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The Ville: Jim Crow Schools as Defined by an African-American, Middle-Class Neighborhood

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Introduction

Located in the northwest quadrant of St. Louis, Missouri, the now-blighted “Ville” neighborhood was long home to a flourishing African-American, elite middle class during the Jim Crow era. Many once-well-cared-for cottages surrounded by manicured lawns are in disrepair, boarded up, shrouded by weeds growing up around vacant buildings, or completely levelled. On Dr. Martin Luther King Drive, formerly Easton Street, the business district south of The Ville which, during the early 1900s, supported many burgeoning African-American establishments, fared less well even than its residential homes. In its current dilapidated state, the observer will find the area hard to envision as a strip of prosperous stores many African Americans patronized. Dr. Herman Dreer, an English teacher at the segregated Sumner High School, was one of five African Americans who pooled fifteen thousand dollars (Wright, 2001) to open one such business: lending institution Elleadsville Financial Corporation (EFC). Located at 4200 Easton Avenue, a few doors away from Dr. Aldrich M. Brooks’ dental practice, EFC financed home development and remodeling (Wright, 2001). Today, there remains no evidence either EFC or Dr. Brooks’ dental practice ever existed. Indeed, many buildings along Dr. Martin Luther King Drive have been razed, made noticeable by numerous empty lots between vacant buildings.

Regardless of socioeconomic status, living in The Ville during the Jim Crow era was likely a goal for many African Americans who were either native St. Louisans or former Southern sharecroppers escaping the South for a better life, moving north to fill manufacturing jobs created by the industrial revolution. After all, The Ville was known as a sort of mecca, well-equipped with schools—elementary through college—, a hospital, a prosperous hair-product manufacturing company, a business district, churches, and entertainment outlets. Community leaders worked strategically and diligently to secure services that would improve the lives of The Ville’s neighborhood families.

Therefore, it is not surprising to uncover a guidance program initiated by the segregated St. Louis Public Schools' (SLPS) Simmons Elementary School and Charles H. Sumner High School: the first African-American high school west of the Mississippi (Sumner High School, 1960). Though Simmons, located two blocks north of Sumner, initiated the high school guidance program when students attended Simmons, in this paper I focus on the program's implementation at Sumner, the high school attendance center for Simmons students. The narrative I recount examines Sumner faculty's implementation of the program which helped prepare students for occupations other than those supported by manual training.

Racial uplift, the advancement of African Americans through education, frames my narrative of Sumner faculty's expansion of students' lives through career exploration. Educational advancement is just one of many aspects of racial uplift described by African-American elites who fought for respect during the Jim Crow era and thereafter. According to Gaines (1996), although African-American elites advocated for education as a way to assimilate with whites for acceptance, the majority's perception was "education of the freed people was...tied to moral evolution and industrial training rather than citizenship" (p. 35). Conversely, the purpose of Sumner's guidance program was to expand students' awareness of careers beyond those occupations aligned with manual training so future generations of African-American students would have an array of interest areas open to them.

Sumner had the unfailing community support of The Ville's residents similar to that support given North Carolina's segregated Caswell County School, notably chronicled by Vanessa Siddle Walker (1996). For example, Julia Davis, a Ville resident and Simmons teacher intimately involved in the guidance program, was the mother of John Buckner, the first male graduate of Stowe, Sumner's principal, and a Ville resident; and Herman Dreer, well-known community leader and Sumner English teacher. Other Sumner teachers living in The Ville included Bernice Young Mitchell (4512 Aldine), Patrobas Robison (4573 Garfield), Rughes R. Freeman, Jr. (4582a Aldine), and Georgia Williams (4590 Garfield) (Bivens, 2011). Teachers with residences in The Ville who were also parents, like Davis and Dreer, affirmed it was not uncommon for African-American parents and guardians to move to where their children could receive a public education (Shaw, 1996). Furthermore, until 1927 Sumner was the only St. Louis Public Schools high school for African Americans; many African Americans either moved to St. Louis or used addresses of relatives living in the city to

ensure their children attended public school (Dowden-White, 2011), especially true of African Americans living in rural Missouri towns since the state did not require school boards to provide educational resources for populations below a specific threshold.

During segregation, neighborhood children saw the rise of African-American dry goods merchants and service providers in the business district south of The Ville, such as realtors and insurance agents. Merchants not only conducted business with neighbors, they also supported the high school by purchasing advertising in programs for the school's musical productions, concerts, sporting events, and other activities. Additionally, the schools' close proximity to neighborhood institutions like Homer G. Phillips Hospital, Stowe Teachers College, and the Tandy Recreation Center, made Sumner accessible so professionals and community members could visit the school and make presentations. Proximity also made it easy for teachers to walk with children to visit nearby institutions. Having access to professionals working in these institutions was no doubt important to African-American students living in overcrowded tenement housing because students were acquainted with doctors, nurses, and college professors who looked like them. In addition, students saw evidence that professional occupations unobtainable for their parents were now accessible to them.

Many of The Ville's citizens relentlessly worked to improve the lives of African-American children during the Jim Crow era, lending the school's guidance program an even larger reach. Moreover, the program gave children the opportunity to reflect on their interests, align those interests with various occupations, and consider the skills and education required to pursue their chosen field. Manual school's training, popular during the Jim Crow era, was diametrically different from the comprehensive guidance program championing students' self-interest and occupations. While manual training kept African Americans in roles as laborers, Sumner's guidance program did the opposite. The program's goal was to prepare students to pursue higher education (Wright, 2001) and then careers requiring a college degree. Consequently, the program aimed to increase the percentage of St. Louisan African Americans with white-color jobs from the time's low level of three percent (Lang, 2012).

Archival data from The Ville's residents, and Buckner's and Davis' personal papers supports the development of this historical narrative. For instance, Sumner's guidance program was the subject of one of Buckner's master's theses completed at Northwestern University (Garry, 2017). Buckner who, in addition to being Stowe's first male graduate, Sumner's math teacher and principal, and SLPS' Curriculum Director,

was so familiar with the program because he helped implement it while at Sumner (Garry, 2017). Additionally, Davis, a local African-American historian and Simmons teacher, participated in the program's development and implementation. A report authored for the Missouri Department of Education, entitled *Four Years of Progress with Missouri Public Schools for the Negro* (1939), supports vocational training for African Americans. I also draw from additional archival data on The Ville and SLPS at the State Historical Society of Missouri as well as various journal articles, textbooks, and newspaper articles.

The Ville

Once part of the Elleardsville farm owned by white horticulturist Charles Elleard who migrated to St. Louis from New York, The Ville was initially purchased from a German-American farmer. Eventually Elleard sold parcels to African Americans now able to purchase land unencumbered by restrictive covenants barring African Americans from home ownership in St. Louis neighborhoods inhabited by white St. Louisans. Although The Ville's first generation of African Americans worked as live-in servants to German- and Italian-American farmers, after the 1920s African-American professionals and laborers became its primary inhabitants (Fulmer, Spence, & Harl, 1995). In 1948, the U.S. Supreme Court's unanimous decision in *Shelley v. Kraemer* ruled racially restrictive covenants unenforceable, which allowed the Shelley family, who were unaware they were in violation of the covenant, to remain in their home (Gonda, 1914). *Shelley v. Kraemer* is considered a landmark case because the Court's decision permitted African Americans, once relegated to specific neighborhoods by the segregationist 1916 Zoning Ordinance (Two segregation laws to be voted on tomorrow, 1916), to move outside previously designated boundaries. Two decades after *Shelley*, the 1968 Fair Housing Act finally ruled desegregated housing illegal. During the 1950s through the '70s, The Ville's middle-class population shrank considerably as migration to neighborhoods formerly beyond African Americans' reach increased.

During this same time, St. Louis city administrators' push for civic progress forced African Americans to vacate the Mill Creek Valley and downtown ghettos to make way for development of highways connecting downtown St. Louis with the suburbs. Many of the poor migrated to The Ville where they rented from absentee landlords, crowding multi-families into single-family homes (Hewes Toft, 1975). Although The Ville neighborhood declined over the years, its historical legacy as an elite African-American neighborhood and vibrant business district lives on in St. Louis annals.

During the early to mid-1900s, most Ville inhabitants were anything but middle class. Then only three percent of African Americans living in

St. Louis were middle class, which mainly consisted of teachers, lawyers, beauticians, physicians, dentists, and morticians (Lang, 2012). In the late 1800s, SLPS' demographic data documents Simmons' families: 4 of 149 African-American parents or guardians were professionals, and 132 of 149 were laborers (e.g., laundresses) (Davis, n.d.-a). Furthermore, although teachers were included among the three percent, teaching was a relatively new profession for African Americans. The SLPS board approved the hiring of African American teachers in 1877 only upon the urging of an African-American community group. In 1878, Superintendent William Torrey Harris reports,

During the past year an experiment has been in progress in our colored schools. Colored teachers were engaged at the beginning of the year for the majority of them. The result has been in every way favorable. The attendance has increased forty percent on the number enrolled in these schools. (Davis, n.d.-b)

In 1890, the SLPS district opened Stowe, a segregated teachers' college. Following World War II, returning African-American soldiers received government assistance to attend college and SLPS approved the enrollment of men in teachers' colleges after which time the number of African Americans who entered the profession grew exponentially (Harris, 1967).

Among the African American middle-class, social class identifiers included not only college attendance but communal standards such as one's skin color, employment stability, dress, character, behavior, and Christian morality (Lang, 2012). Furthermore, the African-American middle class identified as educated, self-employed, well-traveled, uniformed, and entrepreneurial, operating small businesses such as a chauffeur or laundress (Lang, 2012). Railroad porters were considered middle-class because of their pressed, smart uniforms and well-traveled worldliness. Even into the 1930s and '40s, although there was a marked increase of businessmen, lawyers, doctors, and nurses, the majority of African Americans continued to work as laborers. Particular parameters signaled middle-class status for The Ville's African Americans.

Prior to 1865 it was illegal to educate African Americans living in St. Louis. In 1865, when the Missouri General Assembly reversed the state's ban, many citizens voraciously advocated for educational equality. On two different occasions concerned African-American citizens petitioned the SLPS board, first to demand more African American teachers and, second, to relocate Sumner to The Ville. When Missouri lifted the ban on their education, African Americans demanded the district replace white teachers appointed to African-American schools. In 1877, SLPS

Superintendent and former U.S. Commissioner of Education William Torrey Harris initially responded to the citizens' petition by hiring a few African-American teachers (Gersman, 1972) including Charles Newton, Richard Hill Cole, and Arthur D. Langston (Davis, n.d.–b). Cole and Langston enjoyed long SLPS careers, eventually memorialized by schools bearing their names. Cole worked 50 years for SLPS and was not only a teacher but served as Simmons' principal.

Later, African-American citizens petitioned SLPS' board to build a new Sumner building, relocating it to The Ville (Gersman, 1972). Citizens overcame obstacles and prevailed even as the white community attempted to foil their plan by recommending the board build a white manual training school in The Ville instead of Sumner (Bivens, 2011); indeed the white community surrounded The Ville and Shelley house of the landmark case *Shelley v. Kraemer* was just a stone's throw from Sumner.

In 1878, prior to the reconstruction of Sumner in The Ville, SLPS built Simmons on St. Louis Avenue, two blocks north of the future home of Sumner. A two-room schoolhouse, it was named Elleardsville School for Colored Children No. 8, constructed in response to The Ville's growing African-American population. In 1910, SLPS moved Sumner to its newly constructed building on Cottage Street where it remains currently in operation today. In 1940, SLPS built Stowe perpendicular to Sumner. White teachers taught children attending Simmons until 1877 when the district experimented with African-American teachers instructing Simmons' children. Just as Sumner once housed Stowe, Simmons would house Stowe until the district moved it to its new facility in 1940. Simmons continued to serve as laboratory school for the college. In the 1940s the school's student population was as high as fifteen hundred and the district renovated the school several times, expanding the initial two-room school to as many as 32 classrooms.

Guidance Program

Designed to increase children's awareness of occupations early in their education and prepare them for high school coursework needed in preparation for college and, ultimately, their desired career, the guidance program commenced at Simmons and students participated throughout their high school years. Several underlying factors likely compelled teachers to implement the program. One obvious factor was African-American educators' desire to uplift the race by giving new generations of children the capability to guide personal educational and career interests. Buckner (1944) writes, "The individual schools are left the responsibility of preparing their pupils to adjust themselves to the high school program. This responsibility belongs as much to the high school

as to the elementary school” (p. 2). This vein of thinking proved fruitful because, although children in the 1920s through the ’40s graduated from high school intent upon entering the workforce, industries were beginning to require higher-level cognitive skills (Goldin, 1998) when, at the time, existing barriers largely relegated African Americans to low-level jobs.

Plaintiff in the landmark Supreme Court of Missouri case *Gaines v. Canada*, Lloyd Gaines, attempted to enroll in the then-segregated University of Missouri’s law school since neither Stowe nor Lincoln offered law degrees. However, the University of Missouri opted to develop a law program at Lincoln rather than admit Gaines. Since persistent educational barriers for African-American children continued, children needed an education in occupational requirements before and during high school as well as in life obstacles awaiting them. The program helped students distinguish between occupational interest and an infatuation with their local hero’s work. Buckner (1944) argues teachers are obliged to “afford each pupil the opportunity to examine data pertaining to occupations and to counsel the pupil into the cooperative planning of his [sic] high school program of studies in keeping with his [sic] needs, interests, and abilities” (p. 4). A final, likely factor in the program’s founding was the growing number of new professionals—teachers and doctors, for example—who knew the challenges of becoming a professional and wanted to support children early in the educational process. Buckner himself provides a strong example of the guidance program’s utility since the teaching profession was out of his reach until SLPS made the normal school accessible to men.

Buckner (1944) argued the goal of the guidance program was “to equip the pupil so that he [sic] can adjust himself [sic] to any life situation” (p. 18). Here Buckner reinforces the impetus behind racial uplift; however, his nuanced comment suggests teachers working as counselors have greater responsibility than merely exposing students to various occupations. Counselors additionally were expected to share pitfalls students might expect along the way, giving students a realistic picture of the path ahead of them.

According to Buckner (1944), three tenets guided the central committee in establishing its guidance program policy: a) every teacher is a counselor, b) every child is studied and understood, and c) every counselor shares occupational opportunities to children according to their needs. These parameters likely helped students whose goals, interests, and abilities were misaligned, for teachers and students were made to navigate the process collectively so, in this way, high school teachers got to know their students.

As for the guidance program's structure, leadership was provided by the principal and each teacher would maintain membership on one of six committees: a) cumulative record, b) behavior problems, c) directed study, d) special education, e) student activities, and f) parent-teacher association (Buckner, 1944). The program required kindergarten-through seventh grade-teachers focus on students' continual adjustment to school, home life, community, and relationships with program counselors. The elementary school guidance program provided students a transitional bridge to high school because teachers prepared young children by focusing upon future occupation information, presented via classroom discussion, interviews, talks by visitors, films about careers, trips, and specially chosen books (Buckner, 1944). That is, teachers provided background information to students in class sessions and then professionals visited schools and shared their experiences. Program counselors held conferences with children to learn their vocational interest inventory and the progress of their work. Additionally, elementary teachers worked with students to complete high school schedules aligned with their interests and capabilities and parents reviewed completed schedules. Given their advocacy in petitioning SLPS to hire African-American teachers and move Sumner to The Ville, parents' role in reviewing children's high school schedules seems a natural extension of Sumner's parents' involvement in their children's education. Had there been no guidance program, it is likely many students would have pursued manual and vocational training.

When the Missouri Department of Education published a report in 1939 on the progress of African Americans' education, Lloyd W. King, State Superintendent of Public Schools, advocated for manual training for African Americans (Davis, 1939) even though the Smith-Hughes Act of 1917 authorized federal funding for public schools to implement vocational education with the purpose of preparing students for occupations not requiring a college degree. Support for vocational education eventually surpassed manual training because students learned applicable job skills, for, like many peers across the nation, African-American St. Louisans refused to allow whites to keep them shackled to manual, low-wage jobs. The guidance program acted as a vehicle to help students determine whether their career path was vocational or college preparatory.

Although external forces supported manual and vocational training for Sumner students, educational leadership played an integral role in supporting the guidance program as an entry point for students seeking professional jobs. For instance, the first three African-American principals, all immigrants to St. Louis with rich experiences prior to

becoming principals, acted to create an environment supportive of improving students' lives through education. Furthermore, Principal Oscar Minor Waring, the first African-American principal of Sumner from 1879 to 1908 and a linguistic scholar, implemented a college preparatory curriculum (Buckner, 1975). Principal Frank Williams, the third principal and second African American to hold the job from 1908 to 1929 added to Waring's curriculum "subjects of cultural and practical value," most likely vocational courses (Buckner, 1975). During Williams' term about a third of the faculty taught vocational and cultural courses even though many had earned degrees from Ivy League or Big Ten schools (Davis, n.d.–c). The high number of vocational courses taught at the time, such as typewriting, stenography, or household arts, is hardly surprising since the board implemented manual training prior to Williams' appointment. Sumner's longest-serving principal from 1929 to 1968, when George Brantley assumed leadership he created a family-like environment known as The Sumner Family (Buckner, 1975).

Along with six other elementary schools, Simmons transferred students to Sumner at the school year's end; students bound for Sumner attended freshman orientation introducing them to high school routines. Orientation not only demystified high school for students, it likely facilitated the enrollment of students who formerly may have ended schooling at the eighth grade. Orientation also supported the culture for which Brantley advocated during his tenure: faculty, parents, and students collaborating on behalf of children's advancement.

Freshmen enrolled in *Problems of Living*, a course which introduced program opportunities within and outside Sumner. One example of an outside program was the African-American history program taught by elementary and high school teachers Julia Davis and Herman Dreer. Dreer, known by his students for his catchall phrase, "yes, I am a race man," was a local historian and English teacher (Davis, n.d.–d). He and Davis routinely presented African-American history workshops for anyone interested. For example, Dreer and Davis taught history on weekends at Poro College, founded by millionaire Annie Malone and financed by her Ville-based hair product empire (Annie Malone Historical Society, 2014). Poro College became a regular meeting place and entertainment center for African Americans.

Additionally, *Problems of Living* covered topics on school environment, home, family and church, recreation, and on St. Louis at which time students spent three weeks studying the city. In the course's first quarter, students conducted school business, discussed school problems and high school programs of study, and sponsored organized recreational activities. In the second quarter, students discussed school

environment and topics related to young adults, while in the third quarter students' focus was on recreation, such as fall and spring school sports. Lastly, students learned about St. Louis by studying their hometown and visiting local sites. The course's format gave teachers ample opportunity to learn about students.

Conclusion

To this point I have revealed how Sumner's guidance program likely grew out of challenges African American educators and The Ville's community members faced during the Jim Crow era. At the time, African Americans could attend only segregated colleges in segregated states or apply to colleges in Northern states. African-American educators and community members responded to racialized injustices with a guidance plan designed to uplift future generations by providing college preparatory and life skills training, no easy task since educators were SLPS employees responsible to district policies. Although the guidance program was a collective effort, it worked because of the willingness and determination of visionary leaders, compassionate teachers, concerned parents, and many hard-working students. When Sumner's centennial committee prepared for the celebration, it canvassed alumni to write about Sumner faculty. Alumni offered pithy statements like, "...greatest influence on my life," "adapted the situation to the individual," "extended his work with youth beyond the classroom walls," and "her conditioning provided a discipline which I internalized" (Buckner, 1975, p. 28).

While the guidance program was unlikely to prevent The Ville's African-American children from experiencing barriers, it nevertheless systematically provided students with problem-solving skills they may not otherwise have received. Program activities also provided students with experiences that likely helped them enter and navigate college and helped with general life challenges, but Sumner students' success in acquiring professional jobs were the real payoff for The Ville's African-American teachers. In fact, Buckner (1975) alludes to professional jobs secured by his students when speaking at a national convention to his fraternity brothers. He celebrates his former math students who, against all odds, graduated during Jim Crow with degrees in engineering and assumed positions such as design or aeronautical engineers. Literature and archival data on Sumner reveals many of its graduates were successful professionals locally, regionally, and nationally in occupations requiring much more training than a manual or vocational training program could ever provide. More importantly, Sumner students chose their profession because of Ville community members' unwavering advocacy, commitment to educational values, and their moral and ethical imperative to uplift the race.

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