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**Author**

Steward, Tyran Kai

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## **“All I Want is Opportunity”: Doris Weaver, Wilhelmina Styles, and the Pursuit of a Professional Status**

**By Tyran Kai Steward, PhD-Candidate, History, The Ohio State University**

“The time is not ripe for colored and white students to be so intimately associated.” These words were spoken by Ruth Lindquist, Chair of Ohio State University’s Department of Home Economics, in response to Wilhelmina Styles, an African American student who had applied to live in the Grace Graham Walker House.

In the early 1930s, Jim Crow practices at Ohio State University prevented African American students Wilhelmina Styles and Doris Weaver from taking a mandatory course for their Home Economics major. The Home Management Laboratory class required a one-quarter residency at the Grace Graham Walker House, an all-white women’s dormitory. Admitting Styles and Weaver would have resulted in the integration of the residential hall, an act prohibited by the University’s policy against racial intermingling. My essay depicts the racialized and gendered social order maintained by Ohio State University in the early 1930s as well as the political and legal challenges launched by Styles, Weaver, and their supporters throughout the state to protest the school’s version of Jim Crow. The previously unstudied cases of Styles and Weaver offer three significant insights regarding race and gender relations, and two broader implications. First, the efforts to prevent Styles and Weaver from fulfilling their educational requirements expose how institutions in the North maintained separate and unequal practices without the legal underpinnings that existed in Southern states. Second, the opposition that Styles and Weaver faced illuminates how white women actively engaged in constructing racial barriers to prevent

African American women from achieving what historian Alice Kessler-Harris has termed “economic citizenship.” Finally, the resistance efforts of Styles, Weaver, and their supporters reveal how black women defined citizenship during this Jim Crow era, how they came to imagine the role Home Economics training could play in their pursuit of that citizenship, and how black and white communities began to mobilize legally and politically in an effort to foster racial integration. This research is invaluable because it addresses northern race relations and segregation. A significant body of scholarship has examined the history of Jim Crow in the South. This essay, in contrast, provides an opportunity to examine Jim Crow’s existence in the North during the interwar period of 20<sup>th</sup> Century by documenting the Jim Crowism confronted by Wilhelmina Styles and Doris Weaver. The research is also crucial as it underscores on a localized level the NAACP’s national campaign objectives to eradicate racial discrimination. Particularly, the research emphasizes the NAACP’s efforts to develop “test” cases that could be used to legally attack and remedy widespread injustices. The case also demonstrates the differential treatment that Weaver and Styles received from the University and the NAACP, and the significance of skin color in these interactions. Weaver was light-skinned and could pass for white while Styles was dark-skinned, as you will soon see on one of the power point slides.

In 1931, the Laboratory in Home Management Course was established to address problems in family relationships, household expenditure, food nutrition, and care of the home by allowing young women to live together and collectively solve these problems. The Laboratory in Home Management Course was a response to the lasting vestiges of the Progressive Era of the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Progressive reformers during that era sought to restore the virtues of home and family life, and believed that the home provided a fertile ground for the building of America’s national life. These reformers felt that Home Economics provided the scientific

training women needed to learn how to care for the home, spend money wisely, and provide the proper nutrition indispensable to the welfare and happiness of families. Further, Home Economics safeguarded gender stereotypes and proscribed women's right to work.

Early on, Home Economics educators attempted to challenge the gendered roles that they were expected to reinforce through their training of women for domestic roles. Departments provided careers in teaching and institutional management. Land-grant regulations, however, affixed the training of women to traditional roles of domesticity and Home Economics eventually returned to being a gendered domain. Inevitably, women pursuing degrees in Home Economics were prepared primarily for work in the home and, most importantly, for marriage. Marriage was so fundamental to Home Economics training that many academic bulletins announced preparation for matrimony as a key academic goal. In 1931, Ruth Lindquist, Chair of the Department of Home Economics at Ohio State stressed the preparatory role of domestic curricula training. She stated, "Education for marriage and parenthood is no longer an experiment; it is a reality."

But the reality was different for African American women like Wilhelmina Styles and Doris Weaver, especially in a Depression-laden era. Whereas most middle-class white women were consumed by the lofty ideals of marital bliss, and were comfortable with their roles as wives and domestics, middle-class black women felt the imperative to locate roles outside the home. For Weaver and Styles, they glimpsed Home Economics as a vital pathway to achieve their fundamental right to work, not marriage. As Doris Weaver asserted when reflecting on why she pursued a degree in Home Economics, "My purpose had little to do with marriage. I was seeking educational privileges, not social benefits." Emboldened by the "New Negro" and "New Woman" rhetoric of the 1920s, Styles and Weaver aspired to utilize Home Economics to attain

middle-class respectability and a professional status. Styles and Weaver, like other middle-class African Americans, had begun to feel strongly that only economic empowerment and self-sufficiency in the form of good, professional jobs could provide the equalizer against racial injustice and allow them to enjoy the full rights of American citizenship.

It could be expected that African Americans in the South would encounter the most pernicious forms of racial prejudice and segregation. But little did Styles and Weaver understand that Ohio State University had its own injurious version of Jim Crow. When Styles applied to take the Laboratory in Home Management course, she was given an ultimatum that she could either take her training with a black family off-campus or substitute the course. The University claimed that her presence in the dormitory might be offensive to white young ladies. In response to the University's claim, Styles took a poll of her white classmates only to discover that they welcomed her living in the dorm and supported her matriculation. Nonetheless, when she presented the results to OSU's administration, led by Ruth Lindquist and Faith Lanman, she was refused for the reasons of "color and tradition." Weaver, on the other hand, was initially accepted into the Grace Graham Walker House. This is because Weaver was pale and assumed initially to be white. Only days after her application had been submitted and accepted, however, her African American heritage was revealed. Thus, Weaver, like Styles, was also informed that she could not take the course due to the reasons of "color and tradition." Weaver, unlike Styles—and likely due to her skin complexion—was given an opportunity to take her course in the basement of the Grace Graham Walker House, though separate from the rest of her classmates and ideally from the purpose for which the course was designed. President George Rightmire, revealing the fervor of his opposition to racial intermingling, explained

In the Weaver case the distinct question is raised whether in carrying on a University activity in which a group of girls living together as a family in a most intimate way for a six weeks period, colored and white girls should be intermingled and made to occupy the same dining table, the same social room where guests of both colors may be simultaneously entertained, and the same bedroom for sleeping and study purposes.

He continued, "There are 309, 000 colored people in Ohio and 6, 400, 000 white and to do what Miss Weaver is asking might win the approbation of some of the colored people yet it would clearly win the disapprobation of most white people. Therefore, the University administrator hesitates to take the responsibility of ordering white girls to live with colored girls."

Thus, in back-to-back years, the University decided against an African American living in the Grace Graham Walker house.

But neither Styles nor Weaver accepted the University's bigoted policy. Instead, both young ladies challenged the school to uphold the supposed egalitarian traditions of the North. Their confrontation with University officials was quickly aided by the NAACP. The NAACP had long been interested in locating cases it could use as a model for its national campaign to overturn the "separate-but-equal" doctrine. Typically, this took the form of litigation. Litigation, however, was expensive; thus, the NAACP determined that sending protest letters might prove a more cost-effective means for fighting racial injustice. Local chapters of the NAACP started the protest campaign by enlisting black and white Ohioans to write letters expressing their outrage of the University's Jim Crow policy. Ohioans responded vigorously. Letters came from all across Ohio and throughout the United States. These correspondences were sent by black and white community activists, alumni and ordinary citizens, civil rights organizations and concerned

parties of other universities. Many of the letters attacked the University for denying Styles and Weaver on the basis that Ohio State is a tax-based, public institution supported by citizens of Ohio, including African Americans. Some letters took on a different tenor, and denounced the University's policies as inviting the Jim Crowism of the South to triumph in the North. Still other letters simply chastised President Rightmire and the Department of Home Economics for exaggerating the fear of racial intermingling as a way to justify the social exclusion of Styles and Weaver.

The letters were compelling but they were not convincing to Rightmire and the lead administrators from Department of Home Economics who continued to argue that the races be kept separate. Charles Gillespie, an African American and a local state representative hired by the NAACP initially to defend Styles and later Weaver, submitted a resolution to the Ohio House of Representatives calling the University's actions a flagrant violation of Ohio laws and demanding that as a state-run institution, OSU should be investigated. But Rightmire had already sent entreaties to various state officials appealing to them the need to honor OSU's "separate-but-equal" policy as the best thing for the races. Even more, Rightmire argued that only a higher power should force OSU to change its rules. The higher power would become the Ohio Supreme Court. After Gillespie's House Resolution went unobserved, the NAACP felt no other alternative than to turn to litigation.

The NAACP, though, made a fatal mistake in pursuing its case against OSU. Rather than represent both Styles and Weaver for a robust case against the University, they chose only to represent Weaver. Revealing the racism and color politics of the time, the NAACP felt that Weaver's nearly white skin might make it easier for her to win a case against the University than the darker-skinned Styles. Even Weaver invested capital in her own complexion. When asked

about Styles, she said that Styles was dark-skinned and looked like an “Indian.” Without the further aid of the NAACP, Styles was left with no other remedy but to substitute the Laboratory in Home Management course and take her degree, which she did in 1933. But Weaver’s case against Ohio State University did not help her to realize the goal of integrating the Grace Graham Walker House. Her attorneys relied heavily on Ohio statutory law, and made several claims to Weaver’s right to be allowed to take her course alongside white classmates in the Home Economics dormitory. They argued that the University’s sole reason for refusing to allow Weaver to take the Laboratory in Home Management course in the Grace Graham Walker house had been due to her race and color—an allegation that Ohio State University never denied.

In submitting their final brief, Weaver’s lawyers emphasized, “It would indeed be an anomaly without parallel, were this Court to hold that the respondents can legally do at the university what officials of the common schools throughout the state cannot legally do.” But anomalies existed in this segregationist era in which both Styles and Weaver could be Jim Crowed even in the North. Thus, the Ohio Supreme Court sided with OSU and upheld the “separate-but-equal” precedent of the *Plessy* case. Like Styles, Weaver was left with no remedy but to substitute the course and take her degree, which she did in 1934.

In the end, without having taken the course, Weaver painfully admitted that she and Styles lost an average of \$75.00 a month in income because under the Smith-Hughes Act additional monies were provided to those individuals who taught in the field of home economics and agriculture—an opportunity these ladies could not fulfill without taking the Laboratory in Home Management course. Though the NAACP’s efforts to invalidate OSU’s “separate-but-equal” stance—in part due to the group’s miscalculation that Weaver’s skin complexion could persuade OSU to eradicate its segregationist guidelines—it did eventually accomplish the task of



enabling Styles and Weaver to pursue careers in teaching. The NAACP continued its protest sortie against the University even after both Styles and Weaver had graduated. Because of a tarnished reputation, OSU could not tolerate any further scrutiny over its racial attitudes. Both women were allowed to return to OSU, Weaver on a special university scholarship. Weaver attained a Master of Science degree in Chemistry in June 1936 while Styles earned a Master of Arts in Home Economics in September of the same year. After completing their masters' degrees, which finally provided them with the instructional credentials they needed, both women taught in the Home Economics Department at Wilberforce University.

It may have been a small victory for a throng of African Americans and broadminded whites who yearned for a greater display of racial progress. Such longing for justice was evident in the statement made by Weaver's attorneys on the eve of the Court's decision: "The hope stands high in the breast of every Negro in Ohio and indeed of every white person not a slave to race and color prejudice, that this Court will grant this writ to the end that another blow shall have been struck at one of the most relentless and implacable foes of humanity everywhere, namely intolerance; and to the end, too, that Ohio State University may be freer to pursue the ideal of truth unblended by intolerance." OSU and the Ohio Supreme Court did not deliver that blow but stood alongside civilization's enemy—intolerance. But the efforts of Weaver and Styles, and their countless supporters, did *chip* away at this callous adversary, advancing further the cause of civil rights.