

Facing Hostility, Finding Housing

African American Students at the University of Iowa, 1920s–1950s

by Richard M. Breaux

In 1921, an African American law student in Iowa City wrote to James Weldon Johnson at the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People: "The conditions in this city are at present almost unlivable for a colored student. The attitude of hostility is felt most keenly in the matter of housing. No one will rent to colored fraternities and no one will sell in a livable locality."

The University of Iowa law student, William Edwin Taylor, related how a local property owner had broken a contract with Taylor's fraternity, Kappa Alpha Psi, when members of the local Ku Klux Klan organized to outbid the black students. "I have been in this city long enough to note the crystallization of sentiment against us," Taylor concluded. "There is an organization of the Ku Klux Klan here, and I have not the least doubt but that they are financing the scheme to effect our ruin."

Some African American women students in Iowa City earned their room and board by working as live-in domestics in faculty homes. As the *Iowa Bystander* described it, these students "ran to school in the morning without a chance to glance in the glass, hurrying back at noon to help with the mid-day meal, then another run to school. When the evening work was done, they were [too] tired to study."

Being an African American college student in the 1920s was challenging enough. Race-based housing restrictions made it even more so. An unwritten University of Iowa policy, for instance, prohibited African American men and women from living in the two campus dormitories. Fed up with having their housing rest on the whim of property owners' racial views, several women students from the university traveled to Marshalltown in 1919 to request help at the annual meeting of the Iowa Federation of Colored

Women's Clubs. The result was the Federation Home in Iowa City—one of the very few women's dormitories in the nation owned and operated by a formal group of African American women. (See previous article.)

Like other African American women's clubs, the Iowa Federation engaged in what historian Anne Meis Knufer calls "other mothering." This is to say that club members probably filled the role of surrogate mother for the students in the Federation Home. Clubwomen expressed interest in students' study habits and working conditions, and the extent to which they represented African American womanhood. Federation leader Gertrude Rush articulated that ideal: "Strong prideful morality, strong in point of conduct prompted by sense of self-respect and honor. Future mothers can't be flappers and retain the respect of their girls."

For the students, appropriate behavior meant facing up to academic and social challenges on campus, addressing racism and discrimination, and maintaining high scholastic standards—with some partying on the side. Residents knew that their performance could determine the future of the Federation Home. Their achievements added weight to arguments for maintaining the Federation Home and helped African Americans across the state feel as if their financial donations had benefited the race.

The various women who lived in the Federation Home in the early years blazed many trails. Marie A. Brown and Gwendolyn Wilson were among the first African American women to enroll in the College of Pharmacy (Wilson became one of the earliest licensed African American women pharmacists in Iowa). Helen Lemme lived in the Federation Home in 1927–1928; she later became a community activist in politics and women's issues. In 1924, Beulah Wheeler, of

Marshalltown, became the first African American woman to graduate from the College of Law. As a student, Wheeler won the Women's Extemporaneous Speech Contest, speaking on "Uniform Marriage and Divorce Law." She had supplemented the cost of her education by selling handmade art, and she was a leading scorer on the senior basketball team and won honors in volleyball. (Some African American women used athletics as an arena to undermine popular ideals about the feebleness of women in general, and used open competition against white women to combat beliefs about the inherent inferiority of African Americans.)

Black students at the university also relied on other housing. Some found rooms in the homes of local black families like Estelle "Ma" Ferguson, Bettye and Junious Tate, and Helen and Allyn Lemme. Student Juanita Kidd, who became a Pennsylvania supreme court judge, walked "up and down the streets looking for a place to live" in Iowa City, until she "noticed a black baby in diapers on the front porch," according to a reporter's account. "So she went up to the door and asked if she could stay." Kidd took a room at the home of Helen Lemme.

Students faced difficulties finding places to eat and socialize. "They had persons standing at the doors of restaurants in Iowa City, and while I was never refused admission, the person at the door would simply tell the Negro students that they simply didn't serve Negroes," one student recalled. Other times, only light-skinned customers were served. In 1937 Vivian Trent (who had lived in the Federation Home while a student) decided enough was enough. She opened a restaurant called Vivian's Chicken Shack.

Elizabeth Catlett (later a recognized printmaker and sculptor) waited tables in exchange for meals at the Chicken Shack. Catlett lived in the Federation Home for a year, and for a short time, she lived with African American author Margaret Walker, who would later write the popular Civil War novel *Jubilee*. A graduate of Howard University, Catlett was on scholarship at Iowa; in 1940 she was among Iowa's first three graduates to receive the nation's first master of fine arts degrees.

By the time Catlett had arrived in Iowa City, African American students and alumni had collectively developed a referral service and a student welcoming system, which met newcomers at the train station and drove them around town in search of

housing. The University of Iowa had no official ruling on excluding African American students from the dormitories but reasoned that white students would object to black hall mates. Finally, in 1946, five African American students—Esther Walls, Virginia Harper, Nancy Henry, Gwen Davis, and Leanna Howard—desegregated Currier Hall, the women's dormitory. According to Harper, however, the first African American women to live in the dorms went unacknowledged because they were "light-skinned." Harper recalled that "African American women were reported if the proctor found them socializing with a white student." The university also operated several boardinghouses that later fed students into the dorms. Betty Jean Furgerson had to switch homes because one student's parents objected to desegregated living quarters. Furgerson remembered that "it did not seem as if the proctors wanted us [African American women] in the dorm." Martha Scales-Zachary recalls that university officials sent notices to white women's parents asking if they would allow their daughters to live in the same dorm as black women.

Even after Currier Hall opened to Iowa's black women students in 1946, the Federation Home continued to shelter students who appreciated the affordable rent, or black women from other states. By 1949, university regulations permitted all African American women to live in dorms regardless of their state of residency—and with this came the fall of the Federation Home. The degree to which African Americans mourned the loss of the home remains unclear. Club minutes offer no elaborate explanation of its closing. The *Iowa Bystander* and the university's *Daily Iowan* are void of any stories. Although the closing marked the end of gross spatial segregation, the university continued to segregate African American women by dorm room well into the 1950s.

Nevertheless, for many of the African American women studying at the University of Iowa earlier in the century, their personal pride, professional goals, and desire to "uplift the race" helped them to translate their experiences into lifelong lessons of survival. Much of this would have been impossible without the Federation Home. ❖

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