

Reform and Uplift Among Philadelphia Negroes: the Diary of Helen Parrish, 1888

DURING the current urban crisis the popular press has focused attention on the plight of the black community and on the desperate need to improve the housing, the education, and the standard of living of the poor. Yet it is too often forgotten that over the last century there has been a constant effort to improve the lot of the urban Negro, and that several generations of reformers have had faith that to build better homes for the poor would lead ultimately to a solution to the problems of poverty and the city. One of those who had faith as well as doubts was Helen Parrish, a pioneer Philadelphia housing reformer who tried to uplift the lowest class of Negroes by renting clean rooms and apartments at reduced rates, and by making sure that they learned to manage their money and to keep their apartments and their lives clean and orderly. Helen Parrish was a “friendly rent collector,” but she was much more. Her diary, which has recently been discovered, has value beyond that of a human interest story because she was one of the first to work for change in one of the oldest Negro neighborhoods in any American city. The houses she managed in 1888 were a few years later to become the Philadelphia College Settlement, and there in 1896 William E. B. Du Bois lived while he did research for his monumental study of the Philadelphia Negro, and where his attitudes and ideas were influenced by the white philanthropists, such as Helen Parrish, who had gone before.¹

Negroes had been living in the neighborhood of Sixth and Lombard Streets in Philadelphia since 1794, but it was more than fifty years before the city’s philanthropic citizens discovered the area

¹ The editors wish to express their appreciation to Mr. William Jeanes and the Octavia Hill Association for making this diary available.

and its problems. Then, in 1857, George Stewart, a Presbyterian merchant, founded the St. Mary Street Colored Mission Sabbath School, where, after the first few years, Quakers were also allowed to conduct classes. But it was the efforts of Theodore Starr which made the Sixth and Lombard neighborhood the center of much of the philanthropic effort in the city to aid the Negro population. Starr began a savings association, coal club, kindergarden, day nursery and playground. Then, in 1884, Susan Wharton, member of a distinguished Philadelphia family, opened the St. Mary Street Library "for colored children" which later added classes and vocational training. Susan Wharton was assisted at the library by her cousins, Helen Parrish and Hannah Fox.

This group of Philadelphia philanthropists was strongly influenced by the English reformer Octavia Hill and her methods of housing management; she was a personal friend of Susan Wharton and Helen Parrish later studied under her. With the encouragement of John Ruskin, Miss Hill had purchased three homes in a poor section of London in 1865. This was the beginning of an entire neighborhood of homes which she cleaned up and rented to the lower classes at reduced rent. By limiting the profit on the venture to five per cent, she demonstrated that one could make a small profit without exploiting the poor. Octavia Hill was not so much a housing reformer as she was a sympathetic landlord interested in her tenants. Her sympathy, however, went only so far. According to her philosophy, severity was essential in uplifting her tenants, and she "advocated an inexorable demand for rent and inflexible insistence on obedience to rules not for the convenience of landlords, but for strengthening the character of tenants." She also trained "friendly rent collectors" whose duty it was to give homemaking hints and bring joy into the drab lives of the poor, as well as collecting their rent. She also encouraged entertainments and outings, playgrounds, gardens and libraries. Obviously, she tried to instill the values of her own class, but she also sought to free poor tenants from the harsh and negligent rule of profit-hungry landlords.²

The Octavia Hill system spread rapidly to Boston, New York, and Philadelphia. In 1880 Theodore Starr, influenced by the London

² Robert Bremner, "An Iron Sceptre Twined With Roses: The Octavia Hill System of Housing Management," *Social Service Review*, XXXIX (June, 1965), 222-231.

experiment, purchased a lot in St. Mary Street and built a six-room house which he rented to residents of the area. In the next decade he added other homes, keeping the rents low and expecting only a small profit. In 1888 Hannah Fox, a wealthy young woman working at Susan Wharton's library and impressed by both Starr and Octavia Hill, purchased two houses on lower St. Mary Street. With the aid of Helen Parrish she cleaned up the rooms and rented them to the poorest, most transient Negroes in the city. The experiment lasted for four years until in 1892 Miss Fox donated the buildings for the use of the Philadelphia branch of the College Settlement (making it the first social settlement to be founded in a predominantly Negro district). The two women continued to be interested in housing reform. In 1896 they played a leading role in the organization of the Octavia Hill Association of Philadelphia, which not only managed homes but also fought for better housing laws at the city and state level.³

The diary Helen Parrish kept during the summer of 1888, here reproduced in part, reveals both the conditions under which Negroes lived in the slums of Philadelphia in the late nineteenth century and the attitudes of some white reformers toward the Negro. Her maternalism, her acceptance of racial stereotypes, her insistence that her tenants adopt the Puritan virtues of thrift, cleanliness, and sobriety are immediately apparent. In some ways she was more demanding than Octavia Hill herself (Miss Hill, for example, never advocated the invasion of an occupied room), but she was also troubled by self-doubt, and constantly questioned her own actions and attitudes, and occasionally she would let the rents go uncollected. She seems obsessed by the need to impose her own white, Protestant values on those she tried to help. Perhaps her attitudes can be put in perspective by comparing them with those of William E. B. Du Bois at the time he wrote the *Philadelphia Negro*. Du Bois complains of the extravagance of the Negroes, their unwillingness

³ Accounts of these ventures are scattered. See, for example, Julia B. Farrington, *Philadelphia Settlement*. (Philadelphia; 1898); Fullerton Waldo: *Good Housing That Pays: A Study of the Aims and the Accomplishment of the Octavia Hill Association, 1896-1917* (Philadelphia, 1917); Bernard J. Newman, "Women's Work for Housing Reform," *The American City*, VI (June, 1912), 819-822 The annual reports of the St. Mary Street Library and the College Settlement of Philadelphia are also informative.

to save, and he comments, as does Miss Parrish, on their fear of doctors and hospitals. Of course, Du Bois was influenced at the time of his Philadelphia study by the white philanthropists and reformers who encouraged and sponsored his work.⁴

It must be kept in mind that Helen Parrish managed her houses in one of the worst sections of the city. The death rate in the fifth ward was 48.46 per 1,000, highest in the city in the years from 1884 to 1890. It was an area of great mobility where only the poorest, most transient Negroes settled. Many of the residents were recent migrants from the rural South and had had no preparation for life in the city. Du Bois, himself, spoke of them as "barbarians." Often Miss Parrish tried to discourage the "better class" of Negroes from settling in her neighborhood. Perhaps she was moved to protect the middle-class Negro from the bad influences of those who lived in her house; perhaps she felt her true mission was to aid the most downtrodden. This could, of course, backfire. Negroes who desired good neighborhoods often found them restricted to whites and were forced back into the fifth or seventh wards. There was much that was ambivalent in the actions and thoughts of Miss Parrish. Like Octavia Hill and other nineteenth-century reformers (indeed, like many twentieth-century reformers), she was a mixture of compassion and prejudice.⁵ But given the influences of the racist time in which she lived, it is remarkable that a young woman of good family in her late twenties should choose to work in the worst Negro slum in Philadelphia. Certainly her attitude toward Negroes (and incidently toward immigrants as well) was similar to that of social reformers in the late nineteenth century, a mixture of sympathy and paternalism, of comprehension and misunderstanding. Yet it is exactly this mixed heritage from the years of philanthropy and reform that helps explain some of the conflicts and contradictions, as well as some of the success, of the contemporary movements for freedom and civil rights.

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⁴ W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Philadelphia Negro: A Social Study* (New York, 1967), 162, 184-192, 295, 392.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 10-11, 58-60, 149-150, 305-307, 347-348, 355.