Kansas Federation of Colored Women's Clubs, 1900–1930

by Marilyn Dell Brady

On June 20 and 21, 1900, ladies representing ten different Afro-American women's clubs met at the Masonic Hall in Topeka and organized the State Federation of Women's Art Clubs. Under the leadership of Elizabeth Washington of the Topeka Oak Leaf Club, plans for the gala event had been underway for months. The hall was decorated with the club colors, cut flowers, and potted plants. Art work created by the ladies was the chief attraction of the meeting; and the booths which lined the hall were filled with paintings and drawings of various types, as well as a host of needlework—embroidery, Roman cut work, Mexican drawn work, point lace, tatting, and cross-stitching. Twenty-eight official delegates from Topeka, Paola, Leavenworth, and Kansas City, Kansas, were present. The ladies and their male escorts were entertained at a banquet, and three hundred guests attended the reception held to honor out-of-town visitors. All was performed in high style, leading the editor of the Topeka Plaindealer to proclaim: “The Kansas woman is as capable in her sphere as are the women of any other race... Connected with this Kansas Federation are the BEST WOMEN OF OUR RACE in the state. They will succeed because they are laboring in a righteous cause.”

The State Federation, thus organized, did indeed succeed, enlarging its membership far beyond the ten clubs represented in 1900 and enlarging its activities beyond the artwork which dominated the initial meeting. In the early decades of the twentieth century, the federation and the local clubs comprising its membership became major institutions among Afro-Americans in Kansas. Throughout the early decades of the twentieth century, the clubs offered black Kansas women the opportunities for self-expression and education increasingly denied them by white society. With their state and local club work, the Kansas women were able to provide important social services to others of their race, and occasionally their organization was a vehicle of protest and of limited interracial cooperation. For some women, the federation network also meant involvement in national projects and contact with the leading Afro-American women of the era. The women of the Kansas Federation were not passively victimized by the world around them. As they stated in their motto, they were “rowing, not drifting.”

Background for the Formation of the Kansas Federation in 1900

Little was unique in the decision on the part of black clubwomen in Kansas to form a state federation in 1900. By then, Afro-American women already had a long and honorable tradition of working together—in informal networks of slave communities, in churches and lodges, and in the abolitionist and literary societies they had created for themselves in northern cities before the Civil War. In addition, Afro-American women across the country were organizing in the 1880s and 1890s. Discrimination and segregation were increasing in both the nation and in Kansas. Black women found themselves bearing the responsibility for raising children and nurturing families in an increasingly hostile world. Disparaged on all sides for not fitting the image of Victorian ladies, they created organizations to fulfill their dual needs as blacks and as women. As the numbers of Afro-American women’s clubs increased, the idea of one national association spread. Several groups held meetings in 1895, each hoping to become the nucleus of a

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1. Plaindealer, Topeka, June 29, 1900. See also Elizabeth Davis, Lifting as They Climb (Washington: National Association of Colored Women, 1933), 156-57.

ings and early years have died. In Kansas this problem is alleviated somewhat by the reports of club activities which found their way into black newspapers and national club magazines.

Black newspapers were abundant in early Kansas and continued to be active into the 1930s and 1940s. Many of these contain scattered stories of women's clubs. The most useful for the study of women's clubs is the Plaindealer, published in Topeka by Nick Chiles from 1899 till his death in 1929. Chiles was a dynamic figure with many strong commitments. He favored the growth of women's clubs, printed stories about them, and vigorously urged them to concern themselves with domestic science and service to their race. In addition, women from Kansas were active in the national federation, and stories about their state organization and local clubs were sent to the Woman's Era in the 1890s and National Notes, the official publication of the NACW, in the 1920s and 1930s. These written accounts form the basis for this article on the Kansas Federation of Colored Women's Clubs.

By the 1880s and 1890s, blacks in Kansas were experiencing many of the same difficulties as blacks in other parts of the country. In the years following the Civil War, thousands of Afro-American men and women had come to Kansas believing it to be "the Promised Land" of John Brown and abolitionists. For some of those who came, Kansas did offer increased options. Afro-Americans could own land in the state, see their children educated, and, if they were men, participate in state politics. At times men and women who came to Kansas with money or with marketable skills were able to achieve a degree of economic advancement. "Black elites" developed in towns like Topeka, Leavenworth, Wichita, and Kansas City, Kansas. But from the first, Afro-Americans in Kansas faced discrimination, especially if they were poor. By the end of the century, even those who had achieved a degree of financial security were finding doors closed to them on the basis of race.

In Kansas, as elsewhere, the rise of black women's clubs occurred in a climate of decreasing options for Afro-Americans.

4. After Chiles' death the Plaindealer continued to be published, sometimes from Kansas City, Kansas. Some incidental issues were entitled Topeka Plaindealer.
5. For examples, see Plaindealer, April 14, 1889, June 11 and June 22, 1900. Although Chiles' lectures to the clubwomen became less frequent, he did not mellow with age. See Plaindealer, March 1, 1925.

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Probably the first of the women’s clubs formed exclusively by Afro-American women in Kansas was the Ladies’ Refuge Aid Society, organized in Lawrence in 1864. Although the local newspapers contain no mention of these women’s efforts in collecting clothes, food, and money for the ex-slaves who were entering the town in large numbers, there are other references to their work. Another type of women’s clubs was the Coterie, which organized in Topeka in 1889. The Coterie, like the clubs that made up the first state federation, seems to have been composed of women with some wealth and leisure who were seeking culture and education for themselves. Their particular interest was literature, and they studied Shakespeare and other authors they considered to be “the best known writers of this country and England.” Other early clubs in Kansas and nearby states organized around different goals. Afro-American women in Leavenworth created a home for the elderly and for orphans. Women in Kansas City formed a Woman’s League which provided sewing classes and a place to sell items made by women. They also offered classes to former slave women in reading and writing. Temperance societies, anti-lynching groups inspired by Ida B. Wells, and other literary and needlework clubs dotted the region.

7. These references remain unverified, partly due to the lack of press coverage. For references to Aid Society see Kathie Schick, “Lawrence Black Community” (unpublished manuscript, Watkins Community Museum, Lawrence, Kansas). Chapters 1, 12.

8. Plaidealer, November 30, 1899. The Coterie never belonged to the state federation, but did join the NACW in 1901.

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Mrs. W. W. Buckner was a member of the Topeka Coterie. Devoted to the study of literature, the Coterie joined the NACW but never the state organization.

Elizabeth Washington was referred to in later years as "Mother Washington" for her founding work in the state organization.

**The Development of the Kansas Federation, 1900-1920**

The state federation grew quickly after its founding in 1900. Twenty-one clubs were represented at the convention of 1904, and delegates from fifty-one clubs attended the state meeting in Lawrence in 1913. Clubs from all over Kansas joined the federation, from small towns as well as large ones. In 1916 clubs from sixteen towns were present at the state convention at Parsons. Leadership was shared by clubwomen from a variety of towns. Ten women from seven different towns were elected president before 1920, and conventions were held in twelve cities between 1900 and 1920. In addition to towns in eastern Kansas where the black population of


10. The actual size of the organization is difficult to establish since the only statistics available are newspaper accounts of the numbers of clubs and delegates who attended annual meetings. These numbers fluctuate widely, depending on where the meetings were held.

The purpose of this Federation is to elevate our women to a higher standard in the art and musical world, and it is also a lesson that we must educate the hand as well as the brain." Blanche K. Bruce, a resident of Leavenworth and a nephew of the famous black senator from Mississippi by that name, believed that the exhibits proved better than words ever could the abilities of black women and the ways in which black women could teach black men the importance of beauty. Bruce also described how two hundred to three hundred "white ladies and gentlemen" came each day to see the artwork and were impressed by what they saw. As the federation grew, art displays developed into contests, and awards for the best work were given each year.

But art was not to be the only reason for the annual gatherings. Gradually the women began to present papers on domestic science and charity at their annual meetings. When a major flood struck Kansas in 1903, the women began practical efforts to help other blacks in need. The state convention, scheduled to be held in June, was called off, and the women worked to provide clothing and other assistance for blacks who had lived along the flood plains of Topeka and Kansas City.

In the years that followed, the state organization continued to involve itself in charity. At first the dollar contributions were small. For example, in 1918 the federation gave $7.50 to each of four black institutions in the state: one home for the elderly and three orphanages. The size of their projects grew quickly, and in 1916 the organization contributed $200 to a scholarship loan fund. In addition, the state federation encouraged giving on the part of local clubs. Clubs reported the extent of their charity at the annual conventions, and clubs doing the most work received awards. High amounts were reported. In 1918, for example, nearly $2,000 for charity was reported by federation clubs, and in 1920 Wichita alone reported donations totaling over $1,500.

An early crisis for the Kansas state organization arose over the exclusion of Afro-American women from the major national organization for white women, the General Federation of Women's Clubs. When the General Federation met in Milwaukee in 1900, the New Era Club of Boston requested admission to the group, and Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin sought to be seated as their representative. Under pressure from Southern white women who threatened to walk out if
black women were included, the General Federation refused to admit membership to the New Era Club or to seat Ruffin as its delegate.\footnote{17}

The editors of black Kansas newspapers printed lengthy accounts of the controversy and expressed their anger over what had happened. They also discussed the possibility of women who belonged to the Kansas organization challenging the all-white Kansas Federation of Social Science Clubs (the forerunner of the Kansas Federation of Women's Clubs).\footnote{18} There is no evidence that any black women's club tried to join the white organization, or that white women ever debated the issue. Racial restriction on membership did not appear in the published constitution and bylaws of the white organization, but white Kansas clubwomen were supportive of the national decision and expressed pleasure at the attitude being taken by the women of the Kansas Federation.\footnote{19} A woman, presumably Lucy B. Johnston, state president of the white women's state federation, praised the local black women for their work among themselves and for their refusal to follow the example of the eastern women who had sought admission to white organizations.\footnote{20} Such a statement drew a response from a reader of the Plaindealer. Identifying herself only as "A Club Woman," she proclaimed that the black women of Kansas refused to "thrust ourselves in where we are not wanted." In her view, however, the situation in Kansas was neither just nor inevitable. She maintained, "In localities where women are estimated by their intelligence, refinement and ability to do good club work, it may be [a] common sight to see a colored woman a member of a white woman's club, but it is not at all likely that we will see such a sight as that in Kansas soon."\footnote{21}

Although the attitude of the black clubwomen towards whites was generally conciliatory, the state federation did occasionally protest the treatment of blacks and seek to further interracial understanding.

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Nick Chiles, publisher of the Plaindealer, urged club organization and devoted many pages of newsprint to the activities and accomplishments of Afro-American women.
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White visitors and speakers occasionally attended the state federation's conventions. The largest protest by the Kansas Federation occurred when the group held its annual meeting in Parsons in 1916. Angered by their exclusion from the new movie theaters which were opening, members of the federation sent a committee to meet with the county attorney and to advise him that, according to state law, their exclusion was illegal.\footnote{22}

**The Achievements of the Kansas Federation, 1920-1930**

During the 1920s the Kansas Federation flourished. Under the leadership of Beatrice Childs, state president throughout most of the decade, the federation reorganized, expanded its membership and activities, and played a significant role in the NACW.\footnote{23} When Childs became

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\footnote{22} Mrs. Childs' name is frequently spelled "Chiles" in national publications. However, Childs is the more frequent spelling and the one which appeared in Kansas newspapers. She and her husband, Charles Childs, were listed in Kansas City directories. After her husband's death, Mrs. Childs remarried and went by the name of Childs-Fountain. Beatrice Childs appears frequently in the publications of the national association and in the Plaindealer. For examples, see Plaindealer, June 4, 1920. December 16, 1927. The move she and her husband made from Wichita to Kansas City, Kansas, is documented in the Negro Star, Wichita, September 16, September 23, 1921.
president in 1921, she quickly undertook a variety of projects. One of the first was the creation of four districts within the state, an action designed to bring the women who lived in rural areas and in small towns throughout the state more tightly into the club network. Throughout the 1920s large and elaborate district meetings were held regularly, and the districts competed for honors and awards. Music and art contests were organized by district with winners going on to the state competition. Whether or not the new organizational structure was the reason, the number of clubs affiliated with the state federation increased, and in 1926 sixty-eight clubs were represented at the annual meeting.

Although individual clubs and individual Kansas women had been active in the National Association of Colored Women, the Kansas state organization had not been a member during its early years. In 1920 the national organizer had visited Kansas and bemoaned the lack of interest in the national organization. Soon after Childs became president, things changed. The Kansas Federation joined NACW, and in 1922 Childs was its representative at the national meeting in Richmond, Virginia. She took an active part in the proceedings, making motions, serving on the budget committee, and being made one of the chairmen for the neighborhood welfare committee. She was also one of a small group of women who visited President Warren G. Harding in support of anti-lynching legislation. For the next decade, she and other Kansas women were active in the NACW, heading national committees and departments. They wrote frequent articles about their national and state activities for National Notes, and national presidents Hallie Q. Brown, Mary McLeod Bethune, and Sallie Stewart all visited Kansas during the 1920s.

Art had long been a significant part of the activities of the Kansas Federation, but during the 1920s the contests and displays became even more elaborate and important. The valuation of displays at the annual state meeting skyrocketed. For example, the artwork displayed at the 1925 convention was said to be worth over $25,500. In the growth of the art program, Childs was assisted by a fellow Kansas City, Kansas, resident, Susie V. Bouldin, who chaired the state art committee after 1923. She also served on the national committee.

24. Association of Colored Women, History of the Wichita District, 1923-1941 (pp. 1941), 7; Davis, Lifting as We Climb, 157.
25. Plaindealer, July 9, 1925.
26. NACW, Eleventh Biennial Convention, 1918, Minutes. 45-47. Debates were occurring at NACW meetings about the rules for state organizational membership.
27. NACW, Thirteenth Biennial Convention, 1922, Minutes, 7, 9, 27, 40-41; Kansas City Call, August 28, 1922.

After 1931 the state organization was known as the Kansas Association of Colored Women’s Clubs. This photograph of Association members was taken in 1940.
wrote articles about art and related topics for National Notes, and by 1938 was heading the national art department. She continued in this position into the 1950s, conducting elaborate fashion shows as well as art and craft contests. Bouldin considered herself an artist, taught art in Kansas City and at the Kansas Vocational School in Topeka, and held classes in other nearby towns. Art, in her view, included cooking as well as a number of crafts. Bouldin was responsible for acquiring a number of silver cups for both the national and the state organizations as awards for the winning art contestants. Donors of these cups included Sen. Arthur Capper of Kansas and Eleanor Roosevelt. She also organized various contests for girls, including a “Cedar Chest Popularity Contest” in which Kansas girls competed for a chest filled with artwork contributed by clubwomen.28

Music contests, under the directorship of Marie Fines of Wichita, were another important feature of the state federation in the 1920s. Contests were held at both the district and state level for everyone—adults and children, men and women, individuals and groups, instrumental and vocal performers. Schools competed for some of the prizes. Selections included both traditional spirituals and classical numbers. In 1925 Fines headed the national music committee. She also studied music formally, and her musical accomplishments were written up in the Crisis. In addition to being a performer, Fines composed songs, including some for federation projects. In 1926 her “National Motto Song” was performed at the national convention in Oakland and made the official song of the NACW.29

The attention which the Kansas Federation devoted to art and music in the 1920s was consistently matched by the organization’s devotion to service projects. Local clubs continued to compete for the annual distinction of having donated the most to charity. The value of their contributions continued to be impressive. For example, in 1924 the Wichita clubs reported $6,000 worth of donations. The state organization also supported a number of projects. One of the most important of these was the Florence Crittenton Home for Colored Girls in Topeka, which at that time was the only Crittenton home in the country which accepted blacks. Sarah Malone, who


29. National Notes, December 1925; Crisis 31 (February 1926): 181; NACW, Fifteenth Biennial Convention, 1926, Minutes, 27, 40-41, 108. Fines’ first name is sometimes given as Mollie.
created and ran the home, was active in Topeka clubs and in the state federation. The state organization endorsed her when she was chosen to be a Topeka city welfare worker and took part when the home celebrated its twentieth anniversary in 1925. In 1926 while chairman of the state executive board, Malone was honored by being unanimously elected "the mother of the state federation."

Another service project which inspired the enthusiasm of Kansas women in the 1920s was the NACW scholarship drive begun under the leadership of Hallie Q. Brown who visited Kansas during her presidency of the national organization. In response to the slogan "Plant a Dollar and Raise a Scholar," Kansas women pledged themselves to donate one dollar per state federation member. March 10, Brown's birthday, was declared "Hallie Q. Brown Day" by the state organization, and local clubs were urged to observe the day by holding meetings and collecting scholarship donations. Marie Fines even wrote a song about the campaign.

In addition to their work in art, music and charity, the women of the state federation helped to move the NACW in a new direction with their work among the girls of Kansas. In 1924 the Kansas Federation helped organize a group of young girls into a junior club. According to Beatrice Childs, this was the first junior club to be organized. Because the new group had formed in response to Hallie Q. Brown's visit to the state, the group called themselves the "Hallie Q. Brown Rosebuds." Later that same year, Kansas and Pennsylvania were the first states to present junior clubs to the national convention being held in Chicago.

The junior club movement spread quickly both within the state and nationally, and Beatrice Childs was one of its prime movers. In 1925, a year after the first club was organized, 528 girls belonged to thirty clubs in eleven towns in the state. In conjunction with the regular state meeting of 1925, the Kansas Juniors held their own convention, featuring a mother-daughter radio banquet at which the girls carried lighted candles and the major speech was broadcast by radio from a nearby room. In 1926 Kansas Juniors attended the women's national convention in Oakland, California, where they showed their artwork, prepared under the guidance of Susie V. Bouldin, and sang Marie Fines's new song about the NACW to the assembled women.

The success of the junior club program in Kansas made it possible for Beatrice Childs to assume a position of leadership in the national organization. In 1925 she became the head of the organization's first Junior Department and wrote a regular feature in National Notes. In her column, she encouraged clubwomen and girls to organize junior clubs and junior federations and gave practical advice on what to do in them. Marie Fines and Susie Bouldin assisted Childs in her work with juniors, also writing articles for National Notes. They stressed the importance of junior events in art and music, and Bouldin gave detailed instruction for juniors about their art projects, even telling girls how to wrap baked goods in order to mail them to the display at the Oakland convention. One hope the women shared was that junior clubs would insure future membership for the federated clubs. Although statistics of actual membership are hard to establish, the junior program created under Childs' direction was successful. Mary McLeod Bethune, president of the NACW from 1924 to 1928, shared the Kansas women's concern for youth, as did her successor, Sallie Stewart, who reorganized the junior clubs into the present National Association of Colored Girls.

In the midst of their varied achievements, the women of the Kansas Federation celebrated their twenty-fifth anniversary and silver jubilee. Held in Topeka in June 1925, the celebration enabled them to express their pride in their accomplishments. For four consecutive issues, the Plainedaler devoted its front page to its coverage. Ben Paulsen, Kansas governor, spoke to the women, as did Mary McLeod Bethune. Extensive art and music contests were held. There was a parade which featured "Mother Washington," the founder of the state federation, seated on a sunflower surrounded by other early club members. She was later crowned queen of the convention. The Ne Plus Ultra Club of Topeka won the prize for the best float, a vehicle covered with pink and white roses and carrying little girls dressed as flowers. Another feature of the celebration was the meeting of

30. Davis, Lifting as We Climb, 157; Plainedaler, June 6, 1924, February 25, 1925, July 9, 1926; National Notes, March 1925, April 1926.
31. National Notes, June 1924, September 1924, April 1925, December 1924.
32. The first mention of a junior organization was in National Notes, July 1924. Writing three years later, Childs described the founding because other groups were claiming the distinction of having organized the first group. See National Notes, December 1927.
33. It is unclear exactly when and where the first Kansas Juniors organized. Brown is known to have spoken at Wichita and to have attended the state meeting in Fort Scott in 1923. See Negro Star, June 18, 1923. She also spoke at Hutchinson in the spring of 1924. See National Notes, June 1924. Discussion of the importance of junior work was reported in the newspaper account of the state convention that year. See Plainedaler, June 6, 1924. For national convention see National Notes, July 1924.
34. Towns included Kansas City, Topeka, Newton, Olathe, Emporia, Fort Riley, Parsons, Atchison, Junction City, Hutchinson, and Wichita. See National Notes, June 1925.
35. Plainedaler, July 3, 1925; NACW Fifteenth Biennial Convention, 1926, Minutes, 49-41.
36. See the columns which appeared in National Notes, 1925-1927.
37. Hine, When Truth is Told, 68.
clubwomen with white governmental officials in the supreme court chambers of the state capitol building. Governor Paulsen and former state superintendent of public instruction, Lorraine Elizabeth Wooster, gave support for the creation of a new department of the state federation to be called the Interracial Department, and the group adjourned for picture taking on the capitol steps.38

The 1920s were a decade of important achievements for the Kansas Federation. Art and music contests and the silver jubilee celebration gave the women unique opportunities for self-expression. Contributions to charity and to scholarship funds gave a sense of usefulness and service. Although discrimination and segregation remained the rule in Kansas, black women had initiated some tentative interracial gestures. The creation and success of the junior clubs provided hope for the future.

The twenties, however, may have been the high point of the Kansas Federation of Colored Women's Clubs. The depression meant that black women seldom had the money or time to invest in state and national federations.39 Leaders like Childs, Bouldin, and Fines continued some involvement in the state organization.

but their major sphere of action became the local clubs or the national organization. In addition, by the 1930s sororites, professional clubs, and political clubs all competed for the limited resources available to Kansas Afro-American women. Nonetheless, the clubs of the Kansas Association, as the state federation was called after 1931, have continued down to the present, serving the needs of the black community.

Comparisons and Analysis

The story of the Kansas Federation of Colored Women's Clubs in the early twentieth century reveals the ways in which the organization was similar to both other black women's groups and to the clubs being created by black men and white women as Americans of all descriptions united to cope with a rapidly industrializing society. But the Kansas women have their own story, and there is danger in forcing them into the molds of other groups. As a midwestern state organization with particular individuals in leadership roles, the Kansas Federation was not a mere carbon copy of the NACW. More importantly, the members of the Kansas Federation were neither black men nor white women, and their organization reflected their own specific needs.

Like the leaders of the NACW, whom Paula Giddings, Tullia Hamilton, and other scholars have described, the Kansas clubwomen cared deeply about establishing, for all the world to see, how morally upright and culturally "advanced" they were.40 They, too, were fighting the vicious stereotypes being applied to black women. In their devotion to education, their contributions to charity, and their emphasis on being good mothers, they clearly resembled other Afro-American clubwomen. But the Kansas women devoted considerably less attention to politics, to protest, and to the conditions of working women than did national leaders.41

State leaders tended to be less skilled in verbal expression than national leaders like Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin, Mary Church-Terrell, and Mary McLeod Bethune, but the Kansas Federation always put a strong emphasis on other types of self-expression. From its

38. Plaindealer, June 12, June 19, June 26, July 3, 1925; National Notes, June 1925, September 1925.

39. Individual clubs seem to have continued to be active. The Topeka City Federation was able to purchase a clubhouse during these years, but that project may have taken resources away from state and national work.

40. Major works on Afro-American women's clubs are listed in footnote 3. Works by Giddings and Hamilton are particularly useful for understanding the interplay of racial and sexual factors in these clubs.

41. In her discussion of the NACW leadership, Hamilton noted the tendency to focus on specific projects rather than to engage in theoretical debates over accommodation or protest. This tendency was even more prevalent in the Kansas Federation.
Association members met for their annual meeting in Wichita in 1966. Those attending were photographed in front of the New Hope Baptist Church.

earliest days, the state organization emphasized art and music much more than did the NACW. Throughout its early years, art exhibits were a crucial part of the state meetings, and musical performances were always part of the program. During the 1920s, art and music increased in importance with the competitions organized by Susie Bouldin and Marie Fines. As Fines and Bouldin both went on to national prominence in their particular fields, these areas of self-expression seem to have received more attention at the national level than they had previously.\footnote{42}

Belief in education was deeply held by all Afro-American women, and Kansas women responded with particular enthusiasm to educational projects, such as Hallie Q. Brown's scholarship fund in 1924. As Giddings suggests, by educating their daughters black women hoped to protect them from domestic service and the sexual exploitation which often accompanied it.\footnote{43} The Kansans, however, did not limit their concern for education to projects being promoted by the NACW. It was in Kansas that the movement to organize girls

began, again under the leadership of Childs, Bouldin, and Fines. For them, the national motto, "Lifting as We Climb," did not simply mean educating "peasant women," as one historian has claimed, but raising their own daughters and those of their friends to be powerful, responsible women, proud of themselves and of their race.\footnote{44}

Black women in Kansas, as elsewhere, organized in response to forces which were affecting Afro-Americans of both sexes, and their clubs were, in part, a response to the increased racial segregation and discrimination which occurred at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries. Black women's clubs, like those of black men, tried to provide members and others of their race with the advantages which were not available to them elsewhere. Influenced to some degree by the popular ideas of "self help" which Booker T. Washington was putting forth, black women in Kansas generally sought ways to be supportive of each

\footnote{42} This difference in priorities may reflect the interests of scholars who are studying the national organization and the Eastern clubs rather than actual differences in the organizations.  
\footnote{43} Giddings, Where and When I Enter, 100-1.  
other rather than to force integration with white society. As the programs and newspaper stories of the Kansas Federation make clear, they, like black men, were concerned with racial pride and racial culture by the 1920s. Feeling great solidarity with others of their race, black women of Kansas believed that their own advancement depended on the advancement of all Afro-Americans. They saw any slur on any black woman as a slur on themselves. Their future and that of their children was not something that they alone, or they and their husbands, could control, but something in which all blacks were intrinsically bound together.

The clubs which black Kansas women founded, however, differed from the clubs being formed by black men or the organizations in which black men and women worked together. The organizations of black men were aimed primarily at achieving political or economic power—power in the public sphere. Black Kansas clubwomen had little hope of gaining power of this type and focused instead on their power within the home as nurturers. In churches, lodges, and those literary and social clubs which included blacks of both sexes, decisions were ultimately in male hands, even when separate women’s societies or auxiliaries existed. Afro-American women’s organizations provided members with a greater sense of their own importance and leadership ability than these other groups. In addition, within the federation, Afro-American women were a part of something bigger than their own community, something headed by other black women. Through the federation, Kansas women could be exposed to prominent individuals like the national presidents who came to the state and could expand their own vision of their political and social potential. Unlike the churches or lodges, the federation could provide networks of information on topics of particular concern to themselves and their daily lives. Within women’s clubs, members focused their attention on the issues which were often their most immediate concerns—not equality in the public sphere, but their responsibilities as homemakers and as mothers.

In these regards, the Afro-American clubwomen closely resembled the white women, in Kansas and elsewhere, who were also joining clubs in great numbers around 1900. Like their white counterparts, the black clubwomen glorified the home and viewed their role as nurturers as the source of their own importance and power. The rhetoric of motherhood runs through the programs of Afro-American women’s clubs as it does through those of white women. Even more than white women, if that was possible, the women of the Kansas Federation saw the private sphere of home and family as their proper sphere. Like the white women, they accepted without question a strict Victorian moral code and their own responsibility as women to enforce it.66

As Tullia Hamilton has pointed out, however, Afro-American women accepted all the aspects of “The Cult of True Womanhood”—except the docility and weakness that ideology demanded.67 Afro-American women could seldom afford to be weak. Because they were black as well as female, their actions and their words occurred in a context very different from that of white women. They had to prove themselves in ways that white women never did. They and their families had to deal with legal and economic discrimination reflected in such concrete problems as segregated schools and housing. Thus, the activities of Afro-American women’s clubs were limited in ways that those of white women’s organizations were not. Unlike the white women, the women of the Kansas Federation of Colored Women’s Clubs had no grandiose plans to change society by achieving political and social power. Black women’s clubs gave generously to the needy, but when united, the Afro-American women of Kansas lacked the access to power and money that was available to white women. Their projects were limited to simply doing what they could to help each other and those of their race who were in need.

No clear picture of the socio-economic status of the women involved in the Kansas Federation emerges from the printed reports of their activities or from external sources such as city directories. For the early years no membership lists exist from which such data could be collected.68 In addition, there are the difficulties in applying class categories developed for whites to the black community, which has its own, somewhat more fluid, definitions of status. In fact membership and leadership in the women’s clubs probably conveyed status for blacks rather than simply reflecting an existing structure.69

66. In my view, the term “romantic feminism,” as used by Rosemary Radford Reuther, Sexism and God-Talk (Boston: Beacon Press, 1985), 104-109, comes closer to capturing the essential qualities of this approach and of placing it in the context of both feminism and mainstream cultural traditions, than the term “social feminism,” which is widely used in women’s history and is applied to the NAWS by Tullia Hamilton.


68. Officers’ and hostesses’ names appear in newspaper stories, but no early membership lists for the Kansas Federation have been found. Some officers and their husbands were located in city directories, but too few to quantity. The best information about members appeared in the 1916 state minutes and categorized the occupations of those present in the following way: thirty-nine housewives, eight housekeepers; three teachers; three cateresses; two hairdressers; and one haircutter, nurse, dressmaker, proprietress of a cafe, stenographer, beauty specialist, and tailorress. Kansas Federation of Colored Women’s Clubs, Minutes, 1916, 16.

69. Thomas Cox has suggested this was true in Topeka in the early twentieth century.

45. For a useful discussion of the role of black women in churches and the limitations they faced, see Hine, When Truth is Told, 17-27.
Some characteristics of the women who led the Kansas Federation before 1930 can be identified. Married women who were supported by their husbands seem to have been the major figures. Professional women do not appear to have played significant roles in the state organization or existed in large numbers in Kansas. Descriptions of events held and gifts exchanged convey the impression they were meant to convey: that the women were not poor but had a degree of financial security and discretion. In addition, the amount of time which the Kansas leaders gave to clubs indicates that they also had leisure to devote to club work. Nonetheless, the Afro-American clubwomen were not married to men who had the kind of social power that white clubwomen’s husbands often had. This factor limited their power financially, their ability to bring about reforms, and their chances of participating meaningfully in government institutions. It is no wonder that black women turned instead to charity and educational projects and to creating their own institutions.

In the story of the Kansas Federation of Colored Women’s Clubs, debates about the relative importance of sex or race seem somewhat sterile. Neither explanation alone is adequate. The black women organizing and leading the Kansas clubs were responding to conditions which were both racially and sexually limiting. By “rowing, not drifting,” they were drawing on their heritages as blacks and as women to meet their problems. The Kansas Federation of Colored Women’s Clubs, with its conventions, charities, music, and art was part of Afro-American women’s definition of themselves. Their creation of junior clubs was an explicit attempt to hand this definition down to their daughters. The federation’s story is important in its own right, not simply for its place in black history or women’s history.

50. Hamilton observed a large number of professional women in the leadership of early NACW. See Hamilton, “National Association,” 38-53.

51. Malone, who became a city social worker, was an exception, as the amount of attention she received made clear. The Kansas Federation had occasional suffrage and temperance programs, but there is no indication that they were major priorities.