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Black Women and Oberlin College in the Age of Jim Crow

David Diepenbrock*

Introduction

This essay focuses on the experiences of Black women at Oberlin College from 1882-1934. I examine student attitudes and administrative policies towards Black women, and investigate how Oberlin students and administrators were both influenced by and reacted to the ideology of white supremacy that was so pervasive during that period in U.S. history. My objective is to place Black women at the center of historical analysis, to reveal how they were affected by and responded to the racism they encountered at Oberlin. I demonstrate that Black women have been dynamic actors who supported one another in challenging the Oberlin community to actively support their presence at the College.

I agree with a number of historians who have criticized the concept of a single women's community because it minimizes the importance of race and class in differentiating women's experiences.[1] At Oberlin, individual and institutional racism prevented Black women from establishing a bond of sisterhood based on common experiences of patriarchal oppression with their white sisters. Racism made Black women's experience fundamentally different from their white sisters; indeed, the very racism of some white women at Oberlin, meant that for many decades sisterhood could not exist between Black and white women. Consequently, evidence of an interracial sisterhood only surfaced after white women began challenging the racism which affected all aspects of Black women's lives.

Founding Oberlin and the Decision to Admit Blacks

Oberlin College, was established in 1833 on an undeveloped site just ten miles south of Lake Erie in Lorain County, Ohio. The school's founder, John Shippard, "Lamenting the degeneracy of the Church and the deplorable condition of our perishing world, and ardently desirous of bringing both under the entire influence of the blessed gospel of peace" sought to establish an institution that

would train ministers who would save from damnation the souls of those living throughout the Mississippi Valley.[2] Shippard sought to establish an educational institution based on the honored Protestant values of frugality, temperance, and physical labor.[3] Students were to "simplify diet and dress" and work four hours per day to defray the costs of their education and to "promote muscular, mental and moral vigor."[4]

These intense religious sentiments which gave birth to Oberlin were a product of the religious revival, now known as the Second Great Awakening, which began in Cane Ridge, Kentucky, in 1801, and spread South and West, then East and North, culminating in New York state in the 1820s. Revivalism was strongly anti-elitist. Its preachers rejected the doctrine of predestination, and stressed free-will. They also rejected excessively intellectual sermonizing, preferring to appeal to the heart by using a highly emotional style of preaching.[5]

Despite the commitment of Oberlin's founders, they experienced serious difficulties in realizing their vision for the school. The school was in a desperate financial situation within a year of its founding, and was unable to even pay the full salaries of its three faculty members.[6] Oberlin survived largely as a result of the recruitment of thirty-nine students from Lane Seminary in Cincinnati who had withdrawn from the school after its administration refused to allow them to discuss the issue of abolishing slavery. Because of their anti-slavery sentiments, they enjoyed the sponsorship of several wealthy New York abolitionists. This sponsorship enabled them to demand that Oberlin make several changes before they would adopt the school as their new home. They demanded that one of their favorite teachers from Lane be placed on the Oberlin faculty and that another be made President of the College; they also wanted Charles Finney, one of the great revivalist preachers of the day, who lived in New York, to be

made Professor of Theology. They demanded complete freedom of speech on all reform issues; and they also demanded that Blacks should be admitted along with whites.[7]

The proposal to admit Blacks to the school created strong opposition among both students and trustees. Many expressed fears that the school would suddenly be flooded with Black students. Several women students from New England declared they would "wade Lake Erie" and leave the school, rather than attend school with Blacks.[8] A poll of student opinion on the issue indicated that the school's white female students strongly opposed the admission of Blacks fifteen to six; the white male students narrowly favored their admission, twenty to seventeen.[9] The Oberlin trustees accepted all of the Lane student's demands, except the one calling for the admission of Blacks, which was tabled. They were reportedly quite fearful of bringing Black men and White women into such close proximity.[10] Nevertheless, after acrimonious debate, the board passed the policy allowing Blacks to attend the school, by a vote of 5-4 in February 1835.[11]

This decision transformed Oberlin. The substantial support that the abolitionists who had backed the Lane rebels now provided to Oberlin put the school on a solid financial foundation. Oberlin also benefited from conservative suppression of anti-slavery activity on campuses throughout the East in 1834-45. Many students from campuses where anti-slavery activity was barred and faculty who had been dismissed for supporting the abolitionist cause traveled to Oberlin where academic freedom was now guaranteed.[12]

The impact of this influx of abolitionists was dramatic. By June 1835 an Oberlin Anti-Slavery Society was established with 230 members.[13] By 1840 Oberlin had become an important stop on the underground railroad; the town helped hundreds of slaves reach freedom each year.[14] In the early 1840s a school was

established to educate the town's growing Black population. Oberlin students taught at the school. In 1858 white and Black Oberlin residents rescued a young Black man from jail who had been seized by slave catchers. After spending nearly three months in jail for violating the Fugitive Slave Law, these Oberlin students received a hero's welcome by the town and College.[15] Just one year later, three Oberlin citizens died as martyrs to the anti-slavery cause after assisting John Brown in his attempt to inspire a slave uprising at Harper's Ferry, Virginia.[16] Anti-slavery sentiments were so strong in Oberlin before the Civil War that few students who entered the College "escaped complete conversion to the cause."[17]

Oberlin in the Age of Jim Crow and Booker T. Washington

By 1870, slavery had been abolished and Black men had been granted the right to vote. Most white abolitionists believed their goals had been fully accomplished. Even though southern whites were re-establishing political and economic control over Blacks through violent mob actions and new discriminatory laws, northern determination to impose a new order of racial equality was all but gone by 1872. The severe economic recession of 1873 preoccupied northern whites; few protested the removal of the remaining federal troops from the South in 1877. Additionally, a series of Supreme Court decisions in the 1870s and 1880s limited the ability of the federal government to protect Blacks from discrimination. The Supreme Court's 1896 decision in Plessy v. Ferguson upheld the legality of segregation based on the doctrine of separate-but-equal enabling the White South to formally relegate Blacks to second-class status.[18] This system of legalized segregation, known as Jim Crow, would define the Black experience for several generations.

Oberlin was not immune to these changes. In 1882 a professor protested plans to have a Black and white student live together.

During the 1882-83 school year a series of complaints by white women against eating with Black women compelled the Black women to eat by themselves. This was a significant departure from the past when Blacks and whites ate together. Consequently, when alumni learned of the segregation, they vigorously protested and forced the administration to take steps to reintegrate the dining hall.[19] The College was unable to prevent this problem's reappearance several years later.

In 1904, several New England women refused to eat near three Black women who boarded in their dining hall. They reportedly objected on principle to recognizing Blacks as their equals.[20] However, in contrast to the actions taken by College officials in 1883, the house matron accommodated the New Englanders by arranging things so that they would not have to eat near the Black women. Apparently this was not an uncommon incident because in 1908 the Dean of Women, Florence Fitch, felt compelled to lecture a group of white women about these issues. She told them that they were to treat Blacks as equals, interacting with them in their houses, in lectures, and concerts, as they would with white women. She also expected them to stop their habit of leaving seats vacant next to Black women at social functions.[21]

Between 1904 and 1910, white students consistently barred both Black women and men from the school's literary societies. These societies played a central role in student life at the time. Indeed, Mary Church Terrell, one of Oberlin's most well known Black graduates, stated that without the speaking skills and training in Parliamentary Law she gained from her membership in one of these societies while at Oberlin between 1879 and 1884, her leadership abilities would have been seriously handicapped.[22] (Terrell went on to become the first Black woman to sit on a board of education, and was the first president of the National Association of Negro Women.) When alumni learned of these incidents in the

College's alumni newsletter, they vigorously protested and pressured both College officials and students. As a result, one of the men's societies, Phi Delta, re-admitted a Black man they had refused earlier, and dropped their proposed debate topic: "Resolved that the present system of coeducation of colored people at Oberlin be abolished."[23] However, it does not appear that this pressure benefited Black women. Both Mary Church Terrell and a local paper reported that Black women no longer applied for membership because they preferred to avoid the humiliation of being turned down.[24]

Henry Churchill King, Oberlin's President from 1902 to 1927, attended Oberlin in the 1870s when abolitionist sentiments were still strong on campus. Although King realized that, "the attitude of the students toward the colored question as a whole is merely representative of the attitude of the whole north toward the question" these recent incidents represented such a departure from earlier days, that he felt compelled to make his sentiments officially known to the entire campus.[25] In a series of five speeches made during the winter of 1910-1911, King spoke about race relations in general and incidents of student prejudice in particular. In one of these he stated: "Men must find ways of rising above the natural prejudices of race and of working together with mutual understanding and respect."[26] King noted that the abolition of slavery had not eliminated the country's race problem; rather, the extension of the problem into the North had seriously constrained Black rights and opportunities. He also spoke uncompromisingly against the exclusion of Blacks from literary societies, stating, "I am not willing, that in this town and College that have stood thru history for the rights of man, irrespective of race, that we should reach in this question a merely tolerable situation, rather than one that is distinctly creditable to both races."[27]

King's idea of a situation "distinctly credible to both races"

was quite similar to the one articulated by Booker T. Washington. Both men felt it necessary to accommodate racism since little could be done to oppose it. Booker T. Washington stated in his famous Atlanta Compromise speech that, "In all things purely social we can be as separate as the five fingers, and yet one as the hand in all things essential to mutual progress."[28] Similarly, King told Oberlin's students that whites and Blacks could interact in business and public with mutual respect, courtesy and good will, while "In all personal and social matters let each, if he will, go unto his own company."[29] King added that differences between individuals and races always produce a certain amount of "friction," or "uncongeniality," "sometimes in such marked degree that some kinds of association, at least, are better not attempted."[30] Apparently, President King felt that the association of whites and Blacks in College housing and dining facilities were a source of such friction.

These concerns were at least partly responsible for the College's establishing an informal policy of not placing more than two Black women in any single dorm.[31] This policy, however, created some real difficulties for Black students. Since the College could not accommodate all students, white or Black, on campus, most stayed in private houses or privately operated boarding homes. Locating such lodging was complicated for Blacks because as early as the mid-1880s many white townspeople would not receive Blacks as boarders, and white students would often move out of a house rather than room with a Black student. The College attempted to make the search for housing easier by publishing a list of houses approved by the College for Black students.[32]

While Booker T. Washington's doctrine of accommodating racism may still have been prevalent among whites in 1913, it had become much less highly regarded among Black activists and leaders.[33] Indeed, Mary Church Terrell was outraged by the state of race relations at her *alma mater* when she visited the school in

1913 to enroll her daughter. Not only did she discover that Black women were segregated in certain dormitories, she also learned that they had not joined any of the literary societies for several years because they feared they would not be admitted. Mrs. Terrell felt that Black students, by creating separate societies of their own, were playing into the hands of white racism. She was also shocked by one College official who argued strongly with her that Blacks should not be allowed, "to board in any of the dorms and thus be brought into social contact with white students."[34] The following passages communicated Mrs. Terrell's disappointment with the College:

> If colored students are to be segregated at Oberlin with such a wonderful record as it once made for itself even in the dark days of slavery, it seems to me it would be wiser and kinder to exclude them altogether.[35]

> Although I try to be optimistic in this wicked and cruel country, in which everything is done to crush the life and break the heart of my unfortunate race, nothing has come so near to forcing me to give up hope, and resigning myself to the cruel fate which many people are certain awaits us, then the heart-breaking, back-sliding of Oberlin College.[36]

Resisting Segregation, Enduring Prejudice

The deterioration in the quality of life for Blacks at Oberlin continued to mirror the abysmal state of race relations nationally. The millions of Black-Americans who were compelled by crop failures, flood, and economic distress to migrate north, encountered tremendous discrimination and even violent attacks by whites.

Despite the violence and pervasive discrimination they experienced, many Blacks became increasingly militant. Some Black leaders advocated armed resistance to white mob violence, and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) defended in court those who used guns in self-defense. Blacks also attempted to stop lynch mobs by organizing support for the ultimately unsuccessful Dyer anti-lynching bill.[37]

Reflecting the national increase of Black resistance to racism, in 1921 several Black women pressured Oberlin to end segregation in campus housing.[38] Black women firmly refused a proposal by the College's Dean of Women to create a dormitory specifically for them; they firmly rejected any plan that would segregate them.[39] As a result of their pressure, these women were assigned by the College's "lottery" to three separate dorms, conforming to the College's unwritten policy of placing no more than two Black women in any building.

The response to these assignments reveals how inhospitable Oberlin had become for Blacks students. The Dean of Women reported that protests only died down after a "negligible fraction" of the white women in these dorms moved out. Even after the protests had died down, she reported that many white women remained dissatisfied with the new arrangements: "They do not really believe that it is best for either race to live in the same dormitory... they do not want social relations with the Colored race."[40] Records reveal that even the Dean did not believe white and Black women should live together. She was concerned that such arrangements would force personal intimacy between the races beyond their "instinctive limits." The Dean was also concerned that integrated dormitories would lead to miscegenation:

> We ask them (white women) to receive colored women as close associates in their student home, but would swiftly put a stop to the slightest intimacy between white girls and colored men. The white men find the presence of colored girls in a social group to be especially embarrassing. Oberlin has always counted upon the tradition or instinct which keeps the opposite sexes of widely diverse races apart. This is as it should be, but just how far may social relations be wholesome and natural between groups whose intermarriage would be disastrous?[41]

With such sentiments found among administrators, it is not surprising that white students could be strident in their racism. For example, an article in the Oberlin Critic reported that white women often refused to talk to or serve on committees with Black women, and made racist jokes about them.[42] However there were others who worked to improve the climate for Blacks at the school. In 1923, the YWCA formed an inter-racial discussion group to improve race relations on campus and educate the community about Black contributions to society and the barriers constructed by society against Blacks. The YWCA also formed the World Fellowship Committee which decided to investigate the position of Blacks and foreign students on campus.[43]

Even as Oberlin students formed organizations and discussion groups to address campus race-relations in a constructive fashion, elements of the world outside the campus, intruded. A letter appeared in an October 1923 issue of the Oberlin Review, describing the Ku Klux Klan as a peaceful organization, which "stands for welding the different nationalities and religions into one unified whole with a single objective: making America a fit place to bring

up children."[44] Another letter appeared two weeks later in the Oberlin Review, signed by three students who denounced the Klan, and criticized the Oberlin Review for even allowing the organization to use the paper as a forum for its views.[45] A few weeks later, 150 men attended a debate between a student from Oberlin's Graduate School of Theology and three members of the Klan who came from two nearby towns.[46]

These incidents document the renewed Ku Klux Klan movement that emerged in 1915, after several decades of inactivity, aided by the release of the historically inaccurate, idealized portrayal of the Klan in the D.W. Griffith film, Birth of A Nation. Through the 1920s, the revived Klan exploited the insecurities and fears of small-town Protestant America. In addition to Blacks, the Klan now added Catholics, Jews, and foreigners to the list of those who they believed threatened "White America." Before declining into relative dormancy by 1930, the Klan grew to over three million members in 1925.[47] The letter defending the Klan, noted above, was typical of the Klan's attempt to portray itself as a peaceful, fraternal organization committed to defending traditional American values, or as the organization put it, "one hundred percent Americanism." The organization's racism, xenophobia, and vigilantism were denied publicly. Instead, the Klan announced its commitment to helping communities rid themselves of "bootlegging, graft, night clubs, violations of the Sabbath, unfair business dealings," and the like. As the Klansman's letter in the Oberlin Review, stated: "the communities where the Klan is strongest have better law enforcement."[48] Posturing as a solution to the "great menace facing the American people today," the Klan attempted to gain public respectability.[49]

Without further documentation of student attitudes concerning the Klan, it is difficult to gauge the extent to which Oberlin students either supported, or denounced, the Invisible

Empire. The school has had a strong and long-standing commitment to the principal of free speech and debate. Some students may have been curious to hear about the Klan. Others may have hoped to see the Oberlin debater effectively counter the Klan's rhetoric. Regardless of these uncertainties, the mere fact that the debate occurred testifies to the strength the Klan enjoyed throughout the United States at that time.

The 1930'S: Fighting Discrimination

Nationally, the 1930s represented a watershed in race relations, after "a clear-cut reversal in the attitudes of white Americans started to become evident."[50] Although in several important aspects the New Deal was detrimental to Blacks as a group, the Roosevelts, Eleanor Roosevelt in particular, demonstrated sincere concern regarding the status of American Blacks.[51] As early as 1934, Eleanor Roosevelt began to show genuine concern about racial matters; she interacted with both Walter White, head of the NAACP, and Mary McLeod Bethune, former president of the National Association of Colored Women and founder of Bethune-Cookman College. Her support of Blacks emboldened liberal cabinet administrators to appoint Blacks to relief agencies, and to work harder to see that Blacks received a more equitable share of relief allocations. Eleanor Roosevelt's public endorsement of the Costigan-Wagner Act, which called for federal intervention in lynching cases where federal authorities refused to act, and her relationships with Black leaders and organizations "gave the civil rights movement a kind of crucial visibility and sanction it had never had before."[52]

A change also occurred in southern white women's attitudes during the 1930s. For the first time they began to understand that the ideology of protecting white women used to justify lynching, also oppressed them. Previously, Black women like Ida B. Wells,

had worked without any support from their white sisters to stop the lynch mob. Now however, when Mary McCleod Bethune publicly called on southern white women to assume responsibility for stopping the rise in racial violence, they responded by forming the Association of Southern Women for the Prevention of Lynching (ASWPL). However, despite the effectiveness of ASWPL in mobilizing support for the anti-lynching cause, its commitment to civil rights for Blacks was limited. ASWPL leaders were primarily interested in promoting racial harmony (not equality) and southern economic advancement. Consequently, when the ASWPL chose not to endorse the Costigan-Wagner Act in 1935 on the grounds that the Act would limit states' rights, and simply push violence underground, Black women once again felt pessimistic about the possibility of meaningful interracial cooperation.[53]

Oberlin's administration showed a similar lack of interest in improving the status of Blacks. President Wilkins, who assumed leadership of the school in 1927, was the first of Oberlin's Presidents who did not have any personal ties to the school's abolitionist past.[54] While Wilkins did not change school policies in relation to Black students, he was certainly less supportive of their presence and less concerned about the discrimination they experienced than his predecessors had been. A memo he sent describing how the College decided the appropriate number of non-whites to enroll is indicative of this:

> There are not quotas established for minority groups; the controlling factor being the number of any one group that can be assimilated in the student body without student consciousness that there exists such a thing as minority groups. If any so-called minority group were to become so large or *so vocal*, as to threaten the Christian character of the

> College or seriously threaten the democratic unity of the student body, this would probably serve as a break on the admissions for that group until such time as a critical balance had been restored.[55]

When it came to outright discrimination the President favored a slow, patient response. He attended a YWCA-YMCA Student-Faculty Conference in Detroit with a number of students in 1931. One of the more memorable aspects of their trip was that the hotel would not provide equal accommodations to Blacks and whites. The Oberlin delegation met to decide whether to stay or to accompany the Black students to another hotel which did not discriminate. The majority voted to stay at the Jim Crow hotel, leaving Blacks, accompanied by a few principled whites, to seek lodging elsewhere.[56] In a discussion held at Oberlin evaluating their experience in Detroit, some students complained that the fervent support for racial equality found at Oberlin during the days of the underground railroad had evaporated. Others suggested that those interested in reviving this spirit of old become involved in the campus YWCA's Interracial Committee which was studying the "racial problem at Oberlin." President Wilkins however, did not feel so strongly. He commented that, "We are at the place where power is generated, not at the place where it is applied. Everything must be done by us slowly, with resolute, relentless, patient intelligence."[57]

Under Wilkins, the College moved from accommodating racial discrimination, to total acquiescence. Mr. Wilkin's patience with racism meant that Black women and men continued to experience raw forms of racism at Oberlin. In the fall of 1931 Marjorie Witt, who had been at Oberlin only two weeks, quickly discovered how vicious some whites could be. One day when Ms. Witt sat down for breakfast, a white woman at the table became physically sick

and before leaving the table viciously shouted, "I can't eat with a nigger."[58] Years later, Marjorie Witt recalled that incidents such as these, combined with the College's policy of only permitting two Black women to live together in any dorm, created such a sense of isolation that Blacks sought out places of refuge from white hostility. Thomas House, a private boarding house for Black women, provided just such a refuge for Marjorie Witt. At Thomas House she was able to experience a sense of community, deal with feelings of isolation, and gather the strength necessary to go out and participate in campus life.[59] Such community support may have enabled her to take a leading role in a number of campus activities. For example, in November 1932 Marjorie Witt led a discussion of "the Negro problem in the United States from a cultural point of view, considering Negro drama, art, and music," at a meeting of the YWCA World Fellowship Committee.[60]

Unlike the tepid support of the College Administration for racial equality, Black and white students organized for racial justice on the Oberlin campus, in the town, and nationally during the 1930s. Black women were among those who challenged the College's discriminatory practices, protesting a local bowling alley which would not admit Blacks, and supporting the "Scottsboro Boys." The "Scottsboro Boys" were a group of nine young Black men who had been arrested for allegedly raping two white women. The case aroused indignation throughout the country and became "synonymous with southern racism repression and injustice."[61]

In the Spring of 1933, a large number of students and town residents formed the Scottsboro Action Committee. The Committee's officers included Reverend Brown of the Mt. Zion Baptist Church, and one of the four Black women in the class of 1934, Nerissa Brokenburr, who was elected Assistant Secretary.[62] At a mass meeting held in 1933, the Committee adopted a resolution condemning the lynchings and mob violence that had recently

occurred in Maryland, Missouri, and California. They sent the resolution demanding immediate action against these crimes to President Roosevelt, two Judges involved in the cases, and the press. A representative of the International Labor Defense committee, the legal arm of the Communist Party providing legal council to the Scottsboro defendants, spoke at the meeting.[63] In early March of 1934, the Oberlin Review published an announcement that the Committee on Negro Student Problems would be holding a meeting to discuss "the problem of racial discrimination in Oberlin and the general subject of race prejudice." The notice stated further that the same subject had been discussed at a meeting of the Radical Club the previous week, and that "many examples of racial discrimination in the town and on campus" were discussed. Students, "colored and white" were urged to attend and take part in the discussion.[64]

These discussions were quickly followed by action. The same month the discussions were held, members of the Radical Club challenged a town bowling alley's racist policies. Marjorie Witt, who had led a discussion of racial discrimination during the fall of 1932, participated in the protest. While a full description of the protest is beyond the scope of this paper, the College Administration's treatment of Ms. Witt is relevant. President Wilkins called Marjorie Witt into his office and told her that because she was a scholarship student, she should not participate in protest activities. The rationale Mr. Wilkins gave Marjorie was essentially that the College did not believe it should meddle in "town affairs", and so its students should not either.[65]

Challenging College Policies

As we have seen, Black women at Oberlin played important roles in interracial efforts challenging racism at the national and local levels in 1933 and 1934. In these cases they worked with other

students, men and women, white and Black. In the Spring of 1934, several Black women challenged the College Administration on a number of discriminatory policies. One of these women, Florence May, wrote a letter to President Wilkins in May 1934 after learning that student teaching positions in academic subjects were not available for Black women in the town's public schools. The College's policy was that students with a "B" average in their major could be placed as student teachers in town schools. However, Black students, even those with "A" averages, were not placed.[66] Ms. May asked the College to intervene or at least offer a "satisfactory explanation" because lack of student teaching experience "handicaps one in seeking a position after graduation". While she stated tactfully in the opening of her letter that, "It appears that the college itself has no objection to practice teaching on the part of the Negro students," she concludes by stating:

> We are asking that the College do what it can to remedy this situation ... We feel justified in asking this since Oberlin College admits us as students and we would appreciate having all the privileges which are due students, not because we are a minority group, asking for a special favor, but because we are "students."[67]

The Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences, C.N. Cole, supplied the president with the information necessary to respond to Miss May's letter. He wrote that there was only a "policy," rather than a "regulation," of discouraging Blacks from applying for the "privilege" of practice teaching because of the "embarrassment" it would cause both the College and student. Cole wrote that a Black woman would be "embarrassed" not only by the "natural difficulty" arising from her first teaching experience but also by the, "strained

attitude that would naturally arise from putting a colored girl in charge of a room in which the pupils were entirely or mainly white."[68] Dean Cole did note that there was a difference between Black Conservatory women doing practice teaching because they usually played the piano, while white women conducted. Dean Cole insisted: "This decidedly lessens the prominence of the colored girl. In the academic work, where the practice teacher is in complete charge of the room, the situation would be immeasurably different."[69] The Dean continued that the College would not attempt to force the School Board to allow a Black woman to teach because the Administration believed the Board would respond by discontinuing the "privilege" of practice teaching for white students as well. The only redress offered by the College to May was support for her application to student teach at Wilberforce, George Washington University, or the University of Pennsylvania. May was also told that although her application to Kent State and Bowling Green would probably be an "embarrassment to them," she might be able to make special arrangements to avoid "embarrassment."[70] It is worth noting that while similar circumstances certainly existed in towns throughout the country, in nearby Cleveland Blacks taught at predominantly white elementary and high schools by 1929.[71] In Oberlin, the School Board did not allow Black women to teach in the schools until 1940, after heavy pressure was applied by the town's Black community.[72]

On May 18th, two days after the letter just discussed, May again challenged the College on issues of racial discrimination by issuing a report co-signed by her Black classmate Narissa Brokenburr, and two white women. In the earliest documentable case of interracial cooperation in the period examined here, the women detailed several cases of discrimination. They reported an incident where two Black women were compelled to break a previous engagement so that they could accompany two Black men

to a social event at a dormitory. After the two Black couples arrived at the party "the white element stayed in one room and the four colored young people were allowed to play bridge in another room. Added to this the curtains were drawn."[73] Yet on another occasion, one house matron would not permit a Black woman to send an invitation to a "prominent colored student." The women's report also described how a house matron and the Dean of the Women's Office reached an "understanding" that Black women would not live at Lord Cottage any longer, because six Black women had lived there in 1932. The students stated that, "the matron seemed to be pleased by the fact that she did not have any more Negro students in her dormitory."[74] The report also stated that the Deans of the College and Conservatory requested that house matrons with Black women in their cottages ask the students to spend the Centennial Commencement week in Thomas House. "This house is a local colored home which the Deans recommend very highly to Negro girls despite its inadequacy." The women reported that the Dean cited parental disapproval as her reason for asking the Black women to move. Apparently she did not want alumni who would be visiting that week to feel any "friction" or "embarrassment" by staying in the same building with Black women. The women concluded their report by stating:

> We believe that the individual's attitudes and actions are largely influenced by the society in which he is placed, and that the attitudes and actions of the Oberlin deans and matrons exert a significant influence upon the individual student. We believe further, as you suggested to us, that race discrimination as such is caused largely by a lack of education or by improper education. Thus we believe that the Oberlin deans and matrons are not

> properly educated to uphold and to practice the ideal of recognizing their fellow man upon his personal worth, regardless of the accident of race ... It is our hope, that the proper use of (these reports) may serve to bring about a change in the attitudes and actions of students, and to bring about less embarrassment and fewer handicaps to those who are discriminated against because of race.[75]

In her report to President Wilkins in the Spring of 1934, the Dean of Women denied each of the charges raised by Florence May, Narissa Brokenburr, and their co-signers.[76] The Dean attempted to bolster her claim that there was "no discrimination against negro girls," by stating that one Black "girl" was unanimously awarded one of the six available scholarships for which ninety-five women had applied. The Dean stated, "To select a colored girl for a substantial gift, while denying eighty-nine white girls, hardly looks like discrimination against the colored people."[77] Despite the Dean's denials six years earlier, her annual report from 1940-41 indicates that some of the points raised by the four women in 1934 were well-founded. In this report the Dean wrote that "a great deal of tact" was necessary when dealing with housing Black women on campus because,

> A dormitory director is certain to object to having more than two colored students at a time because she fears that her house will be considered a dormitory especially for colored students. For the same reason she will also object to having colored students for two or three successive years.[78]

Evidence of further discrimination is shown by the Dean's terse comment that house directors "never want to have colored girls on the work force," and that "a great care has to be taken in regard to the distribution to these students in jobs." The Dean was particularly concerned about the so-called perennial problem of white women who in their "zeal" to uplift Blacks, made "very friendly" relations with Black janitors. The Dean stated: "One of the most difficult duties of a dormitory director and of a dean of women is to persuade a student, of a reforming temper, that relationships of this kind are unwise and serve no useful purpose."[79] Furthermore, interracial rooming arrangements between women were not permitted.[80]

The Dean also wrote that she had "taken pains" to get to know the Black women on campus and discovered they were intelligent, "well adjusted young persons who asked no favors, who had no sense of being discriminated against, and who were not aggressive."[81] She also stated that there had been no "difficulty" with Black women since 1937. Although it is unclear what "difficulty" took place in 1937, records survive of an event involving Florence May that occurred in 1934. The Dean believed that because of Florence's "radical involvements" she was guilty of assisting a fellow student who had broken the College's honor code. In this incident the Dean threatened to prevent Florence from graduating if she could prove Florence's guilt. The Dean, however, could not find any real evidence to support her allegations and so Ms. May graduated on schedule.[82] This story, like Marjorie Witt's, illustrates that Black women who actively challenged racial discrimination at Oberlin, often risked administrative harassment.

Conclusion

From the 1880s through the first decade of the twentieth century, Black women were socially ostracized and isolated by

whites at Oberlin. White women refused to eat, live, or interact socially with their Black sisters. During this period, Oberlin's alumni and the College's President objected to the exclusion of Blacks from the school's academic and social life. Yet, the school's administrators reflected the opinions of their day, in objecting to forcing personal contact between the races "beyond their instinctive limits." The first steps toward interracial cooperation were taken in the 1920s by the College's YWCA, and flourished during the 1930s as students challenged racism at the national and local levels. However, heightened concern about racial discrimination coexisted with continued racism among students and administrators.

The College's informal policy of limiting the number of Black women who were assigned to any particular College dormitory presented Black women with a real dilemma. They were forced to choose between living in a supportive, all-Black home off campus, or living within a predominantly white dormitory. Either option entailed a degree of social marginalization. For some Blacks choosing Thomas House meant accepting the desires of the Dean of Women, house matrons, and many white women, to exclude them from the College's social life altogether. Other Black women, felt that choosing to live in a predominantly white dormitory meant enduring cultural isolation.

The continuity in sentiments between President Wilkins and the dorm directors is remarkable. As noted above, under President Wilkins, Blacks and other minorities were only welcome at Oberlin as long as they did not disrupt the "Christian character" or "threaten the democratic unity of the student body" by becoming too "vocal" or growing so numerous as to prevent their being assimilated into the student body "without student consciousness that there exists such a thing as minority groups."[83] Similarly, the dorm directors feared that if more than two Black women lived in their houses, the dormitory would be "considered especially for

colored students."[84] Apparently, fears of being inundated by a flood of Blacks, so prevalent in 1835 when the school debated whether to admit Blacks, continued to exist 100 years later. By 1934, however, white women joined Black women in challenging Oberlin to overcome these fears, and its discriminatory policies.

Despite the ongoing presence of racial discrimination at the College, Oberlin's admission policy provided a valuable education to a small, but significant number of Black women during the age of Jim Crow. About 120 Black women graduated from Oberlin between 1870 and 1934, roughly 47 percent of the total number of Blacks who received an Oberlin degree.[85] Many of these women, feeling a deep sense of responsibility to their race because of their relatively privileged status, used that education to go beyond Oberlin and serve their own people and society as a whole.[86]

Notes:

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1. Nancy A. Hewitt, "Beyond the Search for Sisterhood: American Women's History in the 1980s", in *Unequal Sisters, A Multicultural Reader in U.S. Women's History*, Ellen Carol DuBois and Vicki L. Ruiz, eds. (New York, NY: Routledge, 1990), pp. 5-7.
2. Robert S. Fletcher, *A History of Oberlin College, From Its Foundation Through the Civil War*, (New York: Arno Press and the New York Times, 1971), pp. 110, 90.
3. Ibid., pp. 42-43.
4. Ibid., p. 90
5. John Mayfield, *The New Nation 1800-1845* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1991), p. 153.
6. Fletcher, *A History of Oberlin College*, pp. 101; 140.
7. Ibid., pp. 168-69

8. Albert McQueen, "Black Students at Oberlin", *Oberlin Alumni Magazine*, (June 1968), p. 18

9. Robert S. Fletcher, *A History of Oberlin College* , p. 171.

10. Ibid., p. 172

11. Ibid., p. 177. After casting the deciding vote to admit Blacks to Oberlin, John Keep, the President of the Board of Trustees, wrote a letter to Charles Finney which reveals a great deal about how the College would conduct itself in relation to Black student enrollment for many years to come. Keep wrote: "The division in the Board is occasioned by the *alleged* impropriety of permitting blacks to be in the same school with the whites. But the prime object of the movement (am I right?) is I suppose to train in a better manner for the ministry, holding yourselves ready to receive applicants irrespective of color - not as you are *reported*, to congregate such a mass of negroes at Oberlin as to darken the whole atmosphere." While the percentage of Blacks often exceeded 5% in the Conservatory, and sometimes reached nearly 20% in the Graduate School of Theology, the number of Blacks in the College was always quite small. Indeed, Blacks did not comprise more than 3-5% of the College's overall student population until 1964. Colored statistics re 1844-1935, Secretary's Office, Box 126, O.C. Archives; also see "Black Students at Oberlin" *Oberlin Alumni Magazine*, (June, 1968), p. 7.

12. Ibid., pp. 184-85

13. Ibid., p. 236

14. *The Crisis*, December, 1934 , p. 360.

15. Ibid.

16. Ibid.

17. Fletcher, *A History of Oberlin College*, p. 249.

18. The standard account on Reconstruction is Eric Foner's *Reconstruction, America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1988).

19. W.E. Bigglestone, "Oberlin College and the Negro Student, 1865-1940", *Journal of Negro History* (July, 1971): 198-201 and Geoffrey Blodgett,

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"Spiced Wine: An Oberlin Scandal of 1862", *Oberlin Alumni Magazine* (Feb 1970). These authors document several earlier incidents of racism directed towards Black women. I would like to note that this paper would not have been possible without the pathbreaking research of Mr. Bigglestone.

20. Ibid.

21. Idem, p. 202 citing *Cleveland News*, March 12, 1908; *Oberlin News*, March 17, 1908.

22. Idem, citing, Mary Church Terrell, *A Colored Woman In A White World*, (Washington D.C.: Ramsdell, Inc., 1940), p. 44.

23. Bigglestone,"Oberlin College and the Negro Student", pp. 203-204.

24. Bigglestone, "Oberlin College and the Negro Student", p. 204.

25. Ibid.

26. *Oberlin Review*, November 9, 1910, pp. 7-8.

27. Idem, November 16, 1910, p. 5.

28. W.E.B. DuBois, *Souls of Black Folks*, (New York: Bantam, 1989), p. 31.

29. *Oberlin Review*, 23 November 1910, p. 5.

30. Ibid.

31. Bigglestone, "Oberlin College and the Negro Student", p. 209.

32. Idem, p. 208

33. August Meier and Eliot Rudwick, *From Plantation to Ghetto* 3rd ed. (New York: Hill and Wang, 1976), pp. 223-231.

34. Mary Church Terrell, Letter to H.C. King, 26 January 1914, King Papers, O.C. Archives.

35. Mary Church Terrell, Letter to H.C. King, 24 January 1914, King Papers, O.C. Archives: 1.

36. Mary Church Terrell, Letter to H.C. King, 26 January 1914, King Papers, O.C. Archives: 5.

37. Meier, *From Plantation to Ghetto*, pp. 239-42.

38. Bigglestone, "Oberlin College and the Negro Student", p. 210.

39. Idem: 210-211 quoting Frances J. Hosford Memorandum, 1920,

Bohn Files.

40. Ibid.

41. Bigglestone, "Oberlin College and the Negro Student", pp. 210-211, quoting Frances J. Hosford Memorandum, 1920, Bohn Files.

42. Bigglestone, "Oberlin College and the Negro Student", p. 212, quoting, "Race Prejudice in Oberlin", *The Oberlin Critic*, 25 March 1922, pp. 1,4.

43. Bigglestone, "Oberlin College and the Negro Students", p. 212.

44. *Oberlin Review*, 23 October 1923, p. 2.

45. Idem, November 6, 1923, p. 2. These students respond to several points of misinformation in the pro-Klan letter. They state that the Klan, despite its denials did discriminate against Jews, Negroes, and Catholics. In response to the Klan's claim that it had never violated a "single act" of the Constitution, the students stated, "Any intelligent person will admit that the abridgement of an individual's personal rights by punishing for any act whatsoever without legal trial is a distinct and flagrant violation of the spirit and letter of the Constitution. That is what the Klan has done when it has taken the law into its own hands." The students also note that Klan members were convicted by the courts in both Oklahoma and Georgia, and that "many Klan officials were proven to have been implicated in many lawless outrages."

46. Idem, November 13, 1923.

47. David Chalmers, *Hooded Americanism, The History of the Ku Klux Klan*, (New York: Franklin Watts, 1981). See also Kenneth T. Jackson, *The Ku Klux Klan in the City, 1915-1930* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967).

48. *Oberlin Review*, 23 October 1923, p. 2.

49. David Chalmers, *Hooded Americanism, The History of the Ku Klux Klan*.

50. August Meier, *From Plantation to Ghetto*: p. 259.

51. The Agricultural Adjustment Act, whose goal was to raise prices for farm goods by limiting production, allowed southern White landlords to receive federal subsidies for idling land formerly worked by Black and

poor white tenant farmers. This was one factor which compelled thousands of Blacks to migrate north during the 1930s. Paula Giddings, *When and Where I Enter, The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America,* (New York: Bantam Books 1985), p. 218. The Home Owners Loan Corporation consistently designated Black neighborhoods as least desirable, thereby creating the system of redlining. The Federal Housing Association refused to recommend loans to redlined neighborhoods and even urged homeowners to use restrictive racial covenants. Roger Biles, *A New Deal for the American People* (Dekalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1991), p. 178.

52. Ibid., p. 219.

53. Giddings, *When and Where I Enter,* pp. 206-209.

54. Bigglestone, "Oberlin College and the Negro Student", p. 215.

55. Vice President, Letter to Mr. Joseph A. Baily (Editor and Publisher NEW VISTAS), August 8, 1945, Wilkins Papers, Negro Files. Emphasis Added.

56. *Oberlin Review,* January 16, 1931.

57. Idem, January 20, 1931.

58. "One of Ten Thousand Strong: The Story of Marjorie Witt Johnson, Oberlin Class of 1935." Unpublished Play by Mitty Jordan, p. 14.

59. Interview with Marjorie Witt Johnson, December 12, 1987. Black women at Oberlin were divided over the issue of Thomas House. As I show below, others felt that living there meant accepting segregation. This split between ardent interracialism and what might be termed cultural nationalism existed among the leaders of national Black organizations. In 1935, W.E.B. DuBois became highly critical of pursuing a policy of integration for its own sake; he left the NAACP that year, and called on Blacks to build up their own institutions. Similar differences of opinion were aired among Black women leaders when Mary McCleod Bethune's sought to withdraw the National Association of Colored Women from the predominantly white National Council of Women in 1935. Giddings, *When and Where I Enter,* pp. 210-215.

60. *Oberlin Review,* 6 December 1932.

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61. Dan T. Carter, *Scottsboro, A Tragedy of the American South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), p. 50, cited in Mark Naison, *Communists in Harlem during the Depression* (Urbana, University of Illinois Press, 1983), p. 57. The first complaint against the nine defendants, aged 13 to 21, came from several white boys they had thrown off a freight train. Local police invented the rape charge only after discovering that two young white women had been traveling with some of the Black youths. Hysteria followed news of the rape charges, and the National Guard was called to prevent gathered crowds from lynching the youths. Despite weak evidence the nine defendants were tried and sentenced to death within two weeks of the incident.

62. *Oberlin Review*, May 26, 1933.

63. *Oberlin Review*, December 8, 1933. The Communist Party used the Scottsboro Case to attack the NAACP, arguing that Blacks would never achieve equality in a capitalist country. See Mark Naison, *Communists in Harlem* for a full discussion of this.

64. Bigglestone, "Oberlin College and the Negro Student", p. 216 citing *Oberlin Review*, March 2, 1934.

65. Interview with Marjorie Witt Johnson, December 12, 1987.

66. Bigglestone: "Oberlin College and the Negro Student", p. 217.

67. Florence May, Letter to E. H. Wilkins, May 16, 1934, Wilkins Papers, Correspondence, Box 51, Maurer-Mayo.

68. C.N. Cole, Memo to E.H Wilkins June 9, 1934, Wilkins Papers, Correspondence, Box 20. I would like to thank Oberlin Archivist, Roland Bauman for his help in locating these letters and memos.

69. Ibid.

70. Ibid.

71. Kenneth L. Kusmer, "The Black Urban Experience in American History," in *The State of Afro-American History*, ed. Darlene Clark Hine (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1986).

72. Interview with Mrs. Glenn Thomas, December 21, 1987.

73. Margaret Helvinston, Florence May, Mary Gay Blunt, Nerissa Brokenburr, Letter to E. H. Wilkins, May 18, 1934, Wilkins Papers,

Correspondence, Box 65, Racial Discrimination - Ralston, C.

74. Ibid.

75. Ibid.

76. Dean Klingenhagen, Report to E.H. Wilkins, June 1, 1934, Wilkins Papers, Correspondence, Box 65, Racial Discrimination - Ralston, C.

77. Ibid., pp. 2-3.

78. Annual Report of the Dean of Women, 1940-41, Secretary's Office, General Files, Box 25, folder T-Z 1940-41.

79. Ibid.

80. This subject deserves a paper itself. Not until the 1940's were Blacks and whites able to pressure the Administration to allow interracial rooming between women. The files on the Interracial Committee, 1942-57, are in Boxes 3-4 of the Student Senate Files; they are rich with information on the whole struggle. They contain detailed reports of Administrative reactions to Black and white women seeking to room together and detail steps of how the YWCA acted to change the policy.

81. Annual Report of the Dean of Women, 1940-41, Secretary's Office, General Files, Box 25, folder T-Z 1940-41.

82. Phone Interview with Florence May Santiago, December 18, 1987.

83. Vice President, Letter to Mr. Joseph A. Baily (Editor and Publisher NEW VISTAS), August 8, 1945, Wilkins Papers, Negro Files.

84. Annual Report of the Dean of Women, 1940-41, Secretary's Office, General Files, Box 25, folder T-Z 1940-41.

85. The percentage of Blacks women students at Oberlin fluctuated between 1900 and 1935. Black women were 52% of the total between 1900 and 1910, 67% from 1910-20, 61% from 1920-1930, but only 46.6% from 1930-35. Negro Graduates of Oberlin, Bohn Papers, Box 12, Negro and Oberlin College, O.C. Archives. Also see Colored Graduates, Secretary's Office, Box 126, Students-Negro; Colored: Statistics re c. 1844-1935, O.C. Archives. The figures for the total number of Black women who graduated can be better contextualized by noting that there were just 13 Black women bankers, 2 Black women attorneys, and just 333 Black women physicians in 1910. These statistics were taken from *The Black Woman*, edited by La Frances

Rodgers-Rose (Beverly Hills: Sage Publications,1980), p. 23.

86. To my knowledge, a complete investigation into the careers of Black Oberlin graduates in the first three decades of the twentieth century has not been done. The best known graduates of this period are Mary Church Terrell and Anna Julia Cooper. The careers of both women are described at length in Giddings, *When and Where I Enter*. The limited information I do have indicates that Black women who graduated from Oberlin assumed leadership positions within the Black women's movement, and in secondary and post-secondary educational institutions dedicated to the education of Black people.

87. Michon Boston, "The Mission of the Negro Woman", *Oberlin Alumni Magazine*, (Spring 1984), pp. 65-66.

88. Giddings, *When and Where I Enter*, pp. 98; 95-97. Giddings argues that Black women accepted the fundamental premises of the Victorian ethic, even as they opposed its racist and classist implications.

89. Ibid.

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