OPTOMETRY AT THE INTERSECTION OF GENDER, RACE AND CLASS IN THE EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY: THE EXEMPLARY LIFE OF BESS COLEMAN, OD

Kirsten Pourroy Hébert

Heritage Services Specialist
Optometry Cares – The AOA Foundation

khebert@aoa.org

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ABSTRACT

This biographical study of Dr. Bess Francis Coleman profiles the experience of an African American woman in the early twentieth century, employing a critical lens to explore how race, gender and class shaped her life and career, and the methodology of microhistory to draw out the ways in which her life exemplifies and signifies the essential work of African American women professionals during this era. Dr. Bess “Bessie” Anderson Francis Coleman (1893-1967) was the first documented African American woman licensed to practice optometry in the United States. A native of Kentucky, Dr. Coleman’s first career was as a schoolteacher in her native Harrodsburg. In 1923, she married pharmacist John B. Coleman, Jr. The Colemans moved to West Palm Beach, Florida in 1923, and then Chicago, Illinois in 1925 where they opened a chain of pharmacies in the Bronzeville neighborhood. Dr. Coleman received her training at the Northern Illinois College of Optometry from 1932-1934. In 1935, she moved back to Kentucky with her son, where she cared for her elderly parents and opened the only optometry practice in Lexington’s Brucetown neighborhood, well-known for its African American physicians. In 1942, she retired to Denver, Colorado’s African American enclave, Whittier. She died in 1967 and was buried in the Maple Grove Cemetery in her hometown.

KEYWORDS

Bess Francis Coleman; African American history; women’s history; optometry history; history of medicine; history of allied health professions; Northern Illinois College of Optometry; NICO; West Palm Beach, Florida; Bronzeville; Chicago; Illinois; Harrodsburg, Kentucky; Lexington, Kentucky; Mercer County; colorism; history of professionalism; women’s clubs.

INTRODUCTION

Trying A Different Lens: Commemoration and Critical Race Theory (CRT)

In 2020, Americans are celebrating the centennial of the ratification of the nineteenth amendment. To commemorate the act that enshrined women’s suffrage in the United States Constitution, cultural heritage organizations have launched sweeping initiatives to develop educational programming and fund research on women’s history pivoting around the extension of the franchise. For example, the 2020 Women’s Vote Centennial Initiative, a consortium of archives, museums and research institutions, was formed to support public history projects across the nation.¹ The Smithsonian’s Women’s History Initiative, *Because of Her Story*, was inaugurated in late 2018, promising to “disseminate and amplify”² scholarship in women’s history and make 2020 an inflection point for increasing recognition of women’s contributions to society as well as to enrich American historiography. Early this year, the U.S. House of Representatives passed *H.R. 1980 The Smithsonian Women’s History Museum Act*, bringing a 25-year movement to establish a National Women’s History Museum (NWHM) in Washington, D.C. closer to fruition.³ In January, the National Archives (NARA) opened its exhibit *Rightfully Hers: American Women and the Vote*,⁴ and the state of Virginia, at long last, became the thirty-eighth state to ratify the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA).⁵ In March, the Smithsonian opened its first of several exhibits, *Creating Icons: How We Remember Woman Suffrage* highlighting women in national

Bess F. Coleman, O.D. in *Focus*. Northern Illinois College of Optometry, June 1934. Image courtesy ICO Archives.

leadership,⁶ including the American Optometric Association’s (AOA) 2004 Apollo Award winner, Senator Barbara Mikulski who holds the title of longest-serving woman in the U.S. Congress.⁷ These activities are reflected in programs generated by state and local entities, and reverberate in the themes taken up by business and professional associations at meetings and in publications during Women’s History Month; the March issues of organized optometry’s premier publications—*AOA Focus*, *Review of Optometry*, and *Optometric Education*—all have followed suit, featuring articles celebrating women in optometry.^{8,9,10} The commemoration has been treated as an opportunity for Americans to celebrate the elevation of the status of women as a testament to the health of our democracy and the strength of our pluralistic society.

Amidst the applause, however, there also rose familiar critiques of the dominant historical narrative of women’s suffrage, and a renewed demand that history not be sanitized for the sake of celebration. One manifestation of this challenge was the swift condemnation of the National Archives for blurring a photograph of the 2017 Women’s March used in the *Rightfully Hers* exhibit in order to obscure the explicit language and political slogans on the signs held by marchers.¹¹ According to NARA, this step was taken to avoid offending visitors, but many viewed altering the photo as an attempt to mute the message as well as the image. The embattled archivist of the United States, David R. Ferriero, already under pressure from activists after Virginia’s belated action on the ERA had placed him in the hot seat as the figure responsible for certifying constitutional

amendments, apologized for the appearance that NARA had tried to “silence the voices of women”¹² by digitally erasing their words.

The language of Ferreiro’s apology was deliberate—it recognized and validated a more persistent charge leveled at historians and heritage institutions about the way in which the story of women’s suffrage has traditionally been told. Specifically, it recalled the allegation that the popular history of the movement has privileged the experiences of white women and silenced the voices of women of color to figuratively “blur” the less laudatory details of a more complicated story.^{13, 14} This view emerged in academia in the late 1970s, as scholars began employing critical race theory (CRT) to re-examine the road to suffrage, evaluating the same sources through different lenses and from unique perspectives. Their research exposed the racist rhetoric employed by suffragist heroines such as Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Carrie Chapman Catt which had been left out of or glossed in previous biographies. The new scholarship also documented how white suffragists rebuffed black activists’ insistence on racial equality, and turned their backs on African American women by siding with Southern segregationist politicians to secure the vote for themselves. The race critical counter-narrative posited that the familiar tale of how women won the vote is a truncated one which only tells the story of white women’s suffrage, and celebrates accomplishments enjoyed almost entirely by white women. This scrubbing of the historical record not only hid the contributions of black suffragists, but also rendered the historiography of the movement incomplete. The nearly five-decade struggle fought by African American women to exercise the right they had *ostensibly* acquired in 1920, but were *actually* denied by Jim and Jane Crow, was effectively excised from the story of how women—all women—acquired the right and ability to cast their votes.^{16, 17}

This conversation around race, power, and history began to simmer again in the wake of the 2016 presidential election, as feminist groups activated to oppose positions taken by the new administration. The discussion percolated into the popular discourse around the organization of the Women’s March. During this very public dialogue, “fourth wave” feminists carried a concept which originated in CRT scholarship—intersectionality—out of academia and into the mainstream, challenging those in power to consider how race, class and sexual identity operates to structure the allocation of power in political movements, and mitigates the rewards successful movements deliver to the less powerful.^{18, 19} In the run-up to the centennial, some historians and heritage professionals began to apply this lens to their commemorative programs, working to present the stories of how women from different racial and class backgrounds contributed to the fight for the franchise, and to include accounts of how access to the vote may varied across these groups. For example, the Turning Point Suffragist Memorial broke ground in Virginia in November of 2019 promising to include the story “all women,” very specifically calling out the contributions of African American women and recognizing that their stories had been ignored in the past.²⁰ In September 2019, the National Archives livestreamed a panel discussion on the role of African American women in the suffrage movement.²¹ The Smithsonian’s *Because of Her Story* flipped the script, privileging the individual stories of black women suffragists in its virtual exhibits, while acknowledging not only the fact of their neglect in previous iterations, but also its intentionality.²² It is in response to this movement and in this spirit that the story of Bess Francis Coleman, O.D., the first documented African American woman to be licensed to practice optometry in the United States, appears alongside

the personal stories of other women optometrists in this second of two issues of *Hindsight* celebrating women in optometry.²³

Chasing Phantoms: Using Biography and Microhistory to Detect African American Women in the Historical Record

Biography and memoir are the bread and butter of *Hindsight*; every issue published in the last four years has featured at least one biographical sketch or personal narrative—usually more than one. There are two good reasons for this. First, the history of optometry in the United States is relatively young; the profession was not clearly defined until the end of the first two decades of the last century. Therefore, many of our authors have been witnesses to, or participants in, the events about which they write, or at the very least are contemporaries of the key players in historical events. This means that writing optometry history is often an autobiographical endeavor informed by experience, or a biographical one sourced from memories of mentors, colleagues and friends. Second, as much as “the politics of narration”²⁴ lend biography the power to reinforce the dominant narrative, biography also can be used to push those usually relegated to the margins of the story to the center. Just as feminist historians have used the biographies of figures like Stanton and Catt to bring women’s stories into focus within traditionally androcentric historical treatments, optometrists—who rarely see themselves represented in the larger body of the history of medicine²⁵—have used biographies of “significant” individuals to validate their experiences, valorize the collective story of the profession, and reinforce their professional pride and identity.

Optometry historians have also drilled down occasionally to celebrate the stories of white women optometrists through biography, especially those who were the thought to be the first to achieve professional distinction, such as Gertrude Stanton²⁶ (the first licensed woman optometrist), or Elva Cooper²⁷ (the first woman to preside over an AOA Congress). As with black women in the history of suffrage, however, women optometrists of color like Bess Coleman have seen very little coverage in the pages of *Hindsight* or elsewhere. Part of this is because there have been historically fewer black than white optometrists, male or female, in the history of the profession. While those identified as “firsts” are sure to be superseded, one of the earliest documented black African American optometrists in practice was St. Louisan Ira Cooper who graduated from the Northern Illinois College of Ophthalmology and Otology (later Northern Illinois College of Optometry, or NICO) in 1905, although he only practiced for one year before joining law enforcement. In 1915, another Missouri native, William Riley, set up a successful practice in St. Louis and later attempted to enter politics as the first black member of the Missouri State House of Representatives.²⁸ However, neither Cooper nor Riley were licensed at the time of their entry into the profession, since optometry was not legislated in Missouri until 1921.²⁹ The first African American man believed to have been licensed to practice optometry in the United States was William Hiram Lawson who earned his degree in Toronto in 1912 and set up practice in Detroit in 1916.³⁰ By the time Dr. Lawson retired in the 1950s, there were still only 100 black optometrists in the United States³¹ out of roughly 23,575 registered³²—only four tenths of one percent—and most of these had received training courtesy the GI Bill in the decade following the end of World War II. That number had only risen to 175 by 1968, and by this time many were no longer in practice.³³ The number of black women in practice was even smaller; by 1978 of the roughly 500 women licensed to practice optometry, only 20 were African

American.²³ It is understandable that such a miniscule presence overall would make the footprint of a black woman optometrist the historical record almost imperceptibly small.

There were also limitations on participation in organized optometry which would have precluded the presence of African Americans from the record. While the AOA has never barred African Americans from membership, some local affiliates have. For example, Dr. John L. Howlette became the first African American optometrist in Richmond in 1952 but was denied membership in the Virginia Optometric Association (VOA) because of his race.³⁴ The South Carolina Optometric Association explicitly limited membership to white optometrists well into the 1960s.³⁵ Even participating in national AOA events was difficult for African Americans in Southern states—in both 1940 and 1942, AOA Congresses held in Virginia and Texas were inaccessible to black members because the event venues in Richmond and Dallas refused them entry.³⁶ Between 1958 and 1965, the commemoration of the American Civil War and the battle over school integration shared the public sphere, and the presence of white supremacy's most enduring symbol—the Confederate flag—became a frequent artifact at both regional and national events.³⁷ Needless to say, a black woman may have found little purchase within the local affiliate organizations, or within the AOA's women's club, the Woman's Auxiliary to the AOA, at least until the late 1960s. The inaccessibility of organized optometry to black optometrists, aggravated by their small number and the structures of segregation in society at large, makes detecting African Americans in the usual places—trade and professional journals, organizational records, school catalogs, and even popular periodicals—next to impossible before 1969.

Given these circumstances, there is understandably little about Dr. Coleman in traditional sources. Even her novelty claim as the first black woman optometrist is buried in a thin biographical file which has been languishing for decades in the biography files held by the International Library, Archives & Museum of Optometry (ILAMO). Dr. Coleman's file contains an unpublished transcript of an oral history interview conducted with her adult son, and a brief professional biography of her late husband, pharmacist John Bradford Coleman, Jr. According to the transcript, the Coleman family left their native Kentucky in the 1920s, eventually heading north to Chicago, and then west to Denver, Colorado by mid-century.³⁸ In John Coleman, III's recollection, his mother practiced optometry for a little more than 15 years and held claim to neither a specialty, nor an innovation, nor any record of service in a professional optometric association. Optometry was her second career, and not her first choice; she was a school teacher for 13 years before she attended optometry school and maintained an abiding interest in the practice of law, even though her husband discouraged her pursuit of it as a career. In her son's memory, his mother was intelligent, inquisitive and dynamic, but his most vivid recollections are of her activities in the domestic sphere and her career in optometry seems largely unremarkable.

In order to fill in the holes in Dr. Coleman's story it is necessary to look in non-traditional sources and employ different modes of discovery. Even in the best of circumstances, historical research on individual African Americans can be difficult. The patriarchal structure of society—from naming conventions to property laws—makes finding black women in the historical record even more daunting. Vital records documenting Dr. Coleman's early life are scarce and much of her professional activity is only discernible through contextual clues from the places she lived and the company she kept. Even after

enlisting the assistance of two archivists on the ground in her home state of Kentucky, one colleague finally exclaimed in exasperation that Bess was “a ghost.”³⁹ Although still challenging, finding Bess Coleman is far less problematic in 2020 than it was in the 1980s when her file in the ILAMO was first created. The popularity of genealogical research has spurred collaborations between repositories like NARA and private companies like Ancestry to digitize government records and historical newspapers, making African American history easier to research. The rough outline of Bess Coleman's life can be colored in using records such as United States census rolls, draft registration cards, and Social Security death indexes. Likewise, the work of amateur genealogists aggregated in online databases like *Find A Grave* provide invaluable data on birth and death dates as well as kin connections. The efforts of librarians, archivists and public historians to digitize or otherwise provide remote access to periodical collections such as the African American newspaper *The Chicago Defender* have opened a window through which we can see how Dr. Coleman's achievements were recognized within the black community, and get glimpses of her activities between major life events. Digitized maps held in state and local libraries provide a geographic rendering of social life that illuminates how race and class divisions were written into the landscape—and together with vital records allow us to see where the Colemans fit within that structure. (Figure 1) *Google Books*, *HathiTrust* and other grant-funded digitization projects have made government reports, white papers and other grey literature, such as the publications produced by the Works Progress Administration, available to add detail of how resources were differentially allocated to communities of color and to provide contemporary descriptions of the areas in which Dr. Coleman lived and worked. Likewise, archival collections containing reference to the work of black women activists with whom Coleman socialized, such as educators and activists like Lucy Harth Smith, Lizzie Fouse, Theda van Lowe and Belle Jackson, provide a context for understanding the significance and scale of her activities. Finally, digitized oral history collections from the 1980s and new recording projects provide remarkable quotidian detail from inside the communities in which the Colemans operated. The personal biases inherent in these individual accounts provide their own counter-narrative, allowing us to have a more balanced view of African Americans than are available in mainstream literature depicting life during Dr. Coleman's active years only through white eyes.

All of this is to say that while these biographies are hard to construct in the usual ways, the effort to find new ways of doing so is important. Stories which are at first challenging to discern can emerge as the backbone of a larger narrative. That is, biography can form the scaffolding for a microhistory; a life story which may seem insignificant on its own placed within a larger context may “illuminate the relations of power and conventions of representation to show why subalterns' stories are so very hard to reconstruct in the first place.”²⁴ While biographies have been eschewed by academic historians in the past as the work of popularists, the rise of microhistory has in many ways rehabilitated them. Doing history “from the ground up” means finding the individual as a way to explore the whole—something even more important and more difficult when both the individual and the whole are under-represented in the literature at the start. As historian Jill LePore explains: “if biography is largely founded on a belief in the singularity and significance of an individual's life and his contribution to history, microhistory is founded upon almost the opposite assumption: however singular a person's life may be, the value of examining it lies not in its uniqueness, but in its

exemplariness, in how that individual's life serves as an allegory for broader issues affecting the culture as a whole."⁴⁰

The Significance of Bess Coleman's Story: Professions as Portals to Power

Dr. Coleman's biography is significant to the history of optometry for more than her status as the first black woman to enter the profession. Specifically, her career reveals how the profession provided a mechanism for the upward mobility of individuals within marginalized communities at a pivotal time in American history and allows the exploration of what conditioned the success of specific groups in this pursuit. Moreover, her story exemplifies the way in which some black women used the "ideology of respectability"^{41, 42} and gendered social welfare organizations to leverage power and navigate racism in American society at large as well as sexism within the black community. During her relatively short career, Bess Coleman established herself as a specialist among the African American medical professionals in her community through her connections in black women's educational and social organizations. In this way, Dr. Coleman's story reveals a parallel—if separate—set of structures and ideologies to those in play in white optometry. In these ways, Coleman's personal story demonstrates how gender, race and class intersect to shape women's careers as well as the professions they choose, then and now.

During the last half-century, social historians and sociologists have published substantial research documenting the negative aspects of the professionalization of trades, including its use as a tool for excluding women and minority groups from certain vocations. A more optimistic view has emerged in some quarters, as articulated by economist Rebecca Roiphe who argues that professionalization also at times allowed members of some groups relegated to the margins of the economy—women, ethnic minorities and immigrants—to "transcend their role as outsiders and see themselves as architects of a new and just social order," and gave them a way to "translate their experience on the periphery into a new vision for the American polity."⁴³ Roiphe's analysis, however, may have more application to the story of white minorities and immigrants whose ability to assimilate was not hindered by racism. The story of Bess Francis Coleman, optometrist, and her husband John Bradford Coleman, Jr., pharmacist, is more nuanced.

Between 1910 and 1940, southern blacks migrated en masse to northern cities seeking both economic opportunity and an escape from the increasing racial violence—legal and illegal—which served to enforce Jim Crow laws. This "Great Migration" brought about a cultural and intellectual flowering in communities of black migrants epitomized by the Harlem Renaissance.^{44,45} At the same time, this three-decade era also saw the solidification of Jim Crow, a resurgence of the terrorist activities of the Ku Klux Klan, brutal racially-motivated massacres—dubbed "race riots" in the national media—lynchings, and the cold, calculated imposition of covenant laws codifying segregation in both southern and northern cities alike.²² During the Great Depression, racial tension began to build in northern cities, as competition between African Americans and uneducated whites for increasingly rare, unskilled and low-skill jobs became acute. The backlash eroded many of the gains realized by working class African Americans and motivated a second Great Migration of African Americans into the western states.^{47, 48} In this process of moving up the socioeconomic ladder and out of the rural South and, later, the urban North, a new class of black professionals and small business

owners were able to carry the gains they had made forward into the post-war era. This cohort of educated, middle-class African Americans became an aspirational example that motivated the Civil Rights Movement to come.⁴⁹ The Coleman family experience is a microcosm of this larger phenomenon and Bess Coleman's biography gives us insight into how educated African Americans used the prestige of professionalized fields like optometry to grow and sustain their economic progress despite the persistence of discrimination. Furthermore, their story throws into relief the power of phenomena like colorism and self-selection to create stratification within black communities in response to the larger social forces.⁴⁸

Bess Coleman's biography also demonstrates how the Progressive Era shift in attitudes about women's employment crossed racial lines and widened opportunities for black and white women professionals. It is undeniable that educational, legal and social barriers were thrown up to impede African American participation in health care professions and that black optometrists encountered similar obstacles to those in other disciplines. However, like their white, middle-class sisters who used the National Federation of Women's Clubs as the model for the AOA's Woman's Auxiliary to assert themselves, African American "clubwomen"—members of the constellation of local and regional organizations which proliferated in the periphery of the National Association of Colored Women (NACW)—used their social capital as educators and caregivers to "create a sphere in which they could claim political power as . . . leaders of their community and as mediators between the white power structure and the black community."⁵⁰ Just as the Auxiliary spearheaded the establishment of free clinics and school-based vision screening programs in low-income communities across the nation,⁵¹ so did the NACW establish a Health and Hygiene Department that enlisted black women healthcare professionals in public health programs to serve black communities across the nation.^{50, 52} Bess Coleman operated at the center of these activities in both Illinois and Kentucky, keeping company with some of the most powerful "clubwomen" in the country and bringing optometric care to bear in those communities who needed it most.

At the same time, Bess Coleman's life story also lays bare the persistence of gender roles and expectations that even now continue to hinder the upward mobility of women in many professions, revealing the special complexity of African American women's experience in the early twentieth century. In this way, the biography of Dr. Bess Coleman demonstrates the way in which the middle-class, African American professional women in the interwar years helped to set the stage for the feminist movements of the subsequent two decades. The details of Coleman's story resonate as a snapshot of an African American woman navigating successfully through a time of tremendous change. For all these reasons, the biography of Dr. Bess Francis Coleman is exemplary.

BESS ANDERSON FRANCIS COLEMAN (1893-1967)

Life at the Center: The Boundary between Black and White in the Colorized South

Bess "Bessie" Anderson Francis, was born in Harrodsburg, Mercer County, Kentucky in August of 1893,^{38, 53} the eldest of six living children of Charles W. and Emma Lucy Francis.⁵⁴ At the turn of the century, Harrodsburg was a bustling railroad town of approximately 3,500 people, situated only four miles from the geographical center

Figure 1. (Top) **Sanborn Fire Insurance Map of Harrodsburg, KY 1908.** New York: Sanborn Map Company. Available from: University of Kentucky Libraries, Special Collection Research Center. (Right) **Census Map of Chicago: Negro Population, 1934.** From: Abbott E. The Tenements of Chicago, 1908-1935 Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1936: 18-19. Available from: Newberry Library, Chicago I 0896 .013. (Bottom) **Denver Redlining Map (Residential security map), 1938.** Home Owners' Loan Corporation. Federal Home Loan Bank Board. Image Courtesy Western History and Genealogy, Denver Public Library.

of the state. In his 1907 report to the Kentucky Department of Agriculture, President Cornelius D. Thompson of the Harrodsburg Commercial Club (and later Mayor) described it as a “beautiful and substantial town,” home to: “...more than fifty business houses, seven White and three colored churches, two newspapers, two flouring mills, electric light plant, ice factory, water works, laundry, two coal and lumber yards, two tobacco rehandling houses, [a] grain elevator of 150,000 bushels capacity, poultry packing establishment, an opera house and city hall costing \$18,000.00. It has three banks and a complete abstract office.” He goes on to boast that Harrodsburg: “... offers superior social religious educational and commercial advantages. Beaumont College, Harrodsburg Academy and a public graded school and private teachers contribute to these advantages. It has twenty miles of macadam streets with four miles of cement walks and has a number of residences costing from \$8,000.00 to \$40,000.00.”^{55,56}

At the time of Thompson’s report, Bess’s parents were owner-operators of a barbershop located near the corner of Broadway and North Chiles Streets in downtown Harrodsburg, occupying a second-floor space above and a storefront adjacent to a busy lunchroom and grocery. The family home was located around the corner,⁵⁷ on a busy stretch of Chiles bounded by Factory Street to the north and bisected by the Town Branch stream. The Town Branch meandered through the middle of town⁵⁸ precipitating sinkholes and seasonal flooding⁵⁹ which interrupted Thompson’s “macadam streets” and “cement walks.” In 1910, the construction of the Harrodsburg sewer system added to this a series of capriciously placed pits which proved treacherous for Harrodsburg’s pedestrians.⁵⁶ At least two of the facilities detailed in Thompson’s glowing description—the Electric Light Plant and Ice Factory—were walking distance from Bess’s front door, as were livery and the public “colored” school about a quarter of a mile walk west where Lexington Street dead ended into Middle Lane.

The Legacy of Colorism

The Francis family home and business were located at the precise center of downtown Harrodsburg at almost the exact boundary between the poorest members of the African-American community in the western edge of town, and the more affluent white neighborhoods that sprawled to the east.³⁰ Although there were outliers, the social divisions between the black and white residents in Harrodsburg was, like most of the United States, more or less reflected in its geography. (Figure 1) These patterns were made all the more stark over time by Jim Crow laws which mandated racial segregation in housing, education, transportation and social interaction.⁶⁰ For this reason, the Francises’ situation at the center of town is an instructive metaphor for understanding their position within the South’s racialized socioeconomic structure—a position which would underpin the success of Bess and her siblings.

Courtesy of the system of colorism which permeated the American South in the early twentieth century, the Francis family likely had fewer obstacles on the path toward social and economic success than others within the black community.⁶¹ In the meticulous notation of census takers between 1900–1920,^{53,54,57,62} the extended Francis family is often described as “mulatto”—a designation applied to African Americans of fair complexion. The few available photos of Bess Francis support the presumption that the Francises were light-skinned; even early African American researchers looking to identify black graduates in the class photographs of Bess Coleman’s alma mater failed to find her among the portraits of white students. The

term “mulatto,” like all racial categories, is a social construct with little real biological meaning⁶¹—the way it was arbitrarily applied by the census employees illustrates this well; those perceived as “mulatto” were sometimes identified within biologically related family groups who were labeled “black” or “negro” by the same recorder. Moreover, because of the constantly evolving instructions to enumerators about how to record color or race, “mulattos” were sometimes sifted into ever-more discrete categories such as “quadroon” and “octoroon,” only to be recast as generically “black” ten years later. In 1870 and 1880, the instructions to marshals admonished them to “be particularly careful in reporting the class Mulatto. The word is here generic, and includes quadroons, octoroons, and all persons having any perceptible trace of African blood. Important scientific results depend upon the correct determination of this class.”^{63, 64} By 1890, enumerators were instructed to make further determinations of blood quantum, labeling those with “any trace of black blood” as “octoroon.”⁶⁵ In 1900, there was an abrupt consolidation of those with “any negro descent” into “black,”⁶⁶ only to revert back to a two-category classification system, sorting people as either “black” or “mulatto” in 1910 and 1920.^{67,68} Whatever the recording methods, the extreme attention to gradations of skin color emphasizes the social, political and economic meaning of complexion both within Kentucky society and in the nation as a whole.

As mixed-race people with very fair complexions, the Francises very likely benefitted from a “preference for whiteness”⁶¹ that offered light-skinned African Americans a degree of privilege under the auspices of a system of white supremacy which used a purely subjective graduated scale of skin color as an organizing principle. This privilege manifested as greater opportunities for education and accumulation of wealth which, in turn, reinforced their elevated status in both white and black society. This often placed these individuals in mediating positions between the black and white communities, and at a powerful intersection of the social order.

In the oral histories collected from octogenarian Harrodsburg natives in the 1980s⁶⁹ informants consistently describe the complicated implications of fair skin as a legacy that conferred privilege, but also was a source of psychological pain. In the antebellum period, Kentucky slaveholders routinely and intentionally abused female slaves for the purpose of generating more slaves and, thus, more revenue from the sale of “desirable” light-skinned progeny.^{42(p. 30)} These individuals were favored as house slaves, putting them in closer proximity to slaveowners. This, along with the decreased social distance their light-skin suggested to whites, exposed them to continued harassment both at the hands of male slave owners as well as white women who perceived them as a threat to their own tenuous hold on power within the patriarchal system⁷⁰—a fact that made many descendants understandably reject any connections with their white biological relatives. However, it sometimes also gave them access to certain benefits. For example, they tended to have more access to learning a trade, greater access to formal education and were more likely to be granted manumission than darker-skinned slaves working in the fields. This allowed them some to “leverage” their privilege “into better economic statuses after emancipation.”⁶¹

As a result of the deliberate practice of miscegenation, the population of “mulattos” in Mercer county was relatively large on the eve of the Civil War, as was a growing community of free people of color.^{71,72} In 1850, only nine percent of the slave population and 21% of the free people of color were designated “mulatto.” By 1860, this number had grown to 23% and 34%, respectively.⁷³ Both during

slavery and after emancipation, the privilege and lenience afforded light-skinned African American southerners over their darker-skinned brethren—fraught as it was by different forms of exploitation—sometimes resulted in a differential accumulation of economic and social capital which was concentrated in these communities. In the words of Robert L. Reece, those identified as “mulattos” were often: “poised to assume the best of the opportunities available to African Americans. During slavery, that would mean privileged positions on plantations or freedom. During Reconstruction and Jim Crow, that would mean slightly better occupational status.”⁶¹ Bolstered by intermarriage, this relative privilege persisted for several generations and in many ways gave rise to the black middle class as these individuals self-selected to leave the South and pursue opportunities elsewhere^{48(p. 29)}—a model which the Francis children would all come to fit.

By 1910 identification as “mulatto” was rare in Harrodsburg according to the census; only five percent of the town’s “colored” population (which, in turn, accounted for 14% of the total population) were given this designation.⁷⁴ However, where it was assigned it was strongly correlated with literacy, professional status, home ownership and political power. Of these so-called “mulatto” families, many owned businesses and some enjoyed rather exceptional positions within local government, acting as liaisons between the white and black communities. Although she denied any knowledge of white ancestry, Joseph Franklin Young’s daughter made a point of describing both her father and her mother, Florance Utley, as “very fair-skinned,” “proper,” and insisted that they were the descendants of house slaves rather than field hands.⁷⁵ Young also reported significant tension between her mother who interacted with white families in Lexington as an independent entrepreneur, and the black women occupying lower-status positions as servants in white homes. Joseph, an insurance broker for the black-owned and operated company Mammoth Life and Accident based in Louisville, was one of two African Americans who served on the Harrodsburg Town Council, holding the position for seven terms between 1901 and 1915, alongside grocer Ben McCown.⁷⁶ The Youngs were the only African American family to own a home in the white part of town in 1918. Young and his wife were both literate, as were their parents, his father—who became a town pariah in both white and black communities according to Florence—reputedly having gained both education and prestige by acting as a “slave buyer” during the antebellum period. Joseph Young held positions in multiple organizations and maintained strong relationships with white power brokers in the town as well as high status within the black community. After Joseph died, a white attorney and family friend, Mr. James, assisted Young’s widow in her fight against her white neighbors’ attempts to claim slices of her property adjacent to their own, allowing her to sell the home at a tidy profit and move the family to Lexington—and into another community of “upper class blacks” where they would eventually become neighbors with Dr. Coleman.⁷⁵

Whether or not the Francis family descended from free people of color is unclear, but it is very apparent that they shared some of the same intergenerational privilege afforded to their descendants. Even the eldest of the Francis, like the Youngs, were literate at a time when more than 40% of Kentucky’s African-American population could neither read nor write.⁷⁷ Francis also appears to have had social capital within the black community, traveling in the same social circle as Young and McCown. All three men belonged to the Kentucky Grand United States Order of Colored Odd Fellows⁷⁶—the largest

African-American fraternal organization at the time—where Charles held the position of Deputy Grand Master (and violinist).^{78,79}

Privilege and Professions

In this liminal space, etched onto the landscape at the center of the 1908 map of Harrodsburg, the Francis family’s status was also cemented by their entrance to professions that formed the first rung on the ladder which eventually allowed them to access a gateway to the black middle class. At a time and place where most African Americans held jobs in service or as manual laborers (and often both),⁵⁶ Charles Francis was a member of a relatively high-status profession. As a barber in 1900, he practiced one of the few vocations open to African American men which provided both a measure of independence from and prestige within the white community. It was also one that forced him to walk the line between “challenge and accommodation” to white supremacy.⁸⁰ In the antebellum period, black barbers—free or slave—traditionally catered only to a white clientele, and racial attitudes post-emancipation forced black barbers to continue this practice in order to survive economically well into the first three decades of the twentieth century.⁸¹ Barbering had a very special meaning for black men in Harrodsburg. Here in 1832, Robert James Harlan, the son of a white slave owner and a slave woman, was the first free man of color to set up his own barbershop downtown. Harlan, who later gained national fame as a civil rights activist and politician, moved away to Lexington by 1840 and sold his shop, but his legacy was powerful for Harrodsburg’s black residents and lent additional shine to the profession of barbering.^{82,83}

As the Jim Crow era waxed, black barbers were faced with a choice. Increasing social pressure for whites to exclusively patronize white service providers, onerous licensure laws, artificially high insurance premiums offered to black business owners threatened to push black barbers out of business. Some shifted their businesses toward the new community of African-American workers and professionals, eventually placing barber shops in the center of black male culture and making them loci for grassroots organizing and launching pads for political power.^{81,84} By the 1930s, Charles Francis’s barbershop over the lunchroom at Broadway and Chiles served only a black clientele under the new ownership of Mr. Fred Taylor, whose wife Janetta was a schoolteacher.^{59,85} Jim Green, a white man, opened his barbershop around the corner on Main Street just off Broadway in 1920,⁸⁶ which by 1930 served only whites. But Charles Francis had lived and worked at the blurry intersection between these two periods, hovering tenuously between the hope of Reconstruction and the full implementation of Jim Crow. Between 1910-1920, several statutes prohibiting miscegenation and integrated housing were put on the books in Kentucky, but it would take time for these to take hold in Harrodsburg where the antebellum social order persisted and strict segregation was hard to implement given the forced intimacy of such a small community. Placing one foot squarely on either side of the color line, Francis maintained enough neutrality to prosper in his downtown barbershop.^{78,79}

Education and Upward Mobility

In her youth, Bess attended the West Side “Colored” School in Harrodsburg.^{53,57} Erected in 1903,⁸⁷ the “new” school building was situated at the far western edge of town so as to comply with the mandate that it be located “a suitable distance”^{77 (p.19)} from the white public school on the east side. In a town only five-miles square, compliance with this law was no easy feat.⁸⁸ Described by one former

student as a “two-story shack”⁷⁵ with a wood stove and an outhouse, the school that served Harrodsburg’s black children sat directly behind the city dump,⁵⁹ making it hard to imagine just how poor the “old” school building must have been. Here Bess received her elementary education, going on to become a public schoolteacher at West Side by 1910, then under the supervision of principal A.L. Garvin.^{38,54,87} The record of her teacher training has been lost to history, but a law passed in 1908 required all teachers in Kentucky schools to attain training and certification.⁸⁹ The “Day Law,” passed earlier in 1904, prohibited integration in institutes of higher learning precipitating the founding of new schools to educate African American teachers.⁹⁰ In 1906, the state opened two normal schools for African Americans—one in Bowling Green and one in Richmond. The Kentucky Normal and Industrial Institute for Colored Persons in Frankfort (Kentucky State University) had been educating black teachers since before the turn-of-the century. Private colleges, like Berea College south of Lexington, and Simmons University in Louisville, also provided teacher training. It is likely that Bess completed instruction at one of these institutions by the time she turned 18 years old and began her career as a schoolteacher.

Despite the multiple barriers to education faced by African Americans, the Francises constantly pushed against the boundaries in pursuit of higher attainment. Every member of Bess’s generation in her family was not only literate, but also highly educated and imbued with a value on education and the acquisition of knowledge and professional status. Teaching for African American women—like barbering for black men of an earlier era—was a profession that came with authority and, perhaps more importantly, respectability, not only within the black community but also in relationship to the white power structure. The ideology of respectability was (and is) a powerful and persistent philosophy within the black community aimed at “racial uplift” through education, economic success, and “moral” behavior characterized by restraint, public service, and religious devotion.^{41, 42} Born of Victorian sensibilities revolving largely around gender roles which cast women as the keepers and purveyors of social morality, the ideology of respectability was a powerful cultural phenomenon in both black and white society in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, making it an abiding precept in support of the suffrage movement. This also made it an ideal tool for black women to gain power within their own communities and signal their status to whites,⁹² which they did in the Progressive Era by entering “helping professions” like teaching, health care and social work and then representing their communities as leaders in social and professional women’s clubs.⁵⁰ Not surprisingly, colorism also permeated these organizations.^{42(p. 99)} Thus, Bess Francis, daughter of a literate, “mulatto” barber, became a teacher following the example of other women of her class and color in Harrodsburg, beginning with Mercer County’s first African American teachers, Sallie Ann Taylor and Susan Mary Craig^{93,94}—both mixed-race, “house slaves”—and followed by women like Janetta Taylor, the wife of a barbershop owner. It was in Bess’s role as teacher that she would make some of her most important connections that would provide lasting support during both of her careers.

For the Francis-Coleman family, color, education and professionalism were the three pillars of their identity which allowed them to maintain their status and motivated them to reach even higher. In an oral history interview in 1985, her son John pushed back against the interviewer’s supposition that going to college must have been unusual for African Americans in his parents’ youth:

“everybody... was going to school, college or something. ... My mother’s sisters and brothers all went to college for one thing or another... there was a lot of educated people - law school, college, even that far back. ... education... was part of the culture.”³⁸ To Bess’s son, the suggestion that education might be “unusual” was ridiculous—he had never known anything different. Bess herself not only had two careers, but maintained her intellectual interest in law, curating her Blackstone’s law textbooks long after she retired from optometry. Despite medical difficulties in later life, she occupied her retirement years by rewiring and re-plastering the family home, reading “night and day,” and writing short stories.³⁸ It is these qualities—the tireless intellect and constant hunger to improve—that animate John’s memory of his mother and define his family history.

Both Bess and her younger brother, Charles, pursued the few professional opportunities open to African Americans through black colleges and universities. While Bess became a certified teacher and taught at the West Side School, Charles, Jr. also entered education, becoming a school principal in Bath, KY.^{95,96} Both Bess and Charles married members of their own class who were equally ambitious. Charles’s wife, Lelia Iles, also a teacher, became a civil rights leader and went on to champion housing equality and became Dayton, Ohio’s first licensed African-American realtor. In 1923, Bess married John Bradford Coleman, Jr.³⁸ Like Bess, Coleman had grown up in Harrodsburg, attending West Side Colored School, but also the private Wayman Institute run by the African Method Episcopal (AME) Church. Coleman went on to attend the Kentucky Normal and Industrial Institute in Frankfort, and the historically black Clark College in Atlanta, Georgia. Also like the Francises, the Colemans identified as mixed-race, claiming Crow and Blackfoot ancestry on his mother’s side.⁹⁷ In 1918, according to his draft registration card,⁹⁸ John had been living in Louisville working in the business district on Old Walnut Street as a “real estate dealer” near the headquarters of Mammoth Life and Accident,^{96(p. 21)} sending money home to his parents in Harrodsburg. Coleman clearly had seen the path to success for African Americans through professional employment. He went on to earn his pharmacy license after completing the requirements at Meharry Medical College in Nashville, TN in 1922.^{99, 100, 101}

The Great Migration: Moving Up and Out

Just as for Bess’s brother Charles, whose eventual move north led to his service as president of the Dayton’s National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, the migration north was also a critical component of the Francis-Coleman family’s economic success and professional advancement.⁹⁶ In this way, they are a classic example of what W.E.B. du Bois termed the “talented tenth,” the well-educated professional class of African Americans whom he imagined correctly would come to occupy a new black elite.¹⁰² Economists have long linked the Great Migration directly to black-white income convergence across all groups of migrants, but there is substantial evidence that migrants like the Colemans—well-educated, mixed-race professionals—made up a larger portion of those who pulled up stakes and moved north, and were the biggest beneficiaries of the advantages which that move provided.⁴⁴ This “self-selection on the basis of education and ambition”^{48(p.29)} perhaps caused Harrodsburg to lose a disproportionate number of its so-called “mulatto” population—almost half—as compared to those defined as “negro” between 1910 and 1920.³⁰ Bess Francis and her husband John were part of that change.

According to his son, in his younger days John had worked at pharmacies on the Atlantic seaboard where he made the acquaintance of pharmacist Edward Priestly, a South Carolina native and graduate of Howard University's pharmacy program.^{38,103} The couple's first stop outside Kentucky in 1923 was West Palm Beach Florida's vibrant African-American community, where John found employment at Priestly's pharmacy, the storied Palm Garden Drugstore at 3rd and Rosemary Streets,^{38,104} (Figure 2) the neighborhood patronized by the famed "mulatto" mobster James Jerome "Cracker" Johnson whose Rosemary Street empire epitomized the Jazz Age.^{103,105,106}

In 1925, the Colemans made the move to Chicago, Illinois where they eventually opened three pharmacies in Chicago's Bronzeville neighborhood,^{38,97,107} also known as the "Black Belt" because of its largely African-American population.^{108,109} (Figure 1) In Chicago the Colemans eventually found housing in the historic Michigan

Figure 2: The Palm Garden Drugstore, West Palm Beach, FL, circa 1930. *Black Roots. The Palm Beach Post (Sunday Edition); 05 Feb 1984; p. c10. Available from: Ancestry/Newspapers.com.*

Boulevard Garden Apartments, a housing complex erected in 1929 by philanthropist Julius Rosenwald for working-class African American families migrating to Chicago from points south. Rosenwald, President of Sears, Roebuck & Company, collaborated with Booker T. Washington and used his vast fortune to fund the Tuskegee Institute and other medical programs for African Americans. Rosenwald also set up a fund to build a string of rural schools for black children throughout the southern United States, including a new high school in Harrodsburg completed in 1930.^{109,110,111} Bessie's son John described the housing favorably: "Rosevald [sic] was a great philanthropist . . . He built a huge complex - it was a block square with a garden inside. *It was supposed to have been for underprivileged Blacks but it was such a nice building that the professional people moved in.*"³⁸ [emphasis mine]. It was in Bronzeville and the Rosenwald building, an incubator for the black professional class, that the Colemans began to truly prosper.

A Clubwoman's Work: Leading and Serving Family and Community

While many of the characteristics of Bess' story were shared by her husband, gender created a very specific set of circumstances that differentiated her experience and connected it to larger trends and themes in women's history. It does not appear that Bess worked as a teacher either in Florida or Chicago, likely because the period between 1923 and 1932 were taken up with matters related to

childrearing. After suffering two miscarriages, Bess gave birth to John, III in Chicago on August 8, 1927.¹¹² Although her younger sister Hazel was residing with the family in 1930¹¹³ and could have provided some help, Hazel was working as a maid in a hotel while living with the Colemans and was likely contributing financially more than with in-kind services. While John B. Coleman's pharmacy career thrived, Bess's professional aspirations ran into familiar gendered obstacles, beginning with childcare and (almost) ending with her husband's opposition to pursuing her dream of going to law school. John's objection to law is mysterious, but according to her son, when his father failed to support her desire to become an attorney, she looked for another option that might be more appealing to him but equally intellectually stimulating for her. She lit upon optometry while observing her husband's eye exam: "she watched the optometrist and she said 'I can do this' so he sent her to Northern Illinois College of Optometry"³⁸(NICO).

The identity of John Coleman's optometrist is unknown, but there were limited options for African Americans seeking eye care in Chicago during that time. The number of black optometrists were few in the 1920s—even Dr. Lawson advertised in *The Defender* to attract those able and willing to take the train to Detroit.¹¹⁴ There were at least two local white, Jewish optometrists who advertised in the paper,^{115,116} but serving a black clientele could be tricky. In some parts of the country, treating black patients was downright dangerous, as Chicago optometrist M. G. Kahn discovered when he was abducted, whipped and dumped on the side of the road after attempting to examine African American patients in Texas.¹¹⁷ There were also the annual free clinics offered in the city and surrounding suburbs run by the Illinois Optometric Society which promised "no discrimination . . . and full attention . . . to Race and white patrons alike."¹¹⁸

The two most likely candidates, however, were Dr. Herb O. Eagan and Dr. Frank G. Smith. Eagan split his time between Chicago and his parents' native Belize (then British Honduras), but he regularly visited his brother in Chicago and attended the Illinois and Chicago Optometric Society meetings as well as the occasional AOA Congress.^{36,119} In 1929, he was in town for a meeting and was residing only a ten-minute walk from the Rosenwald apartments.¹²⁰ Smith claimed to be the first African American graduate of NICO and was the most prominent black optometrist in Chicago.¹²¹ His office on State Street was only one mile north of the Coleman residence. A native of Alabama, Smith graduated from Fisk University in Nashville, TN the same year that W.E.B. DuBois matriculated as a freshman.¹²² Smith's first career, like Bess's, had been as a schoolteacher and high school principal at the prestigious Pearl school. Smith was not content to rest on his laurels, and concurrently pursued degrees in pharmacy and medicine at Meharry Medical College while he taught. In 1919, he was forced to resign his position at Pearl after delivering a stirring commencement address that called out growing racism faced by black veterans of World War I. Like so many others, Smith came to Chicago to reinvent himself and here applied for admission to the NICO. At first, his application was discouraged by President George McFatrigh who feared other students would protest studying alongside a black man. Handsome, fair-skinned, and charming, the polyglot Smith concocted a scheme to pass as Cuban, taking the surname "Santos" and effecting an accent. McFatrigh agreed to keep his secret until his graduation in 1921¹²³ at which time Smith apparently revealed his true name and background. Smith's own granddaughter, Isabelle King, who grew up in a multi-generational home headed by her grandparents, would go on to become a well-

regarded Chicago optometrist in her own right by 1941.^{124, 125} While either Eagan or Smith could have examined John, doubtless Smith would have proven a persuasive mentor for Bess and an ally against any concerns John may have had about the suitability of the field for a woman.

When Bess entered the optometry program at NICO in 1932, the Colemans were living at 367 East Oakwood Boulevard, almost exactly one mile north of the school's new Drexel Boulevard campus and one mile south of the pharmacy location at 3256 South Indiana.^{113, 126} The new NICO under President, Dr. W.B. Needles, was a state-of-the-art, 12,000 square foot teaching facility equipped remodeled lecture halls, administrative offices, an impressive clinic with almost 20 exam rooms, laboratories, a surgical theatre, and an auditorium and gymnasium. At this time, the 2000-hour curriculum could be completed in two years leading to a doctor of optometry degree for \$225 in annual tuition and fees. (Figure 3) While there is no way to know for certain if Bess held status as the only black woman student at NICO, if it was known at all it may have been met with resignation by the administration and the student body, particularly given her fair skin, refined manner and advanced age. After all, the color barrier at NICO had already broken years before and the location of the new campus in the middle of Chicago's majority-black South Side portended an increase in black students eventually. In any event, Dr. Coleman graduated on June 1, 1934, beginning her practice just shy of her 41st birthday.¹²⁷ An elegant profile photo of Dr. Coleman taken by celebrity photographer Maurice Seymour appeared in *The Defender* that month captioned: "Wife of John B. Coleman, well-known Chicago druggist, who received her degree from the Northern Illinois College of Optometry on June 1. Mrs. Coleman is the first woman of the Race to be graduated from this college."¹²⁸

Dr. Coleman initially set up her practice in the Indiana Avenue pharmacy,^{38, 126} situated down the street from the offices of *The Defender* headquarters at the cultural heart of black Chicago.¹²⁹ At this location, she could have—and did for a time—serve the eye care needs of Chicago's African American community well. It was not long, however, before she ended up back in Kentucky. Only one year later, in May of 1935, *The Defender* reported that Bess was "now practicing in Lexington, KY" and had just received notice of passing the Illinois Board examination "with high marks." *The Defender* declared her "the

Figure 3: Sophomore Class, Second Semester, Northern Illinois College of Optometry, Chicago, IL, 1933. From *Focus*, p. 44. Bess F. Coleman is seated in the front row, fifth from the left at center. Image courtesy Illinois College of Optometry. Available from: www.archive.org.

only Race woman registered optometrist in the United States."¹³⁰ The 1939 census and Lexington City Directory confirm that Bess had indeed relocated with her 12-year-old son to the Brucetown neighborhood of Lexington where she lived with her own 67-year-old mother, Emma, and her 90-year-old father-in-law, John B., Sr., in a rented home at 685 North Upper Street. Here, she is listed as a "doctor of optometry in private practice," and the sole breadwinner for the family.^{131, 132}

The return to Kentucky seems curious considering her husband John remained in Chicago to run the family pharmacy, making their period of estrangement so attenuated. However, there are clues that reveal how the decision may have been reasonable from both a personal and a professional perspective. It does appear that, in keeping with gender norms of the era, Bess was performing the bulk of the emotional labor and caregiving for the family. In light of this, her son's recollection was that his asthma was a primary motivator for the initial move to Lexington seems a good explanation, given how densely-populated Chicago struggled with periodic epidemics of influenza and experienced bitterly cold winters made more bearable only by coal-fired heat which was accompanied by terrible air pollution.³⁸ It also appears that her first few years in Lexington may have been seasonal, or at least broken up by frequent visits to Chicago. After the first announcement of her new Kentucky practice in the spring of 1935, her "return to the city" and opening of her practice on North Upper was announced in *The Defender* in the fall of 1938.¹³³

The need for Bess to provide elder care may have strengthened the case for her return as the decade progressed. The elder Francis-Colemans, both widows, were getting on in years and, as the eldest daughter, Bess could have been expected to take on the role as family matriarch. Furthermore, she had maintained strong connections both to her family and to Kentucky's education community while in Chicago, returning to Harrodsburg in 1930 to celebrate the grand opening of West Side's new Rosenwald-funded high school with former colleagues, students, family and friends.¹³⁴ In 1935, her brother Charles was still living with his family in Bath and had become a school administrator.⁹⁵ Her younger brother Bradley's daughter, Lorraine, graduated from Kentucky State University in the spring of 1935 and went on to become a teacher at West Side School back in Harrodsburg.¹³⁵

The relative social and professional opportunities Lexington offered Dr. Coleman were also compelling. While there were few black optometrists in the United States in 1935, Chicago had a disproportionate number and the new-and-improved NICO was churning out more every year. For this reason, her practice faced stiff competition in Depression-era Chicago. In Lexington, by contrast, even in 1938 *The Defender* reported that "Dr. Coleman is the only optometrist of our group in the city"¹³³ and, therefore, probably the only practitioner serving Lexington's black community at all. Finally, the pull of Lexington's tight-knit network of clubwomen may have been an irresistible draw. Lexington had the second largest population of black women's clubs in Kentucky at this time and the movement was at an early apogee.^{42 (p.58)}

As an educator, Bess would have been a member of the Kentucky Negro Educational Association (KNEA)—one of the most influential and powerful black organizations in the state—and she obviously continued to nurture these relationships even in Chicago, picking them up when she returned to Lexington.¹³⁶ Bess would not have had

to look far to stay connected even in Chicago; The Phyllis Wheatley Club was one of Chicago's oldest African American women's clubs and perhaps one of the more enthusiastic proponents of the ideology of respectability in thought, word and deed. The Wheatley Club⁵² was active in finding housing and work for southern migrants at the time the Colemans arrived in the city, having established a home for single women and girls in 1922 only a half mile east up 33rd Street from the Indiana Avenue pharmacy.¹³⁷ The Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA), was about an equal distance away south on Indiana Ave.¹³⁷ By 1930, the YWCA had begun to integrate leadership positions and find services for girls among Chicago's black doctors. At the annual NACW meeting held in Chicago in 1933, fellow Kentucky-native-cum-Chicago-migrant Dr. Mary Fitzbutler Waring was elected to the first of her three consecutive terms as NACW president after serving more than two decades as the director of the NACW division of Health and Hygiene.^{96, 138} It is improbable that Dr. Coleman would have been unaware of these activities, and it is likely that she was actively involved.

As in Harrodsburg, the geography of Dr. Coleman's Lexington neighborhood illustrates her embeddedness in the community of clubwomen and black professionals, as well as the entrenchment of class and color systems within this group. In the early 1920s, the black areas north of downtown Lexington were generally considered "slums." According to one report Brucetown and surrounding neighborhoods were "well known to school physicians and nurses, to family welfare and baby milk supply workers, to public health visitors, to the hospitals and sanatorium [sic] and clinics."¹³⁹ While it is true that public works and services in these neighborhoods were poor in 1925, the 1930s saw improvements through the efforts of the Works Progress Administration and the diligence of black health care and social workers. Harrodsburg native and Lexington migrant Florence Young⁷⁵ described North Upper Street during this period as an enclave populated by a mix of working-class whites families and well-educated African Americans including physicians, like Dr. Bush Hunter,¹⁴⁰ prominent ministers from the Asbury AME church, and professionals like Jordan Jackson, the attorney and newspaper man-turned-undertaker whose wife Belle Mitchell was a renowned educator and abolitionist in an earlier era.^{141, 142} In 1938, a writer for the WPA's American Guide Series described North Upper Street as "one of the Negro streets of Lexington, where live many of the business and professional Negroes of the city. The progress that the race has made toward home ownership and in all lines of employment is here well-indicated. Here the streets are well paved, houses are mostly frame construction, more often than not owned and kept in good repair."¹⁴³ The author goes on to say that Dunbar High School, located down the block from Dr. Coleman's residence, was considered "one of the best Negro schools in the state," and described the new St. Paul AME church at 253 North Upper as "commodious." He also notes that the Phyllis Wheatley Branch of the YWCA in the neighborhood acts as a "center" for "the activities of the young Negro women of the city interested in association work."

The presence of black physicians seems to have been a defining feature of Dr. Coleman's neighborhood—and perhaps what drew her to it. Charles Jones, whose mother was a teacher at Dunbar and involved with the Women's Improvement Club noted that North Upper Street at this time was home to the "majority" of Lexington's black physicians and attorneys.¹⁴⁴ Indeed, less than a mile from this stretch of North Upper on North Broadway, Dr. Harriett Beecher Stowe Marble, the first African American woman pharmacist, established

her residence in 1921. In 1930, Beecher turned her house into office space and a pharmacy for black physicians, becoming the center of Lexington's black health care infrastructure.^{145, 146} Increasing the quality and quantity of health care services to African American communities was critically important during this period, and Dr. Coleman's optometry services would have had been a significant boon to black health care in Lexington. Jim Crow laws segregating health care and education available to African Americans impacted not only how many practitioners would or could provide care to the community, but also the standard of care they received. In Lexington, as elsewhere, African Americans received sub-standard care in white hospitals and clinics when they were treated at all, and black facilities were often poorly staffed and under-equipped. By 1920, the number of medical schools training black physicians had shrunk from eight in 1910 to two, and they often lacked adequate resources.¹⁴⁷

Aggravating this problem was predatory care. Just as optometrists railed against the harm to public health cause by unscrupulous and untrained practitioners, black patients suffered an additional burden of racism which encouraged the use of African American populations as test subjects.^{148, 149} Optometry was not free of this problem, although regulating the practice as a profession provided some help in drumming out unethical doctors. In 1937, *The Journal of the Tennessee Optometric Association* received an "interesting letter" from a doctor lamenting his move from Mississippi to Memphis where ethical practice standards were supported by legislation. The author was incensed that "after spending hundreds of dollars" he could not continue his "research work" as he had done in Clarksdale, MS "where I could get the Negro population to practice my experiments on with the assurance of the law there that I would be protected against damage suits should there be any."¹⁵⁰ This doctor, by his own admission, left practice and cited the "Progressive" movement toward developing and codifying professional standards as the cause. This predilection of some white doctors for using unwitting African Americans for experimentation made widening the pool of qualified black doctors even more crucial.

Dr. Coleman's activities in Lexington were sanctioned by and documented in *The Chicago Defender* by Lucy Harth Smith,¹⁵¹ the principal of Booker T. Washington Public School and a well-known activist and clubwoman.⁴² Harth Smith was one of the earliest members of the KNEA and served frequently as an officer. She also held leadership positions in the NACW and was a founding member of the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History. In June of 1935, Harth Smith reported as a worthy news item Coleman's presence at Lorraine's graduation from Kentucky State College.¹³⁵ In February of the following year, Dr. Coleman's address on the "history of Negro music" to the City Federation of Women's Clubs made Harth's column.¹⁵² This presentation was one of many organized to celebrate "Negro History Week"—a program that featured a veritable rogue's gallery of famous clubwomen from the NACW, the KNEA, the YWCA, the AME Church and the Women's Christian Temperance Union.¹⁵² In November of 1938,¹⁵³ Coleman accompanied her old friend and colleague from West Side School, Theda van Lowe,^{96, 152, 154} now the principal of Frederick Douglass High School in Lexington, to speak to the Eastern Kentucky Education Association about "The Changing Elementary School." In 1939, she spoke alongside YWCA secretary Mrs. Alice S. Onque, in honor of Woman's Day at the historic Asbury ME Church.¹⁵⁵ These clubwomen played an important role in improving access to health care for and in providing education to the black community. (Figure 4) In Lexington, Dr. Coleman's associates set up a

Figure 4. Cover of *The Kentucky Club Woman*, June 1946, the journal that documented the activities of Kentucky's African American women's clubs. Image courtesy the Lexington Public Library. Available from: www.lexpublib.org/digital-archives.

variety of programs to improve the health of African American children.^{42(p. 222)} For example, Lucy Harth Smith and Theda van Lowe spearheaded the establishment of a summer health camp^{42(p. 234)} to ensure that children not in school received adequate nutrition during the summer months, raising funds through the women's clubs for the project. The YWCA and the Phyllis Wheatley club also held regular health and hygiene courses directed at children and mothers.¹⁵⁶ These reports not only provide evidence of Bess Coleman's involvement in the society of clubwomen, but also how she likely used this association as well as her experience as an educator to promote her optometry services through lectures on the importance of children's vision.

In this regard, Dr. Coleman was operating in congruence with white optometrists in Kentucky and elsewhere, who were availing themselves of the Women's Club Movement to "spread the gospel of Optometry." In the 1930s, the Woman's Auxiliary to the AOA was hitting its stride, making in-roads with school and church organizations. In December of 1936, the local affiliate publication, *The Kentucky Optometrist*, issued a "Woman's Auxiliary Edition" to encourage support and participation in the organization by all women relatives of optometrists. From their point-of-view, optometrists were suffering from "discrimination" at the hands of

ophthalmologists and were engaged in a fierce publicity campaign to legitimize optometry with the public. It was the Auxiliary's stated purpose to promote optometry within the community of clubwomen: "In daily club and social contacts, the women can do much towards bringing a knowledge of modern optometric service to the attention of mothers and school authorities."^{157 (p.1)} In the words of the club's biggest male booster, Dr. A. M. Skeffington, the goal of legitimizing optometry was "a woman to woman crusade."^{157 (p.7)}

For both the Auxiliary and the African American clubwomen, membership among the middle-class was presumed; the ethic of service and "uplift" was the seen as the duty of the well-educated and virtuous to the poorer classes. For African American women, this middle-class status was often also associated with complexion consciousness. In her thesis on middle-class black women in Kentucky, McDaniel notes that "color prejudice was pervasive in many black organizations."^{42 (p. 99)} It is evident the in biographies of many of the most prominent clubwomen in Lexington that a fair complexion was a distinguishing feature, and one that could be traced directly back to multi-generational inheritance of wealth and prestige enabled by early access to emancipation and education. Even still, African American clubwomen used their power to the benefit all black women. In Lexington, this meant defending against racial violence and discrimination with their votes and their voices, which they were not shy about using when provoked. It also meant improving the health and well-being of the next generation. In this way, too, Bess Coleman, was a perfect example of the way that gender, class and race operated to position some women of color to enter professions which provided portals to personal and socioeconomic power.

Into the West: The Legacy of Bess Coleman, O.D.

In 1941, the world was on the brink of change. The United States had entered World War II, an event which many believe was a catalyst for the Civil Rights Movement in the post-war era. In this year Dr. Coleman left Lexington and, after a 6-month interlude in Arizona where the dry air proved good for young John's lungs, she settled near acquaintances in arid Denver, Colorado, retiring from practice due to her own ill health.³⁸ In 1949, the elder John sold his Chicago pharmacy chain and joined his family in Colorado, partnering with another African American pharmacist to open the Standard Pharmacy on 19th and California Streets.^{38, 97, 158} The family settled in a home at 23rd and Lafayette Streets in the historically black Whittier neighborhood north of downtown Denver where they would remain until the end of their lives.

By the time Bess had left her Kentucky practice and put her caregiver years behind her, she began to struggle with two other common conditions linked to women at middle-age: hypertension and anxiety. According to her son, the main reason for her early retirement was chronic high blood pressure, but she had also developed agoraphobia which rendered her unable to even venture out into the backyard of their home. This, in turn, lead to a dependence on phenobarbital: "she took loads...until she couldn't take it any more."³⁸ In the run up to the mid-century epidemic use of the psychotropic Miltown, phenobarbital was an early drug of choice for curing women's psychological ailments, which were presumed by Freudian practitioners to have been brought on by an excess of professional ambition and curable through medication and confinement to the domestic sphere.¹⁵⁹ As the wife of a pharmacist, Bess no doubt had little trouble acquiring the drug, but as related by her son, she eventually was able to give it up and went on to live a

long—if secluded—life. In 1967, Bessie Coleman suffered a heart attack and died at the age of 74.³⁸ Her body was returned to Kentucky and was interred in the Maple Grove Cemetery in Harrodsburg.¹⁶⁰

CONCLUSION

Dr. Bess Coleman's career in optometry foreshadowed the success of black women economically later in the century. She retired early in the 1940s, but black women would continue to realize gains from the pathway women like her forged: "In the 1940s the average real weekly wages of Black women nearly doubled, thereby narrowing the racial wage gap... by a full 15 percentage points. At the same time, the proportion of employed Black women holding formal sector jobs increased from 27 to 50 percent. ... The 1940s marked a dramatic departure from African-American women's experiences earlier in the twentieth century, as they took a large first step in economic equality."⁴⁹ It is at least partially attributable to the relative openness of professions like optometry to minority women that this success was realized, even as the racial barriers persisted. As illustrated by her story, black women seized opportunities where they could find them to push through the small apertures in the "wall" of discrimination. Through women's organizations, they then banded together hand in hand to pull others through and make real the *Kentucky Club Woman's* motto to "lift while we climb." In the biography of Dr. Bess Francis Coleman—teacher, doctor and clubwoman—one woman's story can add new color to the history of women in optometry and provide a more expansive view of the history of the profession as a whole.

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