and "un-teach" racial prejudices, and Iota Phi Lambda Sorority focused on how to participate more effectively in the war effort in its annual program. AKA held a tea for its members and other prominent women in order to introduce them to the local FEPC staff, and the YWCA leadership held an interracial program series dedicated to teaching about various races and cultures. By holding lectures and panel discussions, club women spread the discourse of responsible patriotism to the broader community, both white and black.

In addition to sponsoring civil rights programs for the public, African American club women promoted civil rights by signing up members and holding fundraisers for the NAACP. Because the NAACP needed funds during the war to finance its lawsuits against

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70 The riot, which lasted three days and wasted hundreds of hours in war labor and caused hundreds of thousands of dollars in damage in the black community as well as the lives of dozens of men, heightened Detroiters' awareness of the pervasive race problems in the community. Dominic Capeci and Martha Wilkerson, *Layered Violence: The Detroit Rioters of 1943* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1991), gives the most detailed account of the riot.

industries, schools, and election boards as well as to fight segregation in the military, it sponsored massive yearly membership drives nationwide that brought in the bulk of the money for its operating costs. Although women were not the only ones involved with membership drives and fundraisers, they vastly outnumbered the men in the NAACP recruitment ranks. As in war bond selling, African American club women had the connections through existing networks to reach the greatest number of people in their communities. In Richmond's 1940 drive, 17 women led general soliciting (neighborhood canvassing) and school soliciting teams. They managed to enroll 1300 new members. By 1942, dozens of women enrolled 1,790 members. In 1943, canvassers had enrolled 3,350 women, and by 1944, 3,452 people joined the NAACP. The increase in membership greatly enhanced the financial status of the local NAACP.  

Detroit's NAACP chapter was the largest in the country, so it did not need to make its membership drive as much of a centerpiece of the community as Richmond's chapter did, but women were still at the forefront of fundraisers. For example, Beulah Whitby was the chair of NAACP's Anniversary Ball fund-raiser. In 1945, canvassers had enrolled 3,474 members in one week, which counted towards their goal of 26,000 members. African American women's work for the NAACP was important not only

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because it brought much-needed funds to the organization, but because it helped to 
educate the general black community about the goals and programs of the NAACP.

One of the most important programs implemented by African American club 
women was their voting registration campaign. Because so many African Americans in 
the country could not vote, responsible patriotism involved both getting the ballot to those 
who were disfranchised and urging those in areas where the vote was possible to register, 
pay poll taxes, and do whatever else was necessary to ensure that their community had a 
voice in government. African American club women took their responsibility seriously, 
and spoke out on the right to vote as a patriotic duty. They saw it as their duty, as 
women, to vote and change the country while men were away at war. In 1944, Jeanetta 
Welch Brown, newly nominated Director of Women's Special Activities of the 
Democratic National Committee, argued: "As Wives, mothers, sisters, and sweethearts of 
men in the armed forces, it is our patriotic duty to fight for democracy with ballots just as 
they are fighting with bullets."74 Her remarks rooted African American women squarely in 
the center of the Double V movement, by likening their promotion of democracy to the 
actions of soldiers in the field. The NCNW was also concerned about making sure that 
women got out to vote. The NCNW Telefact warned all members that: "COUNCIL 
WOMEN MUST ASSUME THEIR FULL RESPONSIBILITY...in helping citizens get 
into the habit of exercising our democratic rights in ALL elections—city, County, State, 
Federal, boards of education, dog catchers [sic] and all kinds of elections where are [sic]

74 "Democrat Women Ask Registration of Voters," Michigan Chronicle, 30 September 1944, 16.
future is at stake.” NCNW members used the tropes of patriotic responsibility as they held themselves out as examples of true citizens exercising their civic right and duty for the good of their own community.

Club women in Richmond and Detroit worked hard to get their communities out to the ballot boxes. In Richmond, the Community Junior League advanced loans to members so that they could pay their poll taxes and register to vote. Nine women from Richmond’s NAACP chapter chaired a poll tax drive which sponsored meetings and teas to promote the payment of the poll tax. Once again supporting her effort to put pressure on government. Bethune came to Richmond and told a group of women at a meeting at Leigh Street Methodist Church that the vote was like a weapon that could be used to equalize salaries and get more federal jobs and appointments. Miss Bouldin of the Providence Park Protective League told fellow members that the vote was crucial to change in Richmond: “Whether you are seeking better homes, streets, traffic lights or larger social and economic justice, the vote is the path to these things.”

Unlike Richmond, Detroit did not have the poll tax to block the way to the ballot box. Instead, Detroit’s black community, by all accounts, seemed to suffer from apathy, in that many eligible voters did not go out of their way to register. In all probability, this “apathy” revealed the black community’s underlying skepticism about the power of the

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75 NCNW Telefact, 1:4 (September 1943), NCNW, Series 13, Box 2, Folder 1.

76 “Deadline is Set on Vote by League,” Richmond Afro-American, 11 May 1940, 4; “NAACP to Hold Poll Tax Drive,” Richmond Afro-American, 21 September 1940, 3; “Mrs. Bethune Calls Vote Chief Weapon,” Richmond Afro-American, 18 October 1941, 13.

77 “League Told Vote Will Net Progress,” Richmond Afro-American, 26 April 1941, 13.
vote in a context of the city's injustice. The mayor wholeheartedly supported segregation
in all industries and public housing projects, so the black community knew that the city
government supported racist community practices. Jeanetta Welch Brown became
disgusted with her community, and in an editorial directed at her fellow middle-class
women, she fumed: "We have a vote. Why can't we use it to see to it that our rights are
defended instead of being offended in Congress? The fight for Democracy is Ours.
Ladies."78 Apparently, several women took her admonition to heart. Several months
later, Mrs. Ruth Ellis, Mrs. Sue Colbert, Mrs. Helen Buford, and Mrs. Blanche Smith
registered over 1400 voters in one day on the Detroit streets in an NAACP voting
registration drive.79 African American women's campaigns to vote and register others to
do the same showed the government that they supported their words with action. They
helped to provide a direct political dialogue between their communities and the wartime
state by encouraging all African Americans to vote.

In Richmond, local teachers worked with the NAACP to fight for civil rights
within their own profession. From 1940-1942, the Richmond Teachers' Association
involved itself in a battle over salary equalization. By calling on the NAACP for help and
taking an unequal wage lawsuit through the court system, teachers eventually gained
enough strength to be in a good bargaining position, and they won their battle for equal
pay. In 1938, the average white teacher received $1,848, while the average black

teacher’s salary was only $1098.\(^{80}\) In 1940, after Norfolk’s black teachers won salary equalization through an appeal decision in the Federal District Court, the Richmond Teacher’s Association met to test the court’s decision in its city. More than two-thirds of the city’s 330 black teachers attended a meeting and unanimously asked the school board to drop the color differential in the wage scale. Their petition employed the discourse of responsible patriotism: “democracy would be strengthened by favorable action and...the law of the land would be fulfilled.”\(^{81}\) The Richmond teachers suggested an equalization plan that would bring salaries in line in five years with yearly increases costing $45,305. The white teacher’s association, the Teacher’s League, suggested a nine-year plan to better spread the costs. Each group submitted the plans to the board in the summer of 1941.\(^{82}\)

When the school board countered with a 15-year plan to raise salaries overall but not to dislodge the color barrier, Richmond’s black teachers went to war. First, they got the NAACP involved to sponsor anti-school board rallies. Then, three-fourths of the black teachers showed up at a board meeting, threatening a lawsuit if the board did not accept their plan. In addition, the teachers informed the board that a lawsuit would ask for immediate salary equalization at a great cost to the school system.\(^{83}\)


\(^{81}\) “All Teachers Back Petition on Equality,” *Richmond Afro-American*, 7 December 1940, 2.


\(^{83}\) “Teachers Given Their Contracts,” *Richmond Afro-American*, 4 October 1941, 1-2; “Virginia Teachers Plan Pay Suit,” 8 November 1941, 1.
The problem was—who would be the plaintiff for the test case? The teacher had to be someone with courage and moderate wealth, as many of the plaintiffs in Norfolk had lost their jobs as a result of the suit; someone prominent in the community, as publicity was important to the case; and someone respectable, patriotic, and generally above reproach, as the plaintiff had to make the white community sympathetic to the teachers' plight. The association decided to take Miss Antoinette Bowler up on her offer to stand as plaintiff—the same woman who was head of the USO senior hostesses, prominent Second African Baptist church member, Zeta Phi Beta soror, president of the local NCNW chapter, lifetime Richmond resident and Virginia Union grad, and, by this time, assistant secretary of the local NAACP. Although the teachers had the ideal candidate for the lawsuit, their actions still angered whites. The Richmond Times-Dispatch, generally known for its more moderate views on race, urged the teachers to drop the lawsuit. It employed an old excuse for racism in the New South when it declared in an editorial:

> Our Negro citizens must realize that there are many white Richmonders who do not regard the Supreme Court's order for salary equalization in the Norfolk case as either equitable or sensible... The attitude on this issue of the unreconciled and unreconstructed element of white Richmonders may be deplored. That does not change the fact that the attitude exists.

Despite massive opposition from the white community, the teachers filed the lawsuit. With its back against the wall, and knowing the Norfolk precedent virtually

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guaranteed a loss on appeal, if not immediately, the school board agreed to a friendly settlement. Although it refused to equalize salaries immediately, it did accept the original five-year plan, which the teachers accepted 151-68. Interestingly enough, there were people in the black community who believed that the teachers “sold out” the struggle by not fighting for immediate equalization. The president of the local NAACP argued that the teachers had set the equal rights movement back by many years.86 The teachers, however, were happy. Not only had they secured the promise of equal pay, but they got the color differential removed. And, as part of the friendly settlement, the school board had to sign a statement admitting that it discriminated against teachers based on their race, and assuring the teachers that the board would never discriminate against them again.87

This statement, and the entire battle itself, was an enormous step forward in the struggle for equality both in Richmond, and for teachers across the nation. By forcing the school board to admit a history of discrimination, Antoinette Bowler and the other teachers forced Richmond to acknowledge publicly the history of racism in the city. Moreover, by testing the waters of equal pay using the Norfolk precedent, Richmond school teachers reinforced the District Court’s ruling, leading the way for other teachers in Virginia and other areas to fight discrimination in their communities.

86 “5-Year Plan Accepted By Teachers,” Richmond Afro-American, 21 February 1942, 1-2.

SOCIAL WORK

African American club women believed that in order to promote and finally achieve equality, they would have to raise the next generation to respect both democratic principles and themselves as black Americans in order to create a new vanguard of responsible patriots who would take up the fight for civil rights. African American middle-class women were class-oriented in their youth programs, in that they ran programs that attempted to keep the children of working-class mothers, especially juvenile women, out of trouble. While middle-class children took part in club women's programs, especially through the YWCA and their schools, club women targeted working-class children as the main recipients of their efforts. As teachers and community leaders, middle-class women took over the reigns of leadership in programs that would raise children to be respectable citizens while winning the war.

In both Richmond and Detroit, many teachers promoted the ideas of responsible patriotism in their classrooms in order to make an impression on their cities’ youth. Richmond’s Maggie Walker High teachers got their students involved in selling bonds, and the students both bought and sold $13,846 bonds in 6 weeks—enough to buy 16 jeeps for the army. Teachers also sponsored the Girl Reserves Club of the YWCA. This group held a bond-selling contest in which the winner was honored at a special formal dance (with soldiers attending, of course). Teachers also invited Miss Grace Matthews, assistant district information officer of the OPA, to discuss the rationing program with young women at Armstrong High School. In this program, teachers showed girls how to develop into “respectable” and patriotic homemakers by supporting the wartime
conservation program in their daily household management. Richmond’s high school girls also formed a “Victory Corps,” which participated in twenty six different volunteer activities, including First Aid and home nursing. They managed to collect 7,317 tin cans for scrap—one girl collected 1,117 cans on her own. Younger children also became involved in the war conservation movement. Children from playground recreation groups collected twenty-one pounds of tin foil.48

Detroit’s teachers also played a major part in helping children to practice responsible patriotism. While theoretically, Detroit’s schools were integrated, in reality, the strict neighborhood race barriers created a segregated school system in which teachers labored for less money and in worse facilities than the white teachers, much as black teachers did in the southern school system. Under the guidance of teachers, elementary school children raised $117 to give to the USO Christmas fund, while Garfield Intermediate School students raised $42,000 in bonds, enough to buy the army a tank. Under the auspices of volunteer teachers, a group of “popular teenagers” formed a junior civilian defense group. Like Richmond’s Victory Corps girls, the group participated in many homefront activities, including selling stamps and collecting scrap materials.49


Middle-class women were concerned about the growing rate of juvenile
delinquency during the war. They attributed the problem to the large number of full-time
working mothers. In order to curb the growing crisis, club women in Richmond and
Detroit used a two-prong approach. First, they tried to have programs to stop youth from
becoming delinquents at all. Second, they held programs for teens who were borderline
delinquents, but whom, they believed, could be “fixed.”

Middle-class women were not happy that the need for daycare centers skyrocketed
during the war, but they acknowledged that not only were centers crucial to the
livelihoods of working women, but that the centers could also help these young children
receive guidance and good values at an early age from respectable, trained teachers.
AKA’s Non-Partisan League fought unsuccessfully for the equal distribution of funds to
black and white day care centers from the Lanham Act, which provided 20 million dollars
in funds for day care in 1943.90 Since the funds were not distributed equally—a problem
resulting in generally inadequate funding for daycare in the black community—club women
furnished supplies for, funded, and often staffed their own centers for the children of
working women. Richmond’s College Women Club and Thor Club gave supplies to the
Seventeenth Street Nursery. The city’s Zeta Phi Beta chapter gave a “supply shower” to
the Baker School nursery day care center. Not to be outdone, the Phi Delta Kappa

90 “AKA Fights for Child Care Bill,” Michigan Chronicle, 31 July 1943, 16. Elizabeth Rose argues that
state recognition for child day care reached a turning point during the war, when women’s war work had
to be legitimated, in A Mother’s Job: The History of Day Care, 1890-1960 (New York: Oxford University
Press, 1999), 153-181. The state’s recognition of day care enabled black women to enter into negotiations
with the state over funding issues.
teacher's sorority opened a recreation room for children 6-14 after school during the week. They staffed the center and planned all of the programs.91

Because more African American women entered war industries in Detroit, Detroit's club women faced an even more pressing concern with child care than Richmond's women. Detroit had a major nursery school started by middle-class women in 1936 to promote socialization between children on a weekly basis. The board of directors was dismayed about changing the center to become one for wartime workers: "It was with a great deal of reluctance in 1943 that the Board of Directors...changed the type of program from one of co-operation and self-help to one of service to working mothers."92 Nevertheless, Peter Pan nursery did change its focus, made admission for children of working mothers its main priority, and even received government subsidies for "scholarship" students. As in Richmond, Detroit's Phi Delta Kappa chapter started its own recreation center for elementary school children at Brewster Homes, a war workers' low-income housing project. They included a book and toy lending library at the center, and their programs included education in black history and Bible study.93 These programs suggest that the club women continued to promote the tenets of respectability through

91 "Nursery Sponsored By College Women," Richmond Afro-American, 27 December 1940, 9; "They’re Doing Good Deed," Richmond Afro-American, 9 October 1943, 7; "Phi Delta Kappas Open Rec Center Room," Richmond Afro-American, 28 April 1945, 21.


race progress (teaching about black history) and Christian values (focusing efforts on Bible study).

Richmond and Detroit’s middle-class women also concerned themselves with the problems of teenagers, especially teen girls, in light of the influx of soldiers into the area. They tried hard to provide wholesome activities to teens in order to keep them chaperoned and away from “dangerous” situations. Middle-class women revealed their disdain for lax working mothers by attempting to raise the girls correctly by being program directors and chaperones of wholesome activities. A Detroit reporter warned mothers about the problems with mixing full-time work with parenting: “Facts show that juvenile delinquency is greatest among children left neglected by working parents...Tragedy may be the outcome of parental neglect.” Richmond and Detroit YWCAs both operated Youth Canteens, where teen girls and boys could interact in a supervised setting on the weekends. In addition, both YWCAs held dancing, arts and crafts, sewing, home economics, and charm classes for young women, in order to teach them both the skills necessary to become a homemaker and the values needed to be a productive member of the middle class. The Detroit Urban League’s Chestnut Community Center, located in a very low-income district of town, held classes for girls in charm, positive attitude, skin and diet, makeup, hairstyling, and party planning. These classes were meant to inculcate the children of the working class in the values of middle-class club women.


95 “Y to Hold Ninth Youth Canteen,” Richmond Afro-American, 9 December 1944, 9; “To Open New Canteen at Garfield High,” Michigan Chronicle, 3 July 1943, 17; “Girl Reserves Entertain Boys,” Michigan Chronicle, 2 December 1944, 16; September 1944 Chestnut Center Memo to Mrs. Weldon from
But what about the children who had already been charged with delinquency or who appeared to show the first signs of delinquent behavior? Both Richmond and Detroit's middle-class women attempted to thwart the troubling behavior with intensive programs. Richmond's Friends Association For Colored Children, aided by many black female social workers, found temporary foster homes and permanent adoptive situations for children who were in danger and whose parents could not adequately care for them. In 1940 alone, the association placed 138 children in foster homes and adopted out 6 to permanent homes.⁹⁶

Teenage girls' actions in the Detroit riot of 1943 sparked perhaps the largest volunteer effort in the history of African American club women's activities.⁹⁷ Dismayed by what they determined to be the activities of uncontrolled and poorly parented teen girls, Detroit's Delta chapters decided to build a foster institution for young women who were deemed delinquent but not criminal. Delta's 166 Detroit members discovered that although three homes existed for troubled white girls, black girls either went to the state institution outside of Lansing or slid through the cracks of the welfare system. The Deltas decided to buy and operate a supervised home for girls with behavior problems: "those girls whose environment has contributed to acts of truancy from home and school. late

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⁹⁷ In reality, only four percent of the rioters arrested were women, and they were usually charged with looting after the initial vandalism to stores, according to Capeci and Wilkerson. Still, evidence shows that the Deltas believed that many young women were involved, and hence the need for a home for delinquents.
hours and association with undesirable companions." Delta’s ideology behind the creation of the home was an indictment of lower-class women’s ability to parent their daughters: “These girls, through no fault of their own, have been victims of broken homes, inadequate parental influence, and improper housing.” According to the Deltas, girls would learn proper behavior and become respectable young ladies under the strict scrutiny of sorority members in a supervised living situation. As they explained, “The members of the sorority, who are librarians, social workers, teachers, nurses, business and home women will be able to take care of many of the personal needs of the girls.”

Deltas began raising the funds for the home in 1944, and they ran into problems almost immediately. After applying to many local and national grant-giving groups, they found that their idea for a home that catered to both black and white girls was not popular with the powerful white community. One prospective donor offered to give the sorors $20,000 in cash if only they would limit the access of the home to black girls. Deltas refused the money and turned to the black community for help. By 1947, Deltas had raised enough money to open the Delta Sigma Theta Home for Girls. While the home was interracial by name, it housed only African American girls, because the welfare department would not recommend white girls for the home.

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98 “Delta Sigma Theta Home for Girls Prospectus,” Rosa Gragg Papers, Box 15, Slade-Gragg Academy Correspondence (1) File, p 1-2, Burton Historical Collection, Detroit Public Library.

99 Ibid.

100 Ibid.
By trying to teach young children how to be upstanding, respectable, and patriotic citizens of this country, middle-class women revealed their inherent class bias by implying that these children were not learning the proper skills and values to become responsible patriots in their own homes. As many working-class women in Richmond and Detroit were single mothers, the blame often fell on them for the problems their children experienced. While institutions like the Delta Home for Girls were needed desperately in most communities, the message that the Delta Home sent out was ambiguous, in that it implied that working-class parents were guilty of irresponsible behavior, when in reality if these women did not work full-time, they could not give their children the basic necessities of life.

**WORKING-CLASS ADVOCACY**

African American club women were not only interested in solving the problems faced by working-class youth; they also believed that they had the ability to help working-class women to gain job opportunities. While many middle-class women focused on increasing equality in their own professional fields, they aimed the bulk of their efforts from 1940-1945 towards opening up war industry fields for working-class women. Because of their education and position in society, middle-class women believed that they were naturally suited to speak about the needs of other black women. Moreover, their homefront defense activities had provided them an entry point from which to engage the state on issues of job equality. Club women’s responsible patriotism program enabled

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them to claim rights by nature of their efforts for the state, and as a group they argued that working-class women were being denied the right to participate in the war because they were not allowed to work in many defense industries. Middle-class women recognized that working-class women, by nature of their gender, race, and economic situation, had the hardest struggle for equality in the black community. They saw the problems faced by working-class women as a microcosm of women’s problems in society as a whole. Jeanetta Welch Brown claimed that “Our enemies still try to keep us in unskilled jobs and in many instances to keep us out of jobs, so that today, we Negro women have no assurance of adequate or stable income now or after the war. . .our future is bound up with the future of women of all races and with the masses of women within our own group.”102 Many of the programs that African American club women instituted in order to help working-class women gain equality in jobs were based on a structural analysis of black women’s economic oppression. Many were not.

African American club women understood that in order to solve the employment problems of working-class women, they would need both to identify the kinds of discrimination faced by the women and identify with working-class women themselves. The NCNW held a workshop on employment, housing, and economic structures that threatened jobs for black women, and determined that “The persistent and dominating part of all the discussions was the responsibility that all women have for being in the forefront of struggle and the necessity for identification and working with organizations, labor and

102 Speech to AKAs, April 1944, NCNW Collection, Series 18. Box 1, Folder 1.
education movements devoted to securing better standards of living for all workers.\footnote{103}

AKA set up a national vocational guidance program that included unions on the planning level, and it worked to encourage black women to get qualified for training and helped them secure jobs.\footnote{104} In their national program, Deltas emphasized securing job openings for women, setting up job clinics, and helping find daycare for working women.\footnote{105}

Club women attempted to get the government to support the needs of working women by creating and enforcing non-discrimination policies. They understood that the FEPC was not effective enough to serve the millions of women left out of the wartime employment boom. Jeanetta Welch Brown, representing AKA's Non-Partisan Council, went before the House Committee Investigating National Defense Migration to complain about the lack of opportunities for working-class women. She demanded that the "vast labor market" of black women be given equal opportunities to train and work in war industries. She also reminded the committee that many of these women had been trained during World War I and so were already qualified for war jobs, and that many had secured work in foundries, sheet metal factories, and other heavy industrial jobs. She used the discourse of responsible patriotism as she warned the Representatives that "...any failure


\footnote{104} Middle-class activists had always believed in providing industrial training for working-class African Americans; some programs' sole focus on industrial training over liberal arts training suggests a class bias in the jobs that the middle-class thought appropriate for those lower on the economic ladder. Kevin Gaines gives a full discussion of this issue in \textit{Uplifting the Race: Black Leadership, Politics, and Culture in the Twentieth Century} (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 19-67.

to train and employ the vast reserve of Negro women will definitely affect the successful
prosecution of our Victory program.\footnote{106} Rosa Gragg, representative for the NCNW, went
directly to the president with a plan to help the 30,000 black women in Detroit and
millions of others around the country who wanted to break into war industries. The self-
titled "Gragg Plan" called for the government to force industries to train and employ
10,000 women in Detroit. She told him that he needed to use the War Production Board,
the War Manpower Commission, and the United States Employment Service to have
initial meetings with industry, and then to send in the FEPC to investigate industries and
punish them quickly and severely for any violations against the policy.\footnote{107} The government
did not accept these radical programs, because the administration believed that such
policies would slow down war production. The policies of AKA and the NCNW show
that they concerned themselves with helping working-class women get ahead in industry,
and that they believed that they had the power to go to the highest levels of government to
attain their goals.

Club women in Richmond and Detroit attempted to make young men and women
aware of job opportunities and encourage them to fight for entry into industry. Most of
the activities of club women in these areas focused on job clinics and institutes, which

\footnote{106 Statement from Jeanetta Welch Brown, 9 February 1942, Women's Bureau, Entry 22, Box 36, Negro Organizations File.}

highlighted opportunities in each city's industries. In Richmond, AKA, Zeta Phi Beta, Delta, and the Entre Nous Club worked with the Urban League to sponsor an annual vocational opportunity campaign. They accompanied high school students on field trips to factories and stores, showed movies about job opportunities, and made presentations on how to interview for jobs. In 1942, the vocational drive expanded to include programs on broader vocational training courses and how to secure municipal employment. The YWCA held an Institute on Worker's Education which addressed how to enhance job performance, especially in household employment. In Detroit, Deltas helped to sponsor the Urban League vocational opportunities campaigns, and they focused specifically on how to increase opportunities for women and how to deal with job discrimination. AKAs in Detroit surveyed black businesses and war industries to gauge the job market for women and then held a vocational conference to publicize their findings.

While club women’s programs aimed to help working-class women get jobs, their attempts to change working-class behavior because they believed that it would help them to keep their jobs not only were based on an unrealistic attempt to get working-class women to adhere to the tenets of middle-class respectability, but they were also patronizing and intrusive. During the war, middle-class African American women determined that other black women were undermining the gains made by the entire community by displaying bad behavior in public. Mrs. Lillian Payne of the Order of St. Luke in Richmond bemoaned, “Our highest colored citizens are daily bearing the burdens

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108 "4 Groups Co-operate on Vocational Drive," Richmond Afro-American, 6 April 1940, 4; Richmond Urban League Messenger 9:1 (January 1942), World War II, Box 1B, Folder 92.
thrust upon them by ignorance or conduct of our lowest." Mrs. Emma Harris of the Women's Council of Second Baptist Church complained to Detroit's NAACP that they needed to effect "improvement in the demeanor of colored persons on conveyances and rest rooms. . . Mrs. Harris had observed a growing tendency toward loose and boisterous conduct." Club women determined that they needed to change this behavior in order to uphold the respectability of the race and maintain good race relations.

Both Richmond and Detroit's club women attempted to change the behavior of working-class women. Richmond's YWCA held a charm school for its industrial girls, which included women in cafeteria work, beauty operators, waitresses, factory workers, and laundry workers. The "school" would teach "charm in dress, charm in personal appearance, charm in speech and poise, charm in manners." Detroit's AKA chapters held charm school for senior girls as part of their vocational training conference, and the local YWCA held a school for adults that showed the proper dress for business and industrial work, and gave "personality help." The Detroit Housewives' League distributed flyers to working women for the "Double V Begins With Me" week in 1942. It required working women participating in the program to pledge:


111 YWCA Interracial Practices Questionnaire, 1943 work copy. YWCA Collection, Box 28, Interracial Committee Information 1936-1944 file, Special Collections, James Branch Cabrell Library, Virginia Commonwealth University; "Week of Charm Scheduled at Y," *Richmond Afro-American*, 25 May 1940, 5.

I will...do my best on the job; go to work every day; take active part in my labor union; make friends with my fellow workers—we are fighting the same war; dress properly to command respect; not have a chip on my shoulder.\textsuperscript{113}

Although middle-class women did not understand all of the issues facing women in the factories, it is important to note that in Detroit, club women did make a point of supporting the labor unions, most notably the UAW. The UAW affected positively the hiring practices related to black men in the 1930s, and black club women understood well enough that it was one of the few institutions that could threaten to subvert the structural racism that existed within factories because of its bargaining power and liberal national officers. In fact, Beulah Whitby and Geraldine Bledsoe (the wife of a prominent attorney) were the first on the board of the Urban League to support the UAW in 1940. The following year, AKA helped to initiate a sea change in the relationship between black leaders and the union as it became involved in the movement to condemn Ford's use of black strikebreakers in its Rouge plant during a strike.\textsuperscript{114} Perhaps because African American club women understood that black women trying to enter factories had so many more problems than black men, they became strong supporters of the union as an ally in the struggle for working women's rights.

Along the same lines as the Housewives' League of Detroit but on a much larger scale, the NCNW "sought the assistance" of workers in promoting responsible patriotism

\textsuperscript{113} "Double V Begins With Me" Flyer, Detroit Housewives' League, Box 1. Executive Board Minutes 1942-1944 file.

\textsuperscript{114} August Meier and Elliot Rudwick, \textit{Black Detroit and the Rise of the UAW} (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 86-93.
through maintaining standards of respectability. NCNW chapters across the country, including in Richmond and Detroit, participated in the national “Can You Hold Your Job Campaign” in 1943. The NCNW directed this campaign at working women as an answer to the concerns about women employees. In Detroit, Jeanetta Welch Brown, acting as Executive Secretary of the NCNW, informed Rosa Gragg that “some manufacturers have already said that they are just waiting for the time to let them [black women] go because of their conduct.” The goal of the campaign, therefore, was to make women aware of the fact that in order to keep their jobs, they must be “clean, courteous, punctual, and affable.”

The NCNW used employment clinics to make working women aware of their tenuous situation in industries, and to make sure that they were doing their part to promote responsible patriotism. As Bethune said, “It is our task to make plans concretely and in every community so that the employer will welcome her, so that the community will make provisions to absorb her as a full citizen.” It is clear that middle-class women like Bethune began to equate citizenship with work opportunities for women outside of the middle class by the 1940s. Instead of focusing on better training, working with union representatives, and addressing other pressing issues faced by working women, however, NCNW women maintained that respectable women would be successful workers. The wartime clinics laid out several objectives. At the clinics, NCNW members wanted to point out proper dress and behavior, discourage absenteeism, and urge women to take

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115 Letter from Jeanetta Welch Brown to Rosa Gragg, 23 July 1943, NCNW, Series 5, Box 13, Folder 12.
advantage of self-improvement opportunities. To be fair, the women also tried to get employers to introduce new workers to their jobs properly so that they would do the best work possible. In order to get workers to attend the clinics, NCNW members circulated this memo to working-class women:

Wake Up! Your Job Is In Danger! Check up on—Your Personal Appearance: Do not offend others by being careless. Bathe frequently and insure against body odors. Dress neatly and sensibly. Be attractive! Your Behavior on the Job: Girls, be kind and not 'catty.' Lose that chip-off-of-your-shoulder. Avoid 'showing-off' and being loud and boisterous. It is better to be seen at your work station quietly doing your job than to be heard or seen all over the place. Your Attitude: It is important the way you feel about your—Employer: He has his problems, too. Be considerate and cooperative. Supervisor: He has a job to do and you're hired to help him do it. Fellow-worker: Get along with the other workers on the job. Work with them, not against them. Your health: Eat, sleep, rest, and play sensible. Avoid indulgence in anything. It lowers your efficiency. Your attendance: Get to work every working day and on time. Don't loaf on the job. Monday and the day after pay-day are not legal holidays.

Once war workers attended the clinic, NCNW sponsors required them to sign a pledge to uphold all of the tenets described in the pamphlet.

Obviously, the program to “help” working-class women to retain their jobs was awash both in middle-class Victorian morality and in modern notions of efficiency and management. It had less to do with helping women retain their jobs than with encouraging working-class women to put the best face on for white society—not to protest conditions, to work hard and quietly, to get along with their employers. Since most middle-class

116 President’s Address, 1943 meeting, 3-4, NCNW. Series 2. Box 1. Folder 19.

117 Wartime Employment Clinics Memo, 1943, 3-4, NCNW, Series 5, Box 11, Folder 11.
women did not visit factories as a general rule, they could not be expected to understand that working-class women usually toiled in the most labor-intensive, dirtiest, and most degrading jobs in the factories. Working-class women could no more afford to hold fast to all of the recommendations laid out by club women than they could join one of the exclusive clubs that were dictating how to exhibit "respectable" behavior on the job.

African American women's responsible patriotism incorporated the more traditional aspects of respectability with new definitions of political citizenship that allowed them to enter into direct negotiations with the state over the meanings of equality. By volunteering to support the government in homefront defense, and by providing unpaid physical labor that helped to win the war, African American club women carved out space for themselves in the state. This space enabled the women to claim legitimate citizenship in the country while demanding equality for all African Americans. While they volunteered for homefront organizations, African American women promoted civil rights in defense organizations, helped the NAACP to gain money and new members, encouraged education about discrimination and race relations, and exhorted all black citizens to vote. In addition, they attempted to take their message of responsible patriotism beyond the middle class by educating African American children and by attempting to secure and maintain job opportunities for working women. African

American club women used their volunteer work to legitimize their demands for equality, because their work in homefront activities made them an integral part of the wartime state.

Although middle-class women believed that they represented all women, their discourse and their actions had serious class implications. Higginbotham suggests that “The zealous efforts of black women’s organizations to transform certain behavior patterns of their people disavowed and opposed the culture of the ‘folk’—the expressive culture of many poor, uneducated, and ‘unassimilated’ black men and women dispersed throughout the rural South or newly huddled in urban centers.” While middle-class African American women attempted to get working-class women to embrace the ideology of responsible patriotism, many working-class black women had neither the time nor the resources to contest discrimination by volunteering for the war effort; instead, their day-to-day concerns with employment, housing, and racism in the workforce led to a different kind of struggle against oppression.

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119 Higginbotham, 15.
CHAPTER 3: WORKING FOR DEMOCRACY: WORKING-CLASS WOMEN AND WARTIME OPPORTUNITIES, 1940-1945

Louise Thomas was tired. She had worked hard for no pay at the Commerce School learning riveting in a defense training class. She spent 120 hours in the classroom, sacrificing weeks of no income for the chance at a war job, one that paid much more than the average job an African American woman in Detroit could get. She passed the riveting course with flying colors and went to Ford’s Willow Run Bomber Plant to secure employment in 1942, as she had heard that the factory desperately needed female riveters. On two separate occasions, she spent money on bus fare to the site, about 15 to 20 minutes outside of town, only to sit and wait in employment offices. Finally, two different personnel officers told her that they could not place her. When Thomas returned to the school to question her riveting instructor about the situation, she overheard him telling the other teachers that “the school was not for colored girls and that they were not going to get any employment.” She also heard him tell another black woman that if black women had left jobs to take the riveting class, they had better return to them, as Detroit factories would never hire them.

Thomas was not going to go back to her former job. She had trained for a war defense position, and she was going to fight for the right to work at a skilled job for decent pay. Moreover, she was familiar with the fact that many women had already complained to the FEPC about Ford’s hiring practices, but that nothing seemed to have

1 “Workers—Shortage Cry is Farce to Trained Jobless Women,” Detroit Tribune, 24 October 1942, 1.
been done to alleviate the discrimination. Thomas took her story to one of Detroit's major black newspapers in order to publicize the situation African American working-class women faced in the city. She spoke for all black women as she stated:

If the defense plants in Detroit are not going to hire colored women, and if the Government's Fair Employment Practices Committee is not going to enforce the President's order in this matter, why don't they be frank and tell the colored women the facts. I have spent long hours and sacrificed to get this defense training, which time I could have used in other ways, but I have not been hired. If I were a white woman, instead of a Negro, my school credentials and my O.K. slip for work at the Ford Willow Run plant would mean something and I would now be working on a defense job at Willow Run, riveting war weapons to help our nation win the war. It is time for those in authority to get behind these issues and help get a square deal for Negro Women in defense industry. We, too, are Americans."

Thomas understood that her position as a trained war worker should be compensated by state support for her obtaining a defense job. Her message to the black community suggests that she understood the racial dichotomy in the hiring practices that kept her from a lucrative war position. Her language reflects a growing political consciousness on the part of working-class black women who equated war jobs with racial justice and were willing to call upon the state to support those job claims. Moreover, her demands to "those in authority" to support black women's entry into defense jobs reveals the fact that working-class women understood how to use state agencies and unions to negotiate with industries in order to equalize hiring practices.

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2 Ibid.
African American working-class women had always struggled to piece together resources for themselves and their families, and thus they had experience negotiating with the government to obtain health, monetary, and other benefits. This experience helped them enter into a new relationship with the state over labor issues during World War II. Karen Anderson suggests that "Racial ethnic women have organized politically to resist segregation, employment discrimination, political exclusion, cultural impositions..." and numerous other forms of prejudice in this country, and that this organization has sometimes succeeded in making state institutions more responsive to their needs.\(^3\) This was never more apparent than in World War II, as working-class women politicized the meanings of employment, equality in the workplace, and child care. As working-class black women claimed citizenship on the basis of their potential as wartime employees, they raised the stakes in their everyday struggles for work and decent child care. As they filed complaints with the FEPC, Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt, and powerful government institutions, and as they used the NAACP, Urban League, and unions to help them desegregate industry, African American women equated the right to work with other rights of citizens, including the right to support the country in wartime defense and the right to participate in the electoral process. When these women demanded better working conditions, promotions, better pay, and membership and seniority within their unions, and when they fought for better wages to provide better lives for themselves and their families, they did so under the rubric of helping themselves be more productive for the war effort.

Working-class black women’s attempts to negotiate the terrain of work and child care, employers and government officials, provided a strong base for working-class participation in the civil rights movement during World War II.

**Racism and Sexism in War Industries**

Black women found it harder to break into wartime industries than their male counterparts. Much of the trouble resulted from employers’ reluctance to put white and black women together. According to Ruth Milkman, employers classified wartime production jobs along gender lines, which meant that black women would have to work side-by-side with white women.\(^4\) Evelyn Scanlon, representative of United Auto Worker’s (UAW) local 3 (Dodge Main Plant), believed that she represented a majority of white women at the Women’s Conference in February of 1942. She objected to UAW Local 600’s support of a desegregation resolution, claiming that: “I don’t think we should bring the problem of negro women into this meeting. I don’t think we should consider bringing them into the shops—if we bring them in even in this crisis we’d always have them to contend with. And you know what that means—we’d be working right beside them, we’d be using the same rest rooms, etc. I’m against it.”\(^5\) Scanlon’s statement reflects the pervasive fear of whites about the violation of their space by blacks, whom whites deemed dirty, disease ridden, and impure. Because white women had constructed black women as sexually available and unclean, they resisted sharing the factory floors with those women

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\(^5\) Transcript of Women’s Conference, 7 February 1942, p 40, UAW War Policy Division, Box 2, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University. (Hereafter War Policy)
for fear of contaminating their own work space. Employers found the reluctance of white women to work alongside black women an easy excuse to keep black women out of the factories altogether.

Although Michigan had a Civil Rights law on the books prior to World War II, Richmond’s Jim Crow laws made desegregating factories not only psychologically trying to the white women already employed, but illegal. Segregation laws gave Richmond employers an excuse not even to discuss hiring black women. Father Roche, a head examiner for the FEPC, found that the personnel director of Richmond’s paper company, Wortendyke Industries, “could not” hire black women, although he claimed that he wanted very much to introduce them into the plant to alleviate his manpower shortage. The personnel director admitted that he needed more help but that he had no extra space to add the required bathroom facilities. According to Roche, the industry’s hands were tied, but the company was “surveying space” to see if they could find room for a bathroom. While many of Detroit’s companies did segregate facilities, they did so under a cultural de facto segregation standard; it was not mandated by law. Detroit and Richmond employers both found ample excuses not to hire black women, whether it was “fear of reaction” from white women or “lack of space” for the required segregated

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6 Eileen Boris discusses the problems between white women and black women regarding factory employment in “‘You Wouldn’t War One of ‘Em Dancing with Your Wife’: Racialized Bodies on the Job in World War II,” American Quarterly 50:1 (March 1998), 86-7, 94, 96.

7 Memo to Files from Father Roche, 28 June 1944, re: Field Visit to Wortendyke Manufacturing Co., Records of the President’s Committee on Fair Employment Practices, FEPC, MLR 25, Box 10, Richard Roche File, National Archives, Washington, D.C. (Hereafter FEPC)
facilities. In reality, strict segregation that reached every level of Richmond society kept women out of factories.

Whatever the excuses, the reality was that employers hired black women only under serious pressure from unions and the government. Milkman found that by mid-1943, Detroit’s WMC estimated that 28,000 black women were available for work, but most would only be hired as janitors, matrons (a fancy word for bathroom attendants and maids), and government inspectors. The Women’s Trade Union League (WTUL) acknowledged the difficulties faced by black women, arguing in their monthly newsletter that “Negro women encounter all the prejudice against women in industry and the complication of race.” Moreover, the WTUL found that black women’s vocational choices have always lagged behind those of white women, so that hopeful black applicants to war factories had to catch up to white women’s skill levels, except where defense training equalized the applicant pool. Employers often used this as an excuse in their answers to the FEPC’s charges of racism.

While Detroit and Richmond both experienced a wartime boom and available employment situations for women emerged in each city. Richmond had far fewer manufacturing plants, so Richmond’s African American women faced bigger problems securing employment in factories. Unlike Detroit, which experienced a desperate need for workers by 1943 and eventually led to the hiring of black women, Richmond’s fairly stable

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8 Milkman, 55.

economy experienced a wartime peak in 1943 and 1944, but it did not lead to desperate manpower shortages. In 1944, Will Maslow, FEPC investigator, admitted "The biggest problem in the Richmond area is the employment of Negro women, a group which offers a large available supply." In his report, Maslow told the United States Employment Services (USES) Director of Richmond to develop a program to introduce more black women into the factories in the metro area. The Federal Security Agency found that until 1944, most African American women still found employment in Richmond's service sector as a result of long-standing prejudices against the women, until a severe worker shortage forced some employers to hire more black women.

Moreover, although the AFL-Tobacco Workers' International Union (TWIU) had a presence in Richmond, no union in Richmond could even come close to wielding the kind of power held by the UAW in Detroit, meaning that workers had much less protection against corporate policies and hiring practices. In addition, while the UAW-CIO was quite liberal in its race policies, encouraging blacks to become active members and defending their rights to work, the AFL-TWIU locals in Richmond were segregated into white locals with black auxiliaries, ensuring that black workers would not have an equal say in creating policies, and creating an atmosphere in which the union would not fight for equalization of hiring practices.

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11 Federal Security Agency Richmond Locality Report, to Irving Posner from Myrtle Cohen, 18 November 1944, 2, Records of the Office of Community War Services, RG 215, Entry 51, Box 11, War Area Reports and Correspondence Richmond File, National Archives, Washington, D.C.
In Richmond, lack of job opportunities and weak unions hurt the ability of working-class African American women to advance their careers. Although African American working class women in Detroit had more opportunities to break into and maintain jobs in Detroit’s war industries, women in Richmond fought where they could, established footholds in non-war industries and service work outside the home, as well as in government jobs. Evidence from Richmond suggests that working-class women did take advantage of every job advancement opportunity available to them, and that they were aware that the war enabled them to claim rights to jobs formerly closed to them by gender and race bars.

Using State Structures to Secure Employment Opportunities

In both cities, African American women tried to use the FEPC to break into industries formerly closed to them. Their letters to the committee suggest that the women possessed a sophisticated knowledge of how the FEPC worked and that it was created to help them investigate the roadblocks to their employment. Detroit’s complaint rate vastly outstripped Richmond’s, as African American women lodged at least 171 complaints against government and private industries in the city. While many women complained directly to the FEPC, others wrote to government agents, like President Roosevelt, Eleanor Roosevelt, and the WMC director. The women’s willingness to take their complaints all the way to the top of the state hierarchy shows that they understood that the state had the power to help them to advance racial justice in the industrial sector. In their appeals to the Roosevelts, black workers continued a trend began during the Depression of personal appeals to the president and first lady, who personalized the state
and made the Democratic party more approachable in the eyes of the working class and people of color. Although working-class black women had little money and no political influence, they negotiated directly with the most powerful people in the country in order to gain jobs in industry from 1941-1945.

African American working-class women often charged federal government agencies with discrimination in their complaints, because the Executive Order 8802 called for the desegregation of government offices. Most likely, black women believed that they had a strong chance of success in challenging government segregation since the state had already banned inequality in its bureaucracy. Still, using the FEPC to investigate other state agencies suggests that despite the president’s order to desegregate federal agencies, black women faced discrimination in hiring practices at local offices. The women were in a tenuous position in trying to use one part of the state to challenge other state agencies, and often, the women failed to effect changes and faced few alternatives for appeal efforts. For example, Lela Leverette told the FEPC that she had passed the Civil Service Exam for junior typist with a score of 80-90 percent, but when she went to the Detroit Tank Arsenal for her commission, the personnel officer twice refused to see her. After finally seeing two other people for interviews, she still did not have a job. She noticed that at each of the two interviews, her picture was attached to the file, and she pointed out to the FEPC that obviously, all personnel decisions were made with full knowledge of candidates’ race. Her understanding of the unjust hiring process appeared to make her more determined to

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break into the arsenal, and she called the FEPC to complain. When the FEPC investigated the Tank Arsenal, the personnel officer replied that the office did not have to hire all commissioned candidates, and the FEPC subsequently dropped the case. Annie Butler successfully prosecuted her case against the Office of Price Administration (OPA). After charging the office with discriminatory hiring practices, she actually got a better job as a clerk-typist elsewhere, unbeknownst to the FEPC. The FEPC pressured the OPA personnel director into hiring her, as her skill levels were perfectly acceptable for the job, but she turned it down and formally withdrew her complaint, much to the surprise of both the FEPC and the OPA. These cases suggest that there was no distinct pattern to how the FEPC handled complaints against government agencies.

Eight African American women in Richmond focused their complaints on government offices, including the patent office and the very large Quartermaster Depot. Because Richmond's private factories were legally segregated, women understood that gains would not be made in most war industries in that city. Since Roosevelt ordered federal government offices desegregated, however, African American women had legitimate complaints that could be heard by the FEPC when they encountered discrimination in Richmond's government offices. The hiring problems at the Quartermaster Depot became a serious point of contention between the government and Richmond's African American community. Seven women filed formal complaints against the Quartermaster Depot, and many articles in the Richmond Afro-American detailed the

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unfair hiring practices out at the Bellwood Station. The editor of the paper stated: "A depot like Bellwood needs scores of clerical workers, and a number of young women who passed civil service exams were sent out for jobs only to be told that there were no jobs open while white women who went out were put to work at once." When the editor questioned the personnel director of the depot, the official explained that "this is the South, and the white people won't stand for equality of opportunity and treatment." His answer to the editor reveals the disjuncture between centralized state policies and local racialized politics.

Two women decided to take on the Depot by writing to various government officials in order to see who could do the most good. Both women used language that reflected their understanding of how working-class women could utilize the discourse of responsible patriotism. Elizabeth Smith, a janitor at the depot, became tired of seeing hopeful and qualified black female applicants turned away from Bellwood. She wrote letters to the *Afro-American*, the FEPC, the Civil Service Commission, and the NAACP in order to secure help from state institutions and to rally the black community around her demands for racial justice. In her statement, she claimed:

I understand that many complaints have been filed with your office about the conditions here at Richmond Quartermaster Depot of which I work here as maid.

It seems as if the patrolman #7 think that the Four Freedom consist of serving the White Lords first and then come out and ask the 'Negro Slaves' what in the hell do they want; and then inform them that no

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14 Final Disposition Report, 15 May 1944, Case 5GR1210, FEPC, MLR 25, Box 240.

maids were being hired at present just as if he thought that all Negro women were looking for maid jobs; also an indication that they at RQM Depot had not seen or know that Negroes could look for jobs as typist, clerks, etc.

It also seems as if your patrolman, number 7 thinks that he is Land Lord over all the Kingdom of the RQM Depot and when ever any one once enter they must obey his throne.

I along with many other persons of our community do wish that you would see that Negroes are not barred from opportunity to participate in the war work at the RQM Depot other then [sic] that of common labor; for we have persons who are qualified for such jobs as stenographers, checkers, clerks, formans [sic], guards, and timekeepers.16

For good measure, Smith sent a copy of the letter to Patrolman number 7. The language Smith used reveals a connection between middle-class women's discourse of responsible patriotism and working-class women's understandings of patriotic work as fundamental to African American citizenship. Smith drew a distinction between democracy and the happenings at the RQM by likening the hiring officer to a tyrant, and referring to the black workers as "slaves," thus emphasizing what little control African Americans had over the work process there. She also became a spokesperson for her race by demanding that blacks not be kept from the opportunity to work for the war effort in skilled and well-paid positions. The Civil Service commission responded to Smith's complaint only by suggesting that she take the civil service exam if she personally wished to apply for the jobs on the depot which she mentioned in her letter. The office also noted that because

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she had not furnished any evidence supporting her contentions, it considered the case closed, which effectively negated her power as a leader in the fight for jobs at the base.

Ora Branch was no more successful in her plea for fair treatment at the depot, which echoed the same patriotic language that Smith used but with a personal plea to the president that revealed her belief that as a participant in the war effort, she should be heard. Her poignant letter to FDR suggested that she really believed that the president would personally respond to her complaint:

> During these perilous times, I realize you are carrying a heavy load, and I have taken every means in order not to worry you. but since my efforts have been in vain, I'm appealing to you...Several whites have been put in at both plants [Depot and Patent Office] but they refuse to take me. President Roosevelt, my problem is, please use your influence and see that I'm put on at the Patent Office or Some War Project here in Richmond. Va...I'm a true American, wholeheartedly and I'm exceedingly anxious to do my share in this great war. . .

Like Smith, Branch equated participation in the war with patriotism and charged that state agencies kept her from doing her patriotic duty. A subsequent FEPC investigation revealed that Branch did in fact have an interview with the Depot, but that she was unfamiliar with the engineering supplies that she would have to catalog, so the personnel director refused to hire her. Branch questioned whether white women were expected to know all of the engineering supplies, which was a legitimate query as black women were familiar with ploys to keep them from being hired, including dealing with employment officers that asked for much more experience from black applicants than from whites.

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17 Letter to FDR from Ora Branch, 10 September 1942, FEPC, MLR 25, Box 109, Richmond Quartermaster Depot.
The director explained to the FEPC that it was standard procedure, and Branch did not get the job. In each of these letters the authors showed familiarity with the Double V discourse, in that they pointed out the irony in the fact that the “democratic state” refused to equalize its own hiring practices. They used patriotic language which reflected their belief that the work that women did was work for democracy. This language enabled them to engage with the state over prejudicial practices within its own agencies as potential labor power for the war effort, even if the state failed to respond to their calls for social justice.

Detroit’s working-class women also cited many private industries in their complaints to the FEPC, FDR, and Eleanor Roosevelt, because the state was very involved in working with private industries to increase production for the war effort. While many women complained about discrimination in various Detroit industries, the major automobile manufacturers received a majority of the complaints throughout the period, which is not surprising, given the sheer numbers of manufacturers and suppliers in the city. African American women targeted Murray Body, General Motors, Chrysler, Ford, and Packard in their attempts to desegregate industry. Dorothy Simmons wrote to FDR about the problems she and others had with Murray Body Corporation. She had logged 302 hours of aircraft riveting training, but Murray personnel directors turned her down because of her weight. Simmons claimed, however, that she had seen “larger” white women hired, and that Murray had refused employment to countless other black women.

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18 Memo from George Johnson, 6 April 1943, FEPC, MLR 25, Box 109, Richmond Quartermaster Depot File.
Lillie Trim told the FEPC that she had 178 hours of training as a riveter, but that Murray turned her down. Further, she claimed that Murray hired white women with 64 hours or less of training while turning down black women with 175-300 hours of training. The FEPC investigated both complaints and found that Murray had a plan to begin hiring black women by late 1942. While there is no evidence that Simmons and Trim were among the women hired at Murray, their use of the FEPC enabled other black women to secure jobs at the plant.¹⁹

Ford, Chrysler, GM, and Packard received a large number of complaints throughout the war, because black women saw that these companies were always short of workers but continuously refused to hire black women. African American women workers could easily point to the problems with racism as they saw factories underperforming because of labor shortages while employment officers turned black women away at the hiring gate. Ford plants were especially notorious for turning away qualified black women. In 1944, three women complained about the Ford Lincoln plant’s hiring practices. Clarinda Barnett told the FEPC: “Every time I have been down there, they hire white girls and don’t hire any colored girls. On the fifteenth of February Mr. Cook he is the man that hires picked out 21 white girls and told the colored girls there were no more jobs.” Fannie Robinson and Esteria Mayfield concurred that they experienced the same discrimination, and their complaints were added to the evidence.

¹⁹ Letter to Murray Body from George Johnson, 24 November 1942, FEPC MLR 5 Box 6; Letter to Dorothy Simmons from George Johnson, 10 November 1942, FEPC MLR 5 Box 6; Letter to Murray Body from George Johnson, 19 October 1942, FEPC MLR 5 Box 5. Final Disposition Report, 1 June 1945, Case 5BR1356, FEPC, MLR 25, Box 239.
against Ford to be used in a larger investigation. The FEPC was not able in this instance to help the three women, because the company did not supply the requested information necessary to conduct a large-scale investigation, including the numbers of black women who worked at their plants. All in all, the FEPC, FDR, and Eleanor Roosevelt received at least 49 complaints against Packard, GM, Ford, and Chrysler from 1941-1945. These complaints suggest that in the face of a severe manpower shortage in Detroit, black women knew that they were the best hope for stepped-up production. The women needed help in securing job positions, because informal systems of racist hiring practices played out in struggles over employment officers' refusals to interview women of color. Black women understood that while the FEPC may not have had the kind of enforcement power that would guarantee them victories against prejudicial hiring practices, they knew that the federal government was their best ally in making inroads into these industries.

While the FEPC and government officials heard over 100 complaints from Detroit women, FEPC records only reveal 11 complaints from Richmond. In light of the fact that Richmond was very industrialized prior to World War II, that number seems very low. However, Richmond’s black women had more trouble establishing a foothold in industries for many reasons. First, while Michigan had an established Civil Rights Act that declared segregation illegal, Richmond’s Jim Crow laws maintained strictly defined social space for black and white residents. Women had no law to support them when trying to break into industries, and employers made no excuses for failing to hire black women. When the

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20 Final Disposition Report, 28 November 1944, Case 5BR1052 and Case 5BR1292, FEPC, MLR 25, Box 240.
FEPC questioned Wortendyke Industries for their publication of an ad asking for white women aged 25-45, the personnel director answered: “no colored women are being used, and the company does not believe that they will fit in to the program.” Moreover, he claimed that because black women had no experience in anything but tobacco factories, they could not work the looms in the Wortendyke plant.\(^\text{21}\) The pervasive segregation of the city enabled racist employers to shrug off responsibility for hiring black women for the simple reason that they would not fit into factory culture in that city or because their low-skilled jobs in tobacco factories gave them inadequate preparation for war industries.

Lack of a strong FEPC in Richmond also probably contributed to the small number of complaints: since Richmond had few industries that fell under the absolute essential war industries, it did not fall under the scrutiny of the FEPC as many Detroit industries did. In addition, there was no permanent FEPC office in Richmond. Women had to wait until an investigator came to town in order to file and sign complaints personally, which meant that investigations often went uncompleted and employers faced no consistent pressure to change their hiring practices. African American women complaining to the FEPC also could have faced a difficult personal situation in Richmond. Complainants had to give much personal information on their forms, including addresses of relatives and personal phone numbers. Richmond’s racially oppressive structure implicitly threatened those who spoke against the reigning ideals of white supremacy, and people complaining to the FEPC could well have found themselves targets of white hatred. Moreover, the FEPC had more

\(^{21}\) “Manufacturer Defies FDR’s Orders Won’t Hire Colored,” *Richmond Afro-American*, 16 May 1942, 8.
power in situations where factories employed thousands of workers and had national reputations to lose. While Detroit's auto manufacturers were high-profile companies and were essential to the war effort, Richmond's industries were not classified as the highest priority during the war, which led to less regulation by the War Manpower Commission. Richmond industries, such as Larus Brothers Tobacco, DuPont Chemical Company, and Reynolds Aluminum, had lucrative war contracts, but even these industries were not classified as being of the highest importance to the war effort, so the FEPC spent more time on companies in other cities. Given all of the hardships faced by African American women in Richmond, perhaps it was a small victory that any women filed complaints at all.

Although far fewer women in Richmond used the FEPC in order to try and obtain war jobs, evidence from the women who did file complaints suggests that they were no less convinced that they deserved war jobs than women in Detroit. It is interesting that the vast majority of women filed complaints against federal agencies: in Richmond, black women seemed to understand that their best chances at defense jobs were with the state, rather than the private industries that consistently refused to bow to any federal pressures to integrate. Many of the complainants in Richmond served as spokespeople for the hundreds of women attempting to secure wartime jobs, thus claiming positions as leaders in the working-class community, especially in their fights to desegregate the state agencies that were supposed to be egalitarian as a result of the president's Executive Order 8802. Despite the fact that Richmond women could have put themselves in danger with accusations, and despite the fact that their complaints seemed less than successful, Richmond's African American working-class women such as Smith, Branch, and others
did see some benefit in trying to use the government to equalize employment opportunities.

Securing the Support of Historically Black Institutions

While many African American women looked to the government for help in securing defense jobs, others turned to traditional private institutions of black and working-class power: the NAACP and the Urban League. In each case, working-class women forced these organizations to be responsive to their needs in the name of wartime necessity and equality. Although many historians have cited the NAACP and the Urban League as bastions of middle-class elite leadership, working-class women began to use these institutions during the war in order to bolster their own positions vis-à-vis the government in negotiations over jobs. These two black institutions had infrastructures, leaders familiar with state officials, and money for litigation. Working-class women needed the power of these institutions in order to locate themselves closer to centers of state power, and they used the NAACP and the Urban League as a bridge to bureaucratic government institutions.

In Detroit, the NAACP took many complaints from African American women. Jack Burke, an FEPC investigator, maintained that of 300 complaints referred to the FEPC in 3 months, a large majority had been referred by civil rights groups. Gloster

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22 Kevin Gaines's *Uplifting the Race: Black Leadership, Politics, and Culture in the Twentieth Century* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996) gives the most complete account of how black institutions reflected the concerns of their middle-class leaders in the first half of the twentieth century.
Current, president of the NAACP, argued that many of their referrals came from women whose husbands were in the army, but who still could not secure wartime jobs.\textsuperscript{23} The fact that these women called upon the government to compensate them for the sacrifice of their husbands is significant, in that the women used the gendered language of responsible patriotism in order to demand jobs from the state. In Detroit, women went to the NAACP in groups to complain about specific industries. They must have understood that more complainants could get them more attention within the black community. They constructed legal affidavits with the help of the NAACP. The NAACP had always been active in litigation for equality, and working-class women used this strength to help them as they filed lawsuits and filled out paperwork for the FEPC.

In 1942, the NAACP helped to prosecute two major cases with the help of five women. First, Helen Nuttall, Anna Mae Jones, and Elizabeth Jones claimed that despite their qualifications, Michigan Bell refused to hire them as telephone operators. When the NAACP confronted Bell directly, the company admitted that there were few jobs open for black women, but that they could work in the cafeteria or as elevator girls. The NAACP replied that it was completely unsatisfied with the answer, and the three women became part of a massive public campaign against Bell that lasted for years. They starred in national press releases and local news stories as the NAACP continued to fight their case by engaging the entire black community in the battle through publicity and lawsuits.\textsuperscript{24}

\textsuperscript{23} Roundtable Meeting, 7 April 1943, 10-11, FEPC, MLR 25, Box 168, Detroit File.

\textsuperscript{24} Letter to Gloster Current from George Johnson, 4 December 1942, MLR 5, Box 7; Letter to Jack Burke from Johnson, 26 December 1942, MLR 5 Box 7; NAACP Press Release, Detroit, 30 November 1942.
Buenos Marie Blocker and Jessie Baskins were able to desegregate Hudson Naval Arsenal with the help of the NAACP in 1942. This case provides an interesting contrast between state and private institutions' handling of calls for social justice. When Baskins received a telegram to report to the company for machine work, she waited in the employment office for nine hours only to find out that she would not be hired as "no work was available." Blocker also received a telegram. After Hudson assigned her to a plant, a foreman asked her if she was black. When she told him the truth, he admitted that there had been a mistake and that she could not start work in that particular plant. Both women went to the NAACP, who helped them to file complaints with the union, company officials, USES, the Navy, and the FEPC. After strong pressure from both the NAACP and the union, both women received jobs by December of 1942.\(^{25}\) In this case, the Naval Arsenal, affiliated with the armed forces, fell under the auspices of Executive Order 8802. The pressure from the NAACP finally wore down this arsenal, as it called upon the government to enforce the presidential order that desegregated war agencies and offices. The actions taken by the women and the NAACP suggest the importance of local action in actually getting federal laws enforced on a localized basis.

After receiving continued complaints from numerous women about hiring practices, the NAACP determined to launch a mass protest against Detroit industries' treatment of black women. In April 1943, the NAACP led a call to action, claiming that:

\(^{25}\) Detroit Discrimination Record, 1942, 5, NAACP Group II, Box C86, Detroit 1942 (II) File.
"Trained Negro women war workers are denied employment in most plants and in many where they are hired they are relegated to jobs of a status inferior to their training and skills, or given work so difficult that it was in direct violation of the labor code." The NAACP planned a mass rally that would start with a parade of several miles down the main street of Detroit and end with a demonstration downtown in Cadillac Square. Over 5,000 people demonstrated their support of working-class women's fight for jobs.

Apparently industries were not greatly affected, which led the NAACP to fight even harder for the women who went to the group for help. The next month, four women tested industries to see if the NAACP demonstration had made an impact. Although the women had over 374 hours total of defense training, they could not secure jobs at Ainsworth Manufacturing, American Lady Corset Company, Detroit Lubricator, Eureka Corp., Chrysler, Detroit Gear and Axle, or Palmer Bee Company. When Gloster Current read a WMC press release asking for 72,000 more women in industry, he became angry and sent a press release to the director of the WMC. He claimed:

We know that you are cognizant of continued discrimination against Negro women. We feel that in the interest of the war effort, as well as caring out the provisions of Executive Order 8802 and 9436, the War Manpower Commission ought to proceed energetically against discriminating employers who still violate the order and set our war effort in jeopardy. This is a form of treason which is as detrimental to democracy as Nazi spies.

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The NAACP began to use the discourse of responsible patriotism as it became engaged in the battle for working-class rights. Working-class African American women expected the organization's help in their fight against discrimination, which reveals their growing understanding of their own importance in the overall fight for equality within the black community. The fact that Current equated the actions of racist employment officials to the actions of Nazi spies shows how strongly the NAACP believed in the fact that working-class black women could advance the cause of racial justice through their fight for equal job opportunities.

While Detroit's African American women had the largest NAACP chapter in the country helping them to desegregate industry, African American women in Richmond had to rely on a smaller NAACP and Urban League as allies. Three women's complaints to the NAACP went directly to the FEPC for processing without the kind of preparation that NAACP leaders in Detroit gave their cases. In each case, although the FEPC docketed the complaints, the NAACP failed to push for a satisfactory resolution, and each case has no record of a final disposition report. Richmond women did work with the Urban League to ensure that when jobs became available, they could be first in line. During the war, as a shrinking worker pool threatened the production output in Richmond, black women went unemployed rather than take the domestic jobs listed with the Urban League job register. The Urban League understood the actions of these women to be not only a
rejection of domestic labor, but a call for better jobs that existed in the city. The Urban
League recruited and registered women who had not held industrial jobs, and they
reclassified people who had been seeking domestic work in order to try to transfer them to
industrial jobs when they came open. The amount of Urban League-registered jobs for
women remaining unfilled rose rapidly during the war. In 1940, the League recorded only
289 unfilled jobs. That number rose to 414 during 1941, 1001 in 1942, and 1599 by 1943.
These numbers suggest that women were indeed finding jobs in Richmond, and many of
them took the industrial or non-production work offered by the Urban League job register
while turning down domestic jobs. Like the African American working-class women in
Detroit, Richmond women took institutions that had previously answered mostly middle-
class concerns and made them respond to their personal concerns about labor as their
actions forced the Urban League to shift the focus of their job register activities in order to
privilege non-domestic jobs.

Black Women and the UAW in Detroit

Detroit women did not just rely upon the help of the NAACP; they also went
directly to local unions in order to secure rights as workers. Although technically the
union represented only workers in factories, black women understood that the power of
the UAW might be brought to bear against industries in the hiring process, because the

29 George Johnson to J.M. Tinsley, 24 October 1942, FEPC, MLR 5, Box 7; Memo to Joseph Evans, 15
October 1943, FEPC, MLR 5, Box 16; George Johnson to J.M. Tinsley, 29 July 1942, FEPC, MLR 5, Box 3.

30 The Messenger, II: 1 (January 1944), 6-7, Records of the National Urban League, Series 13, Box 26,
Richmond File, Manuscript Collection., Washington, D.C.
UAW had consistently reached out to the black community in order to bring black workers into the union to strengthen its numbers. In fact, during the automotive strikes in the late 1930s and early 1940s, the union worked hard to turn black scabs into union members, and then represented these men when they wanted to be hired permanently. In addition, the UAW worked to integrate local unions and supported the election of black officials at the factory level. While some UAW locals were unwilling to support employment opportunities for blacks, the national leaders were committed to integration. The UAW was most successful in fighting for the hiring of black women at the Ford River Rouge and Willow Run plants. African American women got the support of the UAW when 200 black women stormed the employment office of Ford’s Willow Run Plant after being refused entry at the hiring gate. This show of force and solidarity, the climax to a year of blatant employment discrimination at Ford, forced the company to start negotiating with the UAW and the NAACP in order to create some sort of program for hiring black women.

After several months of negotiation, however, the UAW realized that it had not made any progress, and the union pressed the company even harder in order to maintain its legitimacy in negotiations with management. The Ford locals at River Rouge and Willow Run plants held a three hour meeting with Ford. Ford refused to hire black women until “outside pressure” ceased, which was a familiar twist to the “outside

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31 August Meier and Elliot Rudwick give the most complete account of race relations and the UAW from its inception in the 1930s through the war years in *Black Detroit and the Rise of the UAW* (1979).

agitator" rhetoric management used when blaming unions for entering into factories and making workers dissatisfied. The personnel director at the meeting, Willis Ward, claimed that the union had no right to represent the women because the women were not workers. Further, he snubbed his nose at Executive Order 8802 and scoffed at the FEPC’s effectiveness: "that the Executive Order probably constituted a law and that possibly it was violated but then who would punish the violators."

In a response to the Metropolitan Detroit Fair Employment Practices Committee, Ward further stated that the unions were not to be involved in this problem, as they "were cutthroats and liars, communistically controlled...[and that] if women were hired at the Bomber Plant, they would hire qualified Negresses as well as white women."

The tension between the union and management became apparent as management accused the UAW of being controlled by communists, and black women actually became the beneficiaries of a power struggle between Ford and locals 50 and 400. The UAW was infuriated with Ford’s questioning of its right to determine hiring practices and sponsored a massive demonstration at the River Rouge Plant that jammed up the gates of the employment office. In the flyer publicizing the demonstration, the UAW related the fight of black women to secure jobs at Ford. In reality, however, the flyer reasserted union power over this issue by playing up the union’s support of black women’s work:

We can no longer tolerate the Ford Motor Company’s policy of

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33 Special Meeting of the UAW Interracial Committee with the Ford Motor Company, 1 June 1942, UAW Fair Practices and Anti-Discrimination Department, Box 14, Folder 11, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University. (Hereafter UAW Fair Practices).

34 Final Disposition Report, 24 August 1945, Case 5BR1440, FEPC, MLR 25, Box 239.
discrimination against the Negro women. We resent Harry Bennett's assertion that the Ford Motor Company is the only company giving the Negro a chance.

Willis Ward, 'the Yes and No Man' of the Ford Motor Company relative to the Negro question, is a traitor to the cause of Better Labor and Race Relations among the Ford Workers. The segregated employment office set-up (all Negroes channeled through Ward's office and all white workers sent elsewhere) is a great demoralizing factor. . . . Mr. Ford, Negro women and men will and must play their rightful part in helping win this war.35

While the UAW stated that this demonstration was not a strike, as it had signed a no-strike pledge to support the war effort, their pressure tactics worked, and Ford started hiring a very small number of black women at the end of 1942. Mrs. Anderson, young mother and wife of an enlisted man, was one of the first hired at Willow Run. She was facing eviction from the Sojourner Truth housing projects since she could not secure a job that paid enough to continue paying the rent there, because she used her meager salary to support her toddler, her nephew, and her sick mother. She had 80 hours of training as an inspector, and she had applied to Ford five times, since her husband had worked there prior to enlisting in the army. In November, Ford notified her to report to work.36 While the UAW did not succeed in getting Ford to hire large numbers of women in 1942, they enabled African American women to break into the factories to establish a foothold, which only led to more hiring of African American women throughout the war. In cases where the FEPC and NAACP failed to effect a solution for the racist hiring practices in Detroit

35 Demonstration Flyer, 20 August 1942, Detroit Urban League Papers, Box 4, General File July-December 1942, Michigan Historical Collection, Bentley Library, University of Michigan. (Hereafter DUL).

industry, the struggle for primacy over the auto industry between the UAW and management enabled black women to gain the support of the union in their quest for jobs.

**Progress in Employment**

By 1943, African American working-class women in Detroit and Richmond had managed to secure jobs in various war production and other non-essential industries with the help of the FEPC, civil rights organizations, and the UAW. In Detroit, the number of black women employed jumped from 14,451 in March 1940 to 46,750 in June 1944. In June 1942, fewer than 30 black women worked in war industries, but that number rose to 14,000 by November 1943. Fewer women took traditional domestic service jobs, which is a clear indication that they received better pay in other industries. The Detroit Urban League observed that while the bulk of black women held jobs in non-essential industries, they simply refused to go back to domestic work. "Despite wages of $5.00 a day, carfare, meals, etc. . .much to the consternation of former employers" The Women's Advisory Committee of the War Manpower Commission found that Detroit laundries suffered a 40% loss in manpower resulting from low wages and a 100% turnover every two months, since their female workers found better pay elsewhere. By early 1943, the UAW conducted a survey of its plants and found that the increase in employment of black

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38 *Current Observations of Detroit*, 7 December 1943, DUL, Box 5, General File August-December 1943.

39 Manpower Supply Committee, War Production Board Field Information Circular No. 46, 14 February 1944, 11, Records of the Automotive Council for War Production, Automotive History Collection, Detroit Public Library.
women was significant in many of Detroit's biggest war plants. Plants that hired no or few black women in 1942 now employed over 100. (See figure 1) Other plants, however, still refused to hire African American women workers, and those plants remained a target of both the FEPC and the UAW throughout the war.

While Richmond has no statistics from which to draw conclusions, contemporary observations of the city suggest that African American women made progress in their fight for employment. In 1943, the Richmond Afro-American reported that black women "invaded" several important industries in the city. They worked at Russell Well Distributor Company, where they made $.54 an hour repairing auto distributors for the army. They found jobs at David M. Lea Company working the nailing and boring machines for shell boxes at $.46 an hour. Bottling companies hired black women for $20-25 per week, and women worked as elevator operators and needle workers in various companies and stores for $12-$20 per week. Winslow & Co., a feed manufacturer, hired black women to sew bags for $.50 an hour, and Miller Manufacturing hired women to sand shell boxes for $.35 an hour. Black women worked at R.F. & P. Railway Station as cleaners, oilers, and window washers, and found jobs at soda fountains and restaurants waiting counters and tables. Grant's Drug Store hired black women as night clerks and cashiers, and major department stores hired black women as billing clerks and customer service clerks for $15-$25 per week.40

40 "4,000 Jobs Go A-Begging," Richmond Afro-American, 23 October 1943, 1-2.
African American women in Richmond had some success obtaining non-production work in service industries like waitressing and elevator operation. Thalheimer's, the largest department store in the city, had to promote African American women to better jobs when white women left to enter defense industries, and black women applied to the store as maids in order to position themselves to get jobs as clerks, elevator girls, and waitresses. The company newsletters wrote about three women who worked hard to be promoted. Hazel Harris and Grace Bradley moved from maids to elevator girls, and Mary Johnson moved from maid to hospital attendant. Pictures from the newsletter also reveal that by 1944, all of the waitstaff in the tea room and all of the elevator girls were African American women. Moreover, many African American women worked as clerks in the stock rooms. One black woman managed to get promoted from the soda fountain to the receiving and marking warehouse.  

As in Detroit, Richmond's black women refused to take domestic jobs with low pay, which caused quite a stir among the members of the white community. As early as 1942, one Richmond newspaper reported that many young black women had been able to get higher wages outside of service work and thus "have abandoned domestic work completely." The reporter noted that the shorter hours and freedom gained in elevator operator and restaurant jobs was probably a major cause of the drop in domestic

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41 *TBI Fights*: V:7 (July 1945), 6; IV:9, 5; IV:11 (November 1944), 5, Thalheimer Collection, Section 6. Personnel Box 2, Folder 44, Virginia Historical Society.
workers. Richmond's Urban League reported that they were having problems filling domestic jobs listed with their job registry. In 1941, 414 domestic service jobs went unfilled, but by 1943, 1272 jobs were unfilled. In 1944, the number dropped to 1,518, which was still many more left wanting than prior to World War II. That year, as white women found that they could not obtain decent help in the home, Anne Folkes wrote an article in the same paper about the distressing situation:

Few problems have been more discussed in recent months than that of domestic help. The PT-A meetings, the Red Cross production rooms have become merely the places where Mrs. Brown bemoans the fact that Susie has left the kitchen to take up welding or Mrs. Smith discusses the high wages she is forced to pay Clara. Before the war Mrs. Apple had a part-time maid who came at noon and stayed until after dinner at night every day of the week except Sundays. For that work she was paid $5 a week and was the recipient of any discarded or outgrown clothing that was not used by the Apple family. She has recently taken a new job and left without notice.

White women could not understand why their "generous" terms of work, including allowing maids to work only 36 hours a week and giving them used clothing, went unanswered during the war. Apple had to settle with women just to do the laundry and ironing once a week for $.40 an hour, and they just did not do a very good job, according to Apple. White women in Richmond shared stories about how they suffered tremendously as they had to take on the burden of housework themselves. Myrtle, a


43 *Messenger*, 12:1 (Jan 1945), World War II, Box 1B, Folder 92.

former maid interviewed for the article, left her job of $10 a week to take a war production job at $.35 an hour and warned white women that $15 a week for a 7am-5pm day was not only fair, but was all white women could probably get black women to agree to after the war ended.\textsuperscript{45}

In both Detroit and Richmond, working-class women fought hard to obtain the better jobs wartime changes brought to white women, and in some cases, they were successful. African American women in both cities used every organization available to them in order to pursue equality in factory work, and the FEPC, the UAW, the NAACP, and the Urban League helped them to obtain better jobs. While most black women did not find work in essential war industries, they did change the terms of employment in both cities by finding jobs outside the home with more freedom, better hours, and better wages. African American working women had the opportunity to leave constricting domestic work, and their experience with wage work changed the way they would negotiate with private employers in the future.

**Promoting Equality Within Factories**

Once African American women gained entrance into both production and non-production work, their struggles continued on the factory and shop floors. In both Detroit and Richmond, working-class women fought for better working conditions, promotions, and, in Richmond, for fair union representation. Because black women in Detroit entered factories in much larger numbers than black women in Richmond, they faced especially
severe problems with white women workers. Detroit’s African American working-class women fought to retain their employment gains in the face of wildcat hate strikes, unfair job demotions, and firings. In Richmond, African American women sought promotions based on seniority, fought demotions, and fought for desegregation of a tobacco local. In one factory, African American women testified against the AFL in front of the National Labor Relations Board.

Detroit’s working-class women fought to claim space on the factory floor as white women tried to maintain segregation on the assembly line and in facilities like restrooms and cafeterias. Karen Anderson and Eileen Boris have noted that strikes occurred as a result of black women’s entry into jobs previously held by whites, because white women feared working in such close proximity to black women, whom they defined as dirty and dangerous. White women wanted to maintain space away from black women, and they often walked out in protest over the introduction of black women into previously white space. The UAW found itself in a tenuous position over this issue, because it had to represent the interests of both its black and white employees, and it often became the negotiator in deals that enabled black women to continue their work.

In Detroit, African American women had to deal with wildcat hate strikes quite often as they joined production lines. In these situations, white workers spontaneously walked off assembly lines when black women entered the factory floor. Chrysler and Packard plants were wracked by a series of work stoppages in 1943 until black women

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got their unions to support their right to work. On February 12, 1943, at Chrysler's Highland Park Plant, Vera Sutton, Bernice Kirksey, and Pauline Justice joined the production line as drill press operators, making $1.00 an hour. White women walked off the line immediately, and the company pulled the African American women off the line and sent them back to training school. When the three women took their case to the union, the union called the FEPC, plant security, management, and an army representative to the plant.\textsuperscript{47} Ironically, when faced with the opposition of both the union and the state, the company that had been reluctant to hire black women decided that they would support the black women in this situation. As the FEPC reported, "management was going to stand firm on the issue of the Negro girls. . .under no circumstances would they be taken away from their machines. . .as that would be a licking for the company."\textsuperscript{48} With both the company and the unions supporting the African American women, white women had no choice but to go back to work. The Packard plant, also located in Highland Park, erupted several weeks later when four African American women joined the production line. The factory went through a series of stoppages, but the black women continued working at their machines. The UAW and Packard determined that the best way to solve the problem was to simply increase the number of black women on the lines so that white women did

\textsuperscript{47} Letter to George Johnson from G. James Fleming, 4 March 1943, FEPC, MLR 25, Box 228, Fleming File; Letter to Montague Clark from Fleming, 4 March 1943, FEPC, MLR 25, Box 228, Fleming File.

\textsuperscript{48} Report on Packard Work Stoppage, 3 March 1943, FEPC, MLR 25, Box 228, Fleming File.
not have such an easy target. Six weeks after the strike, Packard had fifty black women on the assembly line, and the FEPC lauded the company’s progressive policy.\footnote{Letter to Earl B. Dickerson from Fleming, 15 May 1943, FEPC, MLR 25, Box 228, Fleming File.}

The series of stoppages at Chrysler and Packard lasted through several shifts and caused the loss of hundreds of production hours. While black leaders attempted to explain the incidents on the actions of radical racists within the plant, the FEPC, the union, and other officials saw the ethnicity of the white women as the cause. Although the \textit{Michigan Chronicle} blamed the hate strikes on a strong Ku Klux Klan element, especially at the Packard Plant, the FEPC came up with an explanation that focused on race and space. Both plants were located in Highland Park, an almost entirely Polish ethnic enclave in Detroit. The Polish-American women had fought for their own places in the factories, and they were wary of black women who came from outside their neighborhoods to work in their factories. The FEPC went so far as to ask the unions to bring in Catholic priests to explain to the Polish-American women about equality and democracy with respect to Executive Order 8802.\footnote{“Protested Four Colored Girls in Department,” \textit{Michigan Chronicle}, 20 February 1943, 1-2; Report on Packard Work Stoppage.} The tensions between ethnic whites who lived together in neighborhoods surrounding these two plants reveals the fears of white working-class women that black women would first encroach upon their neighborhood space and then threaten their economic security by taking good jobs away from other white women.

Strikes occurred throughout the city in 1943 and 1944 as African American women joined production lines, but in every case, black women continued working and
secured both company and union support in the name of democracy. Strikes occurred at Consolidated Brass, Gemmer Manufacturing, Briggs Manufacturing, and Chicago Pneumatic Tool. The strike at Chicago Pneumatic Tool was especially vicious, as the target was one black woman transferred to an inspection job, which was a job upgrade. When the union ordered workers back to the line, the enraged white women threw banana skins at the black woman, who kept working despite the distractions. In each case, the union’s local leaders, including shop stewards and other officials, not only supported black women but chastised white women for being undemocratic and hindering war progress. UAW local 157 charged the ringleaders of the banana incident with conduct unbecoming a CIO member, and Jess Ferrazza, president of local 212 (Briggs) refused to give in to the prejudice of the white women who demanded the removal of the African American newcomers. When the women struck, Ferrazza told the shop steward:

Go ahead and tell each one of the girls who refuses to work that they can come in here and get their clearance because they are through. The company is going to fire them and we are not going to take up their grievances. As far as we are concerned, they are out, too.

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51 Letter to Consolidated Brass from Will Masiow, 18 August 1943, FEPC, MLR 5, Box 15; Minutes of Local 80 Meetings with Company, 16 September 1942-7 November 1945, Meeting on 19 Jan 1944, UAW Local 80 Collection, Box 4, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University; Interview with Jess Ferrazza, conducted by Jack Skeels, 19-20, Oral History Transcripts, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University; Detroit Progress Report, 5 March 1943, FEPC, MLR 25, Box 228, Fleming File.

52 Detroit Progress Report, 5 March 1943.

53 Interview with Jess Ferrazza, 19-20.
Although the unions and the companies were very supportive of the African American women who became targets of white hatred, often the situations did not resolve themselves neatly when white women went back to work. Ferrazza admitted that many of the white women refused to speak to either union leaders or black workers, and in many other companies, tensions emerged in different ways. African American women had to remain on guard against hostile workers in one-on-one situations and in dealing with segregated facilities.

Often, African American women became involved in physical confrontations as a result of built-up tension created by poor work environments and unfriendly co-workers. In most instances, although black and white workers were each responsible for the altercations, only the black women were fired. The treatment of black women in these situations suggests that in confrontations with whites, blacks were labeled “provocateurs” and blamed for white retaliation. In this way, the company put the responsibility on African Americans to maintain amicable race relations. In 1943, Lillian Garner found a white co-worker at Murray Corp. eating her lunch. The co-worker, “Virginia,” apologized and offered her ten cents for the lunch. Garner was offended because the lunch was worth much more than that, and refused Virginia’s offer. Georgiaphene Buford, Floysell Jones, and Effie Greer, all African American co-workers, witnessed the exchange and went back to the assembly line with Garner. While Garner had thought that the situation resolved itself, Virginia went to get the shop steward to “straighten out” matters. Virginia told the steward that she had offered Garner fifty cents for the lunch, at which point Garner called her a liar. Infuriated by the accusation, Virginia slapped Garner
in the face. Gamer did not retaliate physically. While Virginia received only a four day layoff, as the company was short of riveters, Gamer, Buford, Jones, and Greer were fired two weeks later for "unsatisfactory work," although they had never received any unsatisfactory reports from their foremen.\textsuperscript{54}

The women refused to let the company treat them unfairly. They had fought hard for their jobs, and they were not willing to give them up without a pitched battle over the terms of their labor and the policies of the company. Buford and Jones wrote to Mrs. Roosevelt, and all four went to the NAACP, the FEPC, and UAW local 2 to file grievances. In the subsequent investigation, the FEPC and the UAW found that although the women had training as riveters, for four and a half weeks they had been dusting and painting bucktails, despite the company's riveter shortage. Often, the women had nothing to do, because the company refused to move them to all-white production lines. The UAW noted that the company had laid off two other black women for "unsatisfactory work." and the local suspected that the company had fired all of the women before their six-week probationary period was up so that they had no protection of seniority under the union agreement. After the women made their case to the NAACP, the FEPC, and the UAW, each group pressured Murray Corp. to give the women their jobs back. All of the women were back at the plant by late March.\textsuperscript{55} In this case, the women found success

\textsuperscript{54} "Murray Body Employee's Lunch Stolen, Face Slapped, Is Fired," \textit{Detroit Tribune}, 16 March 1943, 1.

\textsuperscript{55} Oscar Noble. Discharge at Murray Body Report. UAW War Department Bureau Collection, Box 29, Local #2 File. Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University (Hereafter UAW War Dept.); Final Disposition Report, 24 November 1943, Case 5BR1043, 23 November 1043, Case 5BR1056, both in RG 229, MLR 25, Box 251, Region V 1005-1199 File.
when the local union, a local civil rights group, and a state agency converged and pressured the company to give them back their jobs. This incident reveals the ways in which working-class women worked with every available institution in order to achieve success in their battle for equality.

Lillian Garner was not the only woman involved in physical altercations in plants. Several women fought back when faced with the threat of injury, and all contested their subsequent punishments, with varying degrees of success. Jewel Henderson accused a plant guard of tearing her sleeve after the police charged her with disturbing the peace at the Chrysler Plant in 1944. In court, however, two officers testified that she had been drinking, exhibited clear signs of hostility, refused to show her identification badge, and struck a security guard in the jaw. Not only did Henderson lose her job, but the judge did not buy her claim of self-defense and she received six months' probation and a twenty-five dollar fine. Mamie Hawkins complained about the result of an altercation to the FEPC with little success. While leaving an unnamed plant, she accidentally bumped into Frank Kidwell, a white worker. He deliberately bumped her back and she slapped him in the face. At this point, according to witnesses, three black men got involved and the plant supervisor claimed that the men held Kidwell down while Hawkins attacked him. She received a week layoff, while all of the men were fired. The FEPC considered Hawkins lucky to get away with such a light punishment and closed her case. With white and black workers in such close proximity, working ten or more hours a day in often inferior

working conditions, it was understandable that physical violence erupted as a result of built-up tensions releasing over contestations of space. The fact that African American women fought to overturn their punishments suggests that they believed that they had as many rights as white workers, and that they knew exactly where to go in order to appeal unfair decisions.

While tensions between black and white women gave employers an excuse to segregate bathrooms, lunchrooms, and even assembly lines, African American women worked hard for equal facilities in Detroit factories in an attempt to enforce the Diggs Civil Rights Act. Since the Civil Rights law banned any segregation in public areas, working-class women knew that they had a legal right to equal treatment in the factories, and they enlisted the aid of the FEPC and the unions in order to change company segregation policies. Many women protested against inequalities in the plants, often their focus was on segregated bathrooms. For example, while a hate strike at Packard waged by white women protesting the addition of black women onto the assembly lines was in full swing, black women, with the help of their union, pressed the FEPC to help them to abolish segregated bathrooms. The women were only allowed to use toilets "formerly condemned as unsanitary and fitted only for the use of males." Although the FEPC considered this to be a social problem and not one it should investigate, the union disagreed. After negotiating with the company, the union managed to get separate

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57 Final Disposition Report, 31 October 1944, Case 5BR1367, FEPC, MLR 25, Box 239.

58 Letter to Lawrence Cramer from Fleming, 13 March 1943, FEPC, MLR 25, Box 228, Fleming File.
facilities abolished. Given the fact that the FEPC’s job was to examine all inequalities that affected employment, it is interesting that it turned a blind eye to segregated facilities at Packard. Its failure to look beyond hiring practices and into factory space threatened to stifle black women’s activism, but the UAW stepped up as the supporter of black women in this case, which was enough to create a change in the segregation policy.

As late as 1945, African American women complained about segregated facilities, and an incident occurred at the Chrysler-Highland Park plant that changed the way both white and black inspectors ate lunch as a result of a black woman complaining to a local civil rights commission. Gladys Brown told the Detroit Commission on Community Relations that she and her friend faced continued discrimination at the plant. When she and her friend, both government inspectors, tried to enter the cafeteria behind four white inspectors, the guard told all six that the cafeteria was for office workers, not inspectors, and barred their entry. Brown knew, however, that the four white women ate there regularly. The next day, when the four white women went alone to the cafeteria, the guard told them that they could eat after the regular lunch shift ended. When Brown and her friend asked their government representative Lieutenant Waters why they could not eat in the cafeteria, he told them that their race kept them out. They asked Waters whether he thought that was fair, especially since Brown’s friend had a husband overseas and it hurt both of their feelings to see the white women laughing as the two had to go to the outside catering cart to get lunch. Again, working-class women drew upon the

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59 Ibid.
Double V discourse with a gendered spin as they equated their understanding of female sacrifice—a husband at war—with their right to be treated as citizens. The DCCR notified the War Department, which told Waters to let Chrysler know that all inspectors were to be served or denied service in the cafeteria, regardless of their race. Chrysler denied service to all of the government inspectors, rather than serve the black women.60

Clearly, some factories were determined to maintain segregated facilities despite Michigan's civil rights law, which suggests the pervasiveness of de facto segregation, despite the best efforts of black women, civil rights groups, and union locals to enforce the state law. Nevertheless, black women did secure equal facilities within some Detroit factories by using local and national organizations to back their claims for social justice.

**Demanding Upgrades and Fighting Demotions**

African American women in Detroit also fought for their right to work—they again looked to the unions and government agencies to help them secure upgrades and promotions, and to reinstate them after demotions or layoffs. In several cases, African American women were able to enlist the aid of black men to strike for women's rights to job upgrades and job security. These women's experiences suggest that they viewed their tenure in war factories as long-term commitments, and that they expected to be treated fairly and according to their seniority rights, just as any white worker would expect.

Many of the problems with job upgrading surfaced when black women sought to move from non-production jobs in the factory to jobs on the assembly lines. When the women

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60 Incident Report and Follow Up, 25 March 1945 to 25 June 1945, Detroit Commission on Community Relations Collection, Series II, Box 3, Incident Reports 1944-1945 folder, Archives of Labor and Urban
failed to get promotions, they often called upon the FEPC and the unions to intervene and negotiate with the company.

African American women targeted Vickers, Inc. for its unfair upgrade practices. Vickers had 2300 women working for them, but they only hired 35 black women as matrons, or bathroom attendants. The women got the FEPC to negotiate with Vickers, and Vickers agreed to hire qualified women as production workers and to allow the matrons to attend training school. The FEPC was astounded that not one of the 35 women agreed to go to school. This may have been a case, however, of economic necessity superseding job equity goals—many of the women would have lost as much as thirty cents an hour to attend the training school for an undetermined number of weeks, and most probably could not afford that kind of a drop in their wages. In seven other cases, women complained about various Detroit companies. Two actually succeeded in acquiring their requested job upgrades. The small number of women who were successful in their demands for performance-based promotions suggests that the FEPC and the union were not nearly as concerned about the types of jobs black women held once they actually broke down the barriers to employment. In this battle, black women appeared to fight without much support from the state.

Affairs, Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University.

61 Memo to G. James Fleming and Jack Burke, 12 February 1943, re: Vickers, FEPC, MLR 25, Box 228, Fleming File; Detroit Progress Report, Fleming to George Johnson, 5 March 1943, FEPC, MLR 25, Box 228, Fleming File.

62 Final Disposition Reports SBR1233, 29 June 1945, SGR1317, 1 June 1945, SBR1241, 28 November 1944, SBR1497, 20 June 1945, all in FEPC, MLR 25, Box 239; Final Disposition Report SGR1392, 20 December 1944, FEPC, MLR 25, Box 240.
In some cases, Detroit’s working-class African American women fought desperately to hold on to their war production jobs and fought downgrading and layoffs when war production shifted in 1944. Velum Smith wrote a poignant letter to FDR in 1944, as she believed he was her last hope, after the union disregarded her plea for help:

I am a Deafence worker trying to help win the war Buying Bond and stamps. I am trying to Hold out faithful to the end. I Been employed for Chrysler Co...we got a Bad Break and a Bad One I work 17 mos. In Side 501 and did not mind it But now out side exposure to rain and ice and loading and unloading car boties on the Rail Road. Nothing but colored wimon while white wimon wont Do it we got to get 8 feet in the air and push Boties to the ones on the Grown and the Mens looking out the windows loughing saying helo I am telling the truth so help me the mens got good jobs in side. . .The reason I am telling you Because I believe you can do something about Please I am Disgusted and sick... answer as soon please... voted for you. o3

Smith used the discourse of responsible patriotism to demand help in getting her old job back. While she spoke in a language that reflected working-class concerns, her convergence with middle-class rhetoric is apparent in her demand for help based on her participation in the war, which included buying stamps and voting for the president. Moreover, she drew upon the discourse of respectability—that she, as a woman, should not have to work outside while men worked inside, because gender conventions necessitated that women, defined as more delicate than men, should be protected from the Detroit elements. She claimed the rights to citizenship as a voter and an active participant in the war effort. In this case, since Smith obviously needed help quickly, Mary Anderson, director of the Women’s Bureau, wrote back almost immediately and directed Smith to

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o3 Letter to Roosevelt from Velum Smith, 8 November 1944, Women’s Bureau, MLR 22, Box 179. Defense 1944 folder.
call upon the local Women’s Bureau representative Kathleen Lowry. At this point, Smith dropped out of the historical record. At least five other African American women complained directly to the FEPC in order to get their old jobs back. In most cases, the company rebutted by claiming that the women’s work records merited their demotions or firing, but in one instance, a woman at Detroit Axle Company did get her job back after an FEPC investigation. Although these women continued to call upon state agencies to help them in their fight to retain lucrative war jobs, it is clear that towards the end of the war, the FEPC was losing power, since it could not help most of the women who demanded assistance.

Some African American women chose to involve their unions when contesting unfair demotions or firings, and, given the success rate of the unions over the FEPC, it is interesting that more women did not go through union locals for help. It may suggest that several locals continued to be unfriendly towards black women’s issues, despite the UAW policy of no tolerance towards discrimination within the union. When Gertrude Turner wrote to FDR to complain about her demotion from drill press operator to burr remover at Ternstedt Manufacturing, she must have known that most inquiries to FDR were not exactly answered in a timely manner. While she wrote to him, she also filed a grievance

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64 Letter to Smith from Anderson, 21 November 1944, Women’s Bureau, MLR 22, Box 179, Defense 1944 folder.

65 Sworn Statements of Dorothy Smith, Sue Ellen Oglesby, and Nellie Wimberly and Memo to Director of Civilian Personnel and Training from Truman K. Gibson, 1 May 1943, Records of the Civilian Aide to the Secretary of War, RG 107, MLR 188, Box 233, Filed Reports Complaint File; First Quarter of the Fair Practices Committee, 1945, Fair Practices, Box 1, Folder 24; Final Disposition Report, Case SBR1301, 30 June 1944, FEPC, MLR 25, Box 240.
with UAW local 174 demanding her old job back. By the time the FEPC got around to responding to her complaint, the union had already helped her to reverse the demotion. Eight African American women complained to local 3 about their forced transfers at Dodge Main. The women found themselves transferred from the wire room to less desirable jobs in the foundry, but the white women with less seniority received better jobs. The union asked the company for the removal of five white women with less seniority from their current jobs. Management replied that its policy was to return women to their previous departments, and in fact, the eight black women were receiving $1.12 an hour, 10 cents more per hour than the wire room women. Because of the pay rates, the UAW president turned down local 3’s appeal and the women had to stay in their current jobs or be laid off. It is important to note that even though the women lost their case on appeal, the union stood by their seniority rights. These grievance cases clearly show that in some cases, locals supported the rights of black women in the factories.

Sometimes, African American women in Detroit did not rely on government or labor institutions to help them to secure their jobs; rather, they called upon male colleagues to support their fight for equality in an attempt to rally more broad-based support from within their own community. In several instances, black men walked off their jobs to support black women’s fight against discrimination. Hudson Naval Arsenal, the site of many race problems during the war, experienced one such walkout in early 1943. Sixteen of the bus boys and porters left their jobs after their personnel manager

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66 Final Disposition Report, Case 5BR1439, 22 December 1944, FEPC, MLR 25, Box 240.
refused to rehire two black women he had dismissed two days earlier. Mabel Freeman and Janella Banks had been distracting the porters and bus boys in the cafeteria, according to the company. When the striking men questioned the personnel manager's decision, he told the men that the women asked to be fired, as the work was too hard for them. According to Freeman and Banks, they were the first black women hired in the cafeteria and the white women employees threatened to quit over the issue, so rather than lose the white women, the company fired the black women.\textsuperscript{68} Unfortunately, the newspaper that originally carried the story failed to follow up, so we cannot know what happened to the women. Most likely, they did not regain their jobs or the paper would have printed the story. In this situation, the union did not step in and stop what was essentially a hate strike, and so the women, left on their own without institutional support, did not succeed in retaining their jobs.

A serious situation also erupted that year at Chrysler's Jefferson Ave. plant over the kinds of jobs African American women received. African American women who found employment at the plant also discovered that they were either to be attendants in the men's bathrooms or had to haul barrels of metal shavings that weighed up to 250 pounds. In most cases, these women had over 200 hours of defense training and did not know what kind of work they would have to do when they accepted the jobs. They contested the assignments based on gendered concepts of work; they believed that the heavy work in the factory should be assigned to men. When the women quit, they told the male janitors

\textsuperscript{67} Grievance #338, October 1944, UAW Chrysler Department Collection, Box 101, Folder 7, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University.
at the plants what had occurred. In response, 600 men walked off their jobs at the
Jefferson Ave. plant. While the UAW outlawed the strike, the women who quit tried to
explain why the janitors were striking. One woman stated:

We are not given the same opportunity for promotions that white
women are given. . .we have GOT TO do the hard work,
such as pulling steel, running jitneys, and heavy mopping. Many
of us were hired as elevator operators but have never run an elevator
at the plant because the men on the elevators refuse to transfer to the
work we are doing. . .We have taken our complaints to the union. . .
but there has been no action.

The woman’s complaint suggests that union leadership was not always responsive to the
problems of black women. Another woman complained about the conditions in the plant:

We are constantly being intimidated because we insist on eating in
the regular places. When we first went to the plant they gave us
separate toilets—far from our work—and we were told that we
would have to eat our lunch in these restrooms. There is nothing
but two benches and a low table in there.

While the fight erupted over gendered definitions of work, it segued into a contestation
over inadequate and segregated facilities, which drew upon concepts of equality that went
beyond the work detail and into factory culture. Although nine men ended up laid off as a
result of their actions, Chrysler relented and rehired the women, and they did receive


69 Book 3, 13 March 1942-12 August 1943, 1427, UAW Local 7, Box 1; Answer to Grievance 1427, 6
April 1943, UAW Local 7 Collection, Box 3, Folder 7, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Walter P.
Reuther Library, Wayne State University.

70 “Race Workers Strike over ‘Woman Issue,” Michigan Chronicle, 3 April 1943. 9.

lighter duties as a result of the strike. All in all, at least five other strikes occurred over the demotion or poor working conditions of African American women in the factories. In one instance, non-production workers successfully threatened a strike that resulted in much better pay. At Hudson’s Department store, black elevator operators scheduled a strike when the company refused a pay raise. When the union wholeheartedly supported the women, Hudson’s agreed not only to raise their salaries, which ranged from $16-$25 a week, but promised to furnish the women with black stockings for their uniforms. In some cases, strikes were a successful negotiating tool, in that they halted production and forced the companies to deal with the problems faced by Detroit’s African American women. The fact that black men supported black women in these strikes reveals a class unity among members of the black community that provided strength in numbers for the women trying to negotiate for better jobs or better pay.

**Expanding Constricted Parameters in Richmond**

While Detroit’s African American working-class women endured hate strikes, worked with the unions for better working conditions and job security, and sometimes dealt with physical violence in the factories, Richmond’s African American women were creating a political consciousness shaped by wartime rhetoric that helped them to justify

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72 Ibid.

73 “Packard Strikers Return to Jobs,” *Detroit Tribune*, 27 March 1943, 1; NAACP Annual Report, 1943, Children’s Fund of Michigan Collection, Box 8, Mayor’s Interracial Committee 1944 (1) Folder, Michigan Historical Collection, Bentley Library, University of Michigan; Edward Swan, Weekly Report for Week Ending 6 May 1944, FEPC, MLR 25, Box 259, Detroit File; Strike Memo, April 1944, FEPC, MLR 25, Box 110, Richard Roche File.

claiming more space in Richmond industries. Unlike industries in Detroit, Richmond industries refused to put black and white women together in any factories, so contestation of space between women did not occur. Women had fewer opportunities to change the racial climate within factories, but they did what they could in order to take advantage of the wartime labor shortage. Since the unions in Richmond were not only weak, but only mildly concerned with the rights of African American workers, evidence about black working women's activities is scant. Enough exists, however, to suggest that Richmond women dealt with some of the same issues as Detroit women: they asserted their rights as workers by claiming better pay and representation by unions, and by fighting for promotions and job security. Moreover, in one plant, some African American women took on the powerful UTIW hierarchy to win the right to fair union representation.

Just before the war ended, Richmond's YWCA held an international celebration of National Industrial Progress, at which two African American women represented the gains made by their community by recounting their own contributions as patriotic citizens during the war. If their speeches are at all reflective of what the majority of black working-class women felt and did during the war, then we can surmise that black working-class women in Richmond were just as aware of what the war meant for them both politically and economically as Detroit women, and that they were very willing to use their potential as workers for defense to claim political and social rights:

I am Lucille Harris. I am twenty-four years old, and I work as an elevator operator at the C. & P. Telephone Co. You want to know what for years of war and war preparation have meant to me? Well, after finishing high school, I entered college for a year. Conditions being so I couldn't continue, I came to Richmond with the idea of working in order to
continue my education. I soon discovered that with one year’s college and no particular training it can be awfully hard. After trying with no luck, I finally took a job as a nurse maid at $7.00 per week. I worked at this for one year. Not being able to save any money I figured I’d get no where working for such a meager salary and gave it up. After a few weeks [sic] without work I applied for a job at the Telephone Co. The pay was a little more than the former [,] $18.00 a week. This job was formerly held by a white boy, who was called to the armed forces. I work on the midnight shift.. . . At present my salary is $25.00 per week. I can’t say I am satisfied, far be it; but I have been able to save some money and I have purchased five $25.00 War Bonds. The increase in my salary I am sure was due to my belonging to the Union. . . The war has caused me to act and think more soberly. I feel that we as a minority group need not fear as to the future because we are citizens, who do our jobs well on the home fronts, and a people whose citizens try to do everything well need have no worry about its place in the world, or its own ability to survive. . . I pay my poll taxes and vote in every election. . . I am preparing myself for a better job now, as well as in the post-war world.75

Sarah Jackson, a tobacco worker, also spoke at the meeting. She stated:

Four crowded years have meant a lot of things to me. I began work in the local tobacco industry about seven years ago. My first two jobs were temporary [seasonal] ones in two leaf processing plants. . . Eventually, I secured a permanent job in a local cigarette and pipe tobacco manufacturing plant. . . My job has been different since the war. Due to the manpower situation, the management of my plant has formulated a policy to replace men with women, wherever practical and possible. This new policy along with my qualifications gained a promotion for me from that of a laborer to the timekeeper in my respective department. I am doubtful whether this position will remain open for me in the post-war world. Personally, I believe that being a member of a minority group may have some effect on the decision made by management. . . Three years ago I paid my poll taxes and met all other voting requirements. I voted in the presidential election and met all other voting requirements. . . I have tried to influence others to become first-class American citizens. I believe that legislation, coupled with education and determination will make our today’s racial

75 Annual Descriptive report for the year 1945, 27. YWCA Collection, Industrial Department 1941-1945 folder, Special Collections, James Branch Cabrell Library, Virginia Commonwealth University.
problem a thing of the past.76

Speaking to an interracial audience, these women claimed power within the state as active proponents of the war. Their language converged with the discourse of responsible patriotism as they related their efforts to buy stamps and bonds, their labor for the state in a time of war, and, most especially, their participation in electoral politics. They recognized that their labor should be compensated by the state with some sort of support for their job seniority, and both recognized that by voting, they could create new policies within the state that would give equality to the African American community. These powerful speeches related to whites and blacks of similar economic backgrounds the importance of work to patriotic war efforts, and the importance of the black vote to society in general. Since the YWCA considered these women representatives for their working-class counterparts, the women probably echoed the sentiments of many African American women in Richmond as they struggled for better jobs and better economic futures.

Like women in Detroit, Richmond’s black working women fought hard to secure job upgrades and better pay whenever they could. Gladys Ross had a run in with the Quartermaster Depot that started in 1942 but was not resolved until 1945. She worked as a checker at the depot until personnel officers found out that she was black, at which time they demoted her to a janitor position. The light-skinned black woman found her salary reduced by $200 a year and took her case to the FEPC. After many negotiations, the

76 Ibid., 31.
depot agreed to promote her to a clerk, at a salary of $1440 per year. but it took the 
FEPC three years of pressure to get Ross rehired at a position for which she was 
qualified.77 Other women pressured the Depot for promotions and job upgrades, and the 
*Richmond Afro-American* reported that 92 women received promotions that would raise 
their total salaries to over $13,000 per year in 1944.78

Several women did attempt to go to their unions to get pay raises at Larus 
Brothers Tobacco's stemmery plant. Harry Koger, International Representative for the 
United Cannery, Agriculture, Packing, and Allied Workers of America (UCAPAWA), the 
black women's bargaining unit, notified the FEPC that unskilled white women received 
between $.20-.25 higher per hour than unskilled black women. When Koger represented 
the women at a meeting with Larus Vice President Charles Reed. Reed. according to 
Koger. "became very indignant and threatened to call off all negotiations and also 
threatened to call the F.B.I. and have them 'take care of me' because I was trying to stir 
up racial hatred."79 When the FEPC investigated the situation. Reed told the committee 
that the company believed fully in the integration of blacks into the workforce and in 
equality as a general rule, but that the black women addressed by Koger were not doing 
the same types of work, as the white women were in the main plant and the black women 
were in the stemmery. This historic pattern of segregation was not adequately challenged

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77 Memo to Joseph Evans from Clarence Mitchell, FEPC, MLR 5, Box 23; Memo to Will Maslow and 
Joseph Evans, 3 July 1944, FEPC MLR 25, Box 10, Richard Roche File; Letter to Clarence Mitchell from 
Truman Gibson, 14 February 1945, FEPC MLR 25 Box 167, Region IV File.

78 "545 Promoted at Richmond Army Service Forces Depot," *Richmond Afro-American*, 18 April 1944, 3.

79 Letter to Lawrence Cramer from Harry Koger, 3 October 1942, FEPC, MLR 25, Box 104, File L.
by the FEPC, and the women could not do much to upend factory hierarchies without institutional support.  

Although Koger pointed out to the FEPC that the stemmery was almost entirely staffed by African Americans, and that black women were ineligible to work at the higher pay rates, which constituted a clear case of discrimination, the FEPC dropped the case.

While this case appeared to be a clear-cut situation made for FEPC intervention, the FEPC made the case invalid by stating that Koger's original assertion did not match with his reply, that in effect, they were two different complaints, both of which needed more evidence from Koger and women in the factory to pursue. Although it may seem inexplicable that the FEPC failed to encourage this case, perhaps it had something to do with the warm relationship between Executive Secretary George Johnson and Charles Reed. Johnson certainly seemed to appreciate his meeting and follow-up "gift" from Reed:

I was pleasantly surprized [sic] to receive a package containing some of 'America's finest pipe tobacco' and a very attractive pipe. I recall the pleasant conference we had with respect to the employment policies of the Larus and Brothers Co. . . it is my hope that you will play your part in making democracy work by giving equal employment opportunities to Negroes on the basis of their qualifications. . .

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81 Letter to Harry Koger from George Johnson, 30 October 1942, and Letter to Johnson from Koger, 5 November 1942, FEPC, MLR 25, Box 104, File L.

82 Letter to Koger from Johnson, 13 November 1942, FEPC, MLR 25, Box 104, File L.

83 Letter to Reed from Johnson, 5 November 1942, FEPC, MLR 25, Box 104, File L.
Apparently, the needs of hundreds of African American women could not eclipse the appeal of pipe tobacco in the eyes of George Johnson. The stemmery continued to be completely segregated throughout the war. Two years later, the TWIU Local 219B negotiated directly with the company to secure a pay raise for African American women. In 1944, white women received approximately $.64 an hour while African American women received only $.44 per hour. The union got the company to agree to raise black inspectors' pay to $.51 an hour, in contrast with white inspectors' $.70 an hour. Larus voluntarily raised the women's pay to $.59 an hour.84 While the company continued to maintain unequal pay scales, black women did at least get a pay raise out of the contract.

Because the UTIW local at Larus and Brothers had become organized during the strike of 1941, and because the CIO focused its efforts on organizing the black workers in its plants, the company experienced more contention within its factories than other tobacco companies in Richmond. At Larus, prior to 1943, the UTIW-AFL represented all of the white workers and the UCAPAWA-CIO represented the black workers. At times, this situation seemed to work well, as it did during the white workers' strike of 1941. When white workers struck for better wages, black workers refused to cross the picket lines "for fear of getting hurt," and the CIO supported their refusal.85 Relations between the two unions broke down, however, until the AFL called for a company-wide election to

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84 Answer of Larus Tobacco to TWIU case 4-8007 Local 219, 6 July 1944, Records of the Tobacco Workers' International Union, Series III, Box 32, Local 219 Agreements File, Archives and Manuscript Department, University of Maryland. (Hereafter TWIU).

85 Clipping from Richmond News-Leader, 18 October 1941, Larus Brothers Tobacco Collection, Box 7, Tobacco Workers' Strike, Clippings and Affidavits, 1941, Virginia Historical Society.
determine which of the two organizations could retain its union in the company. Apparently, the AFL claimed that it would desegregate the local if the TWIU union won the election, so it gained the support of African American workers. As soon as the TWIU won, however, it created local 219 and local 219B, the segregated black auxiliary. While the TWIU did secure that pay raise for women in the stemmery, African Americans believed that their rights had been violated and that the union did not adequately represent them to the company.  

African Americans decided to bring back the CIO. First, they filed a lawsuit with the help of the ACLU to try to rescind the certification of Local 219 if it did not remove the color bar immediately. Local 219 responded that since two equal units did exist in the plants, that there was no cause to justify revoking the certification. In fact, in their answer to the ACLU, lawyers representing the TWIU used *Plessy v. Ferguson*, the famous 1896 streetcar case that established segregation as a law, for their judicial precedent.  

Two women testified for the CIO before the National Labor Relations Board in 1945. Isabelle Manigo, a tobacco dryer since 1923, argued that when African Americans were required to join a segregated local, they were cheated: "We could have went on and joined up under that same local group they already had, because they [the whites] already

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86 Brief of the ACLU, Case 5R1413 and 5R1437, 2 November 1944, TWIU, Series III, Box 32, Local 219 1944-1945 Reports File.

had a charter." She refused to join 219B, but she had belonged to the CIO since 1941. She was one of the workers who signed the original ACLU affidavit. Sarah Jackson, apparently the same woman who spoke at the YWCA meeting, given her tenure with the company and her job promotion, also testified for the CIO. In her statement, she claimed that she had been working at Larus since 1938 and because she was a clerical worker, she was not allowed in either union, but she had been a member of the CIO until her promotion. She, too, signed the affidavit asking to have 219's charter revoked. Both women experienced heated and antagonistic cross-examinations, in which lawyers for the TWIU attempted to question them about specific legal terms in the affidavit, in order to prove that they did not know what they were signing and thus to discredit their testimony. The lawyers were not successful, however; and the NLRB allowed the CIO to return to Larus Brothers. This testimony suggests that African American women were very involved in black workers' successful bid for non-segregated union representation, and that they understood that the CIO represented their best chance at negotiating power, since it appeared to recognize the desires of the black workers.

In Richmond, African American women could not fight for equality within the

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88 Testimony, 31 July 1945, in the matter of Larus and Brothers, Co. and TWIU Locals 219 and 219B. Case 5R1413, RE: Case R1413 CIO vs. AFL in the matter of 219 and 577. Records of the National Labor Relations Board, RG 25, MLR 156, Box 4004, National Archives, Washington, D.C. (Hereafter NLRB Case).

89 NLRB Case, 277-278. 307.

90 NLRB Case, 544. 546.

91 NLRB Case, 306-308. 557-559.
factories, because the hierarchy of the Jim Crow South extended far into industry. They did not work with white women, and the laws of the city determined that they had no legal precedent for desegregating either factories or facilities, as black women had in Detroit. Still, black women in Richmond claimed power where they could, which included in their demands for better pay and better union representation. In several cases, the women merged the discourse of responsible patriotism with their ideology of patriotic labor in order to place themselves inside the wartime state and gain a stronger position from which to negotiate for rights.

**Fighting for Day Care**

Working-class African American women's struggles did not end at the workplace. They fought to receive services from the state and from the community in order to piece together benefits for their families. Nowhere was this more apparent than in the fight for daycare. Across the country, women of all races faced problems with child care during the war, but because the Lanham Act, established in 1942 to provide money to communities to set up nurseries for working mothers, failed to determine how much money should be set aside for black children, African American women often had to scramble to find safe places in which to leave their children when they went to work. In both Detroit and Richmond, African American women lived in substandard housing as a result of severe housing crises in both cities, and they fought for community facilities for their children so that they would not be left in tenements all day long. In both Detroit and Richmond, African American women tried to create support systems for themselves and their communities so that they had decent places to leave their children while they worked.
In Detroit, Peter Pan Nursery, a nursery originally designed for middle-class black children to come once a week to socialize, opened its doors six days a week at $3.50 per child per week after receiving repeated requests from working class women to extend the hours. At the request of working-class women, nursery officials based the weekly charge on what the women could pay, however, so that the $3.50 was never a fixed number. At the urging of working women, churches, and private clubs, the Detroit Board of Education operated 29 nurseries for African American children during the war years, accommodating children from three to six years old. One community nursery kept hours from noon to eight PM and charged five cents an hour for child care, with twenty-five cents for meals. These centers helped women who had been leaving children home alone or with relatives.\(^2\)

The importance of day care to Detroit's working-class African American women was poignantly expressed in the face of the Detroit Urban League's Chestnut Center Day Nursery closing. Although the nursery was in the poorest section of Detroit, and the next closest nursery was ten blocks away, the Urban League could not secure Lanham Act funds and needed at least $500 to continue operating.\(^3\) In fact, working women enlisted the aid of middle-class women to intercede for them in discussions with the Urban League. Ann Chapman, President of the Capron Women's Activity Club, wrote to the Urban League:


\(^3\) Letter to Mrs. Fred Johnson Charitable Fund from John Dancy, 31 January 1944, DUL, Box 5. General File January-June 1944.
The mothers feel a great loss in losing the Nursery School... A mother came to us worried and discouraged because she had no one to help her with her small child. With no support, whatever, she was forced to make a living for her child, who was left to run the streets daily without any care. She resigned her job—a sacrifice for her child—a stranger in our community with no income—she had come to her battle’s end, but, not defeated because this is our problem too. Some may not agree, but this is how much delinquency starts.\textsuperscript{94}

Thirty-nine members of the Capron Women’s Activity Club signed the letter, and this public outcry was significant enough for the Detroit Urban League to take notice and try to secure funds elsewhere so that it could continue the program, which it did, albeit on a limited scale.\textsuperscript{95} Working-class women also got the Board of Education to respond to their economic needs. In 1944, it lowered nursery school fees to fifty cents a day in order to make it more affordable for the majority of working women.\textsuperscript{96}

Richmond’s African American working women also succeeded in securing childcare centers for their children, although they did not have nearly the number of centers Detroit women enjoyed. By 1943, African American women in Richmond could send their children to three day care centers and one nursery school. At each site, children received three meals a day, for $2 a week for day care and $2.50 for nursery care. Many African American women, however, could not pay the fees. Rather than turn children away, the Richmond Board of Education went $325 in arrears in order to care for the

\textsuperscript{94} Letter to John Dancey from Ann Chapman, 23 November 1943, DUL, Box 5, General File August-December 1943.

\textsuperscript{95} Minutes from Board of Directors Meeting, 3 December 1943, DUL, Box 61, Board of Directors Minutes 1943 folder.

\textsuperscript{96} “Nursery School Fees Lowered,” \textit{Michigan Chronicle}, 12 December 1944, 2.
children, a move that reflected concern for working black women that was unusual for that city board, given their response to African American teachers' pay equalization program. It is likely that working-class women spoke out for the need for daycare in Richmond, and that the Office of Community War Services concurred. Each center was open 12 hours a day, and 179 children attended the four centers. There was a desperate need for more nursery schools, however, and by 1945, at the request of women, the city had three nursery schools for black children. Although it seemed as if demand always outstripped supply, in both cities African American women asked for and used day care centers in their neighborhoods in order to provide their children with safe, supervised, and healthy places to stay while their mothers worked. The women used all of the means necessary to provide services for their families and to maintain their jobs, including negotiation with private and public institutions for child care benefits.

Working-class African American women worked hard to secure employment and create better working environments for themselves and play environments for their children. During the war, Geraldine Bledsoe, Chief of the Minorities Section of the War Manpower Commission in Detroit, noted:

Negro women have shown a very intelligent understanding of the handicaps they have had to overcome to obtain employment, and have approached the preliminary hurdles with good

97 "Nursery Schools and Day Care Centers Aid Working Mothers," Richmond Afro-American, 14 August 1943, 14.

98 "City to Expand Nursery, Child Care Centers," Richmond News-Leader, 14 March 1945, World War II History Commission, Box 29, Nursery File.
spirits and without bitterness. Negro males have often refused to go to a plant unless they were sure they would be hired. Negro girls who were high school graduates and who had between 700 and 800 hours of training often went to as many as 29 or 30 plants before they were finally hired. . . Negro women, it seems, have been more willing than Negro men to break down the barriers to Negro employment. . .

Bledsoe, also the wife of a prominent lawyer and director of the Michigan Unemployment Commission, recognized the role of working-class women in the fight for social justice. As a middle-class woman, her speech revealed a convergence between the classes on issues of employment equality, made possible by working-class women's demands on state and private institutions to support their battles for jobs. Most likely, African American women's willingness to fight for jobs and respect in the workplace stemmed from their experience of two kinds of prejudice, racism and sexism. Evidence suggests that because they had seen white women and African American men hired, they wanted to have the same opportunities as those groups. In any case, black women led the charge to equalize hiring practices, working conditions, and seniority rights.

African American in Richmond and Detroit were willing to use any means available to them to secure their employment goals. They used the FEPC, the NAACP, the Urban League, and unions in order to obtain jobs, promotions, and to retain seniority rights. Their willingness to go to the highest levels of government suggests that African American women understood their location within the state as a powerful potential for stepped-up war production. Working-class black women framed their claims to jobs in the context of

the Double V movement—they fought for equality in the workforce as the U.S. fought for democracy overseas, and they bought bonds and voted just as any patriotic worker would. They used language that forced the state to recognize them as workers and citizens who had the right to economic opportunities.

Although women in Detroit and Richmond fought for the same goals, the success of working-class women in Richmond was limited. Unlike middle-class women, whose programs were similar throughout the country and who achieved similar results in their endeavors, working-class women's localized issues determined how much industries would acquiesce to federal and union pressures, and how much local race policies would change in the face of federal policies to desegregate essential war industries and government offices. Clearly, the structural *de jure* racism of Richmond inhibited the effects of their demands for equal employment opportunities, while the civil rights act legislated in Detroit enabled black women to enter factories and challenge the segregated culture within factory walls.

Despite their location far from centers of power both within the black community and within the state in general, working-class African American women showed both the state and industry that they would not be ignored, either as potential workers or as voting citizens who had the power to change the government. Although most black women in Detroit were not hired in war industries until 1943, and most black women in Richmond worked in non-production jobs, the fact that they consistently called upon the government, unions, and black institutions of power to help them break down industries posed a
significant challenge to job segregation by keeping industries constantly renegotiating the
terms of labor and the race relations within their factories.
CHAPTER 4: LOOKING AHEAD: MIDDLE-CLASS WOMEN'S ACTIVITIES IN THE POST-WAR WORLD

On 2 September 1945, the Japanese government signed articles of surrender which ended World War II. Although the Allies had cause for celebration as they claimed victory over tyranny abroad, African American women could not say that they had secured victory over racism at home. Although they had made gains in employment, bought homes in some segregated neighborhoods, acquired the vote where they could, and gained moderate recognition from the government. African American women still understood that their efforts had not changed race relations in the country as a whole.

Middle-class African American women realized that they were at an important crossroads—they had fought to be recognized by the government as responsible patriots fighting for victory, but how could they maintain their claims to citizenship in the peacetime state? President Nannie Black of the Detroit Housewives’ League queried: “Now that the war is over, and many young men who fought for freedom have returned to civilian life broken in body and spirit, others have made the supreme sacrifice that we may live in a country that offers true democracy. What have we done that the democracy they fought for may become a reality? What is our task ahead?”1 African American club women needed to reposition themselves in a post-war world in order to continue making claims on the state and society. They took advantage of the Cold War to create opportunities in which to extend the logic of the Double V campaign by claiming that

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1 Trade Week Guide, 20-27 November 1946, p 1, Detroit Housewives’ League Collection, Box 5, Burton Historical Collection, Detroit Public Library.
equality and democracy at home could create a united front in the face of outside communist threats.

From 1945 to 1954, middle-class African American women continued their struggle for equality by continuing their activities for the state and for their communities. They promoted the discourse of responsible patriotism by constructing themselves as citizens based on their contributions to the state as volunteers helping to secure Cold War defense systems. In addition, they employed maternalist discourse in order to construct themselves as important players in the domestic containment of communism through their activities that helped the poor and nurtured children. While African American club women promoted equality, they also walked a fine line between contesting the state and claiming legitimacy for their cause. Because definitions of loyalty to the state rested in the hands of hostile whites, black women were obligated to acquiesce to state demands for conformity by backing off of their most militant demands for equality. The state kept African American women's clubs off guard by threatening to surveil them for un-American activities, and African American women struggled with deciding how best to maintain credibility while making claims to equality within a dominant order that could judge their claims to be outside of societal norms, and therefore, "subversive."

Middle-class women continued to use the discourse of responsible patriotism after World War II, but they shaped it to fit the politics of the Cold War. They made a significant impact on the postwar civil rights movement, but they tempered their critique of the state with their anti-Communist rhetoric and their acceptance of a patriarchal nuclear family structure that did not fit with the reality of most wage-earning African
American women. Within a Cold War context, middle-class women re-emphasized traditional concepts of respectability, but they shored up these notions with "scientific" understandings of social work and community uplift. As they did during World War II, middle-class African American women actively promoted equality as they supported the NAACP, fought for their right to vote and to support political candidates, and sponsored forums on race relations. Moreover, middle-class women continued to speak for the working class as they sought to find ways to help working-class women maintain the jobs they had gained as a result of manpower shortages in World War II.

Middle-class African American women believed that their contributions to the war made them participants in the state, and that as participants in the state, they had the right to criticize problems with the government. While responsible patriotism had started with abstract demands for equality, during and after the war, national organizations moved to make their demands on the state concrete. They called upon America's new place as leader of the free world in order to rectify the problems with internal segregation. For example, Beulah Whitby, AKA and member of the new Human Rights council created by several black fraternal organizations, called for the government to pass an anti-lynching law, enact a permanent FEPC bill, overturn southern Jim Crow laws, and desegregate the army. She also pointed out the problems democracy faced when the nation's capital maintained strict legal segregation as she addressed fellow AKA members at their annual convention: "What sadder commentary could there be on American Democracy than that in our Nation's capital, often called the capital of the world, Negro citizens are Jim-Crowed and discriminated against more like than unlike the pattern of the Deep South."
Whitby did support Truman, despite his reluctance to desegregate Washington, because of his plans to desegregate the army and his civil rights bill of 1947. She called his election "a public endorsement of the federal civil rights program." The NCNW joined AKA in its support of Truman's civil rights initiatives and in 1949, it called upon all of its members to "continue to work with all the resources at our command for full citizenship for all citizens. . .we continue to alert Negroes to their potential strength in the use of the ballot." The following year, Dorothy Boulding Ferebee, former president of AKA and current president of the NCNW, urged club women to do their part to promote equality: "Women of today must use their every means to achieve the higher ideals of democracy and the greatest achievement of personal rights, freedom, and brotherhood." In 1948, the NCNW created a ten-point plan to which club women could adhere in order to demand concrete changes in the country. The plan included the following: remove all voting restrictions, outlaw all restrictive covenants, enact a federal anti-lynching bill, create a permanent FEPC, give federal aid to education with strict safeguards against discriminatory spending, get Social Security safeguards for agricultural and domestic workers, and address the problems of youth and delinquency. This plan effectively

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2 Address of Beulah Whitby, Proceedings, 28th Annual Boule, 27-31 December 1948, Morning Session. 24-25, Alpha Kappa Alpha Collection, Box 1, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University. (Hereafter AKA).


4 "Women Must Achieve Ideals of Democracy, Says NCNW Head," Richmond Afro-American, 13 June 1950, 10.

5 Ibid.
outlined all of the major changes club women wanted and would work to create from 1945 to 1954. In order to achieve these goals, middle-class African American women maintained claims on the state based on their post-war patriotic efforts.

As they did during the war, national black women’s groups led the fight for equality by couching their claims within the context of the time period. Because Cold War society demanded conformity, club women faced a dilemma of how to make claims on the state from a marginal position when the state judged the loyalty of its citizens based on adherence to dominant societal standards. While national leaders often drew upon the discourse of the Cold War to point out inequitable race relations within the country, they also had to police their own actions and statements in order to maintain legitimacy within a state that demanded social conformity. For example, sorority women shifted the discourse of responsible patriotism from contributing to the war to fighting communism at home. They strove to preserve their homes and communities in the uncertain “nuclear age.” National organizations claimed that the state could prevail against the threat of outside forces if it guaranteed democracy for all in America. Then, American citizens could show the world a united front in the fight for the free world. AKA’s Non-Partisan Council legal representative Thomasina Johnson explained the importance of democracy to America’s security in the nuclear age when she claimed:

The unleashing of the atomic bomb left us with the choice of one world or no world at all. . . Unless there is justice and first-class citizenship for every American citizen, America too will probably suffer the fate of the destructive use of the atomic bomb. . . because America has not yet learned to live with minority groups let alone with other nations. . . Whether Americans can learn to live with the rest of the world depends on whether they can live with
Negroes and other minority groups.\^4

Johnson equated the danger of social inequality to the danger of nuclear bombs: left unchecked, both were dangerous problems that could destroy the country either from within, in a domestic battle over the fate of segregation, or from an international threat by a country that realized that the United States could not work to effect peace throughout the world because of its problems at home.

The NCNW also focused on the importance of equality to national security. Leaders pointed out the discrepancy between America’s place as defender of democracy and its continued denial of equality at home, much as they did during World War II. At their 1948 conference, Sadie Alexander, the NCNW’s top attorney, noted that American people were “mentally ill” because they refused to budge on perceptions about race. She argued:

America must act quickly and prove herself willing to make her domestic policy coincide with her foreign policy if she is to lead the world to eternal peace. . . .All children are of one God and entitled to equality of all opportunities. America believes in democracy but she does not always practice what she believes, but she must wake up fast as belief in democracy is being destroyed in children who see discrimination practiced daily.\^7

While ostensibly, the women were using patriotic language to support their claims for democracy, they actually included veiled threats in their demands for equality. These women attempted to place the blame for social conflicts, which were regarded as dangerous to American unity, on those who discriminated rather than on those who

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protested unequal treatment; in essence, they tried to upend the definition of subversive by characterizing the behavior of the dominant society as threatening to the social order. They played upon Cold War fears by threatening that racism could contribute to a generation that would be open to communism as the only way to advance democracy. Considering the climate of the Cold War state, these speeches were quite subversive.

While African American club women demanded equality by using language that could be considered dangerous and threatening to the state, they also had to walk a fine line when criticizing the state in order to evade the red-baiting tactics of government leaders. Often, club women had to embrace strong anti-Communist stances so that their organizations would not face scrutiny and denunciation by anti-Communist government forces. In Ronald Reagan: The Movie, Michael Rogin explains that the post-war government bureaucracy used its new larger infrastructure to determine "dangerous" and "un-American" activities. In the new repressive climate, unionism, homosexuality, and any other issue that would undermine dominant societal values was considered suspect. This included all civil rights efforts. In order to keep civil rights activists in line, the state used the threat of repression and surveillance as a mechanism to force marginalized groups to police their own members. The FBI and other state agents repressed free speech in order to protect national security, and many groups came under fire for harboring "communistic" tendencies.⁸

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⁷ 13th Annual Conference Minutes, 1948, 1-2, NCNW, Series 2, Box 3, Folder 40.
The NCNW urged all of its members to fight for the country’s survival by promoting civil rights on the domestic front. On the other hand, African American women’s groups were wary of coming down too hard on the American system, because they feared being branded communists. In fact, several groups distanced themselves publicly from any hints of communism in order to preserve their legitimacy as democratic but activist groups. When Paul Robeson, the noted black singer and entertainer, supported the communists at the Paris Peace Conference and allegedly claimed that African Americans would not fight Russians in a war because they would not help a country that refused to grant them basic rights. Bethune denounced Robeson on behalf of the 800,000 African American women whom she claimed to represent. Bethune’s concern about the NCNW being associated with Robeson is reflected in her press statement about the incident:

Negroes have always stood by America in any emergency, and Negroes will always stand by America in any emergency. . . . Whatever our differences may be here, we stand as one against whatever intrusion might come upon us as a nation. We feel that we are Americans. We have always defended and will always defend the American ideals.  

This statement downplayed the NCNW’s criticisms of American society in order to stress their loyalty to the state. Bethune’s comments stressing the loyalty of black women shows how Cold War fears could stifle protest.

The NACW also fell victim to threats of censorship during the period, and it had to censor itself and its members so that it could exist without being denounced as a

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communist organization. Mrs. Ella P. Stewart, president of the group, had to interfere with the FBI in order to get the group taken off the U.S. Subversive list. She warned other NACW members to monitor groups to which they gave money or in which they had memberships: “I hope, ladies, that you will think seriously about joining organizations and consider what organization you are joining. It was quite an ordeal for this President to confer with various people in high places in Washington to keep us from being placed on the U.S. Subversive list.” This statement reveals the fears of black women, who, after working hard for democracy, had to suppress the speech of their own members in order to maintain some legitimacy within a state that coerced conformity on political and social issues. While African American women’s national organizations worked hard to promote democracy, they faced constricted parameters because they continued to work from within the state to effect change. When the state changed and stopped accommodating certain types of protest, the discourse of responsible patriotism had to reflect that change. Although fighting for democracy still meant fighting for equality in order to secure America’s place as the free world’s champion, adherents to the discourse of responsible patriotism had to be careful not to embrace any ideologies that could seem subversive, so that they would not undermine their efforts to obtain civil rights.

Maternalism in the Cold War State

Because the state kept a close eye on civil rights activities, middle-class African American women had to redefine their activism in terms that the state could accept.

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Middle-class women couched the discourse of responsible patriotism in terms of responsible motherhood in the post-war period in order to legitimize their activities by claiming power within a traditional gendered sphere. In effect, these women drew upon their power as mothers as they tried to change the state and to take charge of community welfare issues. While many historians equate the term maternalism with white middle-class women's reform movements, others argue that black women also claimed the term and used it for their own reform efforts. These scholars, however, focus primarily on the early half of the twentieth century as the height of the maternalist movement. Gwendolyn Mink, Kathryn Sklar, Paula Baker, and other scholars note that maternalist discourse enabled white women to create space in the state in order to gain public authority and enact policies that focused on the welfare of the poor. The maternalists' status as middle-class club women enabled them to engage with the state—they did secure several reforms in the Progressive and New Deal eras, but their reforms were laden with class and race prejudice. The welfare system they created reinforced class and race inequalities with its enforcement of morality clauses in Aid to Dependent Children programs and its system of distribution, which allowed local welfare boards to refuse to disperse funds to minorities.

Several historians, including Linda Gordon and Eileen Boris, acknowledge that African

(Hereafter NACW)

American club women also embraced maternalism during this period, and that their linking motherhood and uplift to civil rights was inevitable as they provided the fundraising and networking skills in order to finance community institutions and assist the poor blacks that maternalist state policies forgot. Boris claims that in the period prior to World War I, African American club women practiced a "social motherhood" that provided the community with services denied them by the state, which blurred the lines between state and community institutions. Although the height of maternalist rhetoric occurred in the first half of the century, black women chose to privilege this discourse in the 1950s in order to engage with the state in traditional gendered terms. This maternalist discourse proved especially valuable to African American women in the post-war period. Because the state privileged women's domesticity as part of its plan to fight communism, African American club women could use their power as mothers to enact social change.

Middle-class African American women's maternalist responses to the Cold War state was not without its problems. Because the discourse necessitated women's acceptance of the state, flawed as it was, in order for them to locate themselves closer to the center of power and make changes inside the state, women had to maneuver within the changes and restrictions wrought by the international Cold War dialogue that followed post-war peace conferences. Elaine Tyler May argues that Americans created a family-centered culture in the post-war period that reflected both their fears and hopes for the

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future, and acted as a buffer against the threat of internal communism. She argues: "As the Cold War took hold of the nation's consciousness, domestic contentment mushroomed into a full-blown ideology that hovered over the cultural landscape for two decades. Of course, a major part of the family as defense called for mothers to be in the home protecting families against outside threats of nonconformity. Because often even middle-class African American women had to work outside the home, albeit in professions like teaching and social work, they had to adapt to the new cultural landscape. They often constructed themselves as mothers working in the home and in the community to help future generations experience democracy, the American way of life. This language reflected a hearkening back to the much earlier discourse of respectability and uplift, but it was prominent in this era of conformity. Local organizations in Richmond and Detroit often projected this language about traditional respectability and domestic womanhood into their discussions about citizenship. Zeta Phi Betas in Richmond concluded: "An ideal woman molds her life so that it will fit in with the life [sic] of others. . .home is the best place to do our work. . .Women should live so that their lives may be the proper example to follow." When addressing the Michigan Association of Colored Women's Clubs, Jean Campus, a Detroit attorney, claimed that in building a world for tomorrow, women must set an example for the entire community in order to secure "the betterment of the future


14 May, 91.

15 "Zetas View an Ideal Woman in Commemoration of Finer Womanhood Week," The Panther XIII:3 (18 April 1950), 3, Virginia Union University Special Collections.
generation." While the wartime discourse of responsible patriotism was gendered in that it called upon women as volunteer and waged workers to give service to the state, the post-war discourse called upon black women as mothers to provide state services and claim rights based on their position as domestic guardians.

Middle-class women set out to politicize motherhood and become guardians of the entire world; they did not intend to remain in their homes and raise their children while turning their backs on their community. Like many white and black reformers in the Progressive era, these club women used the language of domesticity without making it a goal for themselves. They placed themselves in a tenuous position as supporters of a lifestyle that revolved around a patriarchal family—one to which these women did not necessarily adhere. To many club women, using this discourse was a matter of expediency, as it enabled them to achieve their goals without the interference of hostile government agents. AKAs discussed the fact that as Christian women and as mothers, that they could appeal to women across the country and around the world in order to eliminate misunderstandings and mistrust as well as end conflict in general. African American women also understood that while their race made them vulnerable at home, it made them powerful abroad because they could appeal to women in the global community


17 Kevin Gaines addresses the problem of earlier reformers like Alice Dunbar Nelson, who wrestled with trying to promote a domestic ideal without necessarily applying that ideal to themselves, which they understood as problematic for themselves in Uplifting the Race: Black Leadership, Politics, and Culture in the Twentieth Century (Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 1996).

as sisters of color and sisters who had experienced violence firsthand. At a regional institute held by the Richmond YWCA, Dr. Nancy Wooldrich of Hampton Institute claimed that: "Our suffering has made us sisters under the skin...we [must] view the path over which we have trod and strive to establish peace on earth, and good will to all men." Wooldrich and others linked pan-African and colonialist ideologies to their efforts for world peace as they identified with "sisters" of color around the world who struggled for equality and freedom. Wooldrich claimed power in womanhood as she focused on women of color as agents of world peace.

Middle-class women's language reflected their optimism in their own abilities to change the world and bring peace to all nations, again hearkening back to maternalist policies in earlier twentieth-century peace movements. While earlier reformers had focused on the power of women as mothers to fight for both nonviolence and world equality for women, they suggested that peace was necessary in order to further justice for women. Middle-class white women formed groups like the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom and the Women's Peace Union in order to take the lead in establishing world peace and gaining a voice in world politics. Although these women failed in their bid to outlaw war with the outbreak of World War II, their rhetoric of

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women as powerful mothers who could advance the cause of peace and social justice influenced African American club women in the postwar period. Bethune placed the NCNW squarely in the midst of the world peace movement by claiming: "'The peoples of the world are looking largely to the women in the building of lasting peace. Therefore, it is vitally important that an organization such as the National Council create that kind of organization structure which shall strengthen the fulfillment of the principles on which it was founded.'"21 Rosa Gragg, president of the Detroit Association of Women's Clubs, decided that because men had gotten America into wars, it was up to women to keep America out of them. In speaking to the women of the Second Baptist Church, she claimed that world peace would start with education of children at home: "'It is the job of women to rebuild a war-torn world because men have not been able to build a world of peace and goodwill.'"22 While this language was not new, it is significant that African American women used this discourse to reflect the belief in their ability to effect world harmony and international democracy for women of color around the globe. Through maternalist peace discourse, they claimed power as mothers and reformers working for social justice.

_10 of Peace_ (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995) discuss the importance of maternalism to peace movements prior to World War II.


Maternalism, citizenship, and social work

Middle-class African American women did not just look to facilitating international relations as part of their maternalist program. As self-described guardians of the community, they also sought to continue providing their community institutions and poor African American mothers with desperately needed funds that were not forthcoming from the state. As Boris explains, African American club women promoted civil rights as they provided for their community, which helped the entire community progress towards equality.\(^{23}\) This service work was extremely important in the Cold War state, because once the state expanded its benefits, it raised issues for middle-class women as to what the state owed the black community. They understood that their charity work was not sufficient to maintain the black community without the help of the state, and they saw themselves as bridging the gap between state services and community needs. In these cases, club women backed their maternalist discourse with programs to help hospitals, welfare recipients, and children by combining science and traditional uplift efforts.

Club women in Richmond and Detroit focused much of their attention on raising money for hospitals and health organizations that helped the poor. Richmond society got behind the poorly-funded Community Hospital, which was the only hospital that would accept indigent African Americans. For example, in 1946, the AKA chapters raised $515.18 from a barn dance to give to the hospital’s general fund. Several years later, in an attempt to add to the hospital’s facilities by donating the latest scientific equipment, the

\(^{23}\) Boris, 236-237.
chapter raised enough money to donate a baby respirator in the name of the late chapter founder Zenobia Gilpin, a doctor and prominent society member. Detroit's club women also supported hospitals and health clinics. In 1953, African American women teamed up with white women to form the Interracial Community Hospital League. They sponsored a linen drive at the Urban League in which they received a large number of sheets and towels. The Co-Ettes also sponsored a favorite health charity as they raised money for Detroit's School for the Blind. They held a chocolate hour social in which they raised $150 for supplies. While helping the sick was a part of traditionally constructed women's labor responsibilities, club women provided necessary labor and money in closing the gaps left by inadequate state funding.

Club women in Richmond and Detroit also gave money and supplies to agencies that helped poor African American families in their community, which provided an unpaid service to the state by filling in gaps between inadequate state funding and poor families' community survival networks. They located themselves within the state as providers to the welfare system, which enabled them to claim rights based on their contributions to state welfare benefits. While many of the activities occurred around the Christmas and Thanksgiving holidays—providing clothing and toys for the children, food for the families—all of the activities grew out of a concern for the poverty faced by poor families.

24 "AKA's Sponsor Hospital Benefit," 9 March 1946, 10; "AKA Gift to Hospital Honors Late Physician," 4 June 1949, 1:11; "Deltas Give Library Truck," 27 March 1948, 16, all in Richmond Afro-American.

in each city. In Richmond, the Sunday Evening Pals and other social clubs aided poor families by giving away food baskets. Richmond's AKA chapters sponsored an annual shoe drive, which raised over $1000 to establish a shoe bank for needy girls. They raised money by sponsoring fashion shows and holding a Cinderella Ball, in which Richmond teen debutantes competed for the Cinderella title. Detroit's clubs also took action in the post-war period in an attempt to help poor families. Many groups, including the Sparklers Social Club, The Woman's Friendly Club, and the E'Manon Charity Club donated gifts of food, clothing, and gifts to underprivileged families at Christmas. Although giving food and clothing to the needy reflected club women's continuing emphasis on traditional uplift projects in the postwar period, it provided a real safety net to the poor and was a great help to the welfare agencies trying to operate in each city. Often, social workers linked recipients with club women, using professional case worker methods to determine the needs of their clients and then turning the clients over to club women, who "sponsored" them through the holidays, making sure the families had food and clothing during the winter months.


African American women in Richmond had an underlying message in their uplift activities; often, when they supported various causes, they pointed out the inequalities inherent in certain "charitable" institutions. For example, the Phyllis Wheatley YWCA praised the work of its volunteers, especially in light of the fact that its branch always suffered a "lack of adequate facilities" for its programs. After pointing out the hypocrisy of having a segregated "World Fellowship Celebration," the Phyllis Wheatley branch convinced the central branch leaders to create several interracial activities, which included craft groups, community service projects, and a choir. Virginia Union University's Deltas collected clothing for the Salvation Army, but in an article for the *Afro-American*, they pointed out the fact that the Salvation Army units in Richmond served whites only, despite receiving support from the black community. While incidents like this did not occur often, they do reflect the fact that African American club women were concerned about the treatment they and their communities received from charitable organizations.

Middle-class women recognized the importance of their gendered contributions to the state, and claimed as a prerogative for their services the right to reform the recipients of their maternalist efforts. Club women in particular understood that for their efforts to

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30 Annual Report, Young Adult Department, 2, YWCA, Box 28, Reports 1950-1951 Folder.

achieve equality and their discourse of responsible patriotism to survive beyond World War II. They had to make sure that the next generation played its part to support civil rights and to be upstanding citizens. Their desire to raise children to be participants in the state, coupled by their desire to keep children from becoming delinquents and casting a shadow of disrespect on the entire black community, led African American women to continue their sponsorship of nurseries and play schools for children of working mothers, as well as canteens and programming for teenagers. This significant combination of goals and ideologies suggests that club women still defined their citizenship status as reciprocal, rather than inherent; they provided services to the Cold War state that created responsible and patriotic youth, but they expected to be compensated with recognition by the state as important contributors to state functions.

In much of their programming, middle-class women continued to show a healthy dose of class bias. This came through in the form of critiques against the mothering efforts of working-class and poor women. Boris explains that unlike middle-class white women, middle-class black women understood the need of African American women to work because of structural economic segregation into low-wage jobs. As a result, while they did not focus as much on workplace issues, they also did not construct working mothers as unworthy, and instead helped them with various programs for the children.\(^{32}\)

In some of the projects created to help the children of working women, however, middle-class women exhibited a bias against working poor mothers, not so much in the fact that

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\(^{32}\) Boris, 222-228.
they had to work, but in the fact that their parenting skills were suspect, especially in the raising of teenage girls.  

In Richmond and Detroit, club women tried to keep nursery schools open for preschool children as they recognized that many women had to continue working in order to support their families. When the director of Richmond’s only remaining postwar black nursery school revealed its imminent closure from a lack of funds, AKA swung into action. Community leaders began in response to critics stating that working-class women did not have adequate time to raise their children properly. It opened so that “adequate care, supervision, and protection be available to all children, especially those who are deprived of a mother’s care primarily because of economic reasons.”^* 95 percent of the children at the daycare center had working mothers. The local AKA chapter donated 100 dollars and held a very successful barn dance that netted $500.56 for the school. The funds allowed the school to remain open, and other groups volunteered their services in order to make the school’s future secure.^5 Detroit’s club women focused their efforts on the continued sponsorship of Peter Pan Nursery, which maintained its mission to help working-class families’ children. In fact, by 1950, of the 51 children in the preschool, 15 were from broken homes, only 3 lived in homes where the father worked, 14 had the

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33 Gaines claims that there were significant problems with the middle-class using science to categorize and deem pathological working-class behavior, since middle-class elites failed to see that the problems faced by the working-class stemmed from structural economic issues, rather than behavioral ones.

34 Bonnie Parker, “School Needs Public Funds to Remain Open,” Richmond Afro-American, 8 February 1947, 10.
mother as the sole support, 3 had mothers who received welfare, and 28 had both parents in the household and working low-wage jobs.\(^{36}\) Detroit club women worked to provide financial support with fundraisers and materials drives when the nursery lost its funding from the War Chest in 1947. The all-female board of directors requested support from "city churches, organizations, and clubs." It held fundraisers like a "subscription tea" and held a cabaret parties to sell $1 memberships in order to contribute to the general operations fund.\(^{17}\) Fundraising for Peter Pan became an annual gala affair. In 1954, club women created Peter Pan auxiliary club to sponsor bridge fundraisers and charity balls.\(^{38}\) These efforts provided desperately needed services to working-class women, which were threatened by state cutbacks to daycare.

Club women sponsored programs for school-aged children in Richmond and Detroit in order to make sure that children learned responsibility, healthy living, and citizenship. The basic goals of the learning programs reflected a middle-class bias: essentially, club women stepped in to teach the children of working-class mothers respectability in order to make them responsible citizens. The club women's activities suggest that they did not believe that working-class women were adequate teachers of the

\(^{35}\) "Local AKA Chapter Gives $600 Donation to Nursery," 15 March 1947, 7; "Zetas Celebrate Womanhood Week," 6 March 1948, 7; "Church in Community Day Nursery Celebrate at Halloween Fete," 12 November 1949, all in *Richmond Afro-American.*

\(^{36}\) Annual Report of Peter Pan Nursery of Detroit, Inc., June 1943-December 1950, printed in 1951, 10, Children's Fund of Michigan, Box 12, Peter Pan School File, Bentley Memorial Library.


tenets of respectability, and so they moved in to provide what they considered to be necessary lessons for life. In Richmond, Phi Delta Kappa continued to sponsor a recreation room for boys and girls, where they learned art, drama, and took part in social activities after school. Chi Eta Phi, the national nursing sorority, sponsored a movie to raise money for convalescent kids with rheumatic fever and to teach the importance of maintaining healthy habits at the Booker T. Washington Movie Theater. Over 1,000 kids and parents attended the movie. AKAs donated $1500 to Detroit Parks and Recreation in order to buy playground equipment in black neighborhoods, which vastly improved the quality of the children's recreation areas. In addition, the YWCA of Detroit also sponsored several camps for girls in the elementary and junior high schools. It gave scholarships to underprivileged children in order to send them to its sleepaway camp in northern Michigan. One twelve-year-old girl won a scholarship as a result of her efforts to clean up the projects in which she lived. Another girl, eleven, won a scholarship because she had to care for her five siblings and her sick father every day while her mother went to work. The YWCA also held parties for poor children, and they often received help from other clubs. In 1953, AKA, the Premier Homemakers, the Detroit Study Club, and the Excelsior Homemakers helped to sponsor a Christmas party for 150 children at the YWCA.39 These activities revealed club women's efforts to provide wholesome, health-oriented programs designed to take children out of the socially, psychologically, and physically unhealthy ghetto environments.

39 "AKA's Donate $1,500 to Equip Playgrounds," 4 June 1949, 6 and "Camperships to Go to Selected Girls in Project," 22 June 1946, 5; "150 Tots Feted at YWCA Party," 26 December 1953, 9. both in
Although club women's activities for children in Richmond and Detroit helped working mothers make sure that their children had safe activities in which to participate, their focus on parenting the children reveals their class bias. They believed that poor behavior resulted from poor parenting and was a pathology that needed to be corrected before it cast shame on the entire African American community. This belief by the middle class in working-class pathology was not a new phenomena, but in the post-war period, club women focused on the "scientific" causes of children's problems and attempted to control their behavior. For example, social workers conducted studies that concluded that the poverty of families, the squalor of the ghettos, and the hours poor women spent working outside the home contributed to malnutrition, disease, and "poorly behaved" children. While nursery schools worked to incorporate the tenets of good nutrition, good education, and good social skills, programs for older children focused on the benefits of getting out of the projects or the poor neighborhoods to camps far from the confines of the children's neighborhoods.

Nowhere was class bias more prevalent, however, than in club women's programs for teen girls. As they had during the war, middle-class women showed concern over the behavior of the daughters of working-class women. In a direct attempt to stem problems of sexuality and delinquency, club women in Richmond and Detroit worked in a three step process to eliminate teen trouble: first, they provided wholesome entertainment to provide alternatives to delinquency; second, they sponsored personality clinics in order to

*Michigan Chronicle.*
teach young women how to develop into respectable citizens; and third, in Detroit, Deltas recognized delinquent behavior and tried to correct it through the Delta Home program. While these programs did not appear to move far beyond earlier programs that promulgated tenets of respectability, the fact that social workers ran the programs and called them "clinics," giving them a scientific bent, suggests that middle-class women were embracing the new methods of psychoanalysis and clinical studies in order to "prove" that they could solve the youth problems that resulted from working-class lifestyles.

The YWCAs in Richmond and Detroit were instrumental in planning recreational and learning activities for young women. Richmond's Phyllis Wheatley branch held fashion shows, music and dance classes, service projects, and co-ed dances. Detroit's Lucy Thurman Branch sponsored youth canteens with the YMCA, for kids aged 18-25. The young people were in charge of the canteens. The YWCAs also focused on changing young women's behavior in order to create future responsible patriots. In Richmond, the Y-Teen group held clinics on health, work, and social problems, religion, the arts, and personal relations, as well as holding personality contests among themselves. The directors had a specific plan in mind with these activities: "Y Teens try to prepare for their roles as adult citizens." Detroit sponsored a state-wide Girl Reserves meeting in which "equal opportunities in education, adequate recreation, full employment with jobs

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41 "Girls Observe Y-Teen Roll Call": Answers to Questionnaires for Teen Age Department, 1953, YWCA, Box 2, Executive Director Phyllis Wheatley Branch Communications 1950-1953 File.
for all who need work, and happy married and home life" took center stage in discussion workshops.42

Later, the YWCA revealed how it "Quietly" fought delinquency. The directors made a statement about the YW's activities. They were "devoted to character building and to creating, by their programs and facilities, an atmosphere in which their members may grow and develop, morally and physically, into worthwhile citizens."43 YWCAs in both Richmond and Detroit made it clear that respectable women made good citizens in the postwar period, and they carried their message to all young women who joined the groups. These programs showed the pervasiveness of the ideology of respectability and club women's inability to drop it from the discourse of responsible patriotism.

Because they saw respectability as a precondition for claims to citizenship and for the ability to perform responsibly as citizens, various other clubs in Richmond and Detroit sponsored "clinics" both to keep girls out of trouble and to teach them morals and standards of good behavior. Club women attempted to disseminate the discourse of responsible patriotism to young women in order to teach another generation how to claim rights as citizens. Sigma Gamma Rho Sorority's Richmond and Detroit chapters joined other chapters across the country in sponsoring annual "Teen Town" clinics. In 1952, Richmond's chapter held a clinic for youth that included vocational information, movies about social relations, religion, and other guidance topics. A year earlier, Sigmas in Detroit had a panel of experts discuss religion, education, and social and employment

problems of youth in Detroit, which they followed with a teen dance. In 1954, Detroit Sigmas held another Teen Town which focused on girls’ problems. In their clinics, the sorority members focused on the power of motherhood, career vs. homemaking issues, and the importance of a college education.44

Personality and beauty clinics remained the standard fare of sororities and clubs aiming projects at young women. In Richmond, AKAs sponsored a personality clinic for the girls presented at the Cinderella Ball. The sorority stressed: “‘Strive for naturalness in makeup, hair styling, and voice.’”45 In Detroit, the Tangerines’ Club presented a series of beauty clinics for teens in the Sophie Wright Settlement. While they focused on the development of physical beauty through personal grooming, dating, manners, and decent moral standards, they also had a more realistic side to their clinics. The club held a talk about planned parenthood and showed a movie called “Human Growth, a movie geared to promote better understanding of body functions.”46 This marks an interesting break from respectability discourse, in that the Tangerines were willing to deal with an issue regarding young women’s sexuality in a forthright manner. While there is no evidence suggesting that the women discussed birth control at all, their willingness to show a movie about sex


45 “‘Be Natural,’ Teen Agers Told at First Personality Forum,” *Richmond Afro-American*, 27 February 1954, 12.

education reveals an important change in at least one club’s attitude regarding open talk about sexual issues.

In no other place was the attempt to stop delinquency more apparent than in Detroit’s Delta Home for Girls. The Delta home was the pinnacle of club women’s social work and scientific efforts at reform in the Detroit community, and it was a linchpin in club women’s efforts to stop the effects of poor mothering and urban pathology, the main reasons they ascribed to the girls’ delinquent behavior. After raising money for the home, Deltas opened the institution in 1947. The house, run by Delta social workers, provided accommodations for ten girls and was licensed as a welfare agency. Case workers analyzed the girls’ problems and tried to proscribe solutions based upon normative gender roles, like teaching the girls how to cook and sew. The sorority and United Community Services paid for the general expenses of the Delta home, which was staffed by a resident director, two assistant directors, and a cook.

Deltas used Wayne State social work majors to study the effectiveness of the home in a clinical study that promoted scientific sampling methods to look at long-term results of the home. The group of majors looked at 98 young women who lived in the home from 1947 to 1954. 82 of whom were between the ages of 13-15. 59% had lived in their own homes, but few had both parents present in the home. 41% of the residents had lived with relatives or friends. Half of the residents lived in the house less than six months. The majority of the residents were from poor neighborhoods, and grew up in families deemed substandard by Deltas: “poor economically, morally, and socially,” in homes broken by “divorce, desertion, death, or incarceration.” The Deltas believed the families allowed
their daughters to become delinquent: "Lack of parental interest or control, cruel punishments, neglect, all combined to create distrustful, starved, personalities."\textsuperscript{47} Since the Deltas believed that the parents were no longer capable of caring for their daughters, they petitioned the court to take the cases presented to them by the welfare agencies. Most of the girls had been charged with delinquency in the courts, and their acts ranged from sexual promiscuity and "general immorality." to truancy, stealing, aggression, and vandalism.\textsuperscript{48} Social workers sought to change this behavior by setting rules and standards to which the girls had to adhere, including school attendance, and by teaching them homemaking skills.

However high the hopes were for the Delta Home, the sorority members themselves admitted that their success rate was less than stellar, despite their best attempts to teach the young women responsibility and domestic skills. While half of those studied had changed dramatically during their stay at the Delta home, a large percentage reverted back to their previous behaviors after they left. Deltas blamed this on continued poor parenting by the working-class families of the girls.\textsuperscript{49} The Deltas' stress on mother-blaming shows that often middle-class and working-class values were at odds: the sorority women's refusal to look at an economic basis as the causal factor in the young women's

\textsuperscript{47} Delta Home for Girls, Summary of Study Covering Years 1947-1954, 2, United Community Service Central Files Collection, Box 23, Folder 7. Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University. (Hereafter UCS)

\textsuperscript{48} Delta Home for Girls, Summary, 3.

\textsuperscript{49} Delta Home for Girls, Summary, 5, 7.
behavior suggests that they were not cognizant of the real problems faced by the working class.

The Delta Home is significant not necessarily because of the changes it accomplished in the women, but because of what it revealed about the club women’s attitudes towards delinquency and methods of rehabilitation which they believed would lead young women to become responsible, respectable citizens who would further the movement for equality. Deltas believed that a structured home environment would enable girls to “build character, to build morals, good citizenship, and lasting friendships.”50 The rehabilitated women would become wives and mothers, and in the domesticity-oriented state, could make claims on the state as citizens themselves. To that end, case committee workers created group life therapy sessions that developed “personality, character, and intelligence.”51 In addition, case workers helped the residents create their own rules, like setting schedules for laundry, kitchen, and cleaning duties, which were all set forth in a pamphlet called “Fitting In.”52 These programs mirrored white middle-class women’s programs for unwed mothers. While middle-class white women created homes for unwed mothers in order to rehabilitate them and enable them to rejoin society, the Deltas created a home for “unruly” teen girls in order to rehabilitate them and make them respectable.


citizens. The Deltas refused, however, to allow pregnant girls entrance into the home, as they would be a poor influence on the other girls. The title of the pamphlet shows that Deltas believed that conformity with certain behaviors would enable the girls to advance morally and socially and become successes in their own lives. Despite the figures that spoke to the contrary, Deltas held a dinner in 1954 which celebrated the several hundred girls who: "had another chance to 'make good.' Many of them have developed into fine women and are living highly useful lives." Deltas kept believing in the project and maintained the home for several years following 1954.

Unpaid Service to the State

In addition to maintaining maternalist programs to make claims on the state as mothers and guardians of home and community, middle-class African American women also continued to promote their discourse of responsible patriotism through their volunteer work for the state both in the Cold War preparedness campaign and during the Korean War. Their work for the Red Cross and USO kept the discourse of citizenship alive as women agreed to support the state on the new homefront of the Cold War. By volunteering for Cold War defense projects, middle-class women continued to make claims on the state for equal citizenship, based on their contributions to the postwar state. In order to downplay the seriousness of a potential nuclear attack, the government called upon women to "sanitize" nuclear war by likening their preparedness in the face of nuclear

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attack to their homemaking skills. Elaine Tyler May suggests that the state was active in developing a homemaking as a profession in order to make women ready in the case of any dire emergency brought on by foreign aggression. State agents likened stockpiling foods to “grandma’s cupboard” which was always full, in the event of unexpected company. They showed women how to cook and keep the house with makeshift utensils and appliances. Above all, the state sought to maintain gender roles as a form of stability in the face of nuclear attack. By supporting the Red Cross and the USO throughout the Cold War and the Korean War, middle-class African American women located themselves within the state as providers of important domestic services that were linked to Cold War preparedness.

Many middle-class women spent much of their time participating in Red Cross activities. With the threat of immediate and disastrous nuclear strikes hanging over their heads, Richmond and Detroit homemakers took many preparedness classes as part of their postwar efforts to give substance to the discourse of responsible patriotism. In fact, as domestic guardians, homemakers became crucial to the preparedness effort as they planned to learn first aid and sickness prevention, detection, and curing in order to help out and free up doctors and other medical personnel in the event of nuclear crises. These women believed that they were performing an essential function for the state by learning how to keep their families in perfect health. As Richmond’s State Health Commissioner argued: “it is very important for every woman in the home to know how to care for sick

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55 May, 103-107.
members of her family' in case of emergency situations. Just like the courses offered during the war, the classes were intensive and costly, in that the courses took many hours to complete and the books were expensive. Many African American homemakers participated in the classes in order to prepare for any potential disasters. For example, in 1949, the Richmond Red Cross home nursing director praised twelve black women who completed 24 hours of nursing classes without missing any classes. Their attendance set a record in Richmond: never before had a class, black or white, achieved a perfect attendance record.

With the outbreak of the Korean War in 1950, Richmond women stepped in to fill the needs caused by shortages of medical personnel. Eight women trained for the Civilian Defense Corps and seven took 29 hours of theory and 40 hours of practicum to become Volunteer Nurses' Aides (VNAs). The VNAs essentially performed the same duties as Certified Nurses' Aides, but without pay, contributing hours of unpaid labor to the state. Detroit's middle-class women also volunteered to help the Red Cross after the outbreak of the Korean War. In one case, sixteen women graduated from VNA training and planned to spend three weeks in hospitals gaining their practical experience. In 1954.

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58 "Red Cross Class Has 100% Record," *Richmond Afro-American*, 29 October 1949, 3.
59 "First Nurses' Aides are Graduated: Red Cross Trainees Eight Women for CD," 28 August 1951, 20; "Nurses' Aides at St. Phillip," 9 August 1951, 18, both in *Richmond Afro-American*.
60 "Red Cross Aide Trainees, 3 November 1951, 6; "Receive Nursing Certificates," 14 February 1953, 7, both in *Michigan Chronicle*. 
homemaker and member of Detroit's United Council of Church Women Mrs. M.R. Rhonenee, exhorted other women to take home nursing courses to promote homefront defense and to make their own homes safer: "'Learn how to discharge this part of [your] mother job... It is one of the privileges as well as one of the duties of mothers to care for their families when they are ill.'" She praised the work of the Red Cross volunteers as patriotic mothers who kept home and country safe with their preparedness.\textsuperscript{61}

In addition to maintaining preparedness by taking Red Cross activities as part of their post-war efforts to back the discourse of responsible patriotism with activities, middle-class women continued to provide reproductive labor services for the state by caring for soldiers who were returning from European homefronts from 1945-1947, or who participated in the Korean War from 1950-1953. Their continuous support for the USO signified their continuous support of the state. As they fed and entertained the men who fought for the state, they implicitly accepted the fact that they were willing to sacrifice sons and husbands for the security of the state. In both Richmond and Detroit, African American women supported the USOs, despite a serious cut in funding and major cutbacks in programming, in order to maintain troop morale.

Richmond's African American women also provided essential work in getting financial support for the USO after the government reduced its support of local facilities; this furthered their connection to the state as they provided both labor and money to keep the organization afloat. As they did when supporting private institutions, the women

\textsuperscript{61} "Praises Job Done by Red Cross," \textit{Michigan Chronicle}, 25 September 1954, 23.
pooled their money and worked through club networks to maintain facilities for black soldiers, continuing the work on behalf of the state through private groups. When personnel cutbacks affected the camps surrounding Richmond, the national USO council cut funding and forced the closure of both the black and the white USOs several months after the six-year anniversary celebration. The Traveller’s Aid Society also closed its Transit Lounge in the train station. African American women scrambled to rally the community around the soldiers, and created their own programs for the soldiers. The GSO and senior hostesses created a new group, the Girls’ Service Organization, to provide entertainment for hospitalized veterans and soldiers in the camps. Determined to continue their work for the soldiers, the group went to fraternal organizations and black businesses in order to find sponsorships for their programs. Starting in 1948 and continuing through the Korean War, GSO members took over 120 Easter baskets and 150 Christmas stockings to McGuire Hospital for wounded soldiers. They raised money by selling Christmas cards and they collected presents and food from sponsoring businesses. During the Korean War, the GSOs worked with the Phyllis Wheatley YWCA to sponsor dances and parties for Fort Lee and Cheatham Annex Naval Station soldiers. Everyone always had a “wonderful time,” according to the director of the YWCA. Throughout

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62 “USO Transit Lounge Closed,” 19 April 1947, 9; “Leigh St. USO to Close Sept. 30,” 6 September 1947, 7, both in Richmond Afro-American.

63 “USO Dead, Women Volunteers Carry on Work in Richmond,” Richmond Afro-American, 14 February 1948, 11.

64 “Holiday Cheer for Hospitalized Veterans, 23 April 1949, 1:10, and “Members of GSO Display Yule Stockings,” 7 January 1950, 1, both in Richmond Afro-American; Letter from Olivia Daniels to Miss Ella
this period, African American women labored to maintain an institution that was important for black soldiers and the larger black community. They could point to their effectiveness in the fact that soldiers still came to the USO, despite the lack of state support.

Detroit’s USO volunteers were lucky enough to maintain the support of the national USO council, so they were able not only to continue their work, but to expand it to fulfill the needs of soldiers during the Korean War. Moreover, USO leaders merged the black and white USOs into one desegregated unit, something Richmond’s USO council would never have considered. Because more men were shipped out from the West coast, Midwestern bases became more important in the transport of soldiers, and Detroit’s surrounding bases continued to need a place for soldiers to spend their furloughs. In 1946, hostesses served over 2,000 soldiers a day while also providing facilities for wounded and convalescent soldiers on leave.

While the Richmond USOs fought for their existence, the black USO in Detroit actually expanded during the Korean war. Club women sponsored a snack bar, at which the Sympathizers Charity Club and Women’s Council of the Second Baptist Church volunteered to cook and serve food. These women labored for the state, and their work

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Turner, 27 December 1954, YWCA, Box 2, Executive Director Associated Agencies Richmond USO 1954 File.

65 “Reverend Grandy USO Dedication Orator.”


for desegregation of the USOs, which began during World War II, finally paid off. By 1954, in a stunning example of the changing racial climate in the city, the black and white USOs merged into an integrated "Downtown Club." Since Truman had integrated the armed forces several years before, Detroit's USO council decided to follow suit to save on money and volunteer needs. A problem emerged, however, in that when the USOs merged, many African American women stopped volunteering, despite the council's pleas for hostesses. The USO called for a general enlistment of volunteers to help the soldiers at the center: "There is at the moment a particular need for Negro girls. The USO program is an integrated one, as are the armed forces, but the number of colored girls who have signed up and who carry out their assignments faithfully is under par." Although there is no evidence to explain why the number of black women volunteers fell, racial tension within the center may have existed, enough to cause the drop-off in black volunteers. In pictures of the USO, black and white women played games together with mixed groups of soldiers, but if the center needed more black women, then although the center was interracial, the mixing between black men and white women was probably negligible, if not non-existent. If the climate was fraught with hostility, it is entirely possible that young black women were reluctant to work at the USO. Nevertheless, those who did volunteer as junior hostesses served alongside white women as they danced and played card games every night and visited bases for weekly dances.69 And of course, throughout the period, senior hostesses continued to vouch for the respectability of the

juniors, who had to endure a three month trial/training period once they had been
“carefully selected for personality, graciousness, and understanding of youth activity. .
these girls radiate charm and personality.” Again, middle-class women supported their
gendered service to the state with respectability as they worked to provide decent
entertainment for the soldiers.

Middle-class African American women continued to provide support to the state
by participating in traditional gendered volunteer efforts, as they did during World War II.
They expected their contributions to locate them within the state, in order to negotiate for
equality. This expectation became clear in their focus on civil rights activism in the
postwar period, as they called upon the state to enact laws that would guarantee equality.

Civil Rights Activism

At the same time that local African American middle-class women maintained their
voluntary efforts for the state and for their communities, they also continued to promote
equality by using activist strategies to establish a permanent FEPC, support NAACP
desegregation attempts, and gain a strong voice in government by voting and becoming
partisan supporters of politicians who were friendly to civil rights issues. National
organizations took the lead in clarifying the issues important to African American women,
as they had during World War II. From 1945-1954, when prominent national women’s
groups went on record to support civil rights, they focused on urging concrete changes.
They demanded that the federal government enact laws and policies that would change

69 “USO Junior Hostesses Tread Glory Road,” Michigan Chronicle, 10 April 1954, 15.
segregationist policies across the country. For example, the NACW resolved to support Truman's policies to secure full and equal employment opportunities, a democratic housing program, and Department of Justice investigations into voting rights violations. They added: "In order to accord the Negro full citizenship status, Be it resolved that we urge the American people generally accept the principles and application of no segregation—no discrimination until every racial distinction shall have been removed in America."

African American women focused on enacting change within the system, through legislation and litigation, in order to make legitimate their message of equality. By using state systems like the court and electoral politics to demand change, they did not threaten the general state structure, and as a result, their claims for equality did not appear to be as subversive.

As middle-class women used the altered language of responsible patriotism to equate their service to the Cold War state with citizenship, they mobilized networks and became activists for civil rights by supporting the FEPC. As they did during World War II, members of national organizations moved quickly to fight for equality by demanding support for the FEPC. In Richmond, for example, Mrs. Senora Lawson, member of Alpha Phi Omega sorority, Delver Women's Club, NACW, and an executive board member of the YWCA chaired the Richmond Chapter for a Permanent FEPC. She got eleven women to canvass their communities to raise $2,750 for lobbying efforts. The committee also sponsored an FEPC fund rally, at which a prominent singer from New York provided the

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70 "Just Visit the USO."
headliner attraction. Nine women comprised the rally’s organization committee. In Detroit’s middle-class women were also very active in supporting the FEPC. The local Panhellenic Council sponsored a talk by the local NAACP president about the aggressive effort to support the FEPC. In addition, “those popular little debbies,” the Co-Ettes, held a Mother-Daughter Tea and raised $30 for the Committee to Establish a State FEPC. Although the Senate killed two separate bills to establish the FEPC, and the National Council to establish a Permanent FEPC collapsed in 1950, middle-class women’s activism in supporting the FEPC suggests that they were well aware of how important economic opportunity was to the establishment of full equality. Their club networks enabled them to support the continuation of the FEPC as a part of their efforts to achieve full economic opportunities for all African Americans.

In the post-war period, when overt and militant actions often appeared subversive, women’s efforts at fundraising for NAACP litigation was even more important, because litigation effected the most change during this period, especially in the advancement of equality in education. In 1949, Martha Powell, a member of Richmond’s First Union Baptist Church women’s auxiliary, Girl Scout troop leader, and an official on the executive board of the NAACP, single-handedly raised $100 selling NAACP memberships


72 “Mrs. Lawson Civic Leader for 10 Years,” 5 November 1949, 9; “AKA Lobbyist to Speak at FEPC Meeting Sunday,” 26 May 1945, 6; “Drive for $2,750 FEPC Fund Set to Open Friday,” 6 October 1945, 8; “Local FEPC Council Will Present Singer at Rally,” 11 May 1946, 7, all in Richmond Afro-American.


that ranged from $1 to $5. Later that year, 35 women from a group at the Sixth Mount Zion Baptist Church pledged to lead a membership drive among their congregation. Richmond teachers became very involved in the NAACP fund drive of 1951. For example, Navy Hill School teachers became the first group in the city to achieve 100 percent enrollment of $5 memberships. Detroit women also raised money for the NAACP as they acted as chairmen and leaders of fundraising drives. In 1946, division leaders of the yearly drive met to hear Ella Baker praise the chapter for being the largest in the country. At the meeting, 61 women received merit certificates for selling memberships.

In Detroit, club women again found it difficult to separate out traditional gender norms from responsible patriotism, when five “beauties,” all “charming,” of course, wrote memberships for the NAACP at the 1950 Booker T. Washington Trade Association Exhibit. The NAACP must have decided that beauty and charm could raise money, because in 1954, it worked with Detroit’s society women to sponsor a “Fight For Freedom” fashion show at the Arts Institute. Funds raised supported nationwide desegregation cases. Once again, women in both cities proved crucial to the fundraising

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75 “Raises $100 for the NAACP,” 26 February 1949, 3; “NAACP Membership Campaign Launched in Meeting at Local Church,” 14 May 1949, 18, both in Richmond Afro-American.

76 “Navy Hill Teachers 100% Behind NAACP,” 14 April 1951, 8; “Moore School Faculty Gets Behind NAACP,” 5 May 1951, 13, both in Richmond Afro-American.

77 “NAACP Membership Drive Gets Going,” 11 May 1946, 2; “Local Branch Hopes to Make 25,000 Quota,” 28 June 1947, 2, both in Michigan Chronicle.


abilities of the NAACP. Women used their society connections to galvanize support for the civil rights organization, and their work enabled the NAACP to fight desegregation battles across the country.

In Richmond, club women did not just support the NAACP by raising funds—they also worked with the NAACP to mobilize against a racist judicial system that continuously oppressed African American men. Mrs. Florence F. Wood and Miss Madeline Smith called upon 300 Richmond women to raise funds to help the Martinsville Seven, a group of men who faced a death sentence after being unfairly convicted of raping a woman in Virginia, and for the NAACP defense of Mrs. Mabel Crews's son, who had been charged with assault with a deadly weapon when defending his home against white vandals. The women claimed that women had to defend the men, because, "If this type of destruction is permitted to continue without a legal fight, none of us will be safe in our homes regardless of where we may live." In their defense of these eight men, the women promoted the construction of men as providers and women as nurturers, which was the dominant middle-class ideology at the time. Moreover, they proved themselves to be caretakers of the black community beyond Richmond as they fought for the rights of blacks in the country town of Martinsville. The women spoke in terms of fatherless children and destitute mothers or widows who were left to carry on as best they could without a source of income. The fact that the women failed to effect a successful outcome in either case, as the state executed the seven men and convicted Crews of assault, reveals

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80 "Women Gather to Aid Fund Drive," Richmond Afro-American, 24 September 1949, 10.
the continuing problems black women faced when dealing with an entrenched system of racial domination defined and upheld by the state. This class-laden discourse, did, however, enable the women to call upon the NAACP to help families of persecuted men and to point a finger at the injustices done to entire families as a result of inequality in the court systems of Virginia.

Middle-class African American women in Richmond and Detroit believed that helping the NAACP would further equality, but they fought even harder to have their own voices heard in government by becoming activists in the electoral process. In Detroit and Richmond, the same obstacles existed in the post-war period as did during the war: Detroit’s community could vote in any election but needed to mobilize effectively in order to support candidates, and Richmond’s community faced poll taxes as a structural restriction to voting. In the post-war period, not only did women work to get their communities registered, but they became partisan activists, by openly supporting political candidates who would embrace civil rights, and, in some cases, by running for political offices themselves.

As with the defense and uplift projects, national organizations provided the impetus to partisan political action, and grass-roots volunteers carried out national programs. In 1946, members of the NACW sponsored a last-minute drive to protest lynching and back an anti-poll tax bill that was under discussion in Congress. Five hundred club women stormed Congress and demanded to see their Senators. Wall Doxey, the Senator from Mississippi and Sergeant at Arms, panicked when he saw the women advancing on the steps of the building, and, fearing that they would stage a long protest,
he issued orders to all guards not to let the women sit down anywhere. The ladies stood for two hours waiting to see their Senators, and only the Senators from California and Kentucky came out to greet them and to assure the women that they supported the anti-poll tax bill.\textsuperscript{81} Two years later, the NACW sponsored a Non-Partisan Political Forum at their national conference that quickly became partisan when several members called into question the relevance of the Republican party to African Americans. Mrs. Mildred Younger, representative of the party, was caught off guard and had to recover quickly; she "...said she believes that there are tremendous Negro problems which the Party has gone on blindly ignoring but which she believes will no longer be ignored under the wise, far-seeing leadership of Thomas E. Dewey."\textsuperscript{82} The NCNW also focused its attention on political parties when it called upon its members to get educated about each party's platforms:

\begin{quote}
The Democratic and Republican parties are committed by their platforms to support FEPC, ANTI-LYNCHING, ANTI-POLL TAX, HOUSING, and FEDERAL AID TO EDUCATION Bills. If [sic] they are sincere, you want to know it NOW! If they are not sincere, you want to know it NOW!\textsuperscript{83}
\end{quote}

The NCNW's call to arms was important, because it placed the responsibility of reforming the political system squarely on the shoulders of black club women. It was up to the women in their local areas to find out the positions of their representatives, and to vote in a way that would reshape the state.

\textsuperscript{81} "Women March on Capitol, Urge Anti-Poll Tax Bill," \textit{Richmond Afro-American}, 3 August 1946, 19.

\textsuperscript{82} Non-Partisan Political Forum, Reports of the 1948 NACW Convention, NACW, Reel 11.

\textsuperscript{83} NCNW Telefact, VII:6 (July 1948), 2, NCNW, Series 13, Box 2, Folder 9.
In addition to exhorting its own members to keep abreast of the platforms of each dominant party, the NCNW also called upon its members to vote in a way that strengthened the position of blacks in America: "Strengthen your relationship with your government by participating actively in the selection of its leadership... Be sure that you are registered and be sure to influence council members who have not registered to do so as quickly as possible. After you register, vote in the November national elections!" Both the NACW and the NCNW, which were umbrella groups that represented myriad black women's clubs across the country, understood the importance of becoming political activists for change in the postwar era, and both organizations incorporated political party support into a strategy to exert power within the state.

Richmond and Detroit's middle-class women were especially concerned with making sure that their fellow citizens could vote, as it took several months before the election to pay poll taxes and qualify for registration. Women of the Fifth Ave. Baptist Church sponsored a voting registration campaign, at which Bethune spoke to 2200 eager listeners. She pled with the audience to register to vote in order to counter the power of southern whites. She focused on the power of the black vote to gain a voice in government policies when she told the audience: "No group of white people, no matter how liberal, can speak for the 60,000 citizens of Richmond..." The Richmond Civic Council secured the help of Marian Blackwell and Senora Lawson to register voters and preside over a rally for canvassers. As a result of their committee's work, 6,330 people

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84 NCNW Telefact, September-October 1952, 5, NCNW Series 13, Box 2, Folder 9.
paid poll taxes, and 12 women won 100 percent certificates by registering their entire families to vote. Miss Gladys Smith became the class instructor at the Southern School for Workers, which seemed to be a misnomer since the classes were aimed at "Fraternal or other organizations" whose members needed instruction on registering to vote, bloc voting, or any other political information. In 1949, Margaret Spurlock, Ethel Furman, and ten other women spent their days canvassing their neighborhoods as representatives of the Civic League looking for unregistered voters. Women canvassers outnumbered men 2 to 1. Detroit women also helped to promote voter registration. The Detroit Association of Women's Clubs sponsored voters' institutes in order to educate voters on how to register and about the issues involved in the elections. Although the DAWC prided itself on helping the community, it revealed its class bias in allowing only club women to attend the institutes. As the president of the DAWC Mrs. Millie Hynson explained:

It is the desire of the Detroit Association to provide an opportunity for the club women of Detroit to be fully informed about the issues of the pending municipal election and to urge this vital segment of the electorate to full exercise of citizen privileges—to actively participate in the selection of the persons who will be charged with the responsibility of administering our city government with the best interests of the citizens of our community.

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86 "Council Peps Up Suffrage Drive, 26 April 1947, 7; "Council Speeds Up Registration." 7 June 1947, 3, both in *Richmond Afro-American*.


88 "Civic League Launches Drive to Get out the Vote," 19 May 1949, 1:3; "Registering Voters," 6 August 1949, 2:8; "Delver Women's Club, Only Four Year's Old, Has Grown Up," 6 May 1950, 10, all in *Richmond Afro-American*.

The attitude of the DAWC reflected its belief that privileged women should have power. The clinic reinforced club women's ideas that they were at the forefront of civil rights changes by keeping them aware of local issues in order to enable them to vote in a way that represented the best interests of the entire community.

While registering to vote remained an important issue in Richmond and Detroit, middle-class women moved beyond simply registering their communities to supporting specific platforms and candidates actively, and by encouraging citizens to vote for the candidates who had the interests of the black community at heart. Some African American women believed that they were the best candidates for the job and ran campaigns for local and state elections. Lula Patterson, social editor of the Richmond Afro-American, discovered that an important change was taking place in the post-war world as both the Democratic and the Republican party began courting black women for their votes. She noted the fact that Thomasina Johnson and Jeanetta Welch Brown were being considered for a key position as the National Democratic Committee Women's Section leaders (which Brown eventually secured), and she recognized that other black women were lobbying in Washington and gaining important positions nationwide, like Pauli Murray, newly-nominated deputy attorney general of California.90

Middle-class women in Richmond became involved in political campaigns as African American men started to run for local and state offices. Oliver Hill, the president of the local NAACP, ran for city councilman. Since his wife was a Delta, he gained the

90 Lula Patterson, “Towards the Distaff,” Richmond Afro-American, 2 March 1946, 2.
support of the sorority, which gave him $200 for his race. Although Hill's campaign was unsuccessful, it did not deter other African Americans from seeking office. The following year, a group of prominent women gathered to support Dr. W.L. Ransome in his race for the House of Delegates. At least 24 women, under the auspices of Senora Lawson, formed radio, block, and finance committees in order to campaign for Ransome. This race was quite competitive, but Ransome lost in the primary by 440 votes. The women decided that the close vote meant that change could be accomplished in Richmond with enough organized effort. They formed a new group called the Women's Voters League that affiliated itself with the Civic Council and determined to help in other future civic ventures. Although the racial structure in Richmond hurt black political representatives' abilities to gain positions within government, club women's support of black candidates suggests that they understood that the interests of their race lay with black politicians, rather than with whites, even sympathetic ones. Their show of support for political candidates suggests that African American women were willing to mobilize the community in partisan battles in order to effect changes in Richmond through the electoral process.

Detroit’s club women claimed a major victory as a result of their support of Charles Diggs for the U. S. House of Representatives. Thirteen women chaired Diggs's...
campaign in Detroit. They held teas, meetings, and forums to highlight Diggs’s platform and to raise money for the popular candidate. With the support of women’s clubs, and also the support of the UAW, Diggs won the election in a landslide and became the first African American from Michigan and the fifth African American in the U.S. to hold a seat in Congress since Reconstruction.93 The efforts of black women were critical to Diggs’s victory, and their success shows how women’s formal community networks mobilized effectively in order to get the black community galvanized around the candidate in order to create change from a position within the state.

Two women, one in Richmond, one in Detroit, refused to remain behind the scenes supporting male politicians. Even though both lost their bids for state representative, their willingness to campaign as African American women marked a change in methods for middle-class women’s activism. When these two women believed that they did not have fair representation in the state, they became determined to become political players and represent themselves and their communities. Senora Lawson and Jeanetta Welch Brown both ran unsuccessfully for state representative positions, placing African American club women squarely in the center of political action. After supporting other politicians in their unsuccessful bids for offices, Lawson decided to run for the Virginia House of Delegates as a Progressive in 1950. She created a platform that reflected the concerns of African Americans in Virginia, and that drew upon the legacy of Virginians who stood up to unfair

government practices during the American Revolution, thus taking the discourse of responsible patriotism to new historic lengths. In a speech, she argued:

   I feel it my duty to enter this crusade for representation because I believe, with the great patriots of Virginia, that 'taxation without representation is tyranny.' To win this crusade for first class citizenship, however, we must have unity within our ranks regardless of party affiliation. The time has come for us to judge candidates not on the basis of party labels alone but on the basis of issues.  

Lawson supported an immediate end to the poll tax, so that all African Americans could be represented by government. She also supported the abolition of segregation, the establishment of a state FEPC, and the creation of better welfare assistance and unemployment benefits programs. Obviously, Lawson lost, but her campaign effectively gave a prominent voice to Richmond's African Americans and represented an alternative political voice to the traditional white male political power structure.

Like Lawson, Jeanetta Welch Brown was unsuccessful in her campaign for the Michigan Senate, however, she managed to mobilize large groups of women in her campaign, bringing many Detroit women directly onto the political scene of the city. She was a guest speaker at a neighborhood ladies' voter meeting, at which she discussed methods to get voters out to the polls. In addition, Mrs. Eugenia Brayboy, resident of the very affluent Boston-Edison neighborhood, sponsored a fundraising tea that raised money for Brown. It is important to note that Boston-Edison was a wealthy and integrated neighborhood. It is likely that white women attended the fundraiser, bringing class

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94 Emma Bradlaw, "Mrs. Lawson Civic Leader for 10 Years."

95 "Organizing Women," 1 June 1946, 16; "Benefit Tea at Boston Home Draws Women," 8 June 1946, 10, both in Michigan Chronicle.
interests across racial lines in order to support a member of their community. Brown
effectively organized sorority and club women in her campaign, bringing them even closer
to the center of state power by enabling them to engage with the state in the arena of
electoral politics.

While women in Richmond and Detroit both worked hard to promote voter
registration, support candidates, and, in two cases, ran for political office themselves, they
also appealed to both all-black and interracial audiences in forums that talked about human
rights. In this way, they could educate whites about problems faced by African Americans
while they exhorted African Americans to work hard for equality. In Richmond, the
Daughters of the Elks sponsored a talk given to the black community by Mrs. Theresa
Robinson, director of the Grand Temple of the Elks's civil rights program, which
discussed various methods to attain equality. The Delta chapter held an open chapel
service at Virginia Union entitled "Freedom! What does it mean to you?" They told
audience members the importance of supporting the NAACP, they explained the Freedom
Train program, and they performed music composed by African Americans. The NCNW
held a forum discussing possible ways to desegregate public carriers in Virginia. The
women who sponsored these campaigns suggested that they believed that voting for
change would not be enough, but that gaining the support of the white community behind
civil rights efforts could play a substantial role in reversing the discrimination in the city.

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96 "Elk Temple to Sponsor Civil Liberties Parley," Richmond Afro-American, 25 January 1947, 20; "Beta
Upsilon," Delta Journal XVIII (1948), 91; NCNW Telefact, April 1950, 4, NCNW, Series 13, Box 2,
Folder 7.
After the war, interracial coalitions formed between women’s groups in Richmond and Detroit in order to promote civil rights, to highlight progress in race relations, and to point out inequality in each city’s social structure. Richmond’s white Women’s Missionary Union and the black Educational Association and Good Wives Baptist Convention sponsored a two-day interracial rally which featured speakers from the National Baptist Convention. The YWCA in Richmond also became instrumental in leading interracial meetings after 1946, when the black and white Business and Professional Girls’ Clubs held an interracial dinner to celebrate the World Wide Y Observance Day. While the leaders of the YWCA wanted to increase the number of meetings held jointly, rumors of communism in the Y surfaced as a result of their interracial meetings, so the group tabled any talks that focused on civil rights. Once again, Cold War fears stifled open talk about equality by threatening to denounce a prominent community organization that dared speak about civil rights to interracial audiences. Detroit also sponsored forums that focused on civil rights, but the most important advance among black and white club women was the Friendship Tours. After 100 black and white women’s clubs gathered to meet to discuss policymaking in a successful forum, several groups decided to continue gathering yearly in order to promote friendly race relations. The friendship tours, led by AKA Beulah Whitby, the assistant director of the Mayor’s Interracial Committee, took groups of women to each other’s communities to tour businesses and homes. The Women’s Council of the Second Baptist

97 “Miss Burroughs to Speak at Interracial Meeting,” 27 September 1947, 3, and “YWCA Business, Professional Girls Hold Interracial Fete,” 6 April 1946, 12, both in Richmond Afro-American; Minutes of
Church was one of the first black groups to go on the tour, and the tour remained a yearly event and a place in which club women of both races could talk and socialize. Apparently, these meetings led to a much better understanding between black and white women.98

The interracial coalitions joined women along class lines. The women that participated in these meetings had their economic status in their respective communities in common. In reality, this organizing along class lines limited African American women's abilities to create change on a broad social scale, because the concerns addressed at the meetings were not about how to change structural discrimination that hampered the advancement of many African Americans, but about how more ladies could get together and be cordial at race relations-oriented functions. It is possible that within the Cold War climate, class status was an obstacle to structural civil rights changes, as middle-class black women did not discuss significant problems faced by African Americans with middle-class white women for fear of appearing subversive or anti-American. Because we know that this happened at the Richmond YWCA, it is likely that other groups in Richmond, Detroit, and elsewhere faced similar problems.

**Working-class advocacy**

Often, middle-class African American women showed their failure to connect with working-class black women, especially over concerns with children's issues and in their interracial class-oriented meetings. Although their social functions were exclusive and

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98 Summary of Meeting of the Chairman, Discussion Leaders, Recorders, 13 November 1946, 3, NCNW. Series 2, Box 2, Folder 28; Letter to Rev. A.A. Banks from Beulah Whitby, 19 April 1949, Second Baptist Collection, Reel 3, Michigan Historical Collection, Bentley Library, University of Michigan.
their beliefs in urban pathology often stigmatized poor mothers. Middle-class women did show some concern for working-class women's issues as they contributed to the overall development of civil rights in the country. As they did during World War II, club women continued their advocacy of working-class issues in an attempt to stop economic discrimination. Led by their national organizations, local women's groups held vocational opportunity campaigns and job performance clinics as well as some charm and personality clinics. Although club women retained some of their bias against the behaviors of working-class women, several of the programs held in Detroit showed a definite shift away from respectability-oriented programs and towards real alliances with working-class women.

National organizations took the lead in identifying the problems faced by African American women workers, as they did during the war. The NCNW continued its support of economic measures to help workers as it lobbied to get agricultural and domestic workers covered under Social Security in 1946. Testifying before the Senate Ways and Means Committee, Bethune talked about the precariousness position of African American workers which resulted from societal discrimination:

Realizing as we do that the majority of Negro workers...because of discrimination and lack of economic opportunity are unfortunately relegated to the lowest level of employment and their need for insurance against instability is greatest, the NCNW is particularly concerned [about Social Security benefits].

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9 Statement of Bethune Before Ways and Means Committee, 13 March 1946, NCNW, Series 5, Box 11, Folder 8.
The NCNW also called on its members to help working-class African American women survive the post-war shift back to less lucrative jobs. Ida Coker Clark, former USO secretary for workers in Pennsylvania, told the NCNW that “Again the Negro woman worker is faced with problems similar to those encountered after World War I. when she had to return to low-bracket jobs, to unemployment, and to suffering.” Clark urged the NCNW to coordinate new programs of study so that middle-class women could better coordinate lobbying efforts that would effectively gain working-class blacks some legislation that could ensure them some permanent employment and job security.

Increasingly, club women understood the structural racism that kept working-class blacks on lowest economic levels, and they turned towards supporting legislation that would create equal economic opportunities for all African Americans.

Club women also tied their support of equal employment opportunities for black workers to their general support of civil rights. Even when the national FEPC bill failed, national organizations kept trying to secure some sort of equal opportunity bill, or at least pass state FEPC bills. Bethune spoke in front of the House of Representatives Committee on Education and Labor in 1949 in order to support legislation to prohibit employment discrimination. She spoke on behalf of mothers who had to work in order to support their families, thus giving workers’ rights discourse a decidedly gendered spin:

Discrimination in employment because of race, color, and religion that exists in this country today has a devastating effect upon the morale of the human family. For the one who is discriminated

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100 Ida Coker Clark. “Security for the Negro Woman Worker,” Aframerican Women’s Journal, September 1945, 12, NCNW, Series 13, Box 1, Folder 18.

101 Clark, 30.
against, and I take that Negro woman as a case in point, this evil in our national life undermines the building and keeping together of good, strong American families. When a large number of mothers have to leave their homes to seek work in order that their husbands' pay can be supplemented, they cannot maintain a good standard of living adequate for the health and well being of themselves or of their families. Thus, we find the lives of thousands and thousands of children being neglected, the homes of thousands and thousands of families being destroyed just because we have lacked the courage and vision to extend to all the opportunity to share equally the bounties of this rich country.102

In this speech, Bethune appeared to do a complete reversal from her original stand to protect domestic workers under Social Security. Her denunciation of the conditions "forcing" women to work was a nod to domestic defense Cold War strategies. She appeared to call for the abolition of employment bias so that men could earn better wages, indeed a family wage, so that women could stay home and start taking better care of their children. While she did acknowledge that women had to work because of economic necessity, her judgment of working women's families as neglected and unhealthy was based on a very middle-class standard of domesticity. Club women still believed that if working-class men could get jobs that could help them to maintain a decent standard of living, then working-class women could raise their children properly and create the next generation of respectable citizens. With that end in mind, the NCNW continued to press its members to phone Senators in order to get an FEPC or equal employment bill passed, and it called upon members to telegram Truman to support his stand on employment opportunity. The move of African American club women away from supporting working

women's rights in this case reveals the tension between domestic ideologies and the needs of working-class women. By focusing on the rights of working men, Bethune placed herself and her organization squarely within the Cold War state as domestic guardians who wanted to protect the nuclear patriarchal family.

While national organizations made the policies that focused on helping workers, local groups sponsored programs that directly affected the working-class women in their cities. In both Richmond and Detroit, middle-class women supported African American workers by sponsoring vocational opportunity campaigns, as they did during the war. They also attempted to keep working-class jobs secure by providing performance enhancement classes. Moreover, middle-class women sometimes aligned themselves directly with working-class women over issues like strikes and slum clearance.

In Richmond, Delta Sigma Thetas, teachers, and Sigma Gamma Rhos sponsored vocational opportunity campaigns from 1945-1954. Deltas worked with high school representatives, like teachers, to hold programs in schools and make students aware of opportunities available upon graduation. In addition, teachers also worked to provide their students with planning for future vocations. Grace Matthews and several other teachers established a Distributive Education program in local black high schools which trained students for jobs in retail sales and service establishments. The teachers had results placing graduates in stock clerking and part-time work, as delivery boys and receptionists.

Gaines studies the class bias inherent in elites' focus on industrial training, as they believed that only a small group of talented leaders should receive a classical education and then go on to represent the multitudes. These leaders believed that all other African Americans would do well to have a skill that they could perform well in order to maintain a certain degree of economic autonomy.
and they even had a few girls graduate and obtain sales clerk positions. Sigma Gamma Rho held its own opportunity clinics that same year, and they focused on jobs in broadcasting, drama, and radio. While the Sigmas’ clinic may not have been the most realistic way in which to present potential job opportunities to Richmond youngsters, three teachers chaired a very successful Urban League job campaign in 1954 that not only showed youth available jobs, but talked about the importance of equal opportunity for all. The vocational campaign’s theme centered on: “The equalization of opportunities for education and vocational training: full opportunities for job placement for all who are trained and qualified, and the complete elimination of discriminatory practices from all American industry...”

In Detroit, Deltas and teachers took prominent roles in the Urban League vocational opportunity campaigns, and in their own guidance clinics. As part of their 1947 May Week celebration, Deltas took 100 children on tours of local businesses and industries in order to show both opportunities for employment and to highlight black-owned businesses. Then, in 1948, 1949, and 1950, Delta co-sponsored the Vocational Opportunity Campaign with the Urban League. In these campaigns, members chaired seminars on opportunities in Industry which featured Ford Motor Company representatives, and in 1949 they held tours of hospitals. The Deltas also supported the unions by allowing the UAW-CIO to hold forums on wage earning. Their eagerness to engage with the UAW suggests middle-class women’s continued acceptance of unions as

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a legitimate vehicle for fighting workplace inequality, despite the state’s distrust of unions in the post-war period. Each year, over 800 people attended tours and over 1300 attended clinics and presentations. Teachers also helped their students prepare for careers. The teachers of Sherrard Intermediate School held a career clinic in order to show graduates “various job opportunities and possibilities that are open to them when they become ready to assume their responsibilities in our democratic society,” including dressmaking, nursing, skilled mechanical trades, and food service. Two teachers did not stop with bringing career clinics into schools—they took their children to the careers. Katherine Routt and Georgia Adams of Wingert School took 62 students to the A.W. Curtis Laboratories plant and sales office to highlight job opportunities available to high school graduates. It is important to note that in both Detroit and Richmond, the job clinics focused on traditional blue-collar and service jobs, rather than on jobs that required a college education. Perhaps the women who sponsored the campaigns wished to reach a broader audience than just the college-bound group of students, but on the other hand, such a focus might suggest that club women sponsors and teachers believed that the best

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the vast majority of students could do would be to secure employment in a field that did not require any higher education.

Middle-class women in Richmond and Detroit also tried to get working-class women to attend classes to improve their skills in order to secure their jobs. The YWCA was a leader in trying to standardize the work of Richmond’s domestics. In 1946, it discussed holding domestic service clubs for factory workers laid off after the war. YWCA directors believed that if the domestics attended courses to learn about household standards, then the YWCA could institute benefits for the women such as a 50 hour work week, paid vacation, and sick leaves as well as written contracts. In 1947 and 1948, the YWCA and the Urban League sponsored a household course focusing on child care, cooking, and use of modern equipment. The 120-hour course was open to “housewives, mothers, and others interested in the field of household employment,” but sponsors clearly wanted domestic workers to attend, as they offered placement upon graduation through the Virginia USES office. The YWCA’s goal was to set standards in domestic work similar to those of factory work. Directors of the program were perplexed by the turnout in 1948, because in 1947, 35 women had attended the class, although only 7 had received their certificates. In 1948, only 7 matriculated for the course at all, and the directors decided that they would have to go house-to-house in order to secure enough students to


run the course. The fact that so few women received certificates and few matriculated for the course the following year suggests that working-class women in Richmond resisted this standardization of domestic work. Domestic work was the lowest-paid and least popular of job options after the war, even though many women were forced back into homes with the layoffs that occurred in 1946. However, it seems that many domestics would rather not have spent their free time learning how to become better at their skills for no extra pay and no guarantee of extra pay after the end of the course. Once again, middle-class women made assumptions about the needs of working-class women without realizing that better jobs, not more qualifications for the worst jobs available, were driving concerns for working-class women.

While Richmond's club women sponsored courses focusing solely on domestic work, Detroit women moved beyond domestic work to help found a school for vocational trades. In Detroit, middle-class women also focused on how to enhance the job status of working women following post-war layoffs. As in Richmond, the YWCA sponsored a program for domestics which included a three month course on home management, cooking, child care, and "personal development." but the greatest development in terms of advancing workers' opportunities was effected by Rosa Gragg, president of the Detroit Association of Women's Clubs, member of Sigma Gamma Rho, the NAACP, the NACW.

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110 Minutes of Board of Directors, 27 October 1948, 2-3, YWCA, Box 8, Board of Directors Minutes Folder.

and the USO. Rosa Gragg started the Slade-Gragg Academy for vocational arts when she noticed that "World War II had left a considerable excess of displaced and unskilled persons" in the Detroit area. Gragg received the financial support of the numerous clubs in the DAWC, and she mortgaged her own house to start the institution which offered courses in tailoring, dressmaking, food production and service, home service, and waitressing. Gragg then opened a dorm for women of low income, not only to provide them with a place to live, but to "improve the habits of work, and raise economic standards of living by creating and maintaining an environment [sic] where these values will be normally developed." A self-proclaimed Bookerite, Gragg believed strongly in the uplift of the race through skilled labor, thrift, and respectability. She not only held vocational courses for the women students, but they had to receive counsel in "music, charm, grooming, and personal hygiene." While other club women had moved away from sponsoring courses specifically in respectability, Gragg retained the belief that working-class women needed a healthy dose of charm school in order to be good workers. Although many employers expected their secretaries to be charming, in that they were dealing with the public, this could be dangerous for black women who worked for white

112 "Mrs. Rosa Gragg is Bethel AME Speaker," undated, Rosa Gragg Papers, Box 17. Bethel AME Church 1947-1957 File, Bentley Historical Collection, Detroit Public Library. (Hereafter Gragg).

113 Slade-Gragg Academy of Practical Arts Bulletin, 1950-1951, 8, Gragg, Box 2. Correspondence 1950s (2) Folder.

114 Ibid.

115 "Gragg Institute and Dorm for Students and Working Girls," Gragg, Box 15. Correspondence Folder.

116 Clipping, Undated, "New Project Opened for Public Survey," Gragg, Box 15, Slade-Gragg Academy Folder #2.
men, as charm and affability could be construed as sexual availability given the dominant
society's constructions of black women as less than virtuous. Gragg continued the
program of other middle-class reformers by merging the tenets of respectability with
attempts to help women gain economic equality.

Although Gragg, the Deltas, and several other groups continued to focus on the
disparity between working-class women and respectable behavior, several Detroit groups
sought to align themselves socially and politically with working-class women in the post­
war era. In a stunning reversal of tradition, Zeta Phi Betas nominated Mary Clark, a
Detroit Street and Railways Employee, "Miss Charming" of 1950 at the end of their
Charm School week. Moreover, two years later, they named Lillian Hatcher, the UAW­
CIO Fair Practices Representative who had worked her way up from the factory floor, but
who, "first and foremost is a wife and mother," woman of the year.117 It is interesting that
in the interests of building cross-class coalitions, middle-class women chose to ascribe
qualities of their own social definitions of respectability to working-class women, perhaps
to make the work of those women more palatable to elite socialites. Deltas also sought to
become more socially conscious regarding the lives and labors of working-class women.
Although there is no evidence to suggest whether they followed through on the ban or
not. Delta's national leadership ordered a boycott of tobacco products in order to aid the
strikers in the American Tobacco Company who wanted 65 cents an hour minimum wage
and a non-discrimination clause in their employment contract. As former Delta President

Elsie Austin commented, “All organized groups should recognize their opportunity and responsibility in the abolition of hatred, bigotry, and prejudice.” Deltas in Detroit also heard the City Planning Commission talk about plans to fix blighted ghetto areas, including the creation of large playgrounds, modern schools, and libraries. While middle-class women did not disengage their post-war program of responsible patriotism from respectability altogether, they did move away from looking at respectability as a major way to solve working-class women’s problems. This involved a hesitant movement away from their analysis of working-class problems as “urban pathology” to an interpretation of problems resulting from structural racism in both the industrial and non-production sectors of the economy.

In the post-war period, many club women continued to fight for equal voting rights, political representation, and employment opportunities by using the discourse of responsible patriotism. Although they could not use the “victory abroad” trope after 1945, club women turned responsible patriotism into a program of domestic containment and cold war defense. Middle-class African American women continued to service soldiers and aid in civilian homefront defense, albeit of a different nature, and they worked to provide welfare services to their communities in order to enhance their own institutions, and to equalize financial help to poor black women by filling in gaps left by racist state


welfare officials. Sometimes, they articulated their dissatisfaction with racism in state agencies as they pointed out discrepancies in the doling out of benefits. Moreover, they maintained programs for children in order to inculcate them into the programs of responsible patriotism, and they continued to support the NAACP as well as voting and employment rights campaigns. Interestingly enough, national organizations failed to link responsible patriotism directly to the Korean War, despite the fact that African American women did help out with defense during the war. Perhaps the language associated with a "UN-sponsored police action" was not as compelling as the language associated with Cold War defense.

Middle-class women carried their discourse of responsible patriotism beyond World War II and into the post-war period, despite their contradictory relationship to the Cold War state. As a result of post-war repression, African American club women had to reshape their discourse and their activist efforts to achieve equality. The state expected women to be in the home, protecting the family against subversive threats to the stability of American society. As a result, club women had to alter their discourse of responsible patriotism to accommodate maternalist discourse and more traditional notions of respectability. They had to couch their critique of the state in anti-Communist language—they focused on inequality as a destabilizing factor in a state that professed itself the leader of the free world. Organizations had to watch their statements and their members, since the state threatened to censor any groups that spoke out against its values and norms. Within the constricted parameters of the post-war era, however, middle-class African American women continued to promote equality in whatever ways they could, as they
believed that as educated women, they were the natural leaders of their community. With their efforts to define and achieve racial equality for themselves and their communities, middle-class African American women continued to position themselves at the forefront of the civil rights movement in the postwar era.
CHAPTER 5: TRYING TO HOLD ON: WORKING-CLASS WOMEN'S ACTIVITIES IN THE POST-WAR ERA

In 1945, the *Michigan Chronicle* ran a story that investigated the plans of working-class African American women in the post-war period. Mrs. Mae Coleman and Mrs. Bessie Smith, both of whom had worked for Aeronautical Products Corp. and who both received pink slips in 1945 along with hundreds of other Detroit workers, did not seem bothered by their unemployment. As they planned a vacation together, they told the reporter that "Just keeping house" would satisfy them, since "the war is over and they have done their patriotic duty." Mrs. Wayne Maddox, a riveter at Briggs Manufacturing Plant since 1943, began a dressmaking business after she was laid off. She looked forward to remaining at home with her children.¹ While Coleman, Smith, and Maddox constructed their post-war lives in a way that supported traditional domestic roles, just as the government wanted, they were in the minority of workers in the post-war struggle to retain jobs.

In a much more typical case, Minnie Wilson got laid off from her riveting job at Dodge Main Plant on V-J Day and discovered that while other workers had been rehired soon after the layoffs, she could not get her job back. The company claimed that it could not re-employ Wilson because she had high blood pressure. Suspecting that the reason for her continued layoff was her race rather than her health, she called upon her union local to look into the seniority system. Officials of local 3 discovered that those few black women

who were hired back at all worked in the Heat Treat and Foundry positions, the worst jobs at the plant, even though their seniority enabled them to qualify for much better positions. Wilson did not get her job back, but the union sponsored anti-discrimination workshops at the plant. Karen Anderson suggests that African American working-class women faced serious problems in the post-war period. Their relatively late entry into factories placed them low on seniority lists, and they found it hard to get skilled mechanical work after they had been laid off. Moreover, all women faced layoffs before male workers, and industries often overlooked seniority to hire men in fields that had hired men prior to World War II. In addition, some UAW locals refused to support women’s grievances about seniority and unfair hiring practices, leaving African American women with very few options in order to regain some of the jobs they had claimed in the wartime boom.

In addition to job displacement, working-class African American women faced a more repressive atmosphere and restricted opportunities as a result of the government’s move to the right and its subsequent red-baiting of liberal organizations. The fact that civil rights organizations and unions backpedaled on issues promoting working-class equality hurt working-class African American women’s chance of gaining institutional support for their fights to hold on to the gains made during the war. With society’s shift

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1 Minnie Wilson Complaint Case File, UAW Fair Practices and Anti-Discrimination Department, Box 14, Folder 8, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University. (Hereafter Fair Practices).

to the right, working-class African American women operated in a more difficult context of increased structural impediments to the goals of desegregation. Moreover, city planning policies in Detroit and Richmond put working-class black women’s communities at risk of destruction.

The government’s shift towards the right in the form of increased surveillance of liberal groups threatened the existence of civil rights organizations and unions. Although the wartime government had tried to suppress social conflict during the war, tensions caused by the Cold War heightened government surveillance of agencies that threatened the dominant social order, which included civil rights organizations and unions. Richard Fried argues that “Rampant anti-communism narrowed the range of selection open to associations, utterances, and ideas. People were constrained by both external pressures and the inner checks with which they reactively restricted their own affairs.” The repression of the government extended within the state to people’s private lives, as the newly-created National Security Administration policed any “non-conformist” activities, including engaging in homosexual relations and promoting unionism. Any behavior or activities deemed non-conformist by the state became redefined as threatening and subversive, and many liberal organizations found themselves watching their membership lists and their press releases carefully so as not to come under the watchful eye of state anti-Communist agencies.  

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5 There are many works that discuss America’s move to the right and its effects on personal freedoms, including Fried; Michael Rogin, *Ronald Reagan The Movie and Other Episodes in Political Demonology*
State repression affected civil rights organizations and industrial unions, the two institutions that had supported working-class black women’s claims to citizenship during the war. The FEPC became an institution of the past, mired in Senate filibusters, only to be permanently eradicated by 1946. The NAACP and Urban League purged their most radical leaders in order to stay alive, and they turned away from working-class issues in favor of middle-class concerns, like school and neighborhood desegregation. Both groups also moved away from radical protest movements like sit-ins and marches, which would have undermined both organizations by showing a dangerous, subversive side of the civil rights movement to the state. Instead, both continued to promote lawsuits against schools and neighborhood racial covenant laws as their primary vehicles for change.6

Unions also fought for survival within a state that often conflated workers’ rights with communist or socialist activities. Nelson Lichtenstein maintains that communism became the discourse that “framed the limits of debate on every issue, from civil liberties and civil rights to bargaining strategy and political economy.”7 In order to retain some of the power they had gained in the pre-war and war years, unions struggled to purge their socialist members, dropped their civil rights programs from a position of prominence, and focused instead on gaining private welfare benefits like pensions for their employees.

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Walter Reuther, president of the UAW in the post-war years, was especially virulent against communism. He claimed that his union rejected all “outside influence” and worked openly with employers to negotiate worker benefits, which industrial leaders agreed to provide. Employers gave workers private employee benefits because those benefits kept the power of the welfare state in check and guaranteed industry control over worker subsidies. The problem with the new union focus on welfare benefits rather than employment and equality issues was that women and minorities were left out of these negotiations, since their seniority or job levels often did not allow them access to these private welfare benefits.⁸

Working-class women lost the support of civil rights organizations and unions as a result of the government’s shift to the right, but they also faced the destruction of their communities as a result of “urban redevelopment” plans in their cities. In both Detroit and Richmond, thousands of African Americans lost their communities as slum clearance projects and freeways rolled through historically black neighborhoods in the late 1940s. Since poor African American women depended on their neighbors for survival, they faced real danger in the face of city projects. In Detroit, tens of thousands of blacks lost their homes to expressway projects and slum clearance. While some moved into new public housing high-rises, many could not even afford the subsidized housing, and even more found themselves on waitlists for entry, since Detroit maintained segregated projects and refused to allow blacks into the white housing, which usually went unfilled. Richmond’s

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black community faced the same problems. In 1946, as part of a plan to revitalize the downtown area, the city council planned a street widening project through Jackson Ward and an expressway through Fulton, two black districts. The city did not see the need for public housing, so the 7,000 African Americans who found themselves homeless in the wake of construction projects had to make do on their own and find adequate housing without the help of the government. In both cities, black women saw their community networks at risk of destruction at the hands of racist city planning policies.

African American women worked to retain their claims to citizenship within the more restricted parameters of the postwar era. They defined citizenship as equal access to employment, welfare benefits, and housing, even as the state tried to keep these rights of citizenship out of the hands of all people of color. African American women in Detroit and Richmond refused to give up their rights to decent employment without a battle, despite the hostility of employers and some unions. Working-class black women in Detroit and Richmond fought for seniority rights, rehires after layoffs, and better working conditions in factories throughout both cities. Moreover, they pushed for welfare benefits, housing rights, and help from the state and private organizations when they could not stretch their budgets enough to support their families. Working-class African American women drew upon their rights as workers and contributors to industry in order to receive benefits from employers, unions, the state, and private philanthropic concerns. They

Press, 1999), 164.

9 Sugrue, 47-55; Christopher Silver, Twentieth-Century Richmond: Planning, Politics, and Race (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1984), 184-185.
became activists for equality in employment and entitlement benefits as they struggled to support themselves.

War workers faced massive layoffs beginning in 1944 in both Detroit and Richmond, and these layoffs affected African Americans and women who had managed to break into industries during manpower shortages. The Detroit Urban League found that 300,000 jobs had been eliminated in 1944-1945; 80,000 workers would remain in reconverted industries, and 100,000 would remain in aircraft plants. In 1946, the Richmond Afro-American determined that nationwide, 20 million white and black women had either left or dropped out of the labor market, and black women were the “forgotten women” in Richmond and nationwide, as they faced problems getting jobs. While Richmond had problems with reconversion as the War Manpower Commission downgraded the importance of its industries, Detroit faced a real economic crisis. As late as 1949, 63,000 workers remained idle and wages dropped. And even with increased production for the Korean War in 1950, several hundred African American women were refused jobs at the Cadillac Plant while white women had been hired; the plant claimed that white women had seniority and experience, whereas the black women were recent migrants. That was not true, according to the paper, which found that all of the potential hires had experience working in factories.10

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10 Excerpts from Minutes of the Detroit Urban League Industrial Associates, 12 December 1944, 5, Detroit Urban League Papers, Box 5, Industrial Associates Folder, Michigan Historical Collection, Bentley Library, University of Michigan. (Hereafter DUL); Richard Dier, “20 Million Women Workers Vanish,” Richmond Afro-American, 20 July 1946, 8; Minutes, War Manpower Priorities Committee, Richmond-Petersburg Area, Records of the War Manpower Commission, RG 211, Entry 59, Box 15, Richmond File, National Archives, Washington, D.C. (Hereafter WMC); “60,000 Workers Idle as Unemployment Rises,”
Support of Unions as Vehicles of Change

As they did during the war years, African American women refused to accept excuses for racism in industrial hiring practices. They continued to claim their rights based on their position as American citizens and as workers who supported democracy in Detroit and Richmond. From 1945 to 1954, several groups of African American women workers were able to clarify the meanings of citizenship by engaging with their unions and constructing new definitions of labor unionism and patriotism. Historically, laborers have always equated the right to control their own labor with the rights of citizenship, from the first inception of white men's worker insurgency movements in the late eighteenth century as they tried to fight against losing their status as skilled laborers. This language evolved into pro-unionism in the late nineteenth century as white men fought for the right to collectively bargain for benefits and be recognized by the state. African American women drew upon this history as they equated the right to equal access to work with citizenship and as they promoted unions as a primary vehicle for ensuring their rights.

When labor unions came under fire by government officials who claimed that they were too left-leaning in the 1940s and 1950s, African American women recognized that they needed to vote in officials sympathetic to labor unions in order to preserve their rights.


to bargain collectively for benefits. Mrs. Faye Stevenson, head of the CIO Women’s Auxiliary, spoke of the importance of working women and wives of working-class men using the ballot in order to preserve democracy and the labor movement. While members of interracial auxiliaries dined at the Lucy Thurman YWCA, Stevenson told them: "Our country is in danger as long as the labor movement is in danger as it is today. . .It is your responsibility to live up to promises to the world to take the leadership." In Richmond, the black local of American Tobacco Company elected four women and four men to a vote qualifying committee in order to make sure that its 1400 members became eligible to vote. Mrs. Nina Langley, member of the committee, claimed:

As citizens, we have an interest in the administration of the government of the State, and the only way that we, as citizens, may have a voice in deciding how it will be operated is to become qualified voters. . .May we remind you that your vote is power. To vote is your constitutional right. The vote is a weapon every citizen should use and use wisely. Our motto is ‘Be prepared to vote and use the power vested in you as a citizen.’

In each of these two cases, working-class women, speaking as representatives of the working-class communities of Detroit and Richmond, used language that revealed their understanding of the importance working-class voting efforts could have on democracy and, in Detroit, on the power of unionism in an age of anti-labor/anti-red movements. The working-class women who represented their communities by attending citizenship rallies or by making statements about citizenship would continue to claim citizenship within the state, both in the political, industrial, and social spheres, by demanding to be hired or

rehired after layoffs, and by demanding to gain access to public housing and welfare benefits. African American women believed that their contributions during World War II entitled them to equal access to employment as U.S. citizens, and they fought to retain their sense of empowerment in the face of post-war discrimination.

**Using State and Private Institutions to Continue the Fight for Equal Employment**

Not only did working-class African American women in Detroit and Richmond lose jobs, but they continued to face barriers to employment in various industries. Without an FEPC to support them, working-class women in both cities turned to various other agencies to gain support in their fights against discriminatory hiring practices. In Detroit, women turned to state institutions, like the Detroit Commission on Community Relations (DCCR) and the Mayor's Interracial Commission (and even to the mayor himself), to the UAW, and to the NAACP. Because state equal-opportunity agencies, historically black institutions, and unions were weakened by the state’s move to the right, many African American women called upon all three simultaneously in order to maximize the support they received in their fight for equal employment opportunities.

Many working-class women revealed their understanding of local power structures when they called upon state leaders to help them in their bids to obtain equal employment. They politicized their working-class status in order to claim the same benefits white women received. Mrs. Sweetie Hall did not complain about a specific employment

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problem; instead, she wrote to Mayor Albert Cobo about her problems securing decent employment at all. She wrote:

I am a citizen of the United States... I have always worked and I feel that I did my part to help win World War II, but as soon as V.J. came, it seem as if my family and I have been put on the forgotten list. I don't feel that we have had justice in regards of employment. I am a widow, 48 years old but able to work... I have had to go hungry sometime and I didn't have the proper clothing, trying to keep a place for us to live... We go to the employment service and the ones they have in charge are hiring by choice not qualifications. My daughter went to one of the employment offices... After she had waited almost a half-day, they told her that she had been called by mistake, but upon further investigation it was found the position was for white... the Draft Boards and the War Department are not using the word 'white only.' I am not white but I would appreciate and I think I deserve a fair chance to do the work of my choice, whether it is common labor or professional.\footnote{Letter from Sweetie Hall to Albert Cobo, 12 October 1950, Detroit Commission on Community Relations, Part 1, Series I, Box 7, Folder 50-48E, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University. (Hereafter DCCR).}

Hall employed several different strategies in her letter to Cobo. First, she based her demand for a job on her previous performance as a war worker, thus couching her citizenship in terms of her value to the state in wartime. Then, she contrasted the discrimination in industry with the race-blind drafting of soldiers during the Korean War, pointing out the hypocrisy of the state allowing black men to die for the country but not supporting black women's "fair chance" to work. This revealed her understanding that the black community's sacrifices to the wartime state, both in World War II and in Korea, were not appreciated by the military-industrial complex, as evinced by the fact that she, her daughter, and of course, other black women, could not get a job. Hall saw equal
opportunity, guaranteed by the state, as the appropriate reward for wartime support for
the state. Hall’s sophisticated use of patriotic duty discourse got the mayor’s attention; he
forwarded the letter to the DCCR, but after opening her case, the committee failed to
follow up on her complaints, so her case died. Although Hall did not receive justice, her
use of a discourse that incorporated the themes of social justice, wartime sacrifice, and
equal employment opportunity suggests her understanding of how World War II rhetoric
shifted in the post-war period, and how she could use that language in order to support
her claims to work during the Korean War in much the same way as women did during the
previous war.

Working-class women’s use of state systems in Detroit suggests that they felt
empowered enough at least to attract attention when they complained about unfair hiring
practices. Bonita Blair, a member of the Congress of Racial Equality, (CORE)
complained to the DCCR that Sam’s Cut Rate Store refused to hire her and other black
women in its department stores. She threatened to get CORE involved in a massive
boycott of the store, but the DCCR stepped in to negotiate the problem with the personnel
department of Sam’s. The DCCR suggested that Sam’s hire 15 black saleswomen in three
months, or it would wholeheartedly support and even help to organize the CORE
boycott. After a continued battle in which the Urban League and CORE, as well as the

15 Case 50-48, ibid.

16 Report of Meeting re: Discrimination in Retail Trades, 5 December 1945, DCCR, Part 3, Series VII,
   Box 74, Folder 75-11.
DCCR, participated, Sam's Cut Rate hired its first black saleswoman in 1952. Eva Pruitt was promoted from a stock position, which she had held for five years, to hosiery sales.\(^{17}\)

While several other women attempted to use the DCCR to investigate their complaints about employment discrimination in Detroit, others looked to the Urban League to help them to gain equality. At least three different groups of African American women made complaints against Household Finance Corp., Ford, Murray Body Company, and J.L. Hudson from 1945-1954.\(^{18}\) While the Urban League generally forwarded complaints against auto makers to the UAW, it tried to meet employment discrimination at J.L. Hudson head on in a battle over positions in department stores. After hearing repeated complaints about Hudson's hiring practices from angry African American women, the Urban League sent four women to answer an ad for packers and wrappers. Each woman was told that the positions had been filled. Then, over a period of ten months, several African American women responded to ads at the department store, in order to wear down the store's reluctance to hire black women in sales and clerical positions. Mrs. Johnnie Kendrick, Pauline Adkins, Ruth Price, Annie Mae Little, Miss A.J. Moore, and three other women became representatives of the Urban League as they applied for sales and clerical positions. None of them had any success, and they filed depositions with the Urban League that would be used in the DCCR investigation of


\(^{18}\) Letter from Kaye Alford to Earnest Brown, 12 January 1951, Francis Albert Kornegay Papers, Box 4, Discrimination File, Michigan Historical Collection, Bentley Library, University of Michigan. (Hereafter Kornegay); Industrial Relations Committee Minutes, 27 March 1951, 3, Kornegay, Box 5, Industrial Relations of Urban League 1951 File; Departmental Reports 1946, DUL, Box 61, Departmental Reports 1946 File.
Sam's Cut Rate and other department stores in the area. Moore also went to Lane Bryant to apply for a job and reported her experience both to the manager of Lane Bryant and to the Urban League:

On November 26 I replied to your ad of November 25 in the Detroit News for cashier and clerk. Upon inquiring about the same, I was told by the switchboard operator, very quickly and curtly, that the job was taken. I was first in line to inquire concerning the job; behind me was a white girl who inquired about the same job. She was told to be seated. In the meantime I shall discuss this experience with Mr. F.A. Korenegay of the Detroit Urban League, who heads the Vocational Services Department. It is my hope that such matters as these concern you and are worthy of your consideration.

Moore recognized the fact that the employment officers at Lane Bryant continued to employ racist hiring practices. and she protested both her treatment and the injustice of the system. Moore also situated herself within the black institutional power structure by indicating her willingness to work with one of the leaders of the Urban League in order to overturn the practices at Lane Bryant.

The women who fought for the Urban League did gain success for others; while J.L. Hudson remained adamant against hiring black women, Lane Bryant had several black saleswomen, Crowley-Milner had three women training for sales positions and Gutman's Department store had at least four black saleswomen. In addition, in what the black


20 Letter From Miss A.J. Moore to Mrs. Louis Frank, Korenegay, Box 5, J.L. Hudson Company File.

21 "Department Store Employees," Michigan Chronicle, 9 May 1953, 18; Vocational Services Department Report Digest, Korenegay, Box 1, January-April 1953 File.
community considered a major event in the advancement of civil rights, Sears-Roebuck hired its first black saleswoman. Minnie Roberts moved from maintenance to bird and plant department sales after working in the store for only six months. A high school graduate, Roberts was chosen from among several black and white candidates for her "amiable character, her industry and sincerity." These African American saleswomen formed part of the vanguard of what would become a large movement of African American women into the retail industry across the nation.

Perhaps the greatest battle won in Detroit during this period was the desegregation of Michigan Bell by the Urban League and its women members. After fighting the battle of desegregation since 1943, four black women finally secured jobs as switchboard operators in 1946. Lillian Campbell, Jacquelin Oliver, Wilhelmina Irvin, and Josephine Taylor were all hired because they had high school educations, were young, healthy, and tall enough to reach all of the switchboard lines. Several years later, many more black women worked as operators, including Bernice Ford, Hattie Anderson, and Joynal Muthleib who gave out correct times and weather reports in their jobs as dial operators. As successful as the NAACP was in desegregating the industry, women still had to continue pressing the company for employment, because the company continued to be reluctant to raise the number of black women in its offices. A year later, when two women were initially turned down for jobs as operators, they went to the Urban League for help.


23 Karen Anderson, 95.
for help. Doris Burney and Irma Robinson both received jobs from Michigan Bell after the Urban League questioned Michigan Bell's refusal to hire them.24

In Richmond, working-class African American women had neither a city race relations committee, nor a strong Urban League, or even powerful unions in order to support their bids to gain entry into jobs in the post-war period. However, they did have the War Manpower Commission, at least for a time, and the Quality Services Employment Agency, supported by the Director of Richmond's Associated Agencies (which included the YWCA) to help them gain entry into businesses. In 1944, as black women were getting laid off at various Richmond plants, DuPont Chemical Company needed more workers. When African American women brought this to the attention of the War Manpower Priorities Committee, it asked DuPont why the factory could not use black women. DuPont's employment manager argued that he could not afford to pay black women the high wage rates needed for the job, as it would be offensive to white workers. However, after pressure from the WMPC, DuPont did hire 40 black women in the shipping department from 83-93 cents an hour, rates equal to the rates of white women, and agreed to hire more in the near future.25 Even in Richmond, where legal impediments to racism constrained their abilities to obtain jobs in fields dominated by white women, like

24 "Announce Plan to Hire Help Without Bias," 12 October 1946, 1, 19, and "Detroit Girls Get Hundreds of Calls a Day," 21 January 1950, 9, both in Michigan Chronicle; Letter from Doris Burney to Francis Albert Kornegay, 2 March 1953, Kornegay, Box 1, January-April 1953 File; Letter from Irma Robinson to Francis Kornegay, Kornegay, Box 2, May-December 1953 File.

25 Minutes, Manpower Priorities Committee, 26 May 1944, 1-2, WMC, Entry 59, Box 15, Richmond File.
retail sales and skilled industrial work, African American women continued to press for jobs in production and in non-productive work, with varying degrees of success.

Richmond's working-class African American women also tried to break into "pink-collar" jobs—clerical work, receptionist work, and stenographic work. They found resistance at many white-owned businesses, until a black businessman and civil rights activist Horace Gillison created Quality Services, Inc. to place African American women in these jobs across Richmond. In the late 1940s, Gillison circulated a flyer to white-owned businesses that tried to appeal to employers' sense of justice:

Our colored Girls find it difficult to secure jobs in the stenographic field, even though they have been fully trained for this work. Therefore, we are trying to make opportunities for them by offering you a complete and efficient STENOGRAPHIC SERVICE outside of your office. . . We feel that this approach. . . is better than asking you to employ them in your office. We understand your position in not being able to employ eligible Colored Girls in your Offices. We also understand the social pattern that forbids them employment in many fields. However, we are hoping that the plan of service we are presenting you will enable these ambitious Girls to be of service to you. We want them to live decently and respectably and sometimes it becomes very discouraging when doors of most real opportunities are closed in their faces. . . We are not going to let them live a life of bitterness. We are trying to do something ourselves about the matter in this way. We hope you understand and take no offense.26

Gillison appealed to employers who believed that they could advance social justice by farming out work to stenographers rather than hire them in their offices. By hiring the workers but not bringing them to their offices, employers could maintain the boundaries

26 Quality Services Flyer, YWCA Collection, Box 1, Executive Director Associated Agencies Richmond Race Relations File, Special Collections, James Branch Cabrell Library, Virginia Commonwealth University. (Hereafter YWCA).
and fictions of racial segregation by maintaining a constructed space for whites, even while the work was done by blacks. The employment agency did not challenge the strict social segregation of Richmond; rather, it called upon the beliefs of paternalistic employers that they had a responsibility towards the black race, to help them in some small way in order to keep women from losing their respectability. The language in the flyer is fraught with concerns about middle-class respectability, and the fact that the YWCA supported the program wholeheartedly reveals its top-down organizational structure. Nevertheless, working-class African American women did sign up with the agency and did gain work. In fact, in 1947 Quality Services managed to place Edna Hall in clerical work at Neuman’s Clothing shop. She was the first black woman to get clerical work in an all-white firm in Richmond.27

The UAW and Equal Employment Opportunity

While some African American women turned to the DCCR, the NAACP, and Urban League to help them gain entry into jobs, others filed grievances with UAW locals in order to change hiring practices at the factory gates. Although some women were successful in getting jobs in auto plants, others found indifference in many UAW locals. For example, Beatrice Woodruff wrote to Guy Nunn, a vice-president of the UAW about her repeated failure to secure employment and asked for help:

I am very much in need for a good job. I am a sewing machine operator ‘power sewing machine, that is.’ I worked in a factory during the war. The main thing I want in a good job is I want it to be a union shop! I am working in a small cleaners now,

27 “Blazing Trail for Others,” Richmond Afro-American, 12 June 1948, 1:3.
inspecting and doing the minor sewing, working around seven hours a day and underpaid! I am colored; which is a handicap... I dont look for special favors, but I do want to live!\textsuperscript{28}

Nunn forwarded the letter to Chrysler’s Highland Park Plant local 400 president, since he had heard that the plant needed sewing operators.\textsuperscript{29} Woodruff did not bother to file grievances with different locals; she went straight to the top in order to secure help from UAW officials, and it appears that her direct appeal and her praise of unionism may have helped her to get employment in one of the few fields still open to any women after the war, machine sewing in factories.

Other women filed grievances with both the Fair Practices and Anti-Discrimination Department of the UAW and with locals about their problems gaining employment in the factories. They lodged complaints against Champion Spark Plug, Dodge Main, L.A. Young Company, Murray Body, Ford’s Willow Run, Dearborn, Hamtramck, and Highland Park Plants, and Drapper Motors.\textsuperscript{30} These letters about discrimination in the plants compelled the UAW to launch a massive assault on Detroit auto companies, based on Truman’s Executive order 10210, which banned bias in plants with defense contracts in 1951. The UAW claimed that the “...Basis for this attack against Detroit auto firms originated from a series of reports from local unions of auto firms refusing to permit

\textsuperscript{28} Letter from Beatrice Woodruff to Guy Nunn, 22 November 1952, Fair Practices, Box 14, Folder 11.

\textsuperscript{29} Letter from William Oliver to Al Musilli, 10 December 1952, Fair Practices, Box 14, Folder 11.

Negro women applicants to file applications—as well as outright by-passing of Negro women on employment lines." Initially, this move by the UAW succeeded in getting 25 black women hired at the Cadillac Plant, but overall, very few women were hired as a result of this offensive against the auto industry, because the union did not have the time or inclination to investigate all hiring offenses. Still, women's willingness to utilize unions as a resource for advancing civil rights, even when they were not members of those unions, suggests that working-class African American women understood how to manipulate power structures in Detroit in order to maximize their success in gaining employment. Their actions suggest that a working-class consciousness was central to the politics of these African American women.

Progress in the Non-production and Light Industrial Sectors

Despite the fact that African American women in Detroit and Richmond were fighting a mostly losing battle to maintain gains made in wartime industries, working-class women worked hard to take every advantage open to them after the war that did not involve live-in domestic work. While African American women in Richmond and Detroit were losing ground in factories as they saw their seniority rights trampled, they took advantage of the openings in service, clerical, and smaller industrial operative fields. Karen Anderson noted that nationwide, even though 40 percent of black women were in domestic labor by 1950, they had made progress in the apparel industry and in other

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operatives occupational categories.\textsuperscript{32} This included waitressing and pink collar work in both Detroit and Richmond. One of the most significant signs that African American women were finding more job opportunities than before the war was the fact that many simply refused to do live in domestic work. In 1948, Detroit’s Urban League Vocational Services Department wrote: “A large number of the unfulfilled job orders result from the requests for domestic help to live on the premises. This type of job order is extremely difficult to service.”\textsuperscript{33} Detroit’s vocational services department continued to have problems filling these job orders through the 1950s, because the pay was too low and the lifestyle too demanding and confining.\textsuperscript{34} In fact, the number of domestics placed through their job services declined rapidly from 1947 to 1951, until the Urban League finally decided to give domestic service requests to the Michigan Unemployment Commission.

Richmond’s Urban League reported that although black women did not profit from wartime gains as much as it would have liked, “It is now next to impossible to find full-time domestic workers. Those who are willing to accept full time work are making serious attempts to prescribe the hours of employment, and to a person, practically refuse any work that calls for time on Sunday. This is a significant and revolutionary change in the domestic field.”\textsuperscript{35} In addition, the Urban League found that the average educational

\textsuperscript{32} Karen Anderson. 97.

\textsuperscript{33} Report of Urban League Vocational Services Department, 1948, DUL, Box 68, Departmental Reports 1948 File.

\textsuperscript{34} Detroit 1950s monthly reports, Records of the National Urban League, Series 7, Box 55, Detroit 1950s Monthly Reports File, Manuscript Collection, Library of Congress. (Hereafter NUL).

\textsuperscript{35} Annual Report, Richmond Messenger, NUL, Series 1, Box 26, Richmond File.
level of domestic workers dropped from 9.5 to 7.2 years of schooling, suggesting that women with more schooling could get more desirable jobs. Moreover, the average age of Richmond’s domestic workers dropped to 24—the Urban League took this as a sign that a new generation of domestic workers, unwilling to work unless they received better wages and significant concessions in hours and duties, would change the way domestic work was performed in Richmond. White women employers discovered that women would rather take jobs as elevator operators, waitresses, dishwashers, or cooks in restaurants, but if they had to settle on domestic work, 75% to 80% insisted on 8 hour workdays, and at least one and a half days off per week. This evidence suggests the impact of waged production and non-production work on domestic workers; even those women who had to continue as domestics wanted to restructure the contours of the job in order to make it more like wage work in the public sector.

When they refused to take jobs as maids, women in Detroit and Richmond found jobs in many different fields. In addition to work secured in retail sales in Detroit, women found jobs in pink collar work and as nurses, waitresses, survey takers, counter clerks, seamstresses, substitute teachers, and receptionists through Detroit’s Urban League Placement File. In addition, 95 women worked as counter girls, box assemblers, and porters at Farmcrest Bakeries, 6 women were placed as clerical workers for Blue Cross

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36 Annual Report, *Richmond Messenger*, NUL, Series 1, Box 123, Richmond File.


Medical services, the first time black women had been hired by the service, and 6 women
were placed as clerical workers at Michigan Consolidated Gas through the Urban
League's pilot placement program.³⁹

When women in Richmond attempted to make gains in non-industrial work, they
had to do so within the contours of legal segregation, which restricted their ability to claim
sales jobs in department stores. However, the fact that African American consumers
frequented Richmond department stores had already challenged strict racial hierarchies
within those stores. As Grace Hale explains, “Mass consumption depended upon and
created a new geography of shopping,” in which whites and blacks shopped together and
consumer choices expanded racial space and threatened ritualized hierarchies.⁴⁰ While
Richmond's middle-class African American women could not use the restaurants or
restrooms of department stores, they could spend their money there. In the postwar era,
working women attempted to move up the hierarchy of jobs in an atmosphere that often
privileged economic status over race, thus blurring racial bars to jobs. Thalheimer's
Department store promoted six African American women to clerk positions from
maintenance positions. One woman became supervisor of marking in the Receiving
Warehouse, after working at the store for ten years, and another became an embosser of

³⁹ Vocational Services Department Employment of Negroes with the Following Bakeries in Detroit, 20
June 1950, Box 1, April-December 1950 Folder, and “Key Placements,” 21 September 1951, Box 1,
April-December 1951 Folder; Letter from Francis Albert Kornegay to Morlean Helen Austin, 3 October
1945, Box 1, General File September-October 1945; Vocational Services Department Program Report, 13
May 1954, Box 2, January-June 1954 File; all in Kornegay.

⁴⁰ Grace Hale, Making Whiteness: Popular Culture and the South from 1880 to 1940 (New York: Vintage
monogrammed paper after moving from her position as part-time clerk. By 1949, all of the waitresses in the tea room were African American women, and 11 black women and 5 black men worked as elevator operators. Still, Thalheimer's refused to hire any African American saleswomen. The Urban League reported that several "anonymous" department stores had hired black saleswomen, and that Crawford Manufacturing hired a complete shift of African American women as machine operators. In addition, the Little Mending Shop started breaking race barriers as it hired one black woman to work as a machine operator, and she worked out so well that by 1946, the entire shop was manned by black women. B.T. Crump Feed Co. was so impressed by the work of the woman at the Little Mending Shop that they decided to hire several black women on as machine operators in their factory. In these cases, it is unclear whether the women actually broke racial barriers: it is entirely possible that employers profited by moving to a labor pool that they could pay less than white women. In addition, the fact that so many women entered into service jobs like waitressing suggests that whites were willing to accept the labor of African American women outside of the domestic field when the women fulfilled jobs that required serving whites. Still, the jobs were more desirable than domestic work, because the hours and pay were better.

In both Detroit and Richmond, working-class women made progress in non-production and light industrial work as their found their opportunities in the heavier

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41 *TBI Talks*: VII:4 (April 1947) 7-8; 8:6 (July 1948), 8; IX:6 (December 1949), 7; April 1950, 11; X:6 (November 1950), 3, 11, all in Thalheimer Collection, Section 6, Box 2, Folder 45, Manuscript Collection, Virginia Historical Society.

industrial fields constricted. By fighting to gain entry into these jobs, African American women took advantage of openings left by white women who went into more lucrative work. African American women's unwillingness to do domestic labor signifies a serious change in attitudes towards labor that wartime job opportunities wrought. When the women found their access to defense jobs closed, they shifted their wartime activism to post-war activism, drawing upon civil rights groups, unions, and state agencies to desegregate work outside of the heavy industrial sector. Working-class African American women made progress in other fields of work because they continued to contest racist hiring practices.

**Fights for Seniority**

In both Detroit and Richmond, African American women faced not only problems securing employment, but problems with layoffs after the war. In many cases, they fought to retain seniority rights so that they would be recalled when companies started rehiring, but companies were reluctant to rehire women at all, black or white, so working-class African American women faced an uphill battle in trying to get their wartime jobs back. In one instance, at Ford's Dearborn plant, women members of local 600 became so distressed about the fact that men were being hired before the seniority lists were used to recall workers that they considered a picket line to protest the practice. After intense negotiations with the UAW, Ford began to recall women and promised to furnish the union with a complete recall list so that the union could oversee the rehiring process.  

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Women in Detroit and Richmond fought unfair firings and seniority violations by either going to the unions or the DCCR to file grievances and get the backing of powerful institutions in their fight for equality in the workplace.

When working-class African American women in Detroit faced unfair firings, they took their grievances to the UAW or other unions, and in some instances, they did manage to get their jobs back. For example, in late 1945, Lonnie Mae Arrington and Aline Perkins engaged in a fight while working at the Great Lakes Steel Company. When the company fired the women, the women claimed that the punishment was unfair and racially motivated; in essence it was an excuse to get rid of them as workers. They filed a grievance with their local 1209 of the United Steelworkers of America, and they claimed that white employees had always been given short layoffs after fights. After more than five months' arbitration, the union negotiated a deal in which the women got their jobs back and were paid about $2000 in back pay and lost vacation time. The UAW also had some success in reinstating African American women who had been unfairly fired. In 1946, Louise Hamilton transferred to a new job at the Ford-River Rouge plant after working at the plant for two and a half years and clocking 1440 hours of defense work training. After working an hour on the new job, Hamilton was fired for failing to keep up with the production line. Hamilton filed a grievance with local 600, but when it failed to respond quickly to her complaint, she wrote to William Oliver, head of the Fair Practices and Anti-Discrimination Department:

My work during that time [of my employment] was satisfactory, because there was never a complaint that was serious enough for me to have been sent to labor relations or to have been laid off. After V.J. Day I was laid off and was called back in January 46. I worked two weeks and was fired because I was not able to keep up with production in an hours’ time. An hour time is not enough time to justify whether a person is qualified for a job.\(^5\)

Apparently, Oliver agreed with her, and called upon Richard Leonard to order local 600 to conduct a thorough investigation of the incident. The investigation worked, and almost a year later, Hamilton was reinstated and trained properly in the new job.\(^6\) From 1947 to 1953, at least three other women petitioned the UAW trying to get jobs back after unfair firings. In two of those cases, the women were successful after filing grievances with their locals.\(^7\)

Other women in Detroit fought to retain seniority and tried to get reinstated after layoffs when white workers were being called back. Several women took complaints to the DCCR, and interestingly enough, in each case, the women could not get anywhere in their own unions, which were AFL affiliates. For example, five black women laid off after the termination of war contracts from Auto City Plating Company complained that the company had since reinstated white female employees with less seniority. The DCCR

\(^5\) Letter from Louise Hamilton to William Oliver, 5 November 1946, UAW Ford Department, Box 8, Local 600-Aircraft Folder, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University. (Hereafter Ford)

\(^6\) Letter from Richard Leonard to Peter Casper, 21 November 1946, Ford, Box 8, Local 600-Aircraft Folder; Letter from Louise Hamilton to William Oliver, 23 December 1946, Fair Practices, Box 7. Folder 26.

\(^7\) Report of John Clark, Local 961, Case of Thelma Hubert, Fair Practices, Box 16, Folder 19; Memo from Lillian Hatcher to William Oliver, 22 February 1950, Fair Practices, Box 15, Folder 39; Letter from William Oliver to Arthur Johnson, 1 September 1953, Fair Practices, Box 14, Folder 11.
suspected that the AFL metal polisher's union was fostering discrimination against black employees, especially since the women in the case were accused of being "CIO-Minded." As with most cases investigated by the DCCR, suggestions for further study were made and never followed up. All in all, six black women appealed to the DCCR for help when their AFL-affiliated unions did not support their grievances, and in each case, the DCCR failed to follow up on reports and ended up closing the cases.\textsuperscript{48} The refusal of the AFL locals to act in these cases suggests that the Detroit's AFL locals maintained hostility towards black workers, just as Richmond locals did in the tobacco factories of Richmond. The AFL unions' reluctance to support the rights of black workers suggests that its leadership still harbored hostility towards blacks, a fact which constrained African American women who sought to use the union as a vehicle of change.

UAW members often fared much better when they contested the auto industry's violation of their seniority rights. As early as 1945, Gladys Dixon, Julia Turner, Bertha Robinson, Mable Thompson, and Earline Anderson fought their layoffs from Ford's Highland Park Plant aluminum foundry. When the six women discovered that workers with less seniority remained on the job because they were white, the women filed a grievance. Ford admitted its fault and found all of the women employment in its River Rouge plant.\textsuperscript{49} A year later, Fannie Brown, a light punch press operator at Ford's River Rouge plant, found herself transferred to a heavy punch press despite her four year's seniority. She developed stomach and back pains from trying to operate the heavy press,

\textsuperscript{48} Meeting of Case and Clearance Committee, 21 November 1945, DCCR, Part 3, Series VII, Box 75, Folder 75-11; Case 52-20Ec, 11 July 1952, DCCR, Part 1, Series I, Box 9, Folder 52-20Ec.
and she filed a grievance when she discovered that white workers with less seniority remained on the light press. As a result of pressure from the local 600 and the UAW Fair Practices and Anti-Discrimination Department (and a doctor’s note describing her health difficulties), Brown got transferred to an easier job several months later, which she enjoyed—although she complained that her new supervisor was discriminatory because he checked up on her when she took quick breaks.50

Chrysler also faced a battle with its local union at the Dodge Main plant when it laid off 31 women, both black and white, unfairly. Silretha Love, an African American woman who had worked for the company during the war, filed the grievance that got the other 30 women both their jobs and $55,000 in back pay and penalties. Love was originally laid off when the war ended, in violation of her seniority agreement. She and the thirty other women filed grievances, and local 140 managed to get them rehired as auto body wipers. Love faced extreme opposition, however, from the assistant superintendent of the plant, who would follow her as she worked and streak the auto panels with his fingers. At the end of five days, the superintendent had made enough fingerprints to claim that her work was shoddy and he fired her. While Love filed a grievance with the union, she tried to make money selling aprons and dresses door-to-door. During the hearing, the company claimed that Love and other women in the wiping division had failed to perform their duties. Love replied: “It’s funny...I was all right


50 Interview with Fannie Brown, 10 April 1947, and letter from Lillian Hatcher to Peter Kasper, 22 May 1947, Fair Practices, Box 14, Folder 24; Fair Practices Committee Report, Case of Fannie Brown, 13 July 1947, Fair Practices, Box 14, Folder 24.
during the war. What’s wrong with my work now?” The union found that Love had been a good employee who was not given a fair chance to work after she was rehired. Her grievance got her $1,684 in back pay and her job back, as well as the jobs of 30 other women who had been unfairly laid off, rehired, and then fired. 51

From 1946 to 1954, many other African American women brought suit for seniority violations against several companies, including Murray Body, Freuhauf Corporation, C.M. Hall Lamp Co., Fleetwood Auto Body, Briggs Manufacturing, Packard, DeSoto, and the new American Motors Corp., a product of the Hudson/Nash-Kelvinator merger. The UAW managed to get women’s seniority back at Murray and got women back pay at Freuhauf, C.M. Hall, and Fleetwood. 52 In most cases, several women at each company went in groups to file grievances in order to show strength in numbers. Unlike immediately after the war, however, unions were unresponsive to most of the complaints, as the UAW became more concerned with its negotiating power among the big industrialists to secure pensions than with helping women regain jobs. Some historians have suggested that the UAW abandoned women in their fight against seniority violations in the post-war period, especially when they determined that seniority expired after certain

51 “31 Women vs. the Giant Chrysler Corp.,” Dodge Main News 12:24 (12 June 1948), 3-4.

lengths of time when workers were not recalled. Nancy Gabin claims that “Black women certainly suffered double jeopardy during reconversion, facing discrimination on the basis of race as much as sex. . . .” citing evidence that black men fared better than women did in getting grievances addressed. Moreover, the UAW privileged male breadwinners in its postwar focus on negotiating for private welfare benefits. Lichtenstein finds that Reuther's decision to promote benefits for union employees hurt blacks and women, whose seniority levels and overall position within the factories usually made them ineligible for these benefits. Given the UAW's ambivalence towards all women in the postwar period, it is significant that any African American women won grievances at all.

While working-class African American women in Detroit claimed some victories in seniority battles as a result of local CIO unions' support of their grievances, women workers in Richmond did not have the same level of support in fighting seniority-based issues like pay increases and forced layoffs from their AFL-TWIU unions. In some cases, however, CIO locals that functioned as unions for black workers in the tobacco factories gained victories for African American women. Unlike in Detroit, in Richmond protests operated mostly within the limitations imposed by company policies of segregation, forcing the women to maneuver within more constricted parameters than the ones faced by women in Detroit. Sometimes, the CIO-sponsored Food, Tobacco, and Agricultural


54 Feminism in the UAW, 136.

55 Lichtenstein, 287.
Workers unions did gain wage increases for its workers. In addition, local AFL chapters did, in some cases, hear their grievances, and, as a result, African American women were accorded some small victories in the tobacco factories. For example, 280 African American workers at the Larus Brothers Stemmery, both male and female, won $25,000 in pay raises after their CIO local 45 determined that their 7.5 cent an hour pay was violating seniority rights, as the promotion levels were minuscule. The CIO also secured workers at the plant 88 hours in paid vacations per year.\textsuperscript{56} African American women were obviously involved in the union at the stemmery. Two workers, Evetta Hampton and Emma Howard, leaders in local 45, were chosen to be among five operatives throughout the South in the CIO-Sponsored Operation Dixie to organize unions in southern tobacco plants. Hampton and Howard were assigned to organize plants in South Richmond, including the Carrington-Michaux Stemmery.\textsuperscript{57} The fact that the CIO was willing to place African American women in positions of leadership to advance its causes suggests the differences between the AFL and the CIO in terms of their racial policies. African American women took advantage of the opportunity to participate as organizers in order to lead other black workers towards unionization.

Local 216, the AFL American Tobacco Company union, seemed to be the most receptive to women's grievances about seniority, because in this case, black workers created a strong enough local to effect change. Six leaders, three men and three women, had made progress in getting the entire factory wage increases, two weeks' paid vacation,

\textsuperscript{56} "Va. Workers Get $25,000 Pay Hike," \textit{Richmond Afro-American}, 22 September 1945, 1, 19.
and 1300 members enrolled in 1946, and they turned their attention to two women's seniority cases in 1949 and 1950. In 1949, Pauline Christianson found herself transferred to part-time work when employees with less seniority were working the entire day. After she complained to the TWIU local, she received $156.80 in back pay and was reinstated as a full-time worker. The same year, Hattie Hubbard, along with 400-500 other employees at the plant, were laid off when the company converted to seasonal employment. The following summer, Hubbard was not recalled at all. She complained that while employees who had always been seasonal workers were recalled, she, who had been a full-time employee should have been recalled first. The union agreed and negotiated with the company for her reinstatement and back pay. Although the AFL often exhibited hostility towards the integration and promotion of black workers, in the local 216 black leaders took control of the union and effected changes for black women.

The major difference between Detroit and Richmond factories at this time was that in Richmond, jobs were entirely segregated, and therefore, union locals and seniority lists were segregated as well. Companies maintained segregation by constructing different plants and factories for white and black workers in order to racialize space. Although the members of AFL 219B had won the right to be represented by the CIO, it was still an entirely black union. Locals 45 and 216 were also predominantly black. Therefore, when


58 "Officer of Local 216 A.F. of L.," *Richmond Afro-American*, 16 March 1946, 3; Letter from Pauline Christianson to John O'Hare, 21 April 1949, Settlement in Matter between Local 216 and Christianson, and Synopsis of Case with Reference to the Recall of Mrs. Hattie Hubbard, all in Tobacco Workers' International Union Records, Series III, Box 31, Local 216 1949-1961 File, Special Collections, University of Maryland. (Hereafter TWIU).
black women contested seniority issues, they had not been replaced by white women workers, but by other black workers. African American women in Richmond did not have the right to challenge employers to promote them to jobs done by white women in the tobacco factories, and, most likely, the unions would not have supported such a measure. While filing grievances may still have politicized individual black women, all of the gains made by African American women in Richmond's factories did not change the racial status quo within those factories. In Detroit, black women observed the UAW's increasing reluctance to support union seniority rights, but they continued to file grievances in hopes that locals would back them in their battles to retain jobs. In both Richmond and Detroit, African American showed their willingness to remain active participants in the politics of the unions despite the demobilization of the postwar era, which their grievances filed against seniority violations clearly show.

**Fighting for Equality on the Factory Floors**

Working-class African American women in Detroit and Richmond did not stop at trying to break into industries or fight for seniority rights. In several incidents, African American women contested their treatment within factories by challenging segregated facilities and prejudicial treatment by employers, just as they did during the war. While incidents of segregation decreased in Detroit, some individual companies still practiced segregation within the factories, and several individual locals chose to look the other way instead of addressing the problem. In Richmond, where the entrenched system of segregation in the tobacco industry did not allow white and black women contact with
each other, let alone deal with the issue of facilities, black women still fought for fair treatment, albeit within the confines of segregation.

In Detroit, Margaret Sammons took her case against the local 36 of Consolidated Brass all the way to the UAW-CIO national appeals board. Sammons, a shop steward who took grievances for other union members, originally reported a grievance that the company kept Jim Crow bathrooms, which were supposed to have been outlawed in 1944 by union factory rules. While the Fair Practices Department did manage to get the segregated bathrooms integrated, company officials branded Sammons a troublemaker. When she won the battle of the bathrooms, she complained that she was not upgraded from the foundry into a better job because the company did not want her or any other black women working with white women. The company charged her with trying to create dissension among workers, and trying to get workers to slow down rates of work to protest the bathroom situation. The union local president was not sympathetic. He claimed that Sammons was slow, absent and late on many occasions, and that she loitered in the bathroom. Sammons then went to the Fair Practices Division and charged the union local with misconduct when it refused to enter her grievance about unfair firing. She claimed that the company and the union engaged in a conspiracy to get rid of her. Sammons received a fair hearing, in that the UAW reprimanded the local for not supporting the bathroom desegregation, but company records did indicate that Sammons was absent on many occasions, so the UAW would not support her reinstatement at
Consolidated Brass. It is interesting to note that although Sammons won the battle over desegregation by bringing in national leaders to support her, she lost the war because the local brought up issues of her conduct which ended up getting her fired. This suggests that perhaps Sammons was punished by the local for trying to institute a change that was supported by the national leaders.

In Richmond, while African American women did not contest formal segregation, they did protest against inhumane treatment at the hands of whites. For example, Susie Reed filed a $10,000 lawsuit against the British-American Tobacco company, claiming a foreman beat her with her own umbrella. Reed had worked at the company three years, and she endured vulgar language from this foreman, until she finally spoke up and protested to him. He became enraged at Reed, who broke a racial code to speak against a white man's actions, and he brutally beat her with the umbrella she had been holding.

Rosa Williams, a co-worker, claimed that the foreman's violent rage was unprovoked, but the AFL union local president testified that Reed actually struck first. She did not win the lawsuit. Although Reed did not win her case, she filed a lawsuit against the foreman and claimed autonomy by daring to speak out against a white man and then sue him when he attempted to reassert his authority within the racial hierarchy.

59 Letter from George Crockett to Bruce Dodge, 22 April 1946, Fair Practices, Box 14, Folder 18; Transcript of Sammons Case Against Local #36, 14, 15, 21-22, 29, 122, Fair Practices, Box 6, Folder 3; Case #7, Fair Practices Committee Decisions, UAW Fair Practices Department-Women's Bureau Records, Box 2, Folder 10, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University.

On at least two other occasions, once in Detroit and once in Richmond, African American women workers filed grievances or lawsuits against their treatment in factories or businesses. Only Margaret Sammons managed to win a battle over segregation, but in the end, she lost the war by losing her job and her influence at Consolidated Brass. In Detroit, the grievances filed both during and after the war made a distinct impact on the way in which UAW leadership promoted race relations. In the post-war period, conditions in plants across got better as the UAW promoted better race relations and workers started socializing together at union-sponsored events. In 1947, Bertima Guillony, sister-in-law of a Ford employee, won Miss Ford Local 600, beating out 40 other candidates, mostly white, at the annual picnic at which 5,000 members attended. The next year, the UAW banned segregation in its very prominent bowling leagues. The willingness of African American women to attempt to effect change in working conditions in both Detroit and Richmond suggests that they believed strongly in their rights as workers to have decent and equal working conditions, despite company policies that sought to restrict the space in which black women workers operated.

**Strikes**

When working-class African American women could not resolve problems in the workplace through the usual grievance process, they readily struck. In both Detroit and Richmond, African American women picketed for better wages and better working

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conditions in a diverse range of businesses and industries. In a vast majority of cases, in both Detroit and Richmond, industries were so race and gender segregated that black women were the primary groups that walked the picket lines. In the case of hospital and laundry strikes, the few men who worked in those industries joined the strikes, but in each instance, women were the primary activists for change, in that they dominated those segments of the industries.

In Detroit, the antagonism that still existed between the classes in the black community exploded when the women clerical workers of Great Lakes Mutual Life Insurance Co., a black-owned business, struck for better pay. The women, members of the CIO-United Business, Office, and Professional Workers of America local 26 struck for a $5 weekly raise, because their $25 weekly pay was well below that of industrial workers in the area. In November of 1948, the 20 clerical and “pink collar” workers went out on strike. Company management had their wives come in to scab for the duration of the strike. With their actions, middle-class women helped to undermine the working-class women’s movement for better pay. Violence sometimes erupted on the picket line; in one of three major incidents, Dycella Nicholson struck Nettie Cherry, a scab, with a picket sign. The strikers gained the support of policyholders, as 200 of them showed up for a rally in which they canceled their policies in support of the women. The strike went on for five months, until the CIO-UPOBW was branded as a communist stronghold by local authorities, which weakened its bargaining position. Great Lakes refused to recognize the local, and internal dissension among the 20 workers let to a breakdown of the strike, until
all women returned to work with no raise. It is interesting to note that for all of their programming that sought to bridge the gap between the classes and advocate for the working class, middle-class black women were among the oppressors of the working women in this situation. When faced with having to support better wages for women or the authority of their husbands as employers of the women, they sided with the men.

Women employees of Harper Hospital in Detroit fared better than the clerical workers of Great Lakes Mutual, because their strike shut the hospital down. The maids and laundry workers of the hospital struck at about the same time as the Great Lakes women. They picketed the hospital with demands for a closed shop so that they could negotiate wages from a position of greater power. Like some of the Great Lakes women, several of the hospital workers also became violent in picket lines; one picketer tried to knife a scab when she attempted to cross the picket line. The strike lasted about a month, but Harper finally acquiesced after it was no longer able to admit patients, and management allowed the AFL Laundry Workers’ Union to organize workers at the hospital. Their success suggests that even the lowest-paid and least-powerful African American women workers could mobilize their co-workers and gain success by shutting down a hospital with their efforts. These women forced their employers to recognize the

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64 "Harper Patients Snack, AFL Strike Cuts Diets," 13 November 1948, 1, 4; "Still Walking After Two Weeks," 20 November 1948, 1; "Harper Hospital Superintendent Says Union Threatened Workers," 8
importance of their work during the strike, and they won the right to bargain collectively as a result of their actions.

Working-class African American women also struck for better wages and working conditions in several Richmond businesses. In 1946, 115 Sunlight Laundry workers, predominantly African American women, struck for two months for better wages. While there is no record of the outcome of this strike, less than a year later, workers struck again after a plant cave-in almost killed several workers. This time, workers demanded the right to unionize, safe working conditions, and decent wages. Estelle Ewell and Evelyn Stokes, who had been working 30 and 15 years, respectively, at Sunlight, told the Richmond Afro-American that for all their seniority, they still got only $23 a week. The strike occurred in several Sunlight Laundry factories in Richmond and involved over 400 workers by the time the strike ended in late 1947. As in the first strike, there is no record of an outcome, so we do not know if the workers were successful. Apparently, no business could be too small to picket for better wages in Richmond. In 1951, four African American women, members of the AFL Baker’s Union 358, struck against Mrs. Chamberlain’s Pie Shop for a 10 cent an hour raise. Again, we do not know the outcome of this strike, but it is significant to note that even a shop with four women got union support in a town that was...
notoriously anti-union. In each case, although the strikers were not successful, the fact that African American women worked through the AFL-affiliated unions to fight for change on the streets is significant, as they made the city recognize their political activism as workers.

In Detroit and Richmond, African American women workers in many diverse fields were willing to risk losing their jobs permanently by striking against poor wages and working conditions. Both with and without union support, working-class black women challenged employers en masse as they brought their work problems into the public sphere by becoming active picketers. These women took their labor problems to the streets as they became activists for change in their respective industries.

Fighting for Entitlements from State and Private agencies

Working-class African American women were not just activists for equal employment: they were also activists in trying to obtain welfare benefits for themselves and their children. These women were used to inadequate wages, substandard housing, and unsympathetic welfare officials, and they attempted to piece together help from numerous places in the post-war period, from both public and private institutions, and from friends, family, and neighbors. In their fights for adequate entitlement benefits.

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which were dispensed more freely to poor white women, these African American women claimed their citizenship in the state by demanding access to their state welfare entitlements. Moreover, by directly contesting with the state over amounts of and conditions upon receiving welfare benefits, entry into public housing projects, and slum clearance issues, these poor black women became players within the state, trying to control the outcome of decisions made by state welfare officials in Detroit and Richmond.

African American women found themselves at a distinct disadvantage when trying to obtain benefits, because of racist welfare policies that dated back to the inception of mother’s pensions in the early 1900s. During the Progressive era, white middle-class maternalist reformers left black women out of their welfare programs. Joanne Goodwin argues that many maternalists assumed that private agencies and community networks would take care of African American children, and thus they directed black women towards work rather than towards pensions. Moreover, welfare advocates tied benefits with moral standards, and so mothers could only claim benefits if they maintained a household that reflected aspirations towards a normative definition of middle-class domesticity. Since white women constructed black women as laborers and not mothers, black women had a hard time meeting the standards of welfare officials.


69 Goodwin, 185; Pitied but Not Entitled, 5-11.
During the New Deal, black women actually gained access to some public welfare benefits, but because the state privileged white male heads of households in its welfare programs, women and people of color found themselves vying for scant local funds rather than the federal funds disbursed by the New Deal administration. Because New Deal officials constructed social insurance programs that were based upon payroll contributions that specifically excluded domestic work and agricultural labor, most blacks found themselves outside of the "entitlement," or "good" welfare system. Moreover, federal programs like the Works Projects Administration were racially stratified and hired many more white men than black men and women. As a result, black women found themselves gaining access to public welfare rolls, which became stigmatized as "bad" welfare because of its outright public expenditures and because of the racial makeup of its recipients. While black women did receive Aid to Dependent Children benefits and public assistance, the state governments, and not the federal governments, controlled access to these funds. As a result, women and blacks found themselves negotiating with capricious welfare officials and under-funded state systems in order to claim benefits.™

During World War II and the post-war period, African American women continued to claim welfare benefits, but again, these benefits continued to be stigmatized and reduced, especially in the face of government support of union-gained pension and workers' compensation benefits. With the new focus on private welfare doled out by industry, black women found themselves further marginalized as a result of their inability

™ Gordon, 5; Brown, 70, 82, 85; Goodwin, 188; Suzanne Mettler, Dividing Citizens: Gender and Federalism in New Deal Public Policy (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998), 20-25, 45, 143-176.
to get jobs in industry due to structural racism in business hiring practices.\textsuperscript{71} In both Detroit and Richmond, black women attempted to negotiate with welfare officials in order to make claims on the state for what little funding was available. In both cities, the presence of black women as case workers probably helped poor African American women win claims, but in some cases, the class bias of case workers inhibited the ability of poor women to secure funding.

In Detroit, African American women often appealed the decisions made by welfare officials when they believed that they had been given an unfair assessment by a case worker. For example, in 1948, Abbie Louise Veal complained to the Department of Public Welfare when her assistance was cut off. Veal, a widow and on relief since 1948, got approximately $30.84 a week from Social Security Benefits and made $10 a week “supervising” young women at the Club Sedan, but DPW case workers did not believe that she reported her income correctly. Veal’s 16 year old daughter had moved back home when she got pregnant and was abandoned by her husband, and the two women were engaged in a fight with the manager of Brewster Projects because of Veal’s “active political affiliations.” DPW agreed to continue her relief if she got rid of her personal telephone, ostensibly so she would not have another bill to pay. But Veal told her caseworker that she had had a phone for 27 years and was not about to give it up now, because she used it to campaign for the fall elections. Veal lost her money and appealed her case, claiming that it was incredibly unfair to keep a widow alone without any contact

\textsuperscript{71} Brown, 106-109, 127.
to the outside world, and besides, she needed a way to contact her daughter at work in case of an emergency. The appeal board turned her down, claiming that she could use the pay phone on the corner for emergencies. Although the caseworker did not actually say what Veal’s “active political affiliations” were, it is apparent that DPW punished her for being a politically active poor woman, or, at the very least, tried to impede her activism by holding welfare benefits over her head. She fought the caseworker’s assessment, but the bureaucracy was too powerful and she lost her welfare entitlements. This case suggests, however, that women who received welfare felt empowered as political citizens, with the authority to work for change within the political system while still receiving the benefits due to them by the welfare system.

Veal was not the only African American woman who was turned down by welfare, and she was not the only woman to fight the system. In 1950, so many black women complained about their treatment by DPW that they galvanized community action against the “brutal new policies” of the DPW. Residents of Detroit’s east side neighborhoods formed a neighborhood commission to challenge the unfair assessments made by the welfare system. In the first meeting, union members, church members, and community action groups heard Earline Nealy speak about DPW’s attempts to deport her and her one month old daughter to Texas, where her husband fled after he abandoned her. Minerva Davis told the group that although she was on relief, her son helped pay the bills with his job at Chrysler. When Chrysler workers went on strike, Davis could not pay her rent.

72 Letter from Abbie Veal to Appeals Board, 12 October 1949, Interoffice Communication, 8 November 1949, Rosa Gragg Papers, Box 20, DPW Folder, Burton Historical Collection, Detroit Public Library.
She showed the group her eviction notice that she received when DPW flatly refused to issue her an emergency rent check. Bernice Fisher also had a story to tell. DPW put her off welfare when she refused to follow her husband to Tennessee, where he resided with relatives after deserting her in Detroit. In each of these cases, women were fighting to stay in Detroit and make their own decisions about their marriages, despite the policies of welfare officials which attempted to reunite women with their husbands. The new community group vowed to help these women and all others abandoned by the system by challenging welfare officials’ rulings. Working-class African American women politicized the meanings of welfare by mobilizing entire communities around the issue of welfare reform.

When appeals to DPW did not work, African American women took their complaints public and received the support of their neighbors. Like the women who spoke to the east side community groups, Alberta Adams was “Put off the welfare rolls some months ago for some unexplained reason.” The widowed mother of twelve relied on the kindness of neighbors and family, as she housed eight kids in two rooms and received food and other necessities from friends. DPW had given her only $30, which she used to buy her children second-hand clothes and pay the rent. She took her story to the newspapers in order to try to secure help from both the DPW and the community, as she

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(Hereafter Gragg).

had crippling arthritis and could not work. Other poor working mothers picketed DPW and the Board of Education when the board planned to curtail nursery schools and DPW had no plans to help the mothers with childcare. Although the board decided to reduce the number of schools rather than discontinue them altogether in order to continue helping working mothers, DPW did not take action until 8 years later, when it created a nursery school for children whose mothers were the sole or major support of their families. This evidence suggests that African American women understood that as citizens of Detroit, they were entitled to certain welfare benefits, and that they were willing to fight for help in order to get what they deserved, and to get it on their own terms. Moreover, it shows that working-class women refused to accept the state's distinction of entitlement vs. charity, and instead asserted their entitlement to public welfare benefits.

Richmond's African American women also fought for benefits, which they sorely needed. The Richmond Urban League studied a random sample of 187 families in Richmond and found that 36 earned less than $25 a week, and 67 ranged from $25-$35 a week. 23 families had to reduce their milk purchases, and 32 could not buy butter; 26 more reduced spending on various other necessities. Although Richmond's welfare department has closed records, it is still possible to see that African American women got help by looking at the records of the Lumdsen Fund. The local YWCA chapter had a

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75 "Nursery School Fight Takes Form of Picket Line," 13 October 1945, 5; "Nursery School for Mothers is Expanded," 10 October 1953, 3, both in *Michigan Chronicle*.

grant-giving foundation called the Lumdsen Fund that gave money to black and white women for everything from school clothes and other necessities to money for vocational programs and training courses. Although the fund was created in the 1930s, African American women did not get benefits until the late 1940s. The fund was entrusted to YWCA officials, and although we cannot tell if the committee was interracial, it was definitely middle-class, which put working-class women in the position of supplicants to economically-stable women, since it was a scholarship/grant program. For example, Mrs. E.H. "did very well during the war when wages were sufficiently high," but because her husband was injured and her income had dropped, her daughter could not afford to get clothing and other necessities for her to finish high school. E.H. applied for money through her public social worker, Louise Blane, and she received a grant for her daughter to buy clothes and notebooks in order to finish high school and get a decent job. M.P.'s daughter needed money to complete her final year at Virginia State University. M.P., a widow, had managed to put her daughter through her junior year in the pre-med program using ADC and Social Security pensions, but she could not afford her daughter's last year. At the meeting, fund trustees debated giving M.P.'s daughter the money and concluded that "the mother [was] probably not very realistic in planning her daughter's future since there are probably only two medical colleges in the South that accept Negroes." They turned her down. The trustees' response to M.P.'s request for help shows class and race bias. They refused the request not because of grades, but because most black women

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77 E.H. File, YWCA, Box 20.
could not go to medical school in the South. Moreover, trustees showed a consistent reluctance to send women for anything other than vocational training programs. The actions of fund trustees suggests that they were attempting to police black women's aspirations by denying funds to anyone who wanted more than a vocational education.

Other African American women asked directly for funds to improve their own lives. For example, A.H. asked for money to enroll in St. Phillip's Nursing School's Practical Nursing program:

I am a Negro girl 18 years old who for the past 9 years has depended on my fraternal relations...we had had no contact with my father since August 16, 1943 as he has not only deserted [sic] us but failed to support us...I have been working as a clerk for the Marshall Street Poultry Co., and with the money I have earned have been able to partially support myself. However, I have not been able to save any money towards preparing myself for further study. I have learned you help working girls am therefore asking will you help me...79

The trustees gave A.H. enough money to enroll in school, but she did not perform well in her classes. 1949 found A.H. working at Awalt's Ice Cream Company making $20 a week, but she was determined to return to nursing school, which she did that same year. While there is no evidence suggesting whether she finished, the Lumsden fund denied a subsequent application for aid in her junior year at a nursing school in North Carolina, which does suggest that she made it for at least two years after originally leaving school.80

I.S. also asked the fund trustees for money for herself. Through her case worker, Jean

78 M.L.P. Caseworker File. 27 November 1951, YWCA. Box 21, M.P. File.
79 A.H. File, YWCA, Box 20.
80 Ibid.
Collmus, she asked for money to pay for the delivery and after care of her baby, as the father abandoned her as soon as he discovered she was pregnant. I.S. was from a broken home, lived in Richmond, had a fifth-grade education, and did part-time domestic work. The fund board found her “nice, well-mannered, and a co-operative girl,” so they decided, albeit reluctantly, to give her the money she needed. This was the only case in which Lumdsen trustees faced such a special situation, but they felt compelled to help her, since the girl “came from a broken home in North Carolina [where the] father drinks regularly and the father of the baby would not help financially.”

From 1947-1952, thirty-nine women applied for help to the Lumdsen Fund for either themselves or their daughters. Requests ranged from clothing and money to pay foster families to house their children (in two cases) to money for nursing, beauty, and dental hygienist courses at St. Phillips, Virginia Union, Virginia State, and West Virginia State University. Twenty-two received money. In every situation, mothers were either working poor or on disability welfare. Thirteen of the daughters also worked low-wage jobs—from $8 to $25 a week—as domestic workers, soda jerks, janitors, kitchen helpers, or babysitters. Lumdsen trustees refused requests for a number of reasons: poor grades, “domineering” mothers with children who were not “go getters,” or who had too much ambition (wanting a four year liberal arts education rather than a two year vocational degree). Several of these explanations reflect negative middle-class conceptions of working-class people. The fact that trustees were unwilling to fund women who wanted

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81 Letter from Jean Collmus to Rebekah Lee, 14 February 1947, YWCA, Box 21, I.S. File.
more than a vocational degree shows that they did not believe poor women needed or deserved more than a position in a skilled trade. While whites believed that there was nothing wrong with wanting to be a beautician or a nurses' aide, their decisions to not fund women who wanted to go to medical school or become teachers reflected a skewed middle-class value system in which they did not think that such women could succeed at a middle-class job. Because the social workers who brought the cases to the trustee board were black, their actions suggested a collusion with white women across class lines to maintain strict job definitions for working-class women.

Moreover, the trustees' decisions reflected the system of white patronage as a component of racial etiquette in the South. Black applicants needed a social worker as a sponsor (a middle-class woman of either race), and they had to appear to the board as deserving women who appreciated the generosity of white patrons. I.F.'s letter to the board reflects her subordinate position in the process: "I know you and the Lumsden Fund committee both get tired of me writing and I hate like anything to bother you. . . I don't have any money as my husband is in Pine Camp [hospital] and I don't have any more than what I get from the Social Services Bureau."83 Whites maintained the construction of their own superiority through the decisions that they made. For example, they refused to pay the living expenses of a woman trying to get through nursing school because they judged her as incompetent. Trustees believed that her application resulted from her submission to a domineering grandmother who apparently was behind the woman's

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82 Case files, YWCA, Boxes 19-21, quotations come from B.B. File and J.C. File.
ambition to become a nurse: "Mrs. L.'s own parents, C. and J.B., had seven other children in rapid succession after her. Therefore, with a complete unawareness she allowed Mrs. L. to become completely absorbed by her matriarchal grandmother whose method of control is disguised with honeyed, disarming solicitousness." In another case, the committee became very "interested in sterilization for A.A.," since her husband did not make enough money to support her and her three children although his job made the family ineligible for social services money. The Lumsden fund did help A.A.'s family from time to time on an emergency basis, but the trustees' interest in getting her sterilized (apparently without the knowledge of A.A., whose opinion was never reflected in the social workers' reports), suggest that the middle-class women had more than dispensing money on their agendas. Apparently, the trustees believed that sterilization would enable her to rise above the poverty level by not having any more children, even though her husband continued to make only $32 a week at a paper factory. While class and race biases permeated the welfare system of Richmond, working-class and poor women understood how to manipulate the system of middle-class trusteesom and managed to get money to help themselves and their children. They fought for entitlements because they believed that they deserved them as citizens, and they claimed money that had been available only to white women prior to the post-war period.

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83 Letter from I.J. to Community Chest, 19 May 1952, YWCA, Box 20, M.F. File.

84 Report to Lumsden Committee from Family Services Committee, 6 June 1949, YWCA, Box 20, P.B.L. File.

Just as they negotiated with welfare officials for entitlements, African American women in Detroit and Richmond also negotiated housing dilemmas in order to secure decent housing for themselves and their children. They fought to get into publicly funded housing projects, tried to clean up their neighborhoods to make them livable, and attempted to stop slum clearance when such actions would leave them with nowhere to live. As they did when they worked to get their fair share of money, they understood that they deserved decent housing, and they used the context of motherhood and state citizenship in order to protest racial bars in public housing and the razing of slum areas. In some cases, cleanup efforts and safety projects subsidized the state, in that African American women provided services to their communities that the city governments provided to the white communities as a matter of course. In other cases, when neighbors had to organize against highways going through their communities, the state became an obstacle to the welfare of poor black communities and as such, it compelled women's political participation in order to combat highway encroachment. Throughout the housing battles of the post-war period, working-class African American women continued to claim the right to live in state-funded housing as mothers, as citizens, and as workers.

In Detroit, African American women faced an uphill battle in the fight to enter public housing projects. Because projects remained segregated as late as 1952, and the city had built many more projects for whites, African Americans had to endure long waiting lists to get into what few projects were open to them. In 1952, for example, projects had 5,500 vacancies for whites and 1,600 applicants. Black projects had 1,470
vacancies and 8,000 applications, ensuring a long waiting list. Women trying to get their families in public housing turned to many sources for help. Mrs. Cleo Benson, a homeless widow living in an emergency shelter, took three of her children to City Hall, sat on the steps, and demanded that Mayor Cobo find her and her family of seven a decent place to live. From this point, Benson drops out of the historical record, but most likely, she found herself referred to DPW and put on a waiting list for hundreds of other applicants for public housing. Her actions signified a compelling act of protest, asserting her rights and needs as a mother.

One woman turned to the Urban League for help after trying to get in the projects for a year. She, too, called upon her status as a mother to claim the right to occupy publicly-funded housing. When Mrs. Willie Mae Johnson found out that she might have to wait another two years to get into a project, she got angry and wrote to the Urban League:

Why is it men with fewer children and work in the factory can get a project so easily. I am a permanent government employee, divorced and doing all I can to care for my 5 children and have to wait and wait, it seems so unfair. I get so discouraged, I sometimes think I’d be better off on the welfare like a lot of other women do. The place I’m living is no place for any children. There is no hot water, no bath, and only one entrance and exit. It would be a firetrap. I have four girls and one boy and the environment and cleanliness out [in Sojourner Truth projects] would mean a lot to them, if you know what I mean, and if you are a Father you’ll understand my concern over

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87 "We Want a Home!", "Michigan Chronicle, 7 October 1950, 3."
the locality I’ll be placed in.\textsuperscript{88}

The Urban League has no record of a follow-up, but in reality, all it could have done was talk with welfare officials or case workers to try to move her up on the waiting list, which would have been very hard to do. In her letter, Johnson addresses the major concerns of many working poor women in Detroit and uses the discourse of motherhood to elaborate her concerns, including the fact that she needs a safe, healthy environment in which to raise her children. She also points to a gender conflict in that men working in factories got priority as workers, especially in 1951 during the Korean War, but many single mothers could not find the work in factories that could get them war worker priority in the projects. Like middle-class women, Johnson called upon her status as a mother in order to claim entitlements from the state—in this case, for state-funded housing for herself and her children. Although many women still remained on the waiting lists of projects, they did everything they could to move into decent housing for their children.

While women in Detroit had several housing projects to fight their way into, African American women in Richmond did not have the same benefits in their city. Like many other southern city councils, the Richmond city council was reluctant to build any more public housing, since the first project had started such a controversy over black homeowner’s property values and fears of black encroachment in white neighborhoods.\textsuperscript{89}

\textsuperscript{88} Letter from Willie Johnson to Urban League, 31 October 1951, DUL, Box 38, Community Services File June-December 1951.

\textsuperscript{89} Christopher Silver and John V. Moeser discuss the housing policies of Richmond, Memphis, and Atlanta in \textit{Separate Cities: Black Communities in the Urban South, 1940-1960} (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1984).
In fact, the city only had one public housing project until 1952, and most black Richmonders did have housing, such as it was, in tenements throughout the black neighborhoods. It is significant to note, however, that when Creighton Court opened in 1952, its first tenant was widow Francis Jones and her five children ranging from 10 years to 3 months old. Jones was on welfare relief and fought hard to get into the projects: her victory got her a two-bedroom apartment in place of the "squalid, two-room shack" she and her children had to endure in the heart of Jackson Ward. Richmond's major black community.90

Working-class Women and Social Motherhood

Because so many African American women in Detroit had to live under squalid conditions while waiting for public housing vacancies to open, they became major participants in block-cleanup programs to make their communities healthier and safer for their children. By filling in the gaps created by state and structural injustice, working-class women performed the activities that paralleled middle-class women's "social motherhood" programs. From 1948-1952, the Detroit Visiting Nurses' Association listed common slum conditions as falling plaster, broken porches, inadequate heat, overcrowding, trash in the streets, and rat infestations.91 While African American women could not force landlords to fix heat and other structural problems with homes, they did work to clean up the outsides of the houses to cut down on rats and disease. The Detroit Urban League set up

90 "Creighton Court Apartments Open," Richmond Afro-American, 29 November 1952, 14.

91 Complaints File from Visiting Nurses Association, Citizens' Housing and Planning Council, Box 58, Complaints File, Burton Historical Collection, Detroit Public Library.
block clubs in 1945. Out of ten units scheduled for clean up participation, 134 members were women and only 39 were men. The high incidence of women as leaders signifies that they were the primary providers of neighborhood services. One block club secured incinerators for each home in its neighborhood; another raised money to have the road oiled. Several years later, block clubs had raised enough money to put up streetlights in order to reduce crime and playgrounds so that their kids would not have to play in the street, improvements that the city normally undertook in white neighborhoods. In addition, from 1945 to 1951, the *Michigan Chronicle* sponsored block cleanup campaigns, in which the directors of each block cleanup were invariably women. In 1945, six women won the contest for their blocks. The next year, Flossie Stapleton, Kellie Cheatham, Julia Carter, and Patricia McKeethan enlisted the help of children and young adults to clean up their blocks for the campaign. This tradition continued until 1951, when Detroit elected its own “Clean-Up Queen” at the close of the contest.\(^2\)

Although slums were disease-ridden, overcrowded, and rat-infested, despite their poor conditions, several African American women in Detroit and Richmond fought to save them. African American women fought against slum clearance, which would have left them homeless. In Detroit, the Gratoit area of town was condemned and scheduled to be razed in 1946. The mayor had called it the worst slum in Detroit, but several women protested their evictions, arguing that they could not find housing anywhere else. Two

\(^2\) Block Unit Reports, 1945 and Clipping, “Forms First Block Clubs,” 18 August 1945, in DUL, Box 62, Departmental Reports File 1945; December 1948 Block Unit Bulletin, DUL, Box 37, Community Service Department General File, July-December 1948; “Winning Supervisors in Clean Block Contest,” 15 September 1945, 13; “Clean Block Campaign Nears Close,” 31 August 1946, 20; “Detroit to Select Clean-Up Queen,” 7 May 1951, 7, all in *Michigan Chronicle*. 
women wrote to the Urban League and complained that they were never offered alternative placement by the Housing Commission, and one women related that the relocation office tried to move her from her tenement to one equally as bad. Another women stated that her husband made $27 a week, and that they paid $39.50 a month in rent, and without help getting into the projects, they would be out on the street. Seven other women told the Urban League that they would not move until better housing was found. The Urban League secured lawyers and got a three-year continuance to stop the clearance until alternative housing was found.\(^3\) Then, with help from the Urban League, the 700 affected families were moved up the waiting list for the projects; however, 160 of the families moved from the Gratiot area in 1949 were still waiting for housing in 1952.\(^4\) In 1950, 200 tenants of the Douglass projects faced a similar situation when the city attempted to evict them in order to raze and rebuild the project. With support from the Urban League, 18 women and 23 men filed lawsuits against eviction, and 7 women formed a committee to petition the mayor and find an alternative solution. As in the Gratiot battle, the litigants were successful in their court battle and received a restraining order against the city until the Housing Commission could find them other housing.\(^5\)


\(^4\) "Analysis and Recommendations Regarding the Racial Occupancy Policy."

\(^5\) Memo about the Douglass-Jeffries Move, February 1950, DUL, Box 37, Community Service Department, January-March 1950 File; Letter from City of Detroit Housing Commission to Circuit Court Commissioner, DUL, Box 37, Community Service Department, July-December 1950 File; "250 Tenants Win Eviction Delay," *Michigan Chronicle*, 27 May 1950, 6.
Their success suggests that when a large group of activists received institutional support from a prominent organization, they could negotiate with the state and gain victories.

African Americans in Richmond faced the same dilemma. In 1951, Richmond decided to build freeways through Jackson Ward, dividing and destroying the historically black community. Three women called the *Afro-American* to their homes to help them fight eviction. The paper pictured the women in front of their homes, caring for their families, again calling on the discourse of motherhood in order to bring about justice for the families who were to be thrown out of their homes. Several women interviewed, however, were ambivalent about the move. Having dealt with Richmond city government before, they figured that whatever they said would make no difference and that clearance would go on as planned. They did plan to fight for their homes to be bought at a fair price by the city, because they knew that if they stayed and their homes were not part of the clearance project, their property values would drop as a result of the expressway traffic. This, too, was a form of activism, in that cities tended to pay as little as possible for the properties that their projects condemned. In this instance, city policies forced working-class African American women into activism in order to save their homes and their communities.

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96 Memo about the Douglass-Jeffries Move, February 1950, DUL, Box 37, Community Service Department, January-March 1950 File; Letter from City of Detroit Housing Commission to Circuit Court Commissioner, DUL, Box 37, Community Service Department, July-December 1950 File; "250 Tenants Win Eviction Delay," *Michigan Chronicle*, 27 May 1950, 6.
In both Detroit and Richmond, working-class African American women became activists in trying to stop slum clearance. Although Detroit women knew that their neighborhoods were blighted, they also understood that they had little choice but to remain in them as long as housing shortages necessitated emergency welfare shelters across the city. In both Detroit and Richmond, whole neighborhoods fought unsuccessfully to keep the expressway from cutting through their communities, and so property owners then turned to the state to ensure that they would be treated fairly by the cities when they bought the properties. In both cases, working-class women demanded to be recognized by the state as citizens with rights to housing and fair treatment by housing authorities. In many cases, they politicized their status as workers and as mothers, who had the right to welfare benefits and decent housing for their children. Working-class African American women stood as leaders in their communities, claiming benefits for poor themselves and others in the face of a hostile state that was reluctant to give black women the benefits to which they were entitled as citizens.

In the post-war period, working-class African American women in Detroit and Richmond demanded recognition from industrial and state structures, as they continued to fight for jobs and better working conditions, as they tried to hold on to seniority rights, and as they negotiated a bureaucratic and often hostile welfare system in order to get the benefits to which they were entitled as citizens. In every case, working-class African

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97 Sugrue discusses the importance of neighborhood activism in the face of expressway construction and slum clearance in pages 47-51.
American women were activists on their own behalves, fighting to retain the benefits for which they worked so hard during the war, and fighting to be recognized as citizens who deserved as much as white people received from state welfare systems. Often, working-class women continued the same methods of activism they began during the war, as they called upon state agencies, black institutions, and unions to shore up their claims for equal employment opportunities, equal treatment in industry, and equal access to entitlement benefits. In their fight to hold onto gains made from 1940 to 1945, working-class African American women made claims to state, industrial, and historically black institutions of power in order to survive massive layoffs and constricting job opportunities, postwar inflation, and housing shortages and slum clearance projects. They became activists for equality as they fought for their jobs, children, homes, and dignity by demanding the same rights enjoyed by working-class white citizens.
CHAPTER 6: CLAIMING SPACE: AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN AND PUBLIC PROTESTS AGAINST INEQUALITY, 1940-1954

Throughout the wartime and post-war period, middle- and working-class women came together to become activists for change in public spaces. While each group constructed meanings of citizenship during the war and shifted those definitions in the postwar period to try to integrate themselves within the Cold War society, they confronted racism directly by challenging social segregation in Detroit and Richmond. Women of both classes integrated their discourse with activism, and their strategies converged in the forms of public protest they espoused, including staging sit-ins, filing lawsuits against abuses on public transportation, and desegregating neighborhoods and housing projects. Their confrontations with whites over public space coalesced around the public meanings of equality and citizenship. In other words, women of all socioeconomic levels claimed space based on their right to have equal access to facilities. In the post-war period, African American women continued to fight for social equality by filing lawsuits against discrimination in public places and by contesting for space with hostile whites in the streets. Their actions formed the basis of the more militant civil rights activities of the 1950s and 1960s.

In 1943, Sarah Pettaway and Lavinia Wilder boarded a south Richmond trolley for a Saturday excursion. Although the only two empty seats on the streetcar were located in front of a seated white woman, the white woman ignored Pettaway's request for her to move to a seat in front of the couple. The black women then sat in front of the white woman, which posed a strong, if unintended, challenge to Richmond's racial hierarchy.
When a police officer spotted them, he exclaimed: "What are you trying to pull? . . . you know better than this. Get up and move back." When Pettaway and Wilder started "mumbling" about their forced move, the officer arrested them. Despite support from sympathetic white passengers who had seen the entire exchange, police court judge Carleton Jewett fined each woman $2.50 for disorderly conduct. Although Jewett claimed that the issue was not racial in nature, the women got the support of NAACP lawyers and planned to appeal the case.¹

One year later, Detroit playground teacher Gwendolyn Coleman ordered a sandwich at the Western Front Restaurant. When the proprietor gave her the sandwich in a bag and refused to let her eat it in the restaurant, Coleman secured witnesses and reported the incident to the NAACP. NAACP officials accompanied her to a police station so that she could file a warrant against the proprietor for violating Michigan's Civil Rights statute. Detroit's chief prosecutor praised Coleman for following the correct steps in trying to desegregate the restaurant, and he believed that he could probably secure a conviction against the restaurant.²

These cases reveal several obstacles to African American women's efforts to obtain equality. Women had to contest against a hostile society that wanted to preserve the racial status quo. In each case, different groups attempted to thwart the actions of the women. In Richmond, the police officer and the judicial system acted as the agents of the

¹ "Appeal Planned for Two Fined for Sitting in Front of Whites," Richmond Afro-American, 6 March 1943, 20.
state that set up roadblocks to racial equality in Pettaway and Wilder’s case. In Detroit, it was the hostility of whites who hampered Coleman’s efforts to enforce a state law. Both cases suggest that racial climates were at once more forgiving in the South and more oppressive in the North than they would appear at first glance. For example, in Richmond, sympathetic white passengers tried to uphold informal norms of social etiquette by supporting the black women, who were not posing a threat to anyone. This evidence shows that not all white Richmonders were intensely interested in maintaining racial hierarchies. On the other hand, white Detroiters supported and maintained segregation in public facilities, despite a state law that made such actions illegal. In both Richmond and Detroit, women had to fight equally hard to claim equal space in public.

African American women’s claims to citizenship within the wartime and postwar state translated into direct and immediate challenges to segregation. Women of both classes used their newly-politicized status as citizens fighting the war for democracy to claim space in both Detroit and Richmond. African American women of all economic and social backgrounds converged in public spaces to challenge oppressive racial structures. First, they worked to desegregate entertainment and recreation venues. In addition, where segregation was either illegal or not supported by whites, in the restaurants of Detroit and the public transportation system of Richmond, women attempted to reinforce the power of the law and of public opinion by demanding equal treatment in these venues. Moreover, women pushed residential boundaries in both cities by moving into formerly white-only neighborhoods. African American women of both classes also fought against police brutality and court segregation in Detroit and Richmond.
Unfortunately, in many cases, we do not know the outcome of women's struggles in these arenas, as Detroit and Richmond courts purged many of the civil lawsuits from this time and newspapers and civil rights groups often failed to follow up on the stories of particular women who tried to desegregate restaurants, buses, and neighborhoods. Nevertheless, the actions themselves were significant, in that women deployed institutional structures of power, including civil rights groups and the judicial system, in order to claim space. In some instances, when racial tension reached breaking points, women fought whites on public transportation, in the streets, and, in Detroit, in the massive riot of 1943. The activism of black women between 1940 and 1954 forced whites to recognize the black community’s discontent with segregation, as the visible forms of protest and litigation captured the public’s attention.

**Battles over Recreational Facilities**

In both Detroit and Richmond, cramped living facilities and a shortage of recreation space for new residents led to tensions over segregation of the few recreational facilities in each city. These issues emerged during World War II, when the massive influx of migrants caused overcrowding in the residentially segregated black communities. The dangerous and unhealthy situation in which many African Americans lived necessitated some sort of recreational facilities where they could escape from their living conditions, if only for a few hours. The poor conditions caused by housing segregation, coupled with the refusal of whites to desegregate recreation areas or to even provide adequate segregated facilities, led many black women to become activists for their communities in order to gain entry into private and city parks.
African American women in Detroit concentrated their battle for desegregation of recreational facilities on the Bob-Lo boat company, which owned a private island and ran daily excursions and picnics to the area. In 1944, the company refused to take a group of YWCA girl reserves to the island, because two of the girls in the 35 member group were black. An official of the company stated that "We positively will not accommodate Negro passengers." The mothers of the group got the chairman of the YWCA to take the matter to Mayor's Interracial Commission to resolve the problem, since the boat company's actions constituted a clear violation of the Civil Rights Law.

Apparently, the Mayor's Interracial Committee did not effect a solution, since less than a year later Elizabeth Ray, an employee at the Detroit Ordnance Depot, had a run-in with the same company. She and some white friends had planned a picnic on the island, and she successfully purchased a ticket for the boat ride over. However, when a company manager saw her on the boat, he insisted that she quit the area immediately. When Ray refused, two "tough-looking" employees dragged her off the boat. Ray secured a warrant and got the NAACP to represent her in court. In the ensuing trial, the judge found Bob-Lo guilty of violating the Civil Rights law and fined the company $25. The small fine and the guilty verdict had no impact. In 1947, Pearl Bruce, a student at Wayne University and a counselor at the Pioneer House for Children, complained to the Detroit Commission of Community Relations (DCCR) that Bob-Lo refused her admittance as a chaperone on a

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5 "Judge Maher Denies New Trial to Bob-Lo Boat Company, Michigan Chronicle, 8 December 1945, 1."
field trip because of her color. At this point, Bob-Lo had taken Ray’s case to the state supreme court on appeal, and so it refused to make any further concessions or decisions until the case was over.⁶ Although Bruce considered her particular case closed, the supreme court decided that the Bob-Lo excursion company’s exclusion of Ray was in direct violation of the civil rights law and therefore, its actions were illegal. The NAACP, who had supported Ray and had taken over her fight in the appellate court in 1945, claimed a victory over discrimination in Detroit.⁷ It took three years, several litigants, and the actions of two civil rights institutions to change the policies of the company. This evidence suggests that African American women spent much time and effort on repeated and energetic attempts to create small changes in the racial hierarchy of the city.

In Richmond, African American women focused their efforts to desegregate recreation areas that were segregated by law—Richmond’s public theaters, and city parks. In at least two instances, women challenged the Jim Crow seating at the Mosque, a public theater venue, despite the city ordinance that made such seating completely legal. In 1945, Clara Jackson Brown, a teacher at Armstrong High School and the wife of a veteran, sought to buy a $100 war bond which would gain her admittance to a Frank Sinatra concert at the Mosque. When she attempted to buy a bond in her baby’s name from a store clerk at Thalheimer’s Department store, Brown found out that she could only buy a $25 bond, which would give her a seat in the “colored section.” but because the war

⁶ Case 47-51CR File, Detroit Commission on Community Relations, Part 1, Series 1, Box 4, Folder 47-51CR. Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University. (Hereafter DCCR)

bond council had reserved the $100 bonds for whites only. Brown also discovered that
the children who raised the most money for selling the bonds would get to sit on the stage
with Sinatra, and she realized that black children could never raise as much as white
children if they could only sell $25 bonds in their community. She told the Afro-
American: "I was feeling patriotic and wanted to get the baby a bond with our last
allotment check, but now...[her ellipses] I had a desire to see the show because of Frank
Sinatra's fight for decent treatment for colored and other minority groups and I was
hoping that a colored child would be on stage with him." When her complaint prompted
the newspaper to call the War Bond committee about the problem with the children's
sales, the committee explained that because of the seating imposed by the city, there was
simply nothing that it could do, but that blacks were more than welcome to give more than
$25 to children selling the bonds, but they would still sit in the segregated area. The
experience of these African American women suggests that wartime bond sales by blacks
did not cause changes in the racial status of African Americans. Still, it is clear that
African American women called upon the discourse of responsible patriotism to justify
their attempts to equalize facilities in order to locate themselves within the state as they
negotiated for change.

Two years later, the Delver Women's Club, a black organization, sponsored a
concert at the Mosque in an attempt to challenge the city's seating arrangements. In this
case, a middle-class organization spent their money to rent out the Mosque in an attempt

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8 "'White,' 'Colored' Bond Tickets to Sinatra Show," Richmond Afro-American, 29 December 1945, 1-2.
to "privatize" it for the evening and reorder the racial seating structure. While admission was open to all Richmonders, the club refused to maintain segregated seating arrangements. Since the club had rented the entire theater for the night, the seating should have been a private concern, but when an usher saw four black and white women seated together who refused to be segregated, he called the police. When the women told the police that there was to be no segregation at the concert, an officer forcibly separated the group. Even when they were the patrons of the events, middle-class black women found their attempts to create their own seating policies thwarted by the state—in this case at the hands of a police officer.

African American mothers also fought to desegregate parks and playgrounds, and to provide better recreation areas for their children in Richmond. In 1948, the NAACP looked for "one or more mothers" to challenge segregation in parks. Although the mothers involved were never named, the NAACP challenged both the city and the state park system, both headquartered in downtown Richmond, later that year. While the Virginia state system agreed to equalize facilities in its state parks and recreation areas so as to be within Plessy v. Ferguson guidelines, the city refused to budge on its policy of both segregation and providing inferior facilities for black Richmonders. Hilda Warden.

9 Ibid.

10 "Jim Crow Mars Recital by Camilla Williams at Mosque," Richmond Afro-American, 15 February 1947, 10.

11 "Proposed Offensive Aimed at Jim Crow in City Parks," Richmond Afro-American, 3 July 1948, 1:11.

a social worker and a Delta Sigma Theta member, decided to take on Richmond's city council over the poor park facility in her neighborhood. Warden and her neighbors lived in an all-black enclave of Richmond that sat in the boundaries of the wealthy West End/Westhampton area of town. While white children had a beautiful playground to use, black children had an unfenced dirt lot on a busy street. Warden went to the recreation department in 1947 to ask for recreational equipment. When the city agreed to supply games and sports equipment for the children, she pushed for more. Warden asked the head of the committee to come to a meeting at the lot, in order to show him where her children played. She rounded up neighbors to meet at the lot, and she recruited all those with cars to drive up and down the street to show support. When the recreation officer arrived, he found an entire community up in arms ready to fight for their children's safety and health. After the meeting, the recreation committee provided picnic tables, a water fountain, a fence, and a jungle gym for the segregated playground. Warden recalls that the committee was not thrilled to be pushed around by a group of black mothers, but that the pressure worked wonders with the city government.\textsuperscript{13} Despite the fact that Richmond women never had the law to help them desegregate recreation facilities, they still used every possible tactic to fight segregation and provide the best possible facilities for themselves and their community. In this battle, social motherhood became an important rallying cry—women fought for better facilities for their children and demanded entitlements from the state in the form of better parks and more facilities.

\textsuperscript{13} Interview with Hilda Warden, 1 May 1999, tape in possession of author.
Because recreation areas were so crucial to the well-being of all city residents, especially African Americans who often faced cramped conditions in their own neighborhoods, African American women took the fight to desegregate parks very seriously. They used many strategies in their fight—from claiming rights as workers needing a break, to claiming rights as responsible patriots and mothers who sought to protect children. African American women mobilized whatever discourse was necessary to gain victory. When helpful, they called upon civil rights organizations to support their causes as they filed lawsuits and fought city councils for equal facilities.

**Desegregating Restaurants and Buses**

In both Detroit and Richmond, African American women took advantage of civil rights legislation and rulings in order to break down barriers in restaurants and in public transportation. While Michigan had a civil rights law established in 1919, Richmond had legalized segregation codes, some enacted as recently as 1930. Still, African American women in Richmond attempted to take advantage of the 1946 Supreme Court ruling against segregation in interstate transportation by challenging segregation on inter-city buses and streetcars. In both cities, women used laws in order to reinforce both the power of the state and federal government in controlling prejudice and to secure their own equality. In many cases, African American women were successful in eroding racial hierarchies.

From 1941 to 1954, women in Detroit engaged in a battle for equality in restaurants which continued to practice segregation despite the civil rights law. Although the law specifically stated that segregated accommodations, restaurants, and other
facilities that served the public were illegal, Detroit restaurants flaunted the law by ignoring black patrons, treating them rudely enough to get them to leave voluntarily, or allowing them to order take-out food but not allowing them to eat in the restaurant. The frenetic pace of Detroit in World War II gave women the perfect opportunity to challenge restaurants. With more women spending their time in factories or in volunteer homefront activities, restaurants became busy with serving meals to women and families who normally would have prepared meals at home. Moreover, black women found that they could easily employ their position as volunteers or war workers for the state in their attempts to secure service at restaurants, which helped to involve the UAW and institutions like the DCCR and FEPC. As early as 1941. African American women challenged restaurant proprietors by entering restaurants and demanding service, and by securing the help of outside agencies when they found their rights denied.

Working-class women often turned to the UAW in order to get help in their fight to desegregate restaurants outside factory walls. When Miss Cecil Whitaker, a worker at Ford’s River Rouge plant, found that Dexter Dairy restaurant would not serve her, she reported the incident to her local 600. The union swore out a warrant against the restaurant on Whitaker’s behalf, and it helped Whitaker prepare testimony for the prosecution. The owner of the restaurant received a $25 fine. Otha Kirk, secretary to the CIO Director of War Relief, also used the union to help with her claim against Old

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Colonial Restaurant. In 1944, she and a white friend waited twenty minutes for service at the restaurant. The waitress then told the white woman, Miss Duprey, that she could not serve Kirk. Kirk received help from the National CIO Committee to Abolish Racial Discrimination, which secured a warrant against the restaurant for her. At the trial, the owner of the restaurant claimed that while he always served African Americans, his waitress took it upon herself to refuse service to the women. After deliberating for twenty-five minutes, a jury convicted the waitress of violating the civil rights law. The owner paid the $25 fine. This incident prompted the UAW-CIO to conduct an anti-discrimination drive in Detroit restaurants in order to bring organized union pressure against proprietors. Throughout the campaign, local unions boycotted restaurants outside of factory gates in order to attempt to desegregate restaurants. With union power behind desegregation efforts, many restaurants found it expedient to serve white and black workers.

While union members fought for the right to eat lunches outside of factory walls in Detroit, UAW officials were not even immune from discrimination in restaurants. Lillian Hatcher, an African American woman who had become an International Representative in the Fair Practices Department, went to the Varsity Drive Inn with Carole Davis, a white official. At first, they ordered barbecue sandwiches and found that the meat was undercooked, cold, and covered in hot sauce. When they told the waitress that the food

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was inedible and ordered BLT sandwiches, they did not fare any better. The BLTs arrived cold, with raw bacon between untoasted bread. When the women received the bill, they found that they had been charged for all four sandwiches, and they complained to the manager. The manager explained that he could refuse service to anyone, and that they should have gone elsewhere to eat. The women refused to pay the bill, and the manager called the police. When the women attempted to get a warrant for a civil rights violation, the manager told the police that the two had been rowdy and now were attempting to "walk out" on the bill. The women paid the bill and left the proceedings against the restaurant to the UAW Legal Counsel, which prepared the case against the restaurant. Unfortunately, the UAW did not follow up on the outcome of the case, but it is significant that the women understood that their importance as officials in the union enabled them to use their union to bring pressure on a discriminatory restaurant.¹⁹

Even essential war workers and war veterans were not immune to restaurant discrimination, and the NAACP used their status as "citizens contributing to victory" in order to highlight the problems in Detroit. In 1945, Sarah Strickland, Rosa Sunney, and Mary Epps and a male companion, all war workers at Springs Association Factory, went to the Black Swan Café for lunch. At first they were told that the table at which they seated themselves was reserved, but then a waitress informed them that the restaurant would not serve African Americans. Sarah Strickland reported the incident to the NAACP, which publicized it as a clear-cut violation of the democratic principles of the

¹⁹ Deposition, 30 April 1951, UAW Fair Practices Department, Box 5, Folder 13, Walter P. Reuther Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University. (Hereafter Fair
war, and then made sure that the case against the restaurant moved through the court
system. The NAACP also capitalized on the war veteran status of Lieutenant Evelyn
Decker, an army nurse who experienced discrimination at the Modern Restaurant. When
she and her male companion were told that they would have to eat in the kitchen, they
called the police. When the police told the two to fill out a complaint at 8 am and they
arrived late, the department refused to help them. Decker then put the case in the hands
of the NAACP, which listed her record of war service in the press release and submitted
the necessary court documents for the ensuing trial. In these cases, the women
employed the discourse of responsible patriotism in order to claim the right to protection
under the Diggs Civil Rights law. This placed them squarely within the wartime state as
they worked for equality.

After documenting many complaints against Detroit restaurants, the NAACP, like
the UAW, decided to launch a massive offensive against the cafes, using a group of
"respectable" women to try to galvanize public support against discrimination. Mrs. Jessie
Dillard, head of the special NAACP committee, set out with several companions to test
restaurants that reportedly would not serve African Americans. A week after the
committee formed, Dillard found her test case. She and five female friends went into
Presto Restaurant for lunch. When the manager told them that the restaurant would not
serve them, they ignored him and settled into a booth to wait for service. The manager

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called officers to the scene, but the women used the arriving policemen to swear out a warrant against proprietor Alexander Pappis for his refusal to serve them. Apparently, Pappis was a virulent racist who had already been through several trials involving civil rights violations, and so the NAACP scheduled a mass rally in support of the women and against the continued discrimination at Presto.22

While the evidence against the restaurant appeared to be solid, and the case a clear-cut and undeniable example of a civil rights violation, the prosecutor and judge conspired to throw the case, according to a subsequent UAW report. First, the prosecutor allowed the defense to call Dillard’s memory into question by allowing the lawyer to question her about the exact placement of everything in the restaurant, from bottles to employees, without either objecting to the irrelevant questions or cross-examining Dillard. Then, the prosecution allowed the defense to bring up Dillard’s “criminal past;” apparently, Dillard had been arrested while demonstrating against another incident of racial bias in a picket line. Moreover, the prosecution refused to call into question the defense witnesses’ serious inconsistencies in their stories of the events at the restaurant. Before the jury went to deliberate the case, the judge reminded the jury that the key witness was a convicted criminal. The all-white jury quickly returned a not guilty verdict.23 Although the defeat was a crushing blow to the NAACP’s program to desegregate restaurants, it pledged to continue the fight and asked for the community’s


23 Case #1, NAACP Committee to Fight Restaurant Discrimination, Dillard v. Presto, UAW Fair Practices, Box 6, Folder 7.
support in another mass meeting to honor Dillard and the five women who tried and failed to change the racial status quo at a downtown restaurant.24

The Dillard case reveals that despite the best efforts of the activists involved, the Civil Rights act was hard to enforce in the face of a hostile local white power structure. In a society where the dominant population tried to evade egalitarian laws, only the persistent efforts of the minority group could make the law have any meaning. Often, as in this case, even the best efforts of activists did not have the desired effect. In this case, the state sided with racists when the court labeled Dillard's resistance to discrimination criminal. While Dillard and her supporters attempted to fight for change by calling for the enforcement of an existing law, the state thwarted their efforts by branding their activism illegal. This evidence shows the limitations of fighting to change racial patterns from effecting changes from within the state itself when whites held disproportionate power.

While some black women went to their union or the NAACP, others complained to the Detroit Commission on Community Relations (DCCR). The mayor created the DCCR in order to alleviate race problems and avoid another riot, but it did not have any power to enforce laws. The DCCR instead tried to negotiate settlements between aggrieved parties and restaurants, hotels, employers, and other defendants. The DCCR was a very visible group, however, so African American women knew that their complaints would at least be docketed and addressed in some fashion. Between 1943 and 1954, at least 28 women used the DCCR to support their battle against restaurant

segregation. For example, in 1944, six group work secretaries from the YWCA went directly from a Wayne University social work class to Webster Hall for lunch. When the head waitress told them that they could eat in the main dining room but not the luncheonette, they protested, as they were between classes and only wanted sandwiches. When the women asked to see the manager, they were ignored. Finally, afraid that further protest would make them late for class, they went to the main dining room and ate at an "inconspicuous" table in the corner. When the women reported the incident to the DCCR, it took the matter to the Wayne University administration, since it directly affected students on campus. Wayne planned to challenge the policy of the restaurant and did, eventually, secure the right for its students to eat at the restaurant. In this case, the power of the university eclipsed the power of the DCCR, and it backed the women's cause. Because the restaurant was just off-campus, the owner had to listen to the university from whence most of the restaurant's clients came.

While the unions, the NAACP, and the DCCR had some limited successes in their support of African American women's desegregation attempts, some black women chose

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25 Incident Report, 3 April 1945, Box 3, Incident Reports 1944-1945 File; Case #131, 13 October 1948, Box 4, 48-131 Folder; Civil Rights Report #118, 9 September 1948, Box 5, 48-118 Folder; Civil Rights Report #111, 16 August 1948, Box 5, 48-118 Folder; Incident Report on 4 May 1949, Box 6, 49-20CR Folder. Letter to George Sherman from Albert Lehman, 23 June 1948, Box 5, 48-108 Folder; Case Report #49, 6 May 1947, Box 4, 47-49CR Folder; Case Report #47, 28 April 1947, Box 4, 47-47CR Folder; Incident Report, 3 April 1945, Box 3, Incident Reports 1944-1945 File; Case #131, 13 October 1948, Box 4, 48-131 Folder; Civil Rights Report #118, 9 September 1948, Box 5, 48-118 Folder; Civil Rights Report #111, 16 August 1948, Box 5, 48-118 Folder; Incident Report on 4 May 1949, Box 6, 49-20CR Folder. Letter to George Sherman from Albert Lehman, 23 June 1948, Box 5, 48-108 Folder; Case Report #49, 6 May 1947, Box 4, 47-49CR, ALL IN DCCR, Part 1, Series 1; "NAACP Schedules Mass Meeting to Fight Bias," *Michigan Chronicle*, 29 October 1949, 6.

26 Incident Reports, Community Barometer, 26 October 1944, 1-2, DCCR, Part 1, Series 1, Box 1, Reports 1944 Folder.
to fight the restaurants themselves, without outside help. For example, Bessie Reynolds and a white friend went to Seward Bar, and the owner refused them service. After telling Reynolds's white companion that Reynolds was too drunk to be served and learning that they had just gotten off of work so that was impossible, the owner did admit that he did not want to serve blacks in his bar. Reynolds swore out a warrant for his arrest, and at the trial, she pointed out the irony in the bar owner's refusal, since he was a veteran who had supposedly fought for the preservation of democracy. After deliberating for 30 minutes, the jury fined the owner $100—the largest fine allowable for a civil rights violation. 27 Most women who chose to fight restaurants alone were not as lucky as Reynolds. Out of three other cases in which black women brought suit against restaurants for civil rights law violations, only one other case resulted in the conviction of a waitress. 28 Taken as a whole, the restaurant cases in Detroit suggest that quite often, the success or failure of black women's actions rested with the sympathies of the judge and jury. With a capricious judicial system that sporadically backed and often repudiated African American women's efforts to desegregate restaurants, it is not surprising that many racist whites continued to practice discrimination and take their chances with the court when they risked lawsuits.

While Detroit's African American women busied themselves with challenging restaurants in order to enforce and strengthen the civil rights law, Richmond's African

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American community still lived under black codes. In 1944, the NAACP unsuccessfully attempted to get segregation laws on public transportation repealed, and continued that fight until 1954. However, when the Supreme Court outlawed segregation on interstate transportation in 1946, black women in Richmond attempted to use that precedent to overturn all intra-city segregation, which was written into law in 1930 as an exact duplicate of the 1902 interstate segregation law that had been overturned by the court. The 1902 law designated separate sections for black passengers on all transportation.¹⁹

In Richmond, African American women took the lead in trying to desegregate buses, continuing a long tradition of gendered protest against inequalities in public transportation. Historically, African American women had protested against the treatment they experienced at the hands of racist whites on public transportation by claiming that forced segregation into dirty, dangerous railroad cars was an affront to their womanhood. Middle-class women, like Ida B. Wells, claimed that their gentility should have allowed them access into the better white facilities, and they fought for the right to comfortable and safe travel environments, beginning as early as 1886. Club women used the tenets of respectability to claim the right to equal facilities on the railroads, and this translated into gendered protest in later eras, as women claimed the right to sit unmolested on any seat on a bus.²⁰


Beginning in 1947 and continuing through 1953, when educational desegregation battles gripped Richmond, African American women attempted to test the Supreme Court ruling by challenging Richmond's local segregation laws on public transportation. In 1947, Miss Lavalette Allen, a local schoolteacher, refused to move to the rear of a streetcar and was arrested. She was a 20-year veteran of the school system, and she argued before Judge Jewett that because she had been carrying groceries on a full bus, she could not move backwards with ease. Although Jewett fined her $5 for disorderly conduct, she appealed the case with the help of the NAACP, and the appellate court dismissed it. The next year, Willa Johnson, a nurse, refused to move from her seat when ordered by the bus driver, because, as she testified, the seat he wanted her to take was just directly across the aisle, and the driver failed to explain the reasoning behind his order adequately. Apparently, a white passenger who did not want to take the empty seat next to a black person wanted Johnson to quit her seat next to a white woman who did not seem to mind sitting next to her. For some reason, Jewett decided that she had violated the segregation law, and so rather than fine her $5 for being disorderly, he fined her $10 for what was considered a much more serious infraction. When Johnson and the NAACP appealed Jewett's decision, the appellate court also threw out her case, which caused controversy in Richmond. The NAACP and Johnson wanted the court to make a ruling about the segregation law, but apparently, the court had a history of merely throwing out

31 "Ingram to Study Segregation Case," Richmond Afro-American, 27 September 1947, 1, 13; Annual Report, Richmond NAACP Activities, 1948, National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, Group II, Box C278, Richmond File, Manuscript Collection, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.
cases on technicalities rather than deal with an examination of the law itself. At least Johnson did not have to pay the fine. In each of these cases, middle-class women protested peacefully and used the judicial system and the NAACP in order to effect change. Their actions suggest that when middle-class women chose to defy the law, they did so in a manner that was consistent with the tenets of respectability—they used legal means to redress the problem, and rather than fighting, they questioned the bus driver’s orders and came up with plausible reasons for their protest. In the case of Allen, her explanation was based in a gendered concept of domesticity—her arms were full of groceries that she was taking home at the time.

The absurdity of Jim Crow laws made itself apparent in a bus incident that left black churchgoers roasting on a hot bus for thirty minutes. In 1952, a white teenage girl boarded a bus filled with African Americans returning from church. When two black women boarded after her and asked to sit beside her, she did not mind, but the bus driver ordered the black women to the back of the bus. When they refused, the bus driver exploded with rage. He screamed at the women, took the money box, and quit the bus filled with passengers. A half-hour later, another bus arrived that just happened to have an extra driver on board who finished the original bus route. The original driver got the police and charged five men and women with violating the segregation law, but the white community sympathized with the plight of African Americans who had been harassed in their own neighborhood. Since the black newspaper failed to follow up on the story, and

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court records do not exist for this case, we cannot know with certainty what happened to those arrested passengers. Given the pattern of segregation cases within Richmond, however, we can conjecture that the judge probably threw out the case, as most judges did in Richmond at the time in order to stop segregation laws from being reviewed by higher courts.\textsuperscript{32} While the actions of the white passenger enraged the white male bus driver, they revealed a shift in the racial climate in Richmond in which white passengers began to question the segregated bus system.

A year later, the arrests of 17-year-old Thelma Davis and 18-year-old Florence Robinson in a bus segregation incident galvanized Richmond's black community and became a point of serious contention between the community and Richmond's transportation commission. When Davis refused to move to the back of a bus on the way to school, the bus driver stopped in order to wait for an officer to come and arrest her. In a show of support, Robinson asked the driver if he could just continue on, or at least give her a note explaining why she was late to school. When Robinson then tried to get off the bus as the policeman attempted to board the bus, he arrested her for interfering with a police officer. Jewett fined her $5, and she appealed the case with the help of the NAACP.\textsuperscript{34} The NAACP scheduled a rally in support of the two students, and over 1,000 people attended. In a continuation of the Double V theme of World War II, Robinson's mother read a letter pleading for democracy from her eldest son fighting in the Korean

\textsuperscript{32} "Court Slates Bus Jim Crow Case for Thursday," \textit{Richmond Afro-American}, 21 June 1952, 1, 12.

\textsuperscript{34} "Attorneys Appeal Girl's Conviction," \textit{Richmond Afro-American}, 30 May 1953, 1.
War. Robinson and Davis also had a chance to speak out for democracy at the rally.

Robinson stated:

> I was educated to believe in the 'American Dream,' of equal justice under the law, certain inalienable rights, life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. . . . I look forward to these ideals being made real in my daily life. If what I was taught is not really intended for me, then my education has been either wrong or it has been hypocritical. . . . So we youngsters are asking tonight that we have more of this kind of liberty in Richmond, Virginia. These American dreams and the Four Freedoms will be brought to Richmond, with the help of the NAACP. 35

Although this incident occurred eight years after the conclusion of World War II, Robinson still used the discourse made available to women during the war. She claimed freedom and equality based on the country's guarantee of liberty, and drew upon the Declaration of Independence to support her claim. While the 1940s was not the first time in which blacks used democratic ideals to justify equality, the war heightened contradictions in American practices and enabled blacks to make democratic appeals more central to their discourse. Davis also used the economic approach in her argument against bus segregation:

> When you pay for something, you are supposed to get what you want. Everyone who rides a VTC Bus pays thirteen cents. Then, why should we sit in the back of the bus and the white people sit in the front? We are just as clean as they are. If we can cook the food they eat, surely we can sit beside them. 36

In her speech, Davis also challenged racial stereotypes of African Americans as unclean and undesirable. Although she was only seventeen, she clearly understood the

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irony of the fact that African American women took care of white families but were segregated from the same people in Richmond’s racial hierarchy. She also pointed out the fact that while the black community’s money was good enough for the transit system, they were not treated like the white customers. By calling into question the logic in segregation, Davis took a swing at the oppressive racial barriers that stood between the African American community and equality. Although Robinson, Davis, and the other women who challenged the segregated buses were not successful in the short-term, their acts of resistance would serve as templates for the later militant civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s. Similarly, the women who demanded service in Detroit’s restaurants formed part of the vanguard of activist strategists, along with CORE campaigners in the push for civil rights movements in the 1940s. Because women were the most visibly affected by problems with food service and on buses, they became the most militant in their desegregation efforts. They often pointed out that segregated facilities violated their rights as women to be protected when they carried on their reproductive labor on public transportation or took breaks from work to eat a meal. Their sit-in tactics, whether spontaneous or planned, provided the model for desegregation efforts in the following decades.

Housing Battles

At the same time that African American women in Detroit and Richmond were trying to break down barriers in restaurants and public transportation, they also fought to break into all-white neighborhoods. Because both Detroit and Richmond upheld legal segregation covenants that barred house sales to African Americans looking to buy homes
in white neighborhoods, black families found themselves in the worst areas in the cities. In Detroit in 1944, 14,795 African Americans lived in boarding houses and residential hotels because they could not find homes. This represented a 311 percent increase over African Americans who could not find homes in 1940. Out of 44,990 black couples in Detroit in 1944, 30 percent either doubled up with families or lived in boarding houses and hotels. Only 6 percent of Detroit’s 353,155 white couples could not find homes.37

In Richmond, although many African Americans could not get housing, the city council planned massive slum clearance plans from 1940-1950 that threatened the existence of Jackson Ward, the main black community, at a time when very few African Americans owned homes and no other neighborhoods allowed them entry. Christopher Silver and John Moeser found in their study of Richmond neighborhoods, that “blacks and whites had competed for neighborhood space in various parts of the city” in 1940, in an attempt to secure better housing.38 In Detroit and Richmond, both working- and middle-class black women had concerns about housing. While working-class women often fought to gain entry into new wartime housing projects, middle-class women often fought against restrictive covenants in order to secure homes for themselves and their families in all-white neighborhoods.


Thomas Sugrue calls Detroit housing the “contested terrain” of the city in which discrimination determined the seriousness of the post-war urban crisis. He argues that community organizations that represented the “various constituents of the New Deal state” fought to shape neighborhoods and claim space, either by buying or stopping the sale of white-owned houses to blacks, or by stopping slum clearance. He also maintains that from 1940 through the post-war period, white women were very important in maintaining racial boundaries, as they could use the discourse of racial purity, domestic tranquillity, and family guardianship to reinforce their maintenance of the status quo.

While white women attempted to maintain color lines, however, African American women fought to not only get better housing in their own neighborhoods, but pushed hard to break down neighborhood race barriers.

Some working-class African American women fought hard to keep what housing they had during the war, substandard and dangerous as it was, simply because there were few alternatives in Detroit’s housing market. In 1943, Mrs. Russell Jones, mother of a sick baby who was trying to care for her own sick mother, as well as a sister and a nephew, fought the Office of Price Administration over a bureaucratic snafu that left them on the brink of homelessness. When the OPA told Jones to reduce her rent payments in order to make the landlord conform to government-dictated rent ceilings, she complied. But when the landlord later claimed that she owed back rent as a result of her reduced

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39 Sugrue, 5.


41 Sugrue, 250-253.
payments, she found herself evicted with nowhere to turn. When she went to the OPA
office for help, officials told her that they could not get involved in landlord-tenant battles.
Jones took her story to the paper; she insisted that her eviction was a “frame-up,” as the
OPA had been able to negotiate with white tenants’ landlords in order to get them more
time to pay back rent. She asked someone to investigate the OPA on her behalf, even if
she could not get her old apartment back. In another eviction case, Mrs. Walter Berman
became the spokesperson for six families facing an imminent housing crisis in the face of a
health department ruling on the home they rented. She had seven children, another mother
in the building had five, one woman who was hospitalized at the time had two, and
another had three children and a grandchild. Apparently, Berman and the other families
had received notice that because their apartments were unfit for human occupancy, they
had to vacate the premises immediately. When she complained to social services, officials
told her to apply for war housing. Because of the severe housing shortage in 1944, all of
the families were refused by the war housing department. So Berman called upon the
Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) to support her in her battle with the housing
authorities. CORE managed to get Detroit’s housing commission to agree not to evict
any of the families until they had secured housing through the war housing department.
In this situation, poor women effectively maneuvered within state structures and
historically black institutions to support their claims for decent housing.


Other black women also fought for the right to occupy Detroit's housing projects. In 1942, club women and working-class women joined together to support black families' entry into the Sojourner Truth housing projects. In 1942, when the Sojourner Truth housing project for African American families was ready for occupancy, the surrounding white working-class neighborhood rioted to protest the attempts of the first families to occupy the projects. Originally, middle-class African Americans in the surrounding community also protested the projects, because they feared that a project would hurt their property values. As the African American workers tried to gain occupancy and faced violent protests, middle-class blacks finally recognized that this fight was an important moment for the civil rights movement—if the state kept blacks out of a project built especially for them because of the protests of neighboring whites, the state would have abandoned the black community in order to privilege the interests of its white citizens.

In a move showing convergence between middle-class and working-class interests, black club women donated their money and their time to aid the battle to occupy Sojourner Truth. The New Era Study Club donated money to the Sojourner Truth Citizens' Committee to help with funding educational programs. The local chapter of Delta Sigma Theta sent a strong letter to the Detroit Housing Commission that protested the barring of black tenants. The sorority employed the discourse of responsible patriotism in order to reinforce the ironic fact that a housing project named after a famous

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44 Sugrue, 73-76.
45 Sugrue, 73.
black woman was barred to black families because of undemocratic white working-class families in the surrounding neighborhoods. The Deltas demanded justice based on their participation in the war effort. The members wrote:

Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, composed of thousands of Negro college women of America adds her voice to the thousands of voices already protesting the unfair, undemocratic, and prejudicial act of the housing co-ordinator in denying Negro citizens the right to occupy the government homes built for them and named for one of their prominent women...The two Detroit chapters of Delta Sigma Theta comprise 140 citizens who are vitally interested in the defense of America and all it stands for. Our national organization has just purchased $5,000 worth of defense bonds. Our local chapters purchased $300 worth. We believe in America! We want America to believe in us. Democracy, like charity, begins at home! We urge you to bring your influence and pressure to bear in this case and see that justice is done.  

Working-class women, some who were trying to occupy the projects and some who simply supported the fight, also lent a strong voice to the Sojourner Truth housing fight. In March, fifty YWCA industrial club women went to City Hall to join the Sojourner Truth picket lines after their class in blueprint reading at the YW center. Just as the Deltas used their discourse of responsible patriotism to legitimize their claims for democracy in housing, these YW industrial women laid claim to the power of black workers' patriotism to support occupancy of the housing project. As one young woman explained, “Blue Prints speed the Battle of Production, and so does our picket line against Hitler’s Klan friends. When those families are in their new homes and safe from

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47 Letter from President and Corresponding Secretary of Alpha Pi Chapter of Delta to Detroit Housing Commission, 22 January 1942. Civil Rights Congress of Michigan Collection, Series 7, Box 67. Sojourner Truth 1942 #2 Folder, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University. (Hereafter Civil Rights).
KKK terrorism they'll work better and harder in the war factories too. Women joined the Sojourner Truth picket lines outside city hall in large numbers, and they protested for four hours every day from March 5, 1942 until blacks finally occupied the projects several months later. The *Sojourner Truth Daily News* community newsletter recognized all of the work done by women in the battle for occupancy: “The quiet but heroic work of the women who have given so much toward the building of the Citizen’s Committee into a fighting machine in the Battle of Sojourner Truth will be spotlighted at next Sunday’s mass rally.” in which all of the speakers were women who had fought for equality in the projects. By claiming the right to housing built for them, working-class women reinforced their status as citizens as they demanded justice based on their efforts as defense workers.

Black women in Detroit also stood at the forefront of neighborhood integration, as they represented both patriotic sacrifice and motherhood to both the black and the white community. In her article on Emmett Till, Ruth Feldstein suggested that Till’s mother claimed power by calling upon the dominant white discourse of motherhood in her fight to legitimize herself and her son in the wake of his lynching. Feldstein claims that her use of motherhood enabled her to gain not only legitimacy, but national publicity in her fight to

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convict her son’s assailants and to outlaw lynching. African American women in Detroit and Richmond also used their power as mothers trying to make a better life for their children when they argued against segregated housing from 1940 to 1954. While this discourse was not new to middle-class women, as it was a major part of the definitions of middle-class domesticity during the Victorian era, working-class women also began to claim rights based on their status as mothers as they attempted to break into all-white, blue-collar neighborhoods. Maternal concerns motivated and legitimized working-class women's fights for decent housing and education. This language of motherhood gave them the ability to claim the right to have their children live in safe neighborhoods and attend decent school districts both during and following the war.

As early as 1941, Mrs. Mina Johnson fought to stay in her home in Ferndale, a racially-mixed suburb close to Detroit in which whites owned homes and some blacks rented homes. She called upon the government to defend her and her ten children, who had resided in the community without problems for fourteen years until she actually raised enough money to buy the house outright from the landlord. Apparently, white residents were comfortable enough with blacks as renters, but when a black person bought a home, it was viewed by whites as too permanent a change in the economic hierarchy of the neighborhood. In her interview with the Detroit Tribune, Johnson explained that she failed to see why the civil rights law did not protect her, and she determined that she would remain on her property at all costs. In order to reinforce her "good mother" image.

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50 Ruth Feldstein, "'I Wanted the World to See': Race, Gender, and Constructions of Motherhood in the Death of Emmett Till," in Mothers and Motherhood: Readings in American History, ed. Rima Apple
she emphasized that her children were law-abiding citizens who did not deserve to be run out of their own neighborhood. 51

After the war, as African Americans had more money to buy homes and barriers to neighborhoods were contested frequently, African American women continued to put themselves at the vanguard of the movement into all-white neighborhoods. When the NAACP took Detroit's restrictive covenant system to court in 1947, the Les Verites Bridge Club, led by Margurite Glenn, held a cocktail party to raise money for the case. The society page reported that the women, "Demonstrating their indignation over the injustices of racial restrictive covenants...pledged themselves to go about correcting this evil." The women raised $250 for the NAACP. 52 In this case, they showed their support for the entire black community by earmarking the funds for the restrictive covenant litigation.

Many women who moved into all-white neighborhoods reported incidents of violence to the NAACP and to the police, in order to receive help when they were determined to hold their ground. Mrs. Ford, wife of an auto worker and a mother of five with another on the way, returned to her new rental home in a neighborhood close to the River Rouge plant to find her phone lines cut and her windows broken. She reported the incident to the police, who started regular patrols around her house, because she and her

and Janet Golden (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1997), 148-156.


husband were determined to stay. The following month, Anna Cruse went to the DCCR to report incidents of violence surrounding her family’s move to an all-white neighborhood. She was very nervous after someone had started a fire by throwing a firecracker into her home. She was afraid that someone would succeed in burning down the house. The DCCR made sure that police patrols in the area continued. The fact that the police helped out in this situation again confirms the capricious nature of the state—in some neighborhoods, where the police sympathized with whites, they let violence go unpunished, while in others, they actually enforced the law.

African American women sometimes called upon their respectability when justifying their decisions to remain within neighborhoods. For example, Mrs. Smith told the Chronicle about her attempts to desegregate her neighborhood. A typist at the Chrysler Tank Plant, Smith had received offers of buy-outs, threats of “trouble,” and other terrifying messages left at her door. When some white neighbors explained that they were afraid that lower-class people might move in, she became indignant and affirmed her respectability in her comments: “We certainly aren’t low-class people, and as far as the neighborhood is concerned, all we want to do is mind our business and have other people mind theirs.” Despite the fact that Smith’s pink-collar job located her within the working-class, she used a middle-class discourse of respectability to defend herself against

54 File 47-60, DCCR, Part 1, Series 1, Box 4, Case 47-60 Folder.
white neighbors who constructed all blacks as poor. She stood up for herself and others in her economic position by demanding respect and privacy from her new community.

By 1954, although obvious resentment still existed in white neighborhoods in Detroit, African Americans claimed victory in the housing battle. In 1952, as a direct result of pressure from working-class blacks, the Detroit Housing Commission repealed its race segregation policy in housing projects. In 1954, the Supreme Court outlawed restrictive covenants in a case involving Detroit litigants. While African American women could not necessarily change white prejudice, they were able to help break down the structural barriers to housing segregation in Detroit. Still, there were limits to the gains made by desegregation. In every neighborhood, whites fought violently against black incursions, and once one African American family moved into a block, whites left and moved to neighborhoods further outside of the city, retaining de facto racial segregation.

African American women in Richmond also fought against racial restrictions in neighborhoods, despite the fact that the city tacitly supported residential segregation as a method to maintain “peaceful” race relations, or in other words, non-existent race relations by means of non-contact between the races. In 1946, Mrs. Lemuel Eggleston and her husband, a postal employee, purchased a home that was technically covered by a race restrictive covenant, and they stayed despite “neighborhood opposition.”

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56 “Housing Commission Bans Race Segregation Policy,” 19 April 1952, 1, 4, and Charles Wartman, “Housing, Hospital, School Patterns Face Scrutiny Here,” 19 May 1954, 1, 16, both in Michigan Chronicle.

57 Sugrue, 181-258.
newspaper did not report what the opposition was, but because this was a middle-class neighborhood, there may not have been the violent outbreaks that occurred in more working-class neighborhoods but rather, silent hostility towards the family. The *Richmond Afro-American* took a picture of Mrs. Eggleston in her spacious garden clipping flowers. This picture both reinforced Eggleston's femininity, as she was wearing a nice dress and claimed that she spent most of her spare time among the flowers, and the middle-class stature of the family, because it included a shot of the spacious, well-kept colonial-style home. As Smith did in Detroit, Eggleston used her status as a respectable woman to legitimize her claim to a home within a white neighborhood.

Mrs. Crews almost started a riot on Midlothian Pike when she allowed her son to move into a house she had purchased in a white neighborhood. Originally, Crews had told the police about the move and asked for protection, which they refused. When she and her son were in the house, two white men fired sixteen bullets into the home. Her son fired back, and a white mob surrounded the house and began to vandalize the property until police came. Although the two white men who fired the shots were not arrested, Crews's son went on trial for unlawfully discharging a weapon. Once again, Richmond police showed collusion with white male civilians by ignoring their illegal acts but punishing a black man who tried to defend himself and his home against the trespassers. Crews did, however, remain in her home, despite the violent acts of her neighbors. Her

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58 "Defied Hate Covenant and Won," *Richmond Afro-American*, 21 September 1946, 11.

59 "Midlothian Pike Disorder Scene," 13 August 1949, 1, 2, and "Two White Men Freed in Housing Flareup," 27 August 1949, 1, 3, both in *Richmond Afro-American*. 
determination is impressive, given the seriousness of the aggression exhibited towards her and her son.

Despite the fact that Detroit’s and Richmond’s African American communities faced hostility from white neighbors, the police, and the city government, some black women still attempted to purchase and remain in homes in formerly segregated neighborhoods. Several African American women, like Cruse, Eggleston, and Smith, succeeded in staying in their homes by sheer determination, despite white opposition. By challenging residential segregation, these women pushed against and destabilized the oppressive boundaries of each city’s racial hierarchy.

**Richmond Women and the Fight to Desegregate Public Facilities**

Richmond’s African American women fought battles in many public places in order to claim space and challenge the city’s racial structure. Although segregated bathrooms were completely legal in Richmond, two women challenged the system. In 1946, an unnamed “matron,” after making purchases at Grant’s 5 & 10 store, asked to use the bathroom. When an employee told her that there was a bathroom but she could not use it, she took her complaint to the board of health. Since the woman had no legal grounds to complain, she tried to get the board to condemn the store for not providing sanitary facilities for all customers, but the board explained that facilities only needed to be provided in places where patrons would be for more than two hours, like theaters.⁶⁰ Although this matron was not successful in her bid to equalize facilities at this store, she

⁶⁰“Restrooms for ‘White Only’ at Grant’s 5-10 Cent Store,” *Richmond Afro-American*, 4 May 1946, 1, 19.
exhibited much creativity in trying to challenge the racial norm. A year later, when Hilda Warden moved from one city building to an older one as the result of a social work departmental restructuring plan, she found that she went from a universal women’s room to segregated bathrooms. When she told her supervisor that she would not be using the segregated bathroom and requested a move back to the older building, she was refused. While white workers sympathized with Warden’s plight, they refused to stand up for her and demand desegregated facilities. Warden continued to complain about the bathroom, enduring punishments like receiving the worst office furniture and poor assignments, until she finally wore down her supervisors, who had city maintenance take the bathroom signs down. Although her victory was hard-won, Warden succeeded in making the city’s bureaucracy more responsive to race-related problems within its own structure.

In order to reshape race relations within local state structures, two women and their male companion spearheaded the battle to desegregate Richmond’s courtrooms. In 1949, Joyce Vernon, Gladys Barrett, and Walter Smith challenged the Jim Crow seating in the notorious Carleton Jewett’s police court. With the help of the NAACP and the Afro-American, the three staged a protest in court by seating themselves in the white-only section of the room. When the bailiff forcibly removed them from court and held them in a room for questioning without notifying them of their rights, the three filed suit against the judge. Jewett answered the lawsuit by arguing that he provided completely equal facilities, which was the only stipulation required by both the U.S. and the Virginia

61 Interview with Hilda Warden.
Constitution. The plaintiffs replied that while the judge had the right to control his own courtroom, he could not restrict their freedom of movement, which his Jim Crow courtroom clearly did. After being delayed several times, a judge finally considered the case. While we do not have the final verdict, the Afro-American determined that the case did not look promising, as the presiding judge rightly decided that a favorable ruling would open the door to ending all Jim Crow in public areas. Because the group fought to change the state's power structure, they faced a losing battle, since the state overtly supported segregation in Virginia.

Because the Jim Crow laws in Richmond were enforced by agents of the state, including the courts and the police, it is significant that any black women attempted to desegregate public facilities at all. In each case, the activists believed that they could employ a valid reason behind their actions in order to sway the white community, whether it was because they patronized a certain store, or because they worked in interracial offices, or because they believed in a system of blind justice. Warden was actually successful, because white co-workers stood beside her in her complaint. Whether they won or lost their bids to desegregate public spaces, African American women in Richmond provided a blueprint of activist strategies that would be taken up by a new generation in the late 1950s and early 1960s.

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64 Ibid.
Street Fights

With so many African American women in Detroit and Richmond fighting for space, dignity, and equality during and after World War II, it is not surprising that tensions emerged and violence often broke out in the streets over racial slights. Both working-class and middle-class women became involved in pitched battles, whether as the aggressors, or by defending themselves against white civilians and policemen in hostile situations. In these situations, public transportation and the city streets became a literal battleground on which many African American women fought for respect and for their rights.

In both Detroit and Richmond, many fights began on and around the public transportation system. In his study of the Birmingham bus system, Robin Kelley terms the transportation system of World War II a “theater of violence” in which African Americans’ informal but important acts of resistance played out in front of a captive audience, often with “military” involvement as police became involved in the situations. He claims that public transportation was symbolic of the dangerous and undemocratic public space of the wartime city, which was fraught with problems for African Americans trying to survive in overcrowded war conditions and trying to negotiate racially oppressive boundaries. Moreover, because buses did not have a fixed dividing line, Kelley argues that African Americans could easily contest space within them as they challenged what were already fluid boundaries.65 The bus battles that took place in Birmingham during the war

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also occurred in Detroit and Richmond, and, as in Birmingham, participants were trying to change racial boundaries and restrictions in a very real way. In both Detroit and Richmond, African American women instigated many of the battles taking place on buses and streetcars, and they and other participants in the violence often made taking public transportation a dangerous proposition.

Although Kelley clearly explains the shifting boundaries on buses during the war, he fails to see the gendered aspects of bus fights. During the war, women were primary participants in bus fights because buses were gendered space. Women had to negotiate bizarre and often unpredictable routes in order to shop, take their children to daycare, and get to work. Often, they spent hours on buses daily to complete their reproductive work and get to their paid work. The buses were overcrowded, which led to men and women in close proximity, creating a situation in which the violation of women's space often occurred. This violation could be especially dangerous to black women, as the white community definitionally excluded them from constructions of virtue and saw them as available to white men. Moreover, the buses became theaters where definitions of white women's privileges contested against African American women who claimed the same privileges as respectable women attempting to carry out their reproductive labor while navigating the wartime bus systems. In this way, African American women's protests were as much about claiming autonomy as they were about claiming equality.

In Detroit, buses appeared to be almost their own war zones as black female passengers fought with white conductors, black female conductors fought with white passengers, and black and white passengers fought with each other. In the first month of
1947, 37 African American women were involved in violent incidents, and they were considered the aggressors in 12 of those cases. In the first six months of 1945, 66 women were involved in pitched battles on public transportation, and 21 had been the instigators of the violence.66

Often, women contested conductors' interpretations of procedural issues, such as how to use transfers and where stops were located. In 1945, Mary Doctor reported to the police commissioner that the conductor of her bus had screamed at a group of very young schoolgirls who had apparently accidentally ripped their transfers. When Doctor came to their aid, the conductor threatened to throw her off and told a white passenger, "That's the trouble with them, we try to be nice to them and they knife us in the back; the flock of monkeys ought to be back in Africa where they belong." The indignant schoolteacher filed complaints with Detroit Street and Railways system, the police commissioner, and the DCCR.67 Another black woman got in a battle with a driver over stops. When she tried to get the bus to stop and let her on at a place that, according to the driver, was not on the schedule, he refused. She went to the next scheduled stop, entered the bus, and started arguing with him. She hit him and threatened to crack him over the head with the bottle of wine she carried. The police removed her from the bus, and she later received a $15 fine.68 Mabel Bruns also argued over a procedural snafu with a transfer, but instead

66 Data Sheet, First Six Months of 1944-1945, 20 July 1945, DCCR, Part 1, Series 1, Reports 1945 Folder.
67 Letter to Mayor's Interracial Commission and police commissioner, 9 February 1945, DCCR, Part 1, Series 1, Box 3, Special Reports 1945 Folder.
68 DSR Police Report, 2 February 1945, DCCR, Part 1, Series 1, Box 2, Police Reports January-June 1945 Folder.
of receiving a fine herself, she sued the driver and DSR. Bruns claimed that the driver harassed her for not paying a fare, but that she had told him that she had a transfer which she had shown to him but then lost in the crowded bus. She claimed that his accusation wounded her reputation, as she was an upstanding and respectable woman who was active in civic, church, and community affairs. Although she was charged with disturbing the peace in the fight, Bruns tried to sue the driver and DSR $20,000 for defamation of character.\(^{69}\) In these situations, African American women attempted to receive redress from the company that allowed its drivers to abuse them. While none of these women were successful, their actions are important because in filing against the company, they defined themselves not just as slighted women, but as dissatisfied consumers who had a right to decent treatment.

African American women on Detroit’s public transportation contested both their treatment on the buses and their treatment in society by fighting bus drivers, symbols of white male authority. By publicly displaying their displeasure over problems with fares and procedures, these women ensured themselves an audience for their grievances. Moreover, by standing up for what they perceived to be their rights, the women claimed power for themselves in a society that often gave them little chance to speak out against oppression. Although most of them faced the consequences of arrest and subsequent fines, the women had a moment in which they inverted the traditional power relations in the city.

\(^{69}\) "Sues DSR City and Bus Driver for $20,000," \textit{Detroit Tribune}, 3 April 1943, 1.
Several of Detroit’s African American working-class women experienced day-to-day power reversals as the city employed black women as conductors on streetcars and buses. The women often engaged in pitched battles with passengers, but they were the ones with the power, and they called upon their official “conductor” status to justify their actions. In 1943, a black female conductor antagonized white passengers by refusing them entry to the bus until all of the African Americans had boarded, gave rude answers to white passengers, and missed stops that white passengers needed. While there were many witnesses to her behavior and the police questioned her, the conductor faced no punishment.70 That same year, another black female conductor reported: “Woman asked me why I didn’t call Newport. I told her I had called it. She got very insulting and started calling me names. I asked her not to do it any more. She did. so I hit her.”71 In these incidents, African American women used their status as bus drivers to claim power over white passengers. African American women had so often experienced the racism of bus drivers in Detroit that it must have seemed like divine justice to the new black female conductors to be able to act out against hostile whites in similar situations.

Although some African American women working as conductors and drivers found themselves winning power struggles with white passengers, others became the targets of race antagonism, as they were visible signs of a changing racial climate in Detroit. For example, a black female conductor became involved in a dispute with a white man over a transfer that she refused to give him. In her police report, she stated that:

70 Summary of Incidents 11 August 1943, DCCR, Part 1, Series 1, Box 2, DSR Police Reports 1943 folder.
“Passenger called me a b— and said that I couldn’t treat white people that way.”

Apparently, the white man was enraged by the fact that a black woman refused to let him have his way and not pay for a transfer. Her refusal was a blow to the privileged existence he led as a white man in Detroit’s race and gender hierarchy.

In one week in October of 1944, two African American women conductors became involved in physical disputes with passengers. First, one reported that when a white woman dropped transfer money in the fare box instead of giving it to the conductor, as she was supposed to do, the black conductor refused to give her a regular transfer. She gave her one marked “emergency,” which apparently infuriated the white woman for some reason, and the white woman jerked the conductor’s cap down her face. When the conductor pushed the white woman’s hand off of her cap, the white woman’s mother apologized and said that her daughter was sick and did not know what she was doing. Several hours later another black woman working as a conductor refused to give a man a transfer for another bus since he had already used one transfer to get on her bus and he needed to purchase a new one. After arguing for some time, the man cursed and hit the woman in the eye. Although she did not hit him back, she secured witnesses so that he could be prosecuted.73 These physical disputes signified not just an assertion of authority on the part of conductors, but an attempt by white men to re-order their world in order to

71 Summary of 15-21 November 1943, DCCR, Part 1, Series 1, Box 2, DSR Police Reports 1943 folder.

72 Summary of Racial Disturbances for week ending 26 August 1944, DCCR, Part 1, Series 1, Box 2, DSR Police Reports 7/44-12/44 Folder.

73 Summary of Racial Disturbances received week ending 14 October 1944, DCCR, Part 1, Series 1, Box 2, DSR Police Reports 7/44-12/44 Folder.
re-assert their authority. The black conductorettes were symbols of their belief that their world of white male privilege was fast slipping away.

Passengers in Detroit also fought amongst themselves, lending to an already tense situation on public transportation. It is very likely that many of these disputes resulted from earlier factory fights that escalated outside factory walls, since contested space in factories could easily have turned into contested space in buses and streetcars. In 1943, a white man started an argument with a black female conductor. A black woman came to her aid, purportedly to help the conductor collect the man's fare, and the violence escalated. When the man took a swing at the black passenger, she stabbed him in the stomach. She was later charged with aggravated assault. In the summer of that year, just after the Detroit riot, two factory workers returning home on the bus engaged in a battle when the women, one white and one black, fought over a stolen watch. Both had to be removed from the bus when they started pulling out each other's hair. In 1944, Mary Blair, a white woman, made a derogatory comment about Laura Crawford's hair color. Laura Crawford, an African American woman returning home from work, beat up Blair on the Woodward Ave. bus and was charged with assault and battery. Apparently, the buses were so dangerous that one African American woman took to carrying weapons to protect herself, which the police found after she had picked a fight in a bus line by swearing at and pushing against white women. The police searched the unnamed woman and found a set

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74 2 February 1943 Roundup Report, DCCR, Part 1, Series 1, Box 2, DSR Police Reports 1943 Folder.

75 Summary of incidents 11 August 1943, DCCR, Part 1, Series 1, Box 2, DSR Police Reports 1943 Folder.
of knives with five and six-inch steel blades on them. On the crowded, dirty, and unpleasant buses in Detroit, passengers and conductors made the situation dangerous by contesting each other for space with words, hands, and even weapons.

Richmond buses and streetcars also saw their fair share of violence as African American women fought both drivers and passengers in racially-charged incidents over seating, fares, and everyday insults. Richmond buses differed from Detroit's, however, in that racialized space was legally proscribed by Jim Crow statutes and thus, the space to be contested was much less fluid. In several Richmond cases, African American women sued the transit company for the indignities they faced during physical altercations. In 1943, a bus driver told Marjorie Forbes, a student at Armstrong High School, to move to the back of his bus. When Forbes claimed that the bus was too crowded for her to move to the back, the driver grabbed her and attempted to throw her off the bus. When Forbes refused to budge and pushed him away, black and white passengers rose up in support of her, and the bus driver refused to drive the bus. When the police arrived, although Forbes had created a big scene on the bus, they refused to arrest her and she claimed a small victory for her community. Although Forbes won her battle with the bus driver, on the same day Aretha Glass found herself facing a $10 fine and a 30-day suspended sentence for her small act of defiance on the bus. When the driver blamed her for incorrectly signaling for a stop when, in fact, a white woman did it. Glass went to the front of the bus and cursed at

76 DSR Police Department Special Investigation Squad Report, 17 October 1944, and DSR Summary of Racial Disturbances, 1 November 1944, both in DCCR, Part 1, Series 1, Box 2, DSR Police Reports 7/44-12/44 Folder.

77 “Student Balks Bus Driver In Attempt to Oust Her,” Richmond Afro-American, 30 January 1943, 10.
the bus driver until the police arrived to arrest her. The differing experiences of Forbes and Glass suggest that often, the success of an African American woman’s actions depended largely upon whether she could secure white passenger support.

Other women also received fines for being physically or verbally abusive to bus drivers, although most claimed that they only retaliated against the white drivers in self-defense. Mrs. Parrish received a fine for disorderly conduct when she protested against an abusive streetcar driver. When she did not move through the turnstile fast enough for the bus driver, he slapped her, called her a “n—r,” and accused her and other blacks of “trying to run the streetcars.” According to Parrish, she merely protested verbally to the driver, but other passengers admitted that she did strike the driver, but only in self-defense. Parrish received a $5 fine for disorderly conduct, but the judge dismissed the charges against a bus driver. Sadie Boling received a more severe sentence after she fought with a bus driver over the change due from her child’s fare. After he refused her change, she accused him of abusing her and struck him. Boling received a $25 fine and a 3 month suspended sentence. Boling experienced the same injustice that Dillard did when trying to desegregate Detroit’s restaurants. Instead of filing charges against white

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78 Ibid.


80 “Woman Fined $5 in Bus Case,” 24 March 1945, 3; “Woman Fined in Street Car Case,” 5 May 1945, 7, both in *Richmond Afro-American*.

instigators, police focused on black criminality in situations where African Americans tried to challenge the racial hierarchy.

As in Detroit, Richmond’s African American women fought against white passengers in their attempt to renegotiate racially defined space on the segregated city buses and streetcars. In 1941, Helen Johnson became an object of pity in the Afro-American as she displayed the torn coat and cut on her head she received from a white man on a bus. Although the newspaper called her a “matron,” a term denoting respectability, she did engage in physical violence, prompting the white man to hit her with a brick. Apparently, he kicked her and she turned around and slapped him. He then followed her off the bus and hit her with a brick. She did obtain a warrant for his arrest, but the paper did not follow up on her story, so we do not know if the charges were dismissed. It is likely, however, given the justice in Carleton Jewett’s courtroom, that the man did not receive punishment for his actions.¹² In 1943, Addie Walker not only fought with white women on the bus, but she fought with the arresting officers and ended up becoming a victim of police brutality while she resisted arrest. On her way to the factory where she worked one morning, she spotted several white women with their babies in line for the bus. She told the women that it was improper to have babies out in the hot, humid weather, and one white woman slapped her. When she threatened the woman with retaliation, the women called the police, who fought with her when she resisted arrest and then beat her on the way to the police station. Although the NAACP took on Walker’s

¹² “Matron and Scene of Brick Attack.” Richmond Afro-American, 1 March 1941, 24.
case, she received a $20 fine and lost her appeal. These women claimed authority based on their motherhood—a matron became a victim of white male violence, and a working-class woman tried to impart her mothering skills to white women, subverting a normative construction of white domesticity and offending the white mothers. In each case, the women did not receive justice, but the fact that they asserted their autonomy based on claims to motherhood suggests that mothering and social justice continued to be intertwined, from battles over welfare entitlements to battles over bus space.

Although Johnson and Walker did not get any real benefits out of their battles with passengers and police, other African American women sued passengers and the bus company over injuries they received in public transportation battles. In one case, actually termed "The Battle of the Bus" by the Richmond press, Virginia Rose Sadler won $300 from an abusive passenger in her lawsuit against him. When Sadler boarded a bus in which the only vacant back seat was next to a white man, L.B. Rigsby, she asked him to move to the front of the bus where there were several vacant seats. The insurance agent ignored her request, so she sat down. Rigsby then pushed her onto the floor and she pushed him back. He grabbed her dress and hit her in the face, and she punched him in the eye. When the police arrested both of them for being disorderly, Rigsby allegedly told the officer, "'give me your gun and I'll finish her.'" Although the officer affirmed that Rigsby did, indeed make this comment, Rigsby denied it in court. In characteristic fashion, Jewett threw out Rigsby's case and fined Sadler $5. Sadler received justice, however,

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83 "NAACP Will Appeal Bus Case Fine," 26 June 1943, 9, and "State Appeal in Bus Case Given Study," 31 July 1943, 10, both in *Richmond Afro-American.*
when an all-white jury awarded her $300 in her claim against Rigsby and an appellate

court judge overturned her fine, stating that no black person was required to give up a seat
to anyone if they were seated in the back of a Richmond bus.\textsuperscript{84} This case suggests that in
some cases, the right judge and jury could help black women to subvert the racial
hierarchy, revealing the permeable and changeable nature of the state on the issue of racial
justice.

Sadler was not the only woman to win money in a civil court case concerning bus
violence in Richmond. Phila White brought suit against a Virginia Electric and Power
streetcar company for the abuse she endured at the hands of one of their streetcar drivers.
When she boarded his full car, he became angry since he had told her to wait for the next
car to arrive. He pushed her against the wall, verbally abused her and her two
companions, and then would not let her off the car until he called the police. When she
explained the situation to the arriving officers, they refused to arrest her. White settled her
lawsuit against the company out of court for an undisclosed amount of money.\textsuperscript{85} Clara
Roane received not only money from the Virginia Transit Company, but a public apology
over her treatment by a bus driver in 1953. Roane, an assistant pastor of St. James Baptist
Church, fell asleep on a bus after a revival meeting. The bus driver roughly awakened her,
pushing her and calling her a "N----r," and badly scaring her. Roane claimed that the
incident caused her to become hysterical and suffer a nervous breakdown, which

\textsuperscript{84} "Ingram Frees Pair in 'Battle of the Bus,'" 15 January 1949, 1:1, 3, and "Woman Wins $300 in Bus
Case," 1 October 1949, both in \textit{Richmond Afro-American}.

\textsuperscript{85} "Richmond Matron Wins Case Against Virginia Bus Co.," \textit{Richmond Afro-American}, 29 December
1945, 1, 19.
necessitated her hospitalization. The company agreed to pay her medical bills and made a public apology in an out-of-court settlement. In Richmond, although African Americans found their freedoms severely restricted by Jim Crow segregation and popular prejudice, black women still had the right to sue, and they used it to reaffirm their right to be treated with dignity and respect. In these situations, African American women claimed their ladyhood and respectability, continuing a long tradition of gendered bus protest that would climax with the actions of Rosa Parks in 1955.

Occasionally, in both Detroit and Richmond, violence was not just contained in public transportation but spilled out into the streets in the form of brawls, melees, and even riots. Often, African American women fought with whites in the streets in very visible bids to claim space in the hostile city environments. The most violent event that occurred in Detroit stopped production in the city for three days and ended only after federalized Michigan state guard troops shut down the city. On June 20, 1943, a riot that would paralyze the city broke out at Belle Isle, the popular island recreation spot, after African Americans heard rumors that a black woman and her child had been thrown over a bridge. Gladys House may have been the first to pinpoint the real start of the riot, as she explained that late in the day she saw a black boy being chased by a group of white men, and when she attempted to rescue the boy from the mob, she was thrown down and rioting broke out around her. After the rioting was over, the police counted 31 dead.

wounded, and 1400 arrested (of which 1200 were black). The riots shook the country, as businesses counted thousands of production hours lost in the three day melee.

While African American women did not appear to instigate many of the fights during the riots, they often became both targets of aggression and willing informants on white perpetrators in the three days of chaos. Ann Easley, a worker at the Roxy Theater, watched in horror as a group of white women beat an old black woman on the street, and then found herself having to hide from a mob that entered the theater looking for blacks to beat up. She received the help of the manager, who turned the crowd away as she hid in the attic and drove her home when the people left the area. Middle-class women also found themselves in the middle of pitched battles as they conducted business on Detroit's main street. For example, Beulah Whitby, director of emergency welfare, went into action opening centers for food and information during the riot, but found herself needing aid as she waited out the mobs roaming Woodward targeting African Americans. She had to rely on white friends to bring her food until the riots were over. While these women were clearly from different socio-economic backgrounds, their common experience during the riots reveals the fact that the riots affected all Detroiters, not just poor blacks and whites.

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Many women who both witnessed and were victims of violence reported the acts to the NAACP and the DCCR in order to claim justice against the perpetrators. Lillian Thomas, who lived across from the state armory, reported to the NAACP that on the first night of the riot, she witnessed snipers shooting at a black man on the street. The next evening, when she went out to attempt to help a black man running from debris thrown from the armory, she found herself the target of the rifle fire. Thomas displayed her understanding of the newly-devised discourse of responsible patriotism as she told the DCCR that she believed that since she was a member of the Office of Civilian Defense block squad who was trying to investigate a problem, that troops in the armory impeded her duty as a citizen and volunteer of the U.S. When the NAACP reported the incident to the Brigadier-General of the armory, he claimed that the debris thrown from the windows came from inmates who were housed there, and he denied any rifle fire coming from the windows, despite the fact that Detroit police called to the scene found the bullets. Thomas stood up as a witness to state-perpetrated violence, but the lax law enforcement in this case suggests that the state was unwilling to blame its agents who exhibited clear signs of aggression towards innocent blacks.

Other women complained to the groups that brutal policemen denied them their basic rights as they tried to quell riots in the city. Herdracine Parrish reported to the DCCR that the policed stopped her and her six companions as they drove their car down Holbrook. Although the seven had done nothing wrong, the police searched their car.

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89 Lillian Thomas Report, Detroit National Association for the Advancement of Colored People Collection, Part 1, Box 1, Lillian Thomas File, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Walter P. Reuther
took them to the station, and locked them up without reading them their rights. Parrish had taken a pocketknife from her brother when she saw that the police were going to stop the car, so she stopped him from getting too harsh of a sentence, but all seven went to court. Apparently, the police had found a piece of concrete that had been used as a carjack in the trunk along with a beer bottle. All of the African Americans were tried in less than five minutes and found guilty, but according to Parrish, they never knew what the charges filed against them were. While she and her female companion received two years' probation, the men received sentences of 90 days each in the city prison. She protested the fact that they never knew what the charges were, and that they did not have any contact with outside help, including lawyers. All in all, at least seventeen women reported violence against themselves or other African Americans or unfair treatment by police in an attempt to bring some of the whites involved in the riot to justice. While this did not change what happened to the women, it did return some power to them, as they tried to fight back against the whites who had taken away their civil rights and their personal pride.

Library, Wayne State University. (Hereafter Detroit NAACP).

90 Riot Report by Hedrecine Parrish, 27 June 1943, DCCR, Series 7, Box 70, Affidavits-Detroit Riots 1943 folder.

91 Riot reports by Mildred Raskin, Pearl Doch, Miriam Wellington, Theresa Ann Thomas and Mrs. Stalworth, DCCR, Series 7, Box 70, Affidavits-Detroit Riots 1943 folder; Cora Lee Affidavit, Mrs. Eva Gordon deposition, Maude Johnson deposition, Mrs. Ruby Thomas Deposition, Detroit NAACP, Part 1 Box 1, Civil Rights Complaints(2) folder; Opal McAdoo Affidavit, incident reports by two anonymous housewives, Detroit NAACP, Part 1, Box 1, Civil Rights Complaints (3) folder; Hallie Young Deposition, Detroit NAACP, Part 1, Box 1, Civil Rights Complaints (4) folder.
The Detroit riots struck fear into the hearts of city mayors across the country, as rumors of planned race riots circulated throughout the nation. In Richmond, white fears exaggerated black power in the city during the period following the Detroit riots. Governor Darden of Virginia heard rumors that Richmond’s African Americans had planned a race riot for July 4 and called in the FBI to investigate the matter. Apparently, the Director of Public Safety had heard that domestic servants were planning to stay home from work in a civil disobedience campaign that day, and that riots would spread from the black neighborhoods outward to coincide with this day. Although the FBI agent interviewed many African Americans and found that the rumors were unfounded, it is significant that whites feared the power of their maids in 1943. Mrs. Dora Parker, an African American woman who owned a boarding house, told the agent that the recent reports in the white newspapers of riots were the work of Axis agents trying to stir up trouble, and many of the other interviewees reiterated this position. Still, the fact that FBI agents traveled to Richmond to investigate rumors of domestics striking and the populace rioting shows the tensions that played out among the black and white populations of Richmond.92

Although Detroit and Richmond women were not usually aggressors in riot situations, they did participate in many street brawls, especially after tensions were heightened in the wake of the Detroit riot and the Richmond riot rumors. In Detroit, almost a year after the riots occurred, an African American woman became so enraged at

92 Memorandum for the Officer in Charge, Racial Situation in the City of Richmond, Va. File 17074-RJ, Governor Darden Papers, Box 75, Race Problems Folder #1, Virginia State Library and Archives.
the comments of a white man that she could not remain silent and complacent. She hit him with bottles, cut up his face, and continued to beat him until the police arrived. An observer sympathetic to the woman suggested that this burst of violent energy directed at the man may have been triggered by his rude comment, but seemed to be the result of her having to endure many similar comments throughout her life. In other words, after taking as much as she could from whites, she finally snapped and took control of her life back from white male aggressors by attacking the man who had targeted her for verbal abuse in this incident. Although many street fights may have gone unreported, the DCCR and the NAACP recorded at least four other incidents between 1944 and 1952 involving women who refused to back down when aggravated by hostile whites.

Although in Richmond, women did not appear to ever be the aggressors in street fights, they did fight back against their assailants in court in order to try to get their attackers convicted of assault. In Richmond, the court cases from 1948-1953 suggested that in each situation, African American women faced physical danger resulting from their attackers' belief in white men's complete sexual access to black women. When Helen Morton, a worker at the Western Union telegraph center, exited her building after work, a white man grabbed her and asked her if she wanted to make a dollar. She slapped the man, and he and several friends dragged her into the alley, purportedly to sexually assault

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93 12 May 1944 Report, DCCR, Part 1, Series 1, Box 3, Incident Reports 1944-1945 folder.

94 Summary of incidents for 3/6-3/13 1944, DCCR, Part 1, Series 1, Box 2, DSR Police Reports 1/44-6/44 folder; NAACP Report of Executive Secretary Detroit Chapter, October 9-November 13, 1944, NAACP Group II, Box 87, III 1944 Folder; "Slapped Man Who Pinched Her Arm," Michigan Chronicle, 3 February 1945, 17; Interracial Committee Work Sheet Case 52-28, 17 September 1952, DCCR, Part 1, Series 1, Box 9, 52-28CP Folder.
her. A black man who happened by helped Morton to safety, and she pressed charges against the group. When she refused to drop the charges at the judge's request, the judge dismissed the case, since the men were drunk, and therefore just could not know what they were doing.\(^\text{95}\) In this case, it is clear that the judge defined the woman as available to the men, because he downplayed their violation of her by ascribing it to their "drunkenness."

One African American woman secured a court victory against a man who clearly exhibited signs of "road rage" in 1951; in doing so, she claimed her right to drive in the city without being molested by a white male, despite his position as a city worker or his state of mind. When Theola Hall, a McGuire Hospital night shift nurse, was driving to work, she noticed that a car she had passed began following her. She sped up and drove to her in-laws' home in order to get away from the man in the car, and he followed her. Gordon Jarding, an off-duty fireman, grabbed her as she rang the doorbell and said: "I want to talk to you and you want to talk to me." The terrified woman ran inside when her father-in-law came to the door, and Jarding fled the scene. When the police caught up with Jarding, he claimed that Hall had cut her off. He was charged with and convicted of interfering with the nurse when the police explained to the judge that he was a "show-off" and had mixed up the duties of fireman and policeman.\(^\text{96}\) In Richmond, despite that fact that many whites did not believe that African American women had any rights, in this case,


\(^{96}\) "Story of the Week," *Richmond Afro-American*, 2 June 1951, 1.
a black woman won a victory in court. She was not the only woman to win a victory in Richmond’s court system.

The fact that several of the women in Detroit and Richmond were successful in bringing cases against white men suggests that each city’s oppressive racial climate was shifting slightly in order to accommodate black women into the state as citizens with some rights. The importance of single judges and juries in these cases cannot be underestimated, because their acceptance of black women’s lawsuits against white aggressors enabled the women to enter into successful negotiations with the state over what sort of protection they could expect under the law. In every case of street violence, African American women struggled to assert their authority in a hostile world that failed to see African Americans as citizens and equals.

Protesting Police Brutality

African American women had to negotiate segregated public facilities, neighborhoods, and courtrooms both during and after World War II. They also had to travel in the dangerous terrain of public transportation and on the streets, where tensions often led to physical violence. But African American women had one more battle to face in Detroit and Richmond—police brutality. In both cities, women accused of minor charges or women who were simply falsely arrested faced assault by racist white officers. In many cases, however, black women refused to accept this violence as a fact of life in a hostile and prejudiced society. Usually, women brought suit against both individual officers and the police force, and in many cases, they did succeed by winning either civil or criminal lawsuits against the offending officers.
In Detroit, African American women contested unfair and often brutal treatment by police officers. Often, they used their status as mothers and respectable citizens and war workers in order to highlight the cruelty they faced when dealing with the police. Just like in their fight for housing, African American women portrayed themselves as upstanding individuals who received unfair treatment at the hands of prejudiced government personnel. Moreover, they focused on their status as citizens to point out how police trampled the rights of law-abiding Americans. For example, Pearlie Battle, who defined herself to the press as a mother of four and a war worker, was on a Christmas shopping trip in a downtown store when a white woman tried to steal her purchases. When she slapped the white woman, the security guard and a clerk held Battle, allowing the thief to escape. saying, “I don’t care what she’s done. you had no business slapping a white woman. You niggers shouldn’t talk back to a white woman let alone slap one.”

The paper supported Battle and depicted her as a citizen who was caught in an unjust state system of racism. A reporter described Battle as a “woman citizen. . .mother. . .and war worker” and demanded help on her behalf from the mayor’s office in order to apprehend the thief. When she asked an officer for help and he refused, she “pushed the issue” and he kicked her and dragged her to the curb before stealing her money. Not only did Battle lose her purchases and her money, but she was convicted of disturbing the peace in the store. While Battle apparently believed that she had little recourse in the court system.

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98 Ibid.
she did take the story to the papers in order to highlight how the police treated such a patriotic citizen and good mother.

From 1943-1952, at least nine women in Detroit either filed lawsuits or complaints against brutal treatment they received at the hands of officers. In many of these cases, the women were falsely accused of stealing or disturbing the peace, and the arresting officers arrived and humiliated the women with strip searches or beatings.99 Although most of the cases appeared to be unresolved or thrown out of court, the women used the systems available to them in the form of either civil court or investigative committees in order to try to effect positive outcomes in their dealings with the police.

Richmond’s African American women also experienced police brutality, and in almost every case, they gained the support of their communities and sued the police for unfair treatment. Sometimes, the women found their efforts to file civil or criminal charges against the police thwarted by the department itself. For example, 1946 seemed to be a particularly brutal year in Richmond, and the women involved in police disputes filed criminal and civil lawsuits against the arresting officers. Geraldine Polite, an innocent bystander and witness to police brutality, tried to step in and stop the officers from beating

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a black woman accused of shoplifting. When Polite intervened, the mother of a ten-
month-old child found herself at the center of the controversy. When she resisted arrest,
the officers on the scene beat her in the head with nightsticks and, according to one
witness, kicked her while she was on the ground before taking her to the station.
Although Polite attempted to file criminal charges against the police, the department
refused to give her the names of the officers involved, so she could not file a suit against
them. In this case, Polite could not break through the "blue wall of silence" that not
only protected officers, but the racial system of the city.

While Polite was a sympathetic character, as a middle-class housewife and mother.
Louella Tazewell did not receive quite the positive press response from her encounter with
the police. Several months after the Polite incident, an officer at the Greyhound station
attempted to arrest Tazewell for using vulgar language. She claimed that when she
resisted, an officer carried her to a small room, knocked her down, sat on her chest, and
hit her in the mouth several times. The policeman did not deny the charges, but a witness
did tell the press that Tazewell was "'cursing a blue streak, some of the most vile
language I have ever heard,"' so the court deemed that the arrest was justified. Tazewell
received a $5 fine, and the NAACP helped her file a complaint against the officer with the
director of public safety and the chief of police. One other women tried to sue the

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100 "Woman Remains in Bed as Result of Police Beating," 6 July 1946, 1, 19, and "Woman Beaten,
Lodged in Jail," 29 June 1946, 1, 2, both in Richmond Afro-American.

101 "Woman Beaten; Cop Draws Fine," Richmond Afro-American, 14 September 1946, 1, 6.
police for brutality during arrests in 1946, and she was not successful, either. However, the lawsuits did serve to highlight the problems with police brutality in the city, so that when the most severe case of police abuse exploded on to Richmond’s scene at the end of 1946, even white citizens stood up for the civil rights of the woman involved in the case.

In December of 1946, Nannie Strayhorne, a wife and mother, was involved in a fight with a man who offered to drive her home from a party at a minister’s home and became the victim of sexual assault by two police officers. Although sexual assault by white men against black women was considered by many whites to be rather commonplace and completely acceptable in the South, Strayhorne fought for her rights and her dignity in an explosive trial. Apparently, the two officers involved in the incident saw Strayhorne exiting her escort’s car and ordered her to get into their patrol car. Carl Burleson and Leon Davis then drove Strayhorne to a remote area in a Richmond neighborhood and raped her. She reported the incident, and in the ensuing trial, all of the racism that African American women had been trying to fight for centuries became the leading arguments for the defense. Burleson’s and Davis’s attorney argued that she was obviously “easy,” since she had been in the car with another man returning from a party, and that the incident was not rape since she did not fight back (as evidenced from the lack of bruises on her body). Furthermore, he argued, the woman had to have been a prostitute, as “no respectable woman would be leaving a drinking party at two o’clock in

102 “Newsie, Brother Given Grilling,” Richmond Afro-American, 23 March 1946, 1, 3.
the morning. 103 Despite the fact that the officers were white, and despite the defense attorney’s attack on Strayhorne’s character, the all-white jury returned a guilty verdict, and sentenced each man to seven years in prison. Although we do not know why the jury found the men guilty, it could well be an example of a major case bringing dishonor to the city in a way that belied the rhetoric of “cordial race relations” that many white Richmonders embraced.

The verdict was a shock to the city and a huge victory for African American women, as it shook the very basis of race/gender power relations that had functioned in the South for years. Many white Richmonders protested the verdict, and the prosecutor Lynwood Smith received death threats for even taking on the case. 104 The defense continued with its argument that Stayhorne willingly submitted to the police officers, and in the appeal, the attorney argued that “it was preposterous to think that a white man would be guilty of criminally attacking a woman who is not white.” 105 When the appellate court rejected the defense’s argument, it signified a fundamental shift in Richmond’s white community’s construction of African American women as sexually available to men. Strayhorne’s victory challenged the traditional construction of African American women as sexually available by forcing the court to acknowledge that white men could rape black women and in the city of Richmond. Although Burleson escaped

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103 “Richmond Pair Given Seven Years,” Richmond Afro-American, 25 January 1947, 1, 2.
104 “American Nazis In Richmond?” Richmond Afro-American, 1 February 1947, 1.
and remained an at-large fugitive with the help of racist friends, Davis served his term. This case also opened the way for other black women to contest the treatment given to them by police and judges, and from 1947 to 1954, two other women successfully prosecuted civil and criminal cases against arresting officers. Their success is further proof that in Richmond, African American women were making headway by using the justice system to effect change.

In Detroit and Richmond, African American women fought against police brutality by calling upon their rights as mothers, citizens, and workers to fair treatment. The fact that several police officers were found guilty of violations is significant, in that the state was willing to reprimand its own agents of power. In many cases, sympathetic judges and juries determined the outcomes, which reinforces the fact that the state is not a monolith, and that persistent agitation against the dominant order sometimes dislodges aspects of the state's power.

From 1940 to 1954, African American women worked hard to claim space in their cities. They fought for equal access to public recreation spots, restaurants, public transportation seats, housing, bathroom facilities, and even courtroom seating. Moreover, African American women fought back when tense race relations turned into violent confrontations on public transportation and in the streets. Furthermore, African American women stood up to state authority by challenging the brutal treatment they received at the

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106 "Girl Wins $275 Settlement from Store in False Arrest," 8 January 1949, 1:3, and "Warrants Issued for Two Officers," 1 August 1953, 1, both in Richmond Afro-American.
hands of police officers. While not all of the challenges posed by black women changed
the racial hierarchies in Detroit and Richmond, African American women’s informal
protests and formal complaints against the system pushed the constraints of racial
oppression in each city and often shifted the tone of power relations in confrontational
situations.

Often, both middle- and working-class women called upon their new definitions of
themselves as citizens, workers, and mothers to lend legitimacy to their claims for space.
The women “en-gendered” their protests by claiming that as ladies, they had the right to
protection and the right to be safe in public. African American women often claimed that
the indignities they faced when they navigated unequal public facilities violated their
respectability by forcing them to work, play, travel, and eat in dirty and dangerous spaces.
While African American women had used the discourse of motherhood and respectability
in order to claim rights prior to 1940, their merging of citizenship and motherhood gave
their struggles a new tone as they fought for rights that they claimed were inherent and
owned by all Americans.
CHAPTER 7: CONCLUSION

By 1954, Richmond and Detroit's racial structures were still oppressive, but they had shifted slightly. African American women's discourse of responsible patriotism and self-identification as potential war workers enabled them to engage with the state to negotiate new freedoms. These freedoms, which included entry into neighborhoods, industries, and establishments previously closed to them, needed constant reinforcement through formal politics, such as electoral participation and filing lawsuits, and informal protests, including sit-ins. These activities claimed the attention of the nation from 1954 through the 1960s.

African American women in Richmond and Detroit were largely responsible for many of the changes made in each city. Women's voter registration efforts almost quadrupled the number of black voters in Richmond. The city's African American canvassers managed to get 8,000 blacks to vote by 1946, up from 1,527 in 1936. Moreover, the repeal of Virginia's poll tax in 1945 enabled more members of the black community to gain political representation. While we cannot know if the increase in black electoral participation led to the state repealing the poll tax, it was nevertheless a significant victory for the civil rights movement.¹ In Detroit, while voting in predominantly black areas actually decreased from 40.1% of the total eligible voting population in 1948 to 33.7% in 1950, both numbers reveal that the black community voted in greater percentages than the white community, which registered a 37.5% vote in

1948 and a 31.7% vote in 1950. In addition, the money raised by female canvassers for the NAACP throughout the entire period no doubt played a significant role in the funding of NAACP school desegregation lawsuits throughout the 1950s.

Middle-class women had redefined themselves as responsible patriots and enacted programs that pressed hard for civil rights. In some cases, as with various public restaurants and parks and the USO in Detroit, women succeeded in claiming greater access to public facilities for the African American community. Women's groups formed interracial coalitions in each city. The YWCA in Richmond led efforts to desegregate its community by holding many interracial functions after 1945. Its interracial board, desegregated since the 1930s, promoted many more activities between the black and the white branches in order to bring women of both races together. Urged on by African American board members, the YWCA promoted civil rights legislation and interracial understanding. Leaders claimed: "Realizing that human hearts cannot be legislated [we must] find more ways of translating the common needs of all into practices habits of living and understanding." In Detroit, club women again proved to be at the vanguard of civil rights progress when, in 1950, they negotiated with white women and desegregated both

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1 Project 802, 24 June 1953, Francis Albert Kornegay Papers, Box 2, May-December 1953 File, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

2 Report of the Executive Director, Phyllis Wheatley, 1954, YWCA Collection, Box 4, Executive Director Phyllis Wheatley Community Administration 1954 File, Special Collections, James Branch Cabrell Library, Virginia Commonwealth University.
the YWCA and the Girl Scouts. By contrast, the YMCA and the Boy Scouts remained segregated even as late as 1954.  

Working-class women also secured their rights by using government and industrial institutions in order to bolster their claims to equal employment opportunity. In Detroit, prior to 1942, fewer than 100 women worked in manufacturing. By 1950, 6,751 worked as manufacturing operatives. This number represented 1/5 of all working women in the city. In addition, by 1950, 8,643 women worked in service industries outside of domestic work. The number of women working in manufacturing and service work topped the total number of women in domestic work by 3,090. In Richmond, the number of black women working as operatives in factories actually declined from 2,998 in 1940 to 2,217 in 1950. Although they lost ground in factories, an increasing number of black women gained positions outside of domestic work. Although the number of black women in the workforce remained relatively stable throughout the decade (from 16,342 in 1940 to 14,268 in 1950) the number of women employed as domestics dropped dramatically from 7,759 in 1940 to 4,906 in 1950. Women in Richmond made significant gains from 1,976 to 3,610 in non-domestic service work from 1940 to 1950. While working-class African American women found themselves largely abandoned by the unions by the 1950s and lost

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the FEPC after the war, they still managed to make gains in non-domestic work by continuing to press for the right to equal work. In addition, working-class African American women constructed themselves as citizens within the state as they claimed welfare rights and fought the state on slum clearance issues. In some cases, women were able to negotiate with the government and with private institutions for better housing and welfare benefits. Like middle-class women, working-class women also fought for the right to equal public facilities, and their actions helped to destabilize racial structures in Detroit and Richmond.

African American women's protests did not alter fundamentally the racial structures of either city. Legal segregation remained in place in Richmond prior to the Civil Rights Act of 1964, and the city fought integration after 1954 with rezoning laws and simple intimidation. Even today, Richmond retains some of the most segregated school systems in the country as a result of white flight to the suburbs surrounding the city. In Detroit, de facto segregation remained a problem in public institutions and neighborhoods. Most restaurants remained closed to blacks in 1954, and neighborhood protective leagues, claiming their own rights of citizenship in freedom of association and property rights, sprang up to defend white neighborhoods from black encroachment. In both cities, slum


clearance decimated historical black neighborhoods, usually by way of expressways designed to cut wide swaths through black-dominated areas of town. In Richmond, between 1955 and 1957 more than 7,000 African Americans, or 10 percent of the population, moved to make way for expressways built through the heart of Jackson Ward. It would take the mass mobilization of the African American community, coupled with the media’s focus on the civil rights struggle, to effect the changes African American women had fought for throughout the twentieth century.

While African American women did not create vast changes in either Richmond or Detroit, they created the discourse upon which the modern civil rights movement grounded itself. Moreover, they backed their discourse with activities that promoted equality, including canvassing for voter registration, participating in formal and informal sit-ins to protest equality, and using state structures to gain equal employment opportunities. Their language of dissent and protest, centered on immediate demands for citizenship based on their participation within the state, backed with their activism in promoting equality, was a turning point in the civil rights movement. No longer were African Americans supplicants to the state, but a vital part of the wartime and Cold War state by nature of their contributions to both homefronts. By constructing a new concept of citizenship, African American women of all socioeconomic levels put themselves at the vanguard of the modern civil rights movement by giving the movement its language of protest and its template for public activism. As they protested against inequalities by

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staging both formal and informal demonstrations against the various forms of inequality in public facilities, public transportation, government institutions, and industrial workplaces from 1940 to 1954, African American women provided a prototype of non-violent activism used by the new wave of civil rights leaders in the 1950s and 1960s.

The new discourse and programs of middle-class women, linked with the attempts of working-class women to gain and retain jobs and better living conditions, contributed to a new sense of militancy and urgency within the civil rights movement of the 1940s and early 1950s. By attempting to claim their rights based solely on their status as citizens within the state, African American women greatly contributed to the groundwork and the ideology of the more aggressive civil rights campaigns in the 1950s and 1960s. African American women’s initial forays into desegregating restaurants, jobs, transportation, and housing created the momentum for the entire African American community and met with more success as thousands of African Americans promoted civil rights throughout the next two decades.
**Figure 1:**

**WOMEN EMPLOYED IN DETROIT FactORIES, APRIL 1943**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CORPORATION</th>
<th>Black Women-1943</th>
<th>Total Women-1943</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Aeronautical Products</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>600</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bohn Aluminum and Brass</td>
<td>125</td>
<td>1,200</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bower Roller Bearing</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>450</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Briggs-Connor Aircraft</td>
<td>2600 (inc. men)</td>
<td>6,500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Briggs Manufacturing</td>
<td>small but increasing</td>
<td>4393</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Budd Wheel Manufacturing</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>345</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Burroughs</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1,800</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chrysler-De Soto</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>700</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chrysler-Dodge Main</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>1,500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chrysler-Highland Park</td>
<td>140</td>
<td>600</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chrysler-Jefferson Ave.</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>650</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dodge Truck</td>
<td>202</td>
<td>663</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Essex Wire</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>900</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ex-Cell-O</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>3,500</td>
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<tr>
<td>F. L. Jacobs</td>
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<td>400</td>
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<tr>
<td>Farmcrest Bakeries</td>
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<tr>
<td>Fisher Body Fleetwood Div.</td>
<td>140</td>
<td>900</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Fisher Body Plant #37</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>136</td>
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<td>Ford-Highland Park</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>4,500</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ford River Rouge</td>
<td>600</td>
<td>5,000</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ford Willow Run</td>
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<tr>
<td>GM-Cadillac</td>
<td>260</td>
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<tr>
<td>GMC-Ternstedt</td>
<td>4 (all maids)</td>
<td>2,000</td>
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<tr>
<td>GMC Detroit Diesel</td>
<td>0</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Holley Carburator</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>HyGrade Food Products</td>
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<tr>
<td>Kelsey Hayes</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lyon Inc.</td>
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<td>Murray Corp.</td>
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<td>National Auto Fibres</td>
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<tr>
<td>Woodall</td>
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<td>500</td>
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*Information taken from UAW Research Department, April 1943 Chart, Detroit Urban League, Box 5, General File, Mar-May 1943.
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