

# *Nellie Rathbone Bright: Acclaimed Author, Educator Activist, Un-American Woman?*

ABSTRACT: This paper documents the life of Nellie Rathbone Bright, an immigrant daughter, celebrated author, and activist educator, who challenged the boundaries of gender and sexuality and engaged in grassroots political work to alleviate racial inequities in her community and schools. Historians have documented how the national hysteria about communism incited politicians and citizens to disgrace progressive reformers and civil rights activists. Bright's identity as a Black, unmarried, grassroots activist and educator pushes us to consider how the intersections of race, gender, and sexuality made her an innocent victim of the McCarthy era anticommunist campaign.

ON JULY 5, 1952, WITH NATIONAL concerns about communism seeping into public schools, Nellie Rathbone Bright, one of Philadelphia's most outstanding and distinguished educators, announced her resignation as principal of the Reynolds School due to a "smear campaign . . . to sully her reputation."<sup>1</sup> When she made the announcement, rumors circulated that Bright was not a citizen and that she had not taken a required loyalty oath. After careful investigation, reporters confirmed that these rumors were nothing more than "idle fabrication," adding "there is apparently a deliberate intention to smear the reputation of one of the most active and responsible citizens of Philadelphia." Edward T.

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<sup>1</sup>"Communist Teachers," *New Republic*, Mar. 17, 1941, 359–60; "Communists and Teachers," *New Republic*, Feb. 24, 1941, 265; Craig Thompson, "Here's Where Our Young Commies Are Trained," *Saturday Evening Post*, Mar. 12, 1949, 38–39, 148–50.

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Myers, the superintendent of the School District of Philadelphia's regional District 2, told an audience of Bright supporters that she was embarking on "a noble and praise worthy effort" in her retirement. In the middle of his speech, Bright asked Myers to stop speaking about her future plans. In a statement to the *Philadelphia Tribune*, the city's leading Black newspaper, Bright said, "I am leaving the school system and resigning as of June 30. It is for personal reasons and had nothing to do with the system." In reference to the rumors that she was not a citizen, Bright said, "I don't need citizenship papers and it is a silly thing for people to think, if they do. I was born in this country." Responding to claims that she did not take the loyalty oath, she told reporters: "I took the loyalty oath with my staff when it was administered by Magistrate Ralph F. Knox. All my life I have been a loyal American citizen. I am not a Communist. I consider the question insulting. I've given my life to helping people. It is a smear campaign. The implication is that I must be subversive. Even to mention it in a day like this is dangerous."<sup>2</sup>

Reporters described Bright as one of the leading educators in the city and commended her for her extensive civic work. She was one of the founders of Philadelphia's famed Fellowship House, an interracial, intercultural institution for individuals of all racial and religious backgrounds to socialize and learn from one another. She led the plans to eradicate slum housing in North Philadelphia and served on the city's Community Chest, the American Friends Service Committee, and the Mayor's Scholarship Committee. In an official school board comment, Dr. John L. Waldman, associate superintendent, said:

Miss Bright retired of her own volition. It is a private affair with her. The whole school board was upset when she revealed that she was leaving the service . . . It is a universal rule that all professional workers in the school system be citizens of the United States. She would have had to be a citizen to be appointed. I had to make a statement in 1909 concerning my citizenship and Miss Bright came into the system since that time and things have been even stricter.<sup>3</sup>

Why did Nellie Rathbone Bright become the target of a smear campaign to question her citizenship and loyalty to the state? Bright, a woman widely celebrated for her accomplishments and commitments to improv-

<sup>2</sup>"Miss Bright Resigns; Raps 'Smear Campaign,'" *Philadelphia Tribune*, July 5, 1952.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid.

ing education for all children in the city, had nothing in her life record to warrant these claims. Historians have documented the ways in which national hysteria surrounding communism spurred political leaders and engaged citizens to target and smear individuals associated with communist causes.<sup>4</sup> Other historians have demonstrated that the men and women who orchestrated the Red Scare often accused New Deal liberal activists, who had worked in Roosevelt's administration and other welfare-oriented causes, of being associated with communism.<sup>5</sup> Several historians have examined how the fears of sexual deviance and the policing of homosexual activity coincided with the Red Scare in the military and schools.<sup>6</sup> Scholars have also noted the ways teachers' union leaders intersected with communist party leadership and anticommunist sentiment.<sup>7</sup> Even though this literature has contributed to our understanding of this period, current scholarship has often overlooked the ways that gender, race, and sexuality influenced the inquisition of teachers during the 1950s Red Scare.<sup>8</sup> Bright, an immigrant daughter, bourgeois migrant, celebrated author, and activist teacher, challenged the boundaries of gender and sexuality that defined the McCarthy era and engaged in political work that challenged the racial inequities within and beyond the schoolhouse. Bright's identity

<sup>4</sup> Mary L. Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy* (Princeton, NJ, 2011); Ann Mari May, *The Woman Question and Higher Education: Perspectives on Gender and Knowledge Production in America* (Cheltenham, UK, 2008); Ellen Schrecker, *Many Are the Crimes: McCarthyism in America* (Boston, 1998); Phillip Deery, *Red Apple: Communism and McCarthyism in Cold War New York* (New York, 2016); Eric Bentley and Frank Rich, *Thirty Years of Treason: Excerpts from Hearings Before the House Committee on Un-American Activities, 1938–1968* (New York, 2001).

<sup>5</sup> Landon R. Y. Storrs, *The Second Red Scare and the Unmaking of the New Deal Left* (Princeton, NJ, 2015).

<sup>6</sup> Margot Canaday, *The Straight State: Sexuality and Citizenship in Twentieth-Century America* (Princeton, NJ, 2011); David K. Johnson, *The Lavender Scare: The Cold War Persecution of Gays and Lesbians in the Federal Government* (Chicago, 2006); C. Taylor, "What's Wrong with Negative Liberty," in *Freedom: A Philosophical Anthology*, ed. Ian Carter, Matthew Kramer, and Hillel Steiner (Malden, MA, 2007), 153–62; Stacy Braukman, "Nothing Else Matters but Sex: Cold War Narratives of Deviance and the Search for Lesbian Teachers in Florida, 1959–1963," *Feminist Studies* 27 (2001): 553–75; Karen L. Graves, *And They Were Wonderful Teachers: Florida's Purge of Gay and Lesbian Teachers* (Urbana, IL, 2009); Jackie M. Blount, *Fit to Teach: Same-Sex Desire, Gender, and School Work in the Twentieth Century* (Albany, NY, 2006).

<sup>7</sup> Clarence Taylor, *Reds at the Blackboard: Communism, Civil Rights, and the New York City Teachers Union* (New York, 2013).

<sup>8</sup> Even though these works do not focus on teachers per se, there is a growing body of scholarship that focuses on the intersections of gender, race, and radical political engagement. See Dayo F. Gore, *Radicalism at the Crossroads: African American Women Activists in the Cold War* (New York, 2012); Dayo F. Gore, Jeanne Theoharis, and Komozi Woodard, eds., *Want to Start a Revolution?: Radical Women in the Black Freedom Struggle* (New York, 2009); Kate Weigand, *Red Feminism: American Communism and the Making of Women's Liberation* (Baltimore, 2002).

as a Black, unmarried, politically active, assertive female schoolteacher and her decision to engage in grassroots, feminist civil rights activism made her a natural target in the conservative social and political climate of the 1950s. It is a life story that pushes scholars to examine the life of a Black, queer activist-teacher accused of communist activity even though there was little to support that claim.

Born in Savannah, Georgia, on March 28, 1898, Bright was the only child of Reverend Richard Bright and Nellie Jones Bright.<sup>9</sup> Her father, an immigrant from the Dutch West Indies, received financial support from Miss Caroline Rathbone, a wealthy white New Yorker who moved to Louisville and met Bright when he was a child. Richard Bright attended St. Augustine Collegiate Institute in Raleigh, North Carolina, and the General Theological Seminary in New York City.<sup>10</sup> After graduating from the seminary, he moved to Savannah, Georgia. Due to the underfunding of African American parishes in the Episcopal Church at the time, many Black priests struggled to earn a decent salary, and Bright was no exception. He worked at several parishes in Savannah, including St. Matthew's, the Church of Our Merciful Savior, and St. Stephen's, where he spent the majority of his time.<sup>11</sup> In the twenty-five years he worked in Georgia, Bright developed a national reputation as "one of the most talented of the colored priests in the Episcopal Church in the country."<sup>12</sup>

Nellie R. Bright offers conflicting evidence about her mother's birth—in her biographical notes, she states that her mother was born in Jamaica; other sources indicate that her mother was born in Louisville.<sup>13</sup> Bright's maternal grandfather, Quincy B. Jones, owned a distillery in Louisville, which both helped him provide a middle-class lifestyle for his family and made him a target of white racism. One morning, a group of poor whites stormed the store and smashed its goods. When Quincy B. Jones Jr., Bright's maternal

<sup>9</sup>"Public School Teachers Elected," *Louisville Courier-Journal*, July 5, 1887.

<sup>10</sup>"Negro Bishop Will Preach Funeral Sermon of White Woman who Befriended Him," *Louisville Courier-Journal*, Dec. 23, 1901; "Negro Minister," *Nashville American*, Dec. 24, 1901; Richard Bright, 1900 US census, Savannah, Georgia, roll 186, page 21B, district 0068, Family History Library film 1240186, accessed via Ancestry.com.

<sup>11</sup>"History," St. Matthew's Episcopal Church, accessed Jan. 6, 2016, <http://www.stmattsav.org/history>; "The Rev. Richard Bright, Well-Known Colored Minister at the Church of Our Merciful Savior," *Louisville Courier-Journal*, June 24, 1895; "For the Colored Race: Members of the Protestant Episcopal Church to Confer," *Baltimore Sun*, Sept. 24, 1895; "Meeting of Episcopal Workers," *Washington Post*, Sept. 24, 1895; "Short, Simple Services for Veteran Rector," *Philadelphia Tribune*, Apr. 3, 1941.

<sup>12</sup>"The Rev. Richard Bright, Well-Known Colored Minister at the Church of Our Merciful Savior," *Louisville Courier-Journal*, June 24, 1895.

<sup>13</sup>Nellie Bright, biography notes for Ann Shockley, box 1, Nellie Rathbone Bright Family Papers (Collection 2057), Historical Society of Pennsylvania (HSP).

uncle, attempted to force them out, the white vandals shot and killed him.<sup>14</sup> Despite the loss of his son, Bright's grandfather remained positive, encouraging his children to use education to advance their careers. Barred from college in the United States on the basis of her race, Nellie Jones, Bright's mother, earned a college degree in Europe and eventually returned to teach in Louisville's Western Colored School.<sup>15</sup> On November 21, 1892, Richard Bright married Nellie Jones in a small Louisville ceremony.<sup>16</sup>

By the time Richard Bright and his young bride moved from Louisville to Savannah in 1892, the political and economic gains that Blacks had enjoyed following the Civil War had essentially vanished. In the 1880s and 1890s, white supremacists implemented poll taxes and literacy tests to bar Blacks from the ballot and forced Black children to attend grossly underfunded and underresourced schools.<sup>17</sup> With limited education and serious racial discrimination on the labor market, it became nearly impossible for Blacks to secure professional jobs. In 1890, less than 1 percent of gainfully employed African Americans over the age of ten belonged to the professional class. Eighty percent of Black professionals were teachers or ministers in segregated schools and churches.<sup>18</sup>

Like other bourgeois Blacks, Richard and Nellie Jones Bright used their professional positions to engage in racial uplift and promote racial equality, particularly in the realm of education.<sup>19</sup> Shortly after they married, the Brights opened a private school for Black children at Savannah's St. Stephen's Church, where Reverend Bright served as the rector.<sup>20</sup> The school, which included a kindergarten and primary grades, opened on October 1, 1894, with Nellie Jones Bright as one of two teachers.<sup>21</sup> Richard and Nellie Bright believed in the value of education to advance their race against the brutal realities of discrimination and racism.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Nellie Bright, biography notes, card 3, box 1, Bright Papers, HSP.

<sup>15</sup> "Public School Teachers Elected," *Louisville Courier-Journal*, July 5, 1887.

<sup>16</sup> "Bright-Jones, A Young Minister of Savannah Finds a Bride in this City," *Louisville Courier-Journal*, Nov. 22, 1892.

<sup>17</sup> James D. Anderson, *The Education of Blacks in the South, 1860-1935* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1988).

<sup>18</sup> Bureau of the Census, *Negro Population in the United States, 1790-1915* (New York, 1968), 526.

<sup>19</sup> My own understanding of the Black bourgeoisie comes from E. Franklin Frazier, *Black Bourgeoisie* (New York, 1965).

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> "Personal Mention," *Kindergarten News* 4 (1894): 334; "Schools and Teachers among the Colored People," in *The Domestic and Foreign Missionary Society of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the United States of America* (New York, 1904), 51. Bright urged his parishioners to donate funds to support the school. "Small Aid for the Negro," *Washington Post*, Sept. 25, 1895.

<sup>22</sup> Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920* (Cambridge, MA, 1994), 20.

Richard and Nellie Bright's class status and global experiences shaped their daughter's childhood. They took her with them as they traveled the globe so that she could witness firsthand the diverse array of racial experiences for Blacks outside the United States. From the age of four, Nellie Rathbone Bright accompanied her parents on tours to visit family and to hear her father preach to Episcopal audiences in the Caribbean, South America, and Europe.<sup>23</sup> As a member of the talented tenth, Nellie Rathbone Bright had access to the best educational opportunities available to Blacks.<sup>24</sup> Living on a predominantly bourgeois white street in Savannah, she rarely interacted with working-class Blacks who attended different schools, churches, and clubs; accordingly, she knew little about the hardships associated with poverty.

Even though her parents enjoyed many advantages, racism still structured their lives in the Jim Crow South. Richard Bright, a Black minister in an overwhelmingly white and often overtly racist Episcopalian church, and Nellie Jones Bright, a teacher in a racially segregated school system, helped their only daughter understand how to navigate between a white world that shunned them and a Black world that often rejected them on the basis of their class position. Her parents also taught their daughter that their occupational positions—as a minister and teacher—gave them the power to lead the grassroots political work required to advance their community and their race. She watched and learned from her mother and father as they engaged in this work.<sup>25</sup>

Sometime before 1910, Nellie Rathbone Bright and her mother moved to Philadelphia and rented a room from Rebecca A. Walton, an African American teacher who had migrated to Philadelphia from Georgia.<sup>26</sup> What prompted this move is unknown. In Philadelphia, Bright attended the Edwin M. Stanton Elementary School, a public school located on the corner of Seventeenth and Christian Streets, only a few blocks from her home.<sup>27</sup> When Nellie enrolled in this school, she entered a school system

<sup>23</sup> Nellie R. Bright, biography notes for Ann Shockley, box 1, Bright Papers, HSP; Nellie R. Bright, passport, box 1, Bright Papers, HSP.

<sup>24</sup> W. E. B. Du Bois, "The Talented Tenth," in *The Negro Problem*, ed. Booker T. Washington (New York, 1903), 31–76.

<sup>25</sup> On racial uplift projects underway in African American churches and schools in the South at the time, see Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent*; Adam Fairclough, *A Class of Their Own: Black Teachers in the Segregated South* (Cambridge, MA, 2007); and Anderson, *The Education of Blacks in the South*.

<sup>26</sup> Nellie R. Bright, 1910 US census, Ward 30, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, roll T624\_1399, page 9B, district 0695, Family History Library film 1375412, accessed Mar. 3, 2016, via Ancestry.com.

<sup>27</sup> School District of Philadelphia, *Ninety-Second Annual Report . . . for the Year Ending December 31, 1910* (Philadelphia, 1911), 263.



that, despite its geographic position in the North, practiced the racial segregation that she had experienced as a child in Savannah. Philadelphia school officials, like their counterparts in other northern cities, maintained all-Black and all-white elementary schools, with teaching staff similarly segregated.<sup>28</sup> However, the class composition of the Stanton School did not mirror the schools that she attended in Savannah. The majority of children who lived nearby were not the sons and daughters of Black professionals but of craftspeople, laborers, and service workers who struggled to find work in Philadelphia's racially segregated labor market. Her brief but significant time in Philadelphia's impoverished and segregated Seventh Ward exposed the young Bright to the harsh realities of life in racially and often economically segregated Black Philadelphia.<sup>29</sup>

In the summer of 1913, shortly after Nellie had enrolled in the William Penn High School for Girls, her father accepted a position in the Episcopal Diocese of Pennsylvania and restored his family's bourgeois lifestyle.<sup>30</sup> When he arrived in Philadelphia, both the city and the church were undergoing significant changes. Between 1900 and 1920, Philadelphia's Black population rose from 63,000 to 134,000 as tens of thousands of African Americans left the Jim Crow South in search of better opportunities for their families.<sup>31</sup> Facing limited housing and employment options in the city, many migrants found support and refuge in the ever-expanding network of Black churches that dotted Philadelphia's neighborhoods.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>28</sup> Vincent P. Franklin, *The Education of Black Philadelphia: The Social and Educational History of a Minority Community, 1900–1950* (Philadelphia, 1979). For a discussion of this system in another city, see Anne Meis Knupfer, *The Chicago Black Renaissance and Women's Activism* (Chicago, 2005), 79–80. For decades, Black families and civil rights activists challenged the racial segregation in the school system, arguing that Black schools routinely lacked the resources that white schools enjoyed. See W. E. B. Du Bois, "Editorial," *Crisis* 1, no. 1 (1910): 10–11. Most scholarship focuses on segregated schools in the South, but an increasing number of works focus on Jim Crow policies in the North. See Jack Dougherty, *More Than One Struggle: The Evolution of Black School Reform in Milwaukee* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2004); John P. Spencer, *In the Crossfire: Marcus Foster and the Troubled History of American School Reform* (Philadelphia, 2012); and Davison M. Douglas, *Jim Crow Moves North: The Battle Over Northern School Segregation, 1865–1954* (Cambridge, UK, 2005).

<sup>29</sup> W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Philadelphia Negro* (Philadelphia, 1899); Michael B. Katz and Thomas J. Sugrue, eds., *W. E. B. Du Bois, Race, and the City: "The Philadelphia Negro" and Its Legacy* (Philadelphia, 1998); Sadie Tanner Mossell, *The Standard of Living Among One Hundred Negro Migrant Families in Philadelphia* (Philadelphia, 1921).

<sup>30</sup> "Short, Simple Services for Veteran Rector," *Philadelphia Tribune*, Apr. 3, 1941.

<sup>31</sup> James Wolfinger, "African American Migration," *Encyclopedia of Greater Philadelphia*, accessed Jan. 12, 2016, <http://philadelphiaencyclopedia.org/archive/african-american-migration/>.

<sup>32</sup> E. Franklin Frazier, *The Negro Church in America* (New York, 1974), 41–88; Hans A. Baer and Merrill Singer, *African-American Religion in the Twentieth Century: Varieties of Protest and Accommodation* (Knoxville, TN, 1992), 49–59; Arthur Huff Fauset, *Black Gods of the Metropolis* (Philadelphia, 1944), 98–107.

The Diocese of Pennsylvania expanded its support for “colored work” and opened several new segregated mission churches that employed Black ministers, including Bright.<sup>33</sup> Once he secured employment, Richard Bright moved his family out of the crowded row house in the racially segregated Seventh Ward to a middle-class home in a racially integrated West Philadelphia neighborhood.<sup>34</sup>

On December 17, 1914, Bright’s mother, Nellie Jones Bright, died at the age of forty-eight, leaving her father to provide his only daughter with a bourgeois upbringing on his own.<sup>35</sup> Following in her mother’s footsteps, Bright graduated from the all-female and overwhelmingly white Philadelphia Normal School. Historians note that normal schools provided a critical access point for immigrant and Black youth, who were often barred from teaching programs in American colleges and universities. Bright’s time at the Philadelphia Normal School, as part of a small but important group of Black students in her class, gave her an opportunity to develop relationships that she would rely on later in her career.<sup>36</sup> In the spring of 1920, Bright accepted a teaching position at Edwin Stanton Elementary School, her childhood elementary school. Later that year, she enrolled in evening courses at the University of Pennsylvania, teaching during the day and commuting from her father’s West Philadelphia home. As a student, Bright joined networks of elite, Black Penn attendees. Among them was her longtime colleague and collaborator, Arthur Huff Fauset, who graduated from Penn in 1921. As a member of the Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Bright socialized with such women as Sadie T. Mossell, the first African American woman to earn a law degree from the University of Pennsylvania and a prominent leader in Philadelphia’s civil rights movement.<sup>37</sup> In 1923, Bright earned a

<sup>33</sup> Thomas F. Rzeznik, “The Church in Prosperity, Depression, and War, 1910–1945,” in *This Far by Faith: Tradition and Change in the Episcopal Diocese of Pennsylvania*, ed. David R. Contosta (University Park, PA, 2012), 217–25. For a history of Black activism in the Episcopal Church in a later period, see William W. Cutler III, “A Church on Wheels, 1945–1963,” in Contosta, *This Far by Faith*, 263–97. Bright worked in several parishes, including the Church of the Crucifixion, African Episcopal Church of St. Thomas, and eventually St. Monica’s Episcopal Church. See Robert Pierce, “Churches and their Pastors: St. Thomas P. E. Church,” *Philadelphia Tribune*, Oct. 4, 1913; “Society,” *New York Amsterdam News*, Sept. 5, 1936; “Short, Simple Services for Veteran Rector,” *Philadelphia Tribune*, Apr. 3, 1941.

<sup>34</sup> Nellie R. Bright, 1920 US census, Ward 40, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, roll T625\_26A, sheet 26A, district 1498, image 1130, accessed May 30, 2017, via Ancestry.com.

<sup>35</sup> Nellie J. Bright in the Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, Death Certificates Index, 1803–1915, accessed May 30, 2017, via Ancestry.com.

<sup>36</sup> Christine A. Ogen, *The American State Normal School: An Instrument of Great Good* (New York, 2005).

<sup>37</sup> Delta Sigma Theta Sorority—Gamma Chapter, 1920, Women’s Undergraduate Record, University of Pennsylvania, *U.S., School Yearbooks, 1880–2012*, accessed May 30, 2017, via Ancestry.com.



bachelor's degree in English.<sup>38</sup> After graduation, Bright taught in the city's public schools. Like her mother, she also continued her education in Europe, studying literature at the Sorbonne and Oxford University.<sup>39</sup> A decade after moving to Philadelphia, Bright had earned the educational credentials and cultivated the social networks to sustain a middle-class lifestyle.<sup>40</sup>

Members of Nellie Rathbone Bright's generation came of age during the First World War; they understood the unique vulnerability of African Americans who fought to save democracy abroad but lived in a nation that sanctioned racism at home. In Philadelphia, St. Louis, Chicago, and Detroit, race riots broke out when Black residents tried to move their families into predominantly white communities.<sup>41</sup> Racial discrimination on the labor market still barred most Blacks from professional jobs. Blacks who served in the armed forces remained segregated from their white peers.<sup>42</sup> Searching for a mechanism to call attention to the shortcomings of their own nation, many Blacks engaged in a movement that rose to prominence in Harlem to showcase the artistic and literary talents of African Americans. The movement used the arts to expose and combat racism on a national level. The individuals that belonged to these groups believed that they might uplift their race through their own literary and artistic endeavors.<sup>43</sup>

Bright embraced the ideas put forth in this movement and established several clubs and societies to promote the artistic and literary achievements of Philadelphia's Black community. She founded the Fireside Club, an interracial organization dedicated to the advancement of the arts, particularly among the Black bourgeoisie of her generation. The club hosted literary and social events, most likely in her father's church at first, which brought together a diverse array of writers and activists, including Nora Waring, Arthur Huff Fauset, and Langston Hughes.<sup>44</sup> Bright's club, like

<sup>38</sup> Paul Jackson, "Philadelphians: You Should Know," *Baltimore Afro-American*, Oct. 5, 1940; University of Pennsylvania bulletin, catalogue for the session of 1921–22, 308, University of Pennsylvania Archives.

<sup>39</sup> Lorraine Elena Roses and Ruth Elizabeth Randolph, "Nellie Rathbone Bright," in *Harlem Renaissance and Beyond: Literary Biographies of 100 Black Women Writers, 1900–1945* (Cambridge, MA, 1997); Leantín L. Bracks, "Nellie Rathbone Bright," in *Black Women of the Harlem Renaissance Era*, ed. Bracks and Jessie Carney Smith (Lanham, MD, 2014), 28.

<sup>40</sup> Du Bois, "The Talented Tenth."

<sup>41</sup> Vincent P. Franklin, "The Philadelphia Race Riot of 1918," *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 99 (1975): 336–50.

<sup>42</sup> Matthew Countryman, *Up South: Civil Rights and Black Power in Philadelphia* (Philadelphia, 2006), 18–20.

<sup>43</sup> Nathan Irvin Huggins, *Harlem Renaissance* (New York, 2007); Elizabeth McHenry, *Forgotten Readers: Recovering the Lost History of African American Literary Societies* (Durham, NC, 2002).

<sup>44</sup> The exact location of their meetings is unknown, but an article in the *Afro-American* indicates that they used a church basement. See "Cumberland, Md.," *Baltimore Afro-American*, Feb. 7, 1925. For other accounts of the club's activities, see "The Whispering Hedge," *Philadelphia Tribune*, Apr. 10, 1926;

those in other cities, brought together artists who might have otherwise been isolated from one another and generated new networks among the Black bourgeoisie, who represented the majority of members in these clubs and societies.<sup>45</sup> Additionally, these clubs and societies often provided a sanctuary for gay and lesbian members to thrive.<sup>46</sup>

A few years after the establishment of the Fireside Club, Bright and her colleague Arthur Huff Fauset organized a new literary club, the Black Opals, and an eponymous journal. On the back of the journal's first edition, the group articulated its mission: "Black Opals is the expression of an idea. It is the result of the desire of older New Negroes to encourage younger members of the group who demonstrate talent and ambition." In contrast to the Fireside Club, Bright and Fauset insisted that the Black Opals represented a "movement," not simply a literary group. Its founders believed that "literature should be a sanctuary for all black people" and thus "encouraged anyone interested in literary expression to contact and join them."<sup>47</sup> To make their point clear, the editors wrote:

Black Opals does not purport to be an aggregation of masters and masterpieces. . . . These expressions, with the exception of contributions by recognized New Negro artists, are the embryonic outpourings of aspiring young Negroes living for the most part in Philadelphia. Their message is one of determination, hope, and we trust power.<sup>48</sup>

Writers from all over the country submitted and published their works in the journal. Many of them, including Marita Bonner and Gertrude P. McBrown, were urban schoolteachers.<sup>49</sup> In the June 1927 volume of the *Crisis*, W. E. B. Du Bois commended the journal's founders for creating a space for the "embryonic outpourings of aspiring young Negroes."<sup>50</sup> *Opportunity*, the literary engine of the National Urban League under the direction of Charles S. Johnson, promoted the Black Opals and its editors

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"Thru Society Land: With Crom Wells Entertaining Walter White," *Philadelphia Tribune*, Jan. 29, 1927; "Scoutin' Round," *Baltimore Afro-American*, Oct. 7, 1933; and Ralph Lester, "Meet Your Principal: Brief Sketches of Philadelphia School Leaders You Should Know," *Baltimore Afro-American*, Dec. 4, 1943.

<sup>45</sup> McHenry, *Forgotten Readers*, 253–80.

<sup>46</sup> Marc Stein, *City of Sisterly and Brotherly Loves: Lesbian and Gay Philadelphia, 1945–1972*, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia, 2004), 41.

<sup>47</sup> McHenry, *Forgotten Readers*, 293–94.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 293.

<sup>49</sup> Front cover, *Black Opals* 1, no. 2 (1927), University of Pennsylvania Kislak Center for Special Collections, Rare Books and Manuscripts.

<sup>50</sup> W. E. B. Du Bois, *Crisis* 34, no. 6 (1927): 130, cited in Vincent Jubilee, "Philadelphia's Afro-American Literary Circle and the Harlem Renaissance" (PhD diss., University of Pennsylvania, 1980), 29.

to a national audience of Black artists, writers, and activists involved in the New Negro movement.<sup>51</sup> The founding of the Black Opals transformed Bright's role in the New Negro movement from that of a hopeful bourgeois intellectual eager to promote interracial dialogues in her city to a radical activist engaged in the national movement for racial equity.<sup>52</sup> While this activism propelled her to national prominence as a writer, it later created a swirl of questions about her affiliation with the Communist Party, to which Fauset and others belonged.

Bright leveraged her editorial position to publish her own work in the journal and build a national reputation as a writer.<sup>53</sup> In the journal's second issue, Bright published two poems, "To One Who Might Have Been Friend" and "Query." In the first poem, Bright described a friendship between two individuals—one with fair skin and one with a brown cheek—and the tensions that this interracial friendship and same-sex desire posed. Bright began, "Do you remember how that glowing morn / We stood hands clasped beside an amber pool / Of lilies pale as your fair skin, and cool / On my brown cheek was the misty breath of dawn?" Her poem suggests that the two friends, at least initially, believe in their relationship despite their racial differences: "we were born / To dwell at beauty's shrine. There is no rule / That being brown and being fair, we play the fool." At the end of the poem, Bright foreshadowed a future in which the fair-skinned girl will realize that it is dangerous to acknowledge her own desires to be with the brown girl:

'Twas then I saw amid the thin-leaved grass  
The souls of dead men and men to be;  
Blue fires, old thrilling hopes that leaped and died  
When you in dread, a childhood friend espied—  
And seeing his slow smile, you shrank from me—  
Then,—my faith dead—I turned—and—let—you pass.<sup>54</sup>

<sup>51</sup> McHenry, *Forgotten Readers*, 292.

<sup>52</sup> Huggins, *Harlem Renaissance*, 6. See also Jubilee, "Philadelphia's Afro-American Literary Circle and the Harlem Renaissance," 24–34.

<sup>53</sup> Bright's poem *Longings* appeared in the journal's debut edition. In June 1928, she published a review of Leslie Pinkney Hill's *Toussaint L' Ouverture*. During her tenure as the editor of *Black Opals*, Bright received national accolades for her work—publishing several pieces in *Opportunity*, the literary magazine affiliated with the National Urban League, and *Carolina Magazine*, the official magazine of the University of North Carolina. See Roses and Randolph, "Nellie Rathbone Bright," 24–25.

<sup>54</sup> Nellie R. Bright, "To One Who Might Have Been Friend," *Black Opals* 1, no. 2 (1927), University of Pennsylvania Kislak Center for Special Collections, Rare Books and Manuscripts.

The *Black Opals* gave Bright a platform to explore and publish works that examined racial inequality in her bourgeois life and gave her a way to share her writing with a national audience. In 1927, Bright's essay "Black" won third prize in a national contest sponsored by *Opportunity*. The essay details Bright's experiences as a Black woman traveling on a steamship to Europe. It opens with a description of her failed attempts to purchase a ticket for the ship's tourist accommodations. Even though she had a newspaper advertisement detailing the availability of these accommodations for teachers and students who wished to travel to Europe over the summer, the ticket agents repeatedly looked at her "in great consternation" and "answered glibly or curtly, but always with the flat denial that there were any bookings left."<sup>55</sup> Rather than submit, Bright visited the manager's office to inquire about ticket availability. While she waited, "blood pounding at my temples, my heart beating at such a pace," as she described, the manager sent a young boy over to ask her what she wanted. After several minutes, the young boy returned to Bright and told her, "We don't sell tourist third [class] to Negroes."<sup>56</sup> Bright wrote:

Then, that was it. It wasn't that it was a curse to be poor, but in my case it was a curse to be a Negro. My skin was brown. In my excitement in planning for the adventure, I had committed a new crime. I had forgotten that I was the brown girl.<sup>57</sup>

Bright eventually secured a ticket to travel in steerage with immigrants who had booked tickets for brief visits to their homelands. When she boarded the ship and rushed down to the hold, her father, who was saying goodbye and sending his daughter on the journey alone, refused to look at her: "he did not want me to see the hurt in his eyes."<sup>58</sup> Despite her parents' efforts to give Bright the bourgeois entitlements that they both enjoyed, she still remained subject to a system that oppressed Blacks, and she used her pen to expose the daily manifestations of this racism. Her decision to travel to Europe as an unaccompanied woman pushed the normative boundaries that governed even the lives of bourgeois, white women. For a time, *Black Opals* provided a platform for sharing these experiences, but it

<sup>55</sup> Nellie Rathbone Bright, "Black," in *Tell It to Us Easy and Other Stories: A Complete Short Fiction Anthology of African American Women Writers in "Opportunity" Magazine (1923–1948)*, ed. Judith Musser (Jefferson, NC, 2008), 84.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 84–85.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 85.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 86.

never generated the circulation to make the publication financially viable. In 1928, the journal and its club ceased operations.

During the summers of 1928 and 1929, Nellie studied art at the Berkshire Summer School for Art in Great Barrington, Massachusetts. Throughout her stay, she wrote her father letters that detailed her activities and travels. While most of the letters contain mundane information about her day—from the food that she ate for breakfast to the walks that she took in the woods, the letters document the process of racial socialization that she experienced as one of presumably few Black students in the program. In a letter to her father sent shortly after she arrived at the school, Nellie assured him that the Sunset Inn in Great Barrington was “a fine place” with “two houses and a dining room divided part for white, one for colored.” In the same letter, she wrote that the students in her classes “are very nice. At first some didn’t look at me at all but when the teacher stood and talked a long time asking about our teachers at the School [at] Broad and Pine,” her peers finally noticed her.<sup>59</sup>

The racism that Nellie experienced extended beyond the classroom. A week after she arrived at the school, she described the “beautiful towns where there are magnificent hotels for millionaires” in the Berkshires and told her father, “the colored porters [at these hotels] were sitting on the edges of the porches giving us inquiring glances.”<sup>60</sup> In an undated letter, Bright told her father that a cart named “Goody Shop” passed through the summer camp. Bright described how a “colored man and woman were selling goods. Their eyes opened in their heads and from then on they were speechless.”<sup>61</sup> Bright’s presence surprised this Black man and woman; seeing a Black girl in the art class challenged the racial hierarchy that governed the lives of both the white students in her bourgeois art program and the Black laborers who worked in the Berkshire woods. These experiences with race and difference shaped Nellie’s own understanding of her position in the world. In her final letter to her father from the summer program, she warned him that the summer had changed her. Nellie wrote, “you won’t know your own child—she’s black as midnight when there’s no moon.”<sup>62</sup>

These letters also reveal the close, same-sex relationship that Nellie cultivated with Ella, her roommate and confidant, who traveled with her from Philadelphia to attend the Berkshire School of Arts. In her letters,

<sup>59</sup> Nellie Bright to Richard Bright, July 8, 1928, box 2, Bright Papers, HSP.

<sup>60</sup> Nellie Bright to Richard Bright, July 14, 1928, box 2, Bright Papers, HSP.

<sup>61</sup> Nellie Bright to Richard Bright, undated, box 2, Bright Papers, HSP.

<sup>62</sup> Nellie Bright to Richard Bright, Aug. 10, 1928, box 2, Bright Papers, HSP.

Nellie provided her father with minute details about her daily activities and adventurous outings with Ella. For example, on July 8, 1928, a few days after she and Ella arrived at the school, Nellie explained that Ella's art classes began at 8 a.m., while hers began an hour later. This staggered start time made it possible for them to alternate sleeping schedules and recuperate from their long trip.<sup>63</sup> Midway through the 1928 program, Nellie informed her father that she and Ella had been trying to keep to themselves but had found that they were both spectacles of "Nordic curiosity." Nellie told her father that at every meal, these students would "come to sit at our table or want us to sit at theirs" and "come to our rooms at all hours and sit on our beds." One, Nellie wrote, "comes persistently to beg me to teach her how to draw and to go sketching with her. I haven't fallen yet. She's from Coolidge's town, Plymouth, and [is] as heavy as dough."<sup>64</sup> Although Ella did not accompany Nellie to the school in 1929, Nellie told her father to "call Ella for me please when you can—I have no extra stamps, so tell her I'll write when I get some."<sup>65</sup>

The relationship with Ella extended beyond the Berkshire School of Arts. In 1930, Ella wrote Nellie a letter about their summer housing options at the Jersey Shore. This is the last letter to or from Ella in the collection. These are the last letters that Nellie preserved. The scraps that Nellie left in her collection make it difficult, if not impossible, to parse out the nature or extent of their relationship. However, the inclusion of these letters in an archive that Nellie Rathbone Bright created herself suggests that she wanted people to know about the relationship she shared with Ella. Even though her relationship with Ella never surfaced during the 1952 smear campaign, Nellie's unmarried status, her literary interests, and her close relationship with women including Ella might have raised questions about her sexuality, which in turn might have motivated the accusations that she was affiliated with the Communist Party.

Neither her literary nor her artistic endeavors provided enough money to sustain her middle-class lifestyle. Instead, Bright focused on her teaching career, which she began in 1920 while attending classes at Penn. She first taught at Stanton Elementary School, later moving to Thomas Durham Elementary School and Alexander Wilson School, which was located a few blocks from her West Philadelphia home.<sup>66</sup>

<sup>63</sup> Nellie Bright to Richard Bright, July 8, 1928, box 2, Bright Papers, HSP.

<sup>64</sup> Nellie Bright to Richard Bright, July 25, 1928, box 2, Bright Papers, HSP.

<sup>65</sup> Nellie Bright to Richard Bright, undated, box 2, Bright Papers, HSP.

<sup>66</sup> Lester, "Meet Your Principal."



At the same time, economic tumult destabilized all aspects of city life, including its schools. In the late 1920s, Philadelphia experienced several serious economic recessions that devastated its textile industries and left thousands without work.<sup>67</sup> The 1929 stock market crash compounded many of these problems. A national study conducted in 1930 indicated that Philadelphia ranked third in unemployment, behind only Detroit and Cleveland.<sup>68</sup> Like other elected officials who belonged to Philadelphia's corrupt Republican machine, the city's new mayor, J. Hampton Moore, refused to acknowledge his constituents' problems, claiming:

I toured the lower sections of South Philadelphia. I went into the small streets, and saw little of poverty . . . I have counted automobiles and watched them pass a given point. Rich and poor, white and colored, alien and native-born, all riding by. . . There is no starvation in Philadelphia.<sup>69</sup>

Desperate for city officials to recognize their plight, residents staged radical political protests and conducted militant labor strikes.<sup>70</sup> Even with these actions, Philadelphia's Republican machine refused to act. Instead, as one journalist said, in Philadelphia, "the poor are taking care of the poor."<sup>71</sup> With limited government support and massive unemployment, the city's unemployed relied on one another.

With tens of thousands unemployed, the School District of Philadelphia (SDP) experienced a drop in tax revenues that dramatically affected its ability to run its schools. To save operating costs, in 1932, district officials terminated 150 teaching positions and implemented a hiring freeze. They slashed the school district's extensive afterschool programs and successful

<sup>67</sup> Gladys L. Palmer, *Recent Trends in Employment and Unemployment in Philadelphia* (Philadelphia, 1937); Walter Licht, *Getting Work: Philadelphia, 1840–1950* (Cambridge, MA, 1992), 220–55.

<sup>68</sup> Karl deSchweinitz, "Philadelphia Takes Heart," *Survey*, May 15, 1931, 217–19. See also "Philadelphia's Survey Shows Peak of Unemployment Passed," *Business Week*, June 11, 1930, 10; Bonnie R. Fox, "Unemployment Relief in Philadelphia, 1930–1932: A Study of the Depression's Impact on Voluntarism," *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 93 (1969): 90; and J. Frederic Dewhurst and Robert R. Nathan, *Social and Economic Character of Unemployment in Philadelphia, April, 1930* (Philadelphia, 1932), 22–23.

<sup>69</sup> Mauritz A. Hallgren, "Mass Misery in Philadelphia," *Nation*, Mar. 9, 1932, 275–76.

<sup>70</sup> Sharon McConnell-Sidorick, *Silk Stockings and Socialism: Philadelphia's Radical Hosiery Workers from the Jazz Age to the New Deal* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2017); "Many Rioters Hurt in Radical Rallies," *Philadelphia Public Ledger*, Mar. 7, 1930; "Hosiery Strikers and Workers Fight," *Philadelphia Evening Bulletin*, Mar. 10, 1930; Joseph Schwartz, "Philadelphia Strike Inspires Other Trade Unions: Hosiery Workers Stand Out for Aggressive Labor Policies in Time of Depression," *New Leader*, Mar. 28, 1931, 1–2.

<sup>71</sup> Hallgren, "Mass Misery in Philadelphia," 275.

summer schools. They even closed several recreational centers and playgrounds, leaving many children on their own after school.<sup>72</sup> In 1933, school district officials took even more drastic measures, firing experienced teachers, reducing staff salaries, and slashing school supplies, such as textbooks, to “an irreducible minimum.”<sup>73</sup> The school district’s actions did little to alleviate its budgetary woes. From 1931 to 1934, the Board of Education cut \$4.6 million from the school district’s annual budget, even though its per-pupil expenditures had been among the lowest in the country before the depression struck.<sup>74</sup>

While the district was struggling, Nellie Rathbone Bright was rising to prominence in the Pennsylvania Association of Teachers of Colored Children, an organization that brought African American teachers together, published a scientific journal, and worked to advance racial equality.<sup>75</sup> Drawing on her fourteen years of experience as a teacher in the SDP, Bright gave a speech at the association’s annual conference in 1934. In it, she urged her colleagues to conduct their own studies and compile their own data on their work in the public schools and their students’ outcomes in the labor market. Bright told listeners, “many of the dangers of the past are still dangers of the present. In the early days sentiment was divided; one group [comprising Blacks and progressive whites in society] regarding Negro education as a social necessity, the other [comprising fiscally conservative and racially biased whites] regarding the cost of such an education as not commensurate with the return.” She continued:

This is a vital question today when experts consider everything on a monetary basis. Are we willing to let others formulate statistics on the basis of our work showing that the return for the expenditure is inadequate, or are we doing such a fine job that the statistics are a challenge to the experts to spend more for Negro education? Are we as a group sufficiently aroused to this danger?<sup>76</sup>

<sup>72</sup> Edwin C. Broome, “Report of the Superintendent,” in *One-Hundred Fifteenth Annual Report of the Board of Public Education, First School District of Philadelphia* (Philadelphia, 1933), 32.

<sup>73</sup> Edwin C. Broome, “Report of the Superintendent,” in *One-Hundred Sixteenth Annual Report of the Board of Public Education, First School District of Philadelphia* (Philadelphia, 1934), 100.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 100–117; Edwin C. Broome, “Report of the Superintendent,” in *One-Hundred Eighteenth Annual Report of the Board of Public Education, First School District of Philadelphia* (Philadelphia, 1936), 9.

<sup>75</sup> Zoe Burkholder, “Education for Citizenship in Bi-Racial Civilization: Black Teachers and the Social Construction of Race, 1929–1954,” *Journal of Social History* 46 (2012): 347.

<sup>76</sup> “Cites Losses in Industrial Field: Urges Organization and Study of Field by Colored Teachers,” *Baltimore Afro-American*, Jan. 20, 1934.

In Philadelphia and other northern cities, Black teachers and administrators worked in schools that were grossly underfunded and underresourced compared to white schools. Such civil rights activists as Floyd Logan, who founded the Educational Equity League in 1932, and such Black teachers as Nellie Rathbone Bright believed that they could change the status quo by revealing these discrepancies to SDP officials.<sup>77</sup> Documenting and analyzing these inequities from a ground-level view at each school, Bright and others argued, was critical to their quest for racial equity.<sup>78</sup>

On February 14, 1935, school officials announced that they had selected Nellie Rathbone Bright to succeed the late Marie Roland as the principal of Germantown's all-Black Joseph E. Hill Elementary School.<sup>79</sup> Located on the corner of McCallum and West Rittenhouse Streets, it was situated in the middle of a multiracial and mixed income community comprising primarily African American and Italian residents. Allen Ballard, who attended the Hill School when Bright served as its principal, recalled that Black and white children routinely played together in the streets and that the families looked out for one another's children. Every day after school, Ballard went to his neighbor's house to eat *pasta e fagioli* with his Italian neighbors. Although the streets might have seemed integrated, the community's institutions were deeply segregated. In the 1930s and 1940s, Philadelphia school district officials still maintained such informal policies as gerrymandered school boundaries and racist registration policies that segregated Black and white youth. Black youth, including Allen Ballard, attended the all-Black Hill School, while his white neighbors attended white schools in the community. At times, Black students had to walk past newer and better-resourced white schools. Ballard recalled:

The Italian kids went to the [all-white] Fulton School which was brand new, spanking school. . . . they just rolled out of bed and walked half a block and we had to walk three and half, four blocks past them to the Hill School . . . and that really irritated the hell out of us.<sup>80</sup>

<sup>77</sup> Matthew Delmont, *The Nicest Kids in Town: American Bandstand, Rock 'n' Roll, and the Struggle for Civil Rights in 1950s Philadelphia* (Berkeley, 2012), 70–96.

<sup>78</sup> "Cites Losses in Industrial Field."

<sup>79</sup> "Nellie Bright is Named to Principalship," *Philadelphia Tribune*, Feb. 14, 1935. See also Bernice Dutrieuille, "Expect Principal Appointment at Hill School Soon," *Philadelphia Tribune*, Feb. 16, 1935; and "Recommended for Principal," *Philadelphia Evening Bulletin*, Feb. 8, 1935, George D. McDowell *Philadelphia Evening Bulletin* News Clippings Collection, Temple University Urban Archives (TUUA).

<sup>80</sup> Allen Ballard, interview with the author, Feb. 26, 2016. See also William T. Coleman Jr., interview with the author, Aug. 10, 2010.

Despite the myriad shortcomings of this segregated system of schools, Black youth who attended the Hill School under Bright's leadership recalled that she cultivated a school environment that stressed academic learning and racial uplift. Bright decorated the school walls with images of Blacks who had fought for racial equality, including Harriet Tubman, Toussaint L'Ouverture, and Frederick Douglass.<sup>81</sup> She exposed her students to the music of Marian Anderson—who occasionally visited the school—and the poetry of Paul Lawrence Dunbar. She also brought together a group of extremely talented Black teachers who, like her, found their professional aspirations restricted by racial discrimination on the labor market. As Ballard suggested, they had “no other outcomes for their lives.”<sup>82</sup> These men and women dedicated their lives to their teaching, their school, and their students. Robert Abele, a relative of Julian Abele, the famed architect, taught students about classical music and Black spirituals. The Philadelphia-born second grade teacher, Louise Baskerville, treated students as her own children—but, as Ballard recalled, she “was constantly augmenting and seeing where we were, lifting us up from that place.” Ballard remembered other teachers—“bourgeois folks with bourgeois values”—who pushed their students to lean on one another to develop their academic skills and “uplift one another together.”<sup>83</sup>

Even though the teachers tried to instill a strong sense of community among their students, the Hill School enrolled students from a variety of socioeconomic backgrounds, often with little in common except their race. William T. Coleman Jr., the son of professional parents who eventually graduated from Harvard Law School, attended the Hill School under Bright's leadership. Coleman recalled that his time at the school, which drew students from a large and economically diverse geographical area, gave him the opportunity to interact with the sons and daughters of low-income Blacks for the first time in his life. This experience, he argued, exposed him “to a different kind of discrimination, one based on poverty, class, and envy rather than [solely] race” and increased his own awareness about the level of poverty among African Americans in his community.<sup>84</sup>

Bright worried about the effects of poverty on the low-income children and families who attended her school as well as the challenges associ-

<sup>81</sup> Allen B. Ballard, *Breaching Jericho's Walls: A Twentieth-Century African American Life* (Albany, NY, 2011), 24.

<sup>82</sup> Ballard interview.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid. See also Ballard, *Breaching Jericho's Walls*, 23–25.

<sup>84</sup> Coleman interview. See also William T. Coleman, *Counsel for the Situation: Shaping the Law to Realize America's Promise* (Washington, DC, 2010).

ated with racial inequity. She encouraged her families to participate in the Hill School Home and School Association, which she used as a forum to discuss racial discrimination in the city's housing and labor markets. To spread awareness beyond the school community, she gave several lectures on these issues to Germantown's social service and civic associations, including the all-Black Rittenhouse YMCA.<sup>85</sup> In the 1930s, several Hill School students contracted tuberculosis and died—events that most middle-class Hill School teachers refused to acknowledge. Unlike many of her colleagues, Bright used the opportunity to speak at these institutions to expose the hardships of poverty and advocate for racial equality.<sup>86</sup>

In 1937, first lady Eleanor Roosevelt urged a group of educators in New York City to learn about the housing conditions in their communities and to prepare underprivileged children for their roles as citizens. Roosevelt believed that slum conditions persisted in the country because “a great many people don't even know what housing conditions are and some don't know what they should be.” She insisted that educators had an obligation to familiarize themselves with the quality of the homes in their communities and teach their students and families about the benefits of maintaining them.<sup>87</sup> Roosevelt's speech coincided with a movement to use federal funding to remove blight and expand public housing. In 1937, Congress passed the Wagner-Steagall Act, which gave the United States Housing Authority the power to allocate money for federal loans to local housing agencies. These loans were intended to subsidize the costs of replacing slums with safe and sanitary homes for low-income families. Black activists hoped that this legislation might provide the Pennsylvania Housing Authority with the funds it needed to build new public housing and alleviate the overcrowding in many Black communities. In Philadelphia, like other American cities, their hope was short-lived. The PHA used the funds it received to build public housing, but the vast majority of these homes were reserved for white residents.<sup>88</sup>

<sup>85</sup> Nellie Speaks, “Germantown School Head Talks At Community Meeting,” *Philadelphia Tribune*, June 4, 1936; “Y' Interracial Group Aids Race Relations,” *Philadelphia Tribune*, Feb. 13, 1941; “Rittenhouse Y.M.C.A.,” *Philadelphia Tribune*, May 27, 1944; “Rittenhouse YMCA News,” *Philadelphia Tribune*, June 3, 1944.

<sup>86</sup> Allen B. Ballard, *One More Day's Journey: The Making of Black Philadelphia* (New York, 1984), 194.

<sup>87</sup> “Mrs. Roosevelt Challenges Educators To Study Housing Conditions in Slums,” *New York Times*, Feb. 6, 1937.

<sup>88</sup> John F. Bauman, “Safe and Sanitary without the Costly Frills: The Evolution of Public Housing in Philadelphia, 1929–1941,” *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 101 (1977): 114–28; Marcus Anthony Hunter, *Black Citymakers: How The Philadelphia Negro Changed Urban America*

While many Philadelphians worried about the city's limited public housing stock and the expansion of "slum housing" in the city's inner core, members of the Germantown Community Council (GCC), a civic association founded in 1933 to improve the community, were concerned about the rise in juvenile delinquency and petty crime. On March 4, 1941, the GCC invited Mrs. T. S. Carson, the director of the twelfth district of Philadelphia's Crime Prevention Bureau, to speak to the members of the council about the conditions that caused the problems and the best solutions to them. In her opening remarks Carson outlined the bureau's work. Organized in 1931, the bureau received its caseload from a variety of places—courts, schools, parents, and social agencies. After bureau officers reviewed the cases, they referred them to local recreational agencies, hospitals, or clinics for remediation and counseling. Carson told listeners, "many young problem boys and girls have been helped in this way and turned away from more serious misdemeanors and crimes." While she acknowledged that petty crime was not "always confined to the very poor or underprivileged," Carson believed that one's home environment played "the most vital part in the education of youth" and urged the council members to institute character-building programs for young people who lacked a stable home environment as a way to prevent crime in their community.<sup>89</sup>

In the 1930s and 1940s, Bright belonged to the NAACP and the National Negro Congress (NNC), an association increasingly known for its communist members.<sup>90</sup> Her experiences as an educator and an activist pushed Bright to question Carson's assertions. While Bright agreed that the rise in juvenile delinquency created unrest in the community, she did not believe that such problems should be attributed to the home environment. Instead, she believed that the rise in juvenile delinquency stemmed

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(Oxford, UK, 2013), 69–96; James Wolfinger, *Philadelphia Divided: Race and Politics in the City of Brotherly Love* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2007), 57–61. For a discussion about the national implications of racial discrimination in the private housing market, see Thomas J. Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* (Princeton, NJ, 2005), 33–55.

<sup>89</sup> For a discussion of Carson's lecture, see Germantown Community Council Minutes, Mar. 4, 1941, box 20, folder 3, Germantown Community Council (Philadelphia, PA) Records, URB 39, PC-42, TUUA. For a discussion of the effect of race on juvenile delinquency, see "The Germantown Community Council Reports to the Community," Ninth Annual Meeting, Nov. 18, 1943, box 21, folder 21, Germantown Community Council Records, TUUA.

<sup>90</sup> Arthur Huff Fauset to Nellie Bright, Oct. 1937, *African America*, Communists, and the National Negro Congress, Schomburg Center, New York Public Library, accessed Jan. 5, 2017, <https://www.nypl.org/collections/articles-databases/national-negro-congress-1933-1947>. See also <http://qa.www.aws.nypl.org/collections/articles-databases/national-negro-congress-1933-1947> and <http://archives.nypl.org/scm/20648>.



from structural factors that limited economic, social, and educational opportunities for Black residents. Rather than implement a character-building program for youth, as Carson suggested, Bright advocated for a more radical agenda, which not only provided additional activities but also ended the racism that barred Black youth from better jobs, homes, and schools—an agenda that mirrored the national movement that Fauset and his Red-leaning NNC colleagues promoted.<sup>91</sup>

To prove her point, Bright proposed an innovative program for her students. Drawing on the sociological methods pioneered by W. E. B. Du Bois and the social science surveys conducted in Philadelphia during the Great Depression, she had them conduct a door-to-door survey, asking residents about levels of juvenile delinquency, good health, adequate nutrition, and adequate housing in the community.<sup>92</sup> The survey results revealed that tensions in the neighborhood had risen due to “inadequate jobs, overcrowding, insanitary conditions, and lack of recreational activities” for youth in the area. The Hill School survey confirmed that juvenile delinquency was 15 percent higher in the school community than the surrounding area, but Bright and her students argued that these elevated delinquency levels were related to the community’s poor housing stock and limited recreational activities for low-income youth rather than the racial and socioeconomic composition of the population. The survey revealed that 10 percent of the residents lived in homes with outdoor toilets, and many endured insufficient heat, gas, electricity, or water. The survey found that 3 percent of these homes should be condemned and 37 percent needed major repairs. Bright pointed out that the low-income Blacks who lived in the Hill community had no other choice because “there were no decent low cost houses for Negroes in Germantown.”<sup>93</sup> While Fauset and his colleagues at the NNC focused mainly on providing better schools and jobs for Black citizens throughout the nation, Bright concentrated her efforts

<sup>91</sup> Erik S. Gellman, *Death Blow to Jim Crow: The National Negro Congress and the Rise of Militant Civil Rights* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2012), 165–212. According to FBI files, Fauset was much more interested in advancing the United Peoples Action Committee, a communist, interracial committee that he led, causing local interest in the NNC to wane. See Federal Bureau of Investigation, Philadelphia, PA, Mar. 11, 1946, File Number 100–869, accessed via Federal Surveillance of African Americans database.

<sup>92</sup> Bright’s work built on a long tradition of these methods in Philadelphia; see Du Bois, *Philadelphia Negro*. See also Dewhurst and Nathan, “Social and Economic Character of Unemployment in Philadelphia”; and Mossell, *The Standard of Living Among One Hundred Negro Migrant Families in Philadelphia*.

<sup>93</sup> Nellie R. Bright, William E. Coale, and Emily Crosby, “Demonstration Project in Neighborhood Improvement,” *Report of the Germantown and Chestnut Hill Housing Committee*, July 1943, box 50,

on improving the educational opportunities and housing options for the families in the Hill School community.<sup>94</sup>

Realizing that city officials had failed to provide government-subsidized public housing or to end discriminatory practices in the private housing market, Bright decided to lead her own movement to change the conditions in her community and appealed to like-minded individuals to join her. As Bright averred, she wanted to use her position as an educational leader in the city to engage in efforts toward “raising the standard of living of the people, reducing the crime rate, securing better housing, and securing equality of opportunity for American colored people.”<sup>95</sup> Bright gave several lectures at the all-Black Rittenhouse YMCA and the all-Black Wissahickon Boys Club to discuss the factors that contributed to the increase in juvenile delinquency in the community. In these talks, she advocated for more recreational programs for Black youth. She also worked closely with William T. Coleman Sr., the director of the Boys Club, to expand afterschool and weekend activities for her students and other Germantown youth. Bright’s lectures brought together Black families and community leaders to discuss their concerns and devise solutions.<sup>96</sup>

An event occurred in March 1942 that spurred Bright to connect with the citywide political movement to improve housing for low-income Black residents.<sup>97</sup> Rumors spread throughout Germantown that a realtor had ordered the eviction of eight low-income African American families who lived in the Johnson Court Homes, a group of row homes several blocks from the Hill School. Housing activists noted that these homes represented a “filthy miserable slum . . . in the heart of an up-to-date, well maintained residential district.” The homes, proponents argued, had once been “a decent place for humble people” to live, but due to “neglect by absentee landlords” they had fallen into disrepair. When a realtor purchased the homes, he convinced city officials to condemn them and ordered the

folder 10, Germantown Community Council Records, TUUA.

<sup>94</sup> Gellman, *Death Blow to Jim Crow*, 165–212.

<sup>95</sup> Nellie Bright quoted in Jackson, “Philadelphians: You Should Know.”

<sup>96</sup> Catherine P. Taylor, “Germantown,” *Philadelphia Tribune*, Jan. 23, 1941; “Shamrock Tea Raises Funds to Send Hill School Tots to Camp,” *Philadelphia Tribune*, Mar. 20, 1941; “Public Schools Observe Health and Music Week,” *Philadelphia Tribune*, May 22, 1941; Catherine P. Taylor, “Germantown,” *Philadelphia Tribune*, Nov. 15, 1941; “First Aid Groups Get Certificates,” *Philadelphia Tribune*, June 13, 1942.

<sup>97</sup> For examples of the connections that educators forged between schools and communities, see William W. Cutler III, *Parents and Schools: The 150-Year Struggle for Control in American Education* (Chicago, 2000); Tracy L. Steffes, *School, Society, and State: A New Education to Govern Modern America, 1890–1940* (Chicago, 2012); and Michael C. Johanek and John L. Puckett, *Leonard Covello and the*

families to move out immediately. When six families refused to leave, the new owner persuaded city officials to turn off the water. Even with these measures, the families remained in the homes for weeks because they had no other place to live. A committee of local citizens, including Leo E. Alexander, Charlotte Washington, John Martin, and Mae Martin, banded together to investigate the situation and protest the realtor's actions.<sup>98</sup> After weeks of protests, residents were evicted and relocated to homes that were just as dilapidated as the ones from which they had been evicted.<sup>99</sup>

Frustrated with these actions, Bright founded the Germantown–Chestnut Hill Housing Committee (GCHHC), an interracial coalition to investigate corrupt and racially discriminatory housing practices and improve housing conditions throughout the community. Using the Hill School as its meeting space, GCHHC brought together members from over seventy local and citywide organizations, including the Germantown Neighborhood Council, the Friends Inter-Racial Committee, the Hill School Parent Teachers' Association, and the Urban League. To encourage widespread participation across racial and class lines, the GCHHC maintained a nominal membership fee paid annually. Its members described the group as “an action committee” to educate “all possible groups for better housing” in the area. They pledged to visit realtors, homeowners, and tenants to discuss the committee's aims and encourage them to participate in its work. In addition, members hoped to work with government officials to increase support for public housing projects and reduce racial discrimination in the private housing market.<sup>100</sup> The GCHHC also hired a consultant housekeeper to meet one-on-one with tenants and teach them how to “make minor repairs, mend furniture, clean and keep up property, make homes attractive on limited budgets, [and] pay rents regularly.”<sup>101</sup> The consultant acted as a liaison between the tenants and landlords to promote better relationships and educated both parties about their legal rights and responsibilities.<sup>102</sup>

*Making of Benjamin Franklin High School: Education as If Citizenship Mattered* (Philadelphia, 2007).

<sup>98</sup> “Protest Germantown Evictions,” *Philadelphia Tribune*, Mar. 14, 1942.

<sup>99</sup> Nellie R. Bright, William E. Coale, and Emily Crosby, “Demonstration Project in Neighborhood Improvement,” *Report of the Germantown and Chestnut Hill Housing Committee*, July 1943, box 50, folder 10, Germantown Community Council Records, TUUA.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>101</sup> William E. Coale, “Germantown & Chestnut Hill Housing Committee Aims and Accomplishments,” undated, box 50, folder 11, Germantown Community Council Records, TUUA.

<sup>102</sup> Nellie R. Bright, William E. Coale, and Emily Crosby, “Demonstration Project in Neighborhood Improvement,” *Report of the Germantown and Chestnut Hill Housing Committee*, July 1943, box 50, folder 10, Germantown Community Council Records, TUUA.

In 1942, the consultant housekeeper visited homes on Ely Street, in the heart of Germantown's Black community. Despite repeated protests from tenants, these homes lacked running water—a violation of the city's housing code, which had been implemented to protect low-income residents from this kind of negligence. GCHHC committee members reported their findings to the Philadelphia Housing Authority and the city's Board of Health. They publicized this “truly deplorable situation” in their newsletters and other venues to embarrass the absentee landlord and raise awareness about the dire housing conditions among Germantown residents.<sup>103</sup> The landlord eventually responded, telling GCHHC leadership and city officials that he had not been able to “get sufficient labor” to install running water in the homes.<sup>104</sup> David and Mary Ritchie, the directors of the American Friends Service Committee's youth weekend work camp, learned about the Ely Street situation and offered to help the GCHHC alleviate the problems. On January 9, 1943, a group of teenage volunteers reported to work camp headquarters at Germantown's Phillis Wheatley Recreation Center and received their instructions to renovate the homes on Ely Street. Throughout the day, the male volunteers dug canals for pipes behind the homes so that the residents could have cold running water, while the female volunteers worked with the tenants, sewing curtains and tidying the interiors. In the evenings, they returned to the Wheatley Recreation Center, where they discussed housing challenges and listened to lectures about social injustice. In return for the free labor, the landlord provided new windows, lumber, and paint to defray the costs for interior repairs.<sup>105</sup>

Bright and her colleagues at the GCHHC believed that the Ely project had “a significant educational value.” Before the project, many tenants were bitter that their landlords had not maintained their homes. After the project finished, several residents expressed their gratitude to the volunteers and remarked that the project had given them a “fresh start that has

<sup>103</sup> William E. Coale, “Germantown & Chestnut Hill Housing Committee,” *The Tie*, fall 1943, box 50, folder 10, Germantown Community Council Records, TUUA.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid.; Nellie R. Bright, William E. Coale, and Emily Crosby, “Demonstration Project in Neighborhood Improvement,” *Report of the Germantown and Chestnut Hill Housing Committee*, July 1943, box 50, folder 10, Germantown Community Council Records, TUUA; “Hill School Students' Survey Was Factor in Founding Housing Group,” *Germantown Courier*, June 13, 1946, box 50, folder 11, Germantown Community Council Records, TUUA.

<sup>105</sup> “Friends Bring Summer Camp to City, Help Slum District to Repair Homes,” *Philadelphia Record*, Jan. 10, 1943, box 50, folder 10, Germantown Community Council Records, TUUA.

made them healthier, happier, and more cleanly [*sic*].” The housing committee arranged for several follow-up visits with the Ely Street landlords and tenants to guarantee that the landlords kept their promises to care for their properties. In addition, the president of the Hill School Parents’ Association and the consultant housekeeper organized a mothers’ club on the block to teach women how to use an electric sewing machine, wire an electric lamp, and can vegetables and other goods. Between October 1942 and June 1943, the GCHHC repaired thirty-nine homes in the community and enlisted the support of 148 high school students from over ten schools in the area. While this did not end the discrimination that Blacks faced in the private housing market, it provided immediate support to residents and educated middle-class youth about the substandard housing in their city.<sup>106</sup>

Bright understood that racial discrimination barred most Blacks from decent housing. As the leader of this new committee, she advocated for programs and policies to improve the quality of housing for African Americans. She wanted to secure an official agreement with the Germantown Real Estate Board to require local landlords to cooperate with the housing committee. This never happened. The Germantown Real Estate Board, an independent entity controlled by powerful white businessmen, had little interest in providing decent homes for the increasing numbers of low-income and Black residents who had moved to the area.<sup>107</sup> However, the fact that she pressured Germantown’s white business elites illustrates Bright’s attempts to move her activism beyond the schoolhouse and to challenge those in power. These challenges would later prompt the charges that she was a member of the Communist Party.

Facing more and more obstacles in her quest to improve Black housing and worried that her approach undermined incremental housing improvements, Bright engaged in a more conservative approach to social change and supported the GCHHC’s decision to hire a consultant housekeeper. The new position gave the committee the knowledge to make immediate improvements to Germantown homes, but it also reflected the politics of respectability that had defined Black bourgeois racial uplift for decades. As

<sup>106</sup> Nellie R. Bright, William E. Coale, and Emily Crosby, “Demonstration Project in Neighborhood Improvement,” *Report of the Germantown and Chestnut Hill Housing Committee*, July 1943, box 50, folder 10, Germantown Community Council Records, TUUA.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*; William E. Coale to Thomas C. Shipley, Sept. 8, 1944, box 50, folder 10, Germantown Community Council Records, TUUA; Thomas C. Shipley to William E. Coale, Sept. 9, 1944, box 50, folder 10, Germantown Community Council Records, TUUA.

Evelyn Higginbotham suggests, the politics of respectability stressed the importance of reforming individual behavior—in this case the conditions of one’s home—as a goal in itself and as a strategy to end structural racism. By forcing low-income Black residents to conform to the bourgeois standards of homeownership, the consultant housekeeper “reflected and reinforced the hegemonic values of white America.”<sup>108</sup> Bright’s support for the consultant housekeeper helped her negotiate her way between the racism that existed in the nation as a whole and her desire to improve the housing conditions for low-income Blacks in the Hill School community.<sup>109</sup> While the move to a more conservative push for racial equality and better housing might have served Bright and her allies at the time, it did not protect her from the accusations that she was a foreign-born resident and Communist Party member—accusations that were clearly tied to her earlier activism.

After the success of the Ely Street project, Bright lobbied city officials to recognize, replicate, and fund the committee’s model—a full-time housekeeper consultant to oversee the work and a team of volunteers to repair homes—to enhance housing conditions for low-income residents throughout the city. The committee relied on voluntary contributions from residents and social service agencies to fund its work. Even with the donations that they received, the GCHHC never had the funds it needed to scale its model citywide.<sup>110</sup>

As the GCHHC struggled to fund its work, Bright remained an active participant and civic leader in the community. Citywide organizations rewarded her efforts by showering her with local awards, such as the “Red Feather Woman of the Week,” given by the Community Crusade, and the annual award of the Philadelphia Fellowship Commission.<sup>111</sup> In 1945, after serving as the Hill School principal for a decade, Bright moved on,

<sup>108</sup> Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent*, 188.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, 186–202. For other arguments about the politics of respectability in the North among teachers and middle class Blacks, see Victoria W. Wolcott, *Remaking Respectability: African American Women in Interwar Detroit* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2001); and Knupfer, *The Chicago Black Renaissance and Women’s Activism*.

<sup>110</sup> Nellie R. Bright, William E. Coale, and Emily Crosby, “Demonstration Project in Neighborhood Improvement,” *Report of the Germantown and Chestnut Hill Housing Committee*, July 1943, box 50, folder 10, Germantown Community Council Records, TUUA; William E. Coale to Thomas C. Shipley, Sept. 8, 1944, box 50, folder 10, Germantown Community Council Records, TUUA; Thomas C. Shipley to William E. Coale, Sept. 9, 1944, box 50, folder 10, Germantown Community Council Records, TUUA.

<sup>111</sup> Lester, “Meet Your Principal”; “Miss Bright Is Chosen ‘Red Feather Woman,’” *Philadelphia Tribune*, Dec. 16, 1944; “Miss Bright, Flood Receive Fellowship Comm. Awards,” *Philadelphia Tribune*, Feb. 21, 1950.



succeeding Dr. James H. Duckery as the principal of the Harrison School on Tenth and Thompson Streets. Five years later, she became principal of the Reynolds School on Twenty-Fourth and Jefferson Streets. Bright believed that public schools represented a vital resource and that educators had to play an active role in improving the conditions in their school communities.<sup>112</sup> At Harrison, Bright organized three tenants' groups, planted twenty community gardens in vacant lots, and transformed an abandoned plot full of waste into a modern playground.<sup>113</sup>

Concerned about the many challenges that they faced funding and sustaining their crusade to improve housing, Bright and her colleagues testified before the United States Congress to appeal for more federal funds to build low-income housing for Philadelphia's Black residents. On November 13 and 14, 1947, the Joint Committee on Housing held public hearings. Bright testified about the housing conditions in the neighborhood served by North Philadelphia's Harrison School. Representing the Harrison School and the East Central Housing Committee, she presented twelve photographs and a model that her schoolchildren made "showing the neighborhood exactly as it is." First, Bright used statistics to illustrate the housing challenges in the predominantly Black community. She told the committee that 38 percent of the housing units in the area were substandard, compared with 17 percent citywide. In the area, 6.5 percent of the homes were overcrowded, whereas the city's average was 3.1 percent. Bright noted that "many houses of 8 to 12 rooms with 1 bathroom, originally built for 1 family, now house from 10 to 35 persons." In addition to the overcrowded conditions, most of these homes, Bright reported, had "no heat, no light, toilet facilities are out of repair, and there are frequent accidents due to large rat holes in floors and walls. Roofs leak, walls and floors sag, stagnant water from defective plumbing floods cellars for many months." After detailing these problems, she argued that the substandard housing conditions affected juvenile crime rates, public health disparities, and family problems. Juvenile arrests in the area were more than twice the city average, and poor housing conditions correlated with above-average rates of tuberculosis, venereal disease, and illegitimacy. She

<sup>112</sup>There is a rich literature on the ways that schools and educators worked in their communities throughout the twentieth century. For examples, see Cutler, *Parents and Schools*; Steffes, *School, Society, and State*; and Johaneck and Puckett, *Leonard Covello and the Making of Benjamin Franklin High School*.

<sup>113</sup>"People Can Work Together," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, Apr. 9, 1950, box 2, folder 1, Bright Papers, HSP; "School Enrollment Increases; Precedent Set in City System," *Philadelphia Tribune*, Sept. 15, 1945; "Miss Nellie Bright Gets Reynolds Post," *Philadelphia Tribune*, June 16, 1951.

did not end there. Bright argued that it was becoming increasingly difficult for Americans to rent or buy a home. The problems, she contended, were worse for Black residents; the average annual income of Blacks in America was \$1,043, while the average income for whites was \$3,062. The unemployment rate for the nonwhite labor force in Philadelphia was triple the unemployment rates for white workers (18 percent versus 6 percent). Bright wrapped up by stating that “discrimination against minorities prevents their getting the training and the jobs to procure higher income so that they can rent or buy decent housing.” To close her testimony, she submitted “12 photographs showing substandard housing conditions in the area considered here,” as well as “a model made by children of this area showing their houses as they are today.” Singling out one of the structures in the model, Bright concluded, “Since this model was made this house [pointing] collapsed, and I therefore urge that we have decent low-cost housing by the United States Government.”<sup>114</sup> Bright made it clear: racism paralyzed Blacks in the labor market and forced them to live in substandard housing.

Bright not only encouraged her students to understand the structural inequities that created the housing conditions in their community but also urged Harrison School families to testify before the committee. At the same hearing, local resident Annie Lee Harrison, a widow with six children, testified that she had lived in the community “for over 4 years, and during the time of living in this neighborhood I haven’t had a proper home to live in.” She had never lived in a home where she “had the privilege” of a bath or heat; even her children “have to take baths . . . in pans or tubs of our own.” In addition to the plumbing problems, she had to contend with wet walls, and her children constantly asked her when they would have a playroom and a home with a bathtub. She said, “I am a mother that sends my children to Sunday school, and I wish to someday that I will have a nice home to live in which my children could be taught different things like other children. Since we are piled up on each other . . . they cannot be shown the use of those things.”<sup>115</sup> The moderator abruptly interrupted her and thanked her for her testimony. Even though Bright believed deeply in local action to create change, she also used her position as one of the only Black female principals in the School District of Philadelphia to advocate

<sup>114</sup> “Statement of Nellie R. Bright, Representing the East Central Housing Committee, Philadelphia, PA,” *Study and Investigation of Housing, Joint Committee on Housing, Eightieth Congress, First Session, Part 3, November 13–14, 1947* (Washington, DC, 1948), 3416–17.

<sup>115</sup> “Statement of Annie Lee Harrison, Eastern Housing Center, Philadelphia, PA,” in *ibid.*, 3515.

change on a national level. Her actions pushed her activism beyond the walls of the schoolhouse and ultimately made her vulnerable to the accusations that would end her career.

On July 5, 1952, the *Philadelphia Tribune* announced Bright's decision to resign as the principal of the Reynolds School and to retire from the SDP after almost three decades of service. While the article cited Bright's decision as a personal one, the newspaper also hinted at allegations that Bright had resigned due to rumors that she was not an American citizen and, perhaps even worse, that she was a member of the Communist Party. Like hundreds of other teachers who had entered the profession during the Great Depression and engaged in political activities to promote social democracy, Bright denied these accusations.<sup>116</sup> After thirty-six years of service in the school district, she retired.

After retirement, Bright remained active, working with the Philadelphia Fellowship Commission and giving several lectures on African American history at the Fellowship House Farm near Pottstown, Pennsylvania. She continued this work because "scarcely any white Philadelphian and too few Negroes know about the bravery of Americans like Richard Allen and Absalom Jones, or the achievements of Negro families whose descendants are still living in this area."<sup>117</sup> Bright continued to travel extensively and frequently returned to the West Indies, her father's birthplace, to run her feet in the sand that she had longed for in her first published poem.

In the winter of 1960, Nellie R. Bright received a letter from Marjorie Penney, the founder of the Fellowship House, an organization committed to interracial and interreligious education and socialization. Penney commended Bright on the opening of her Africa Speaks course that aimed to expose fellowship members to African history. Through Penney, Bright attracted the attention of Horace Fleisher, a wealthy Philadelphia architect. After thinking about the "awful ignorance of most Americans, white and colored, regarding African history," Fleisher asked Penney if Bright had given any consideration to publishing her work, offering to help if she was interested. When Bright learned this, she wrote a letter to Arthur Huff Fauset, her Penn classmate, fellow educator, and long-term collaborator,

<sup>116</sup>"Miss Bright Resigns." For a discussion of the movement to accuse teachers of subversive activity, see Storrs, *The Second Red Scare and the Unmaking of the New Deal Left*.

<sup>117</sup>"Miss Bright to Lecture," *Philadelphia Evening Bulletin*, Sept. 1, 1957, McDowell Collection, TUUA. See also "Brotherhood Caravan Tours Schools in Philadelphia," *Philadelphia Evening Bulletin*, Feb. 20, 1950, McDowell Collection, TUUA.

to see if she could “wrangle it [the publication] for your series” on Black history.<sup>118</sup> After several years of delay, in 1969 she and Fauset published *America: Red, White, Black, and Yellow*, a junior high school textbook that highlighted the achievements of Blacks, Native Americans, and Hispanic leaders. The text also documented how these individuals challenged racial inequities in the United States and abroad. For example, the chapter on the civil rights movement documented the aims of the 1960s sit-ins, the challenges of desegregating schools, and the role that Muslim leaders played. The chapter on the history of Columbus’s voyage and the settlement of the thirteen colonies described the transition from indentured servitude to chattel slavery and the resistance that the newly transported Blacks engaged in to challenge this shift. The end of the book contained a list of Black leaders, with short biographies documenting their educational backgrounds, life experiences, and major accomplishments. Finally, Bright and Fauset’s text included a call for students to act. In the postlude, Bright and Fauset wrote, “This simply tells America’s unfinished story. It’s a story you, your relatives and friends can complete in the only way that will make our nation honest and strong. That way is to give to all men an equal chance.”<sup>119</sup> Bright and Fauset hoped that public schools across the nation might adopt their book and use it to expand students’ knowledge, end racial stereotypes, and promote social justice for all.<sup>120</sup> Fauset used his networks in Philadelphia and New York City to encourage educators to adopt and use the book in their classrooms.<sup>121</sup> A few years later, Bright received a certificate from the Pennsylvania Society for the Abolition of Slavery for her work on civil rights. On February 7, 1977, Nellie Rathbone Bright passed away at the age of eighty-one, leaving behind a long legacy of activism through her leadership in the schools and communities where she lived and worked.<sup>122</sup>

<sup>118</sup> Nellie R. Bright to Arthur Huff Fauset, Dec. 9, 1960, Arthur Huff Fauset Papers, box 1, folder 22, Kislak Center for Special Collections, Rare Books and Manuscripts, University of Pennsylvania.

<sup>119</sup> Arthur Huff Fauset and Nellie Rathbone Bright, *America: Red, White, Black and Yellow* (Philadelphia, 1969), 302–32, 62–68, postlude.

<sup>120</sup> Carole H. Carpenter, “Arthur Huff Fauset, Campaigner for Social Justice: A Symphony of Diversity,” in *African American Pioneers in Anthropology*, ed. Ira E. Harrison and Faye V. Harrison (Urbana, IL, 1998), 236–37; Orrin Evans, “Story of America,” *Philadelphia Evening Bulletin*, May 25, 1969, McDowell Collection, TUUA.

<sup>121</sup> Nellie R. Bright to Arthur Huff Fauset, May 7, 1969, box 1, folder 22, Fauset Papers, University of Pennsylvania.

<sup>122</sup> “Nellie R. Bright Ex-Phila. Principal,” *Philadelphia Evening Bulletin*, Feb. 10, 1977, McDowell Collection, TUUA.

Nellie Rathbone Bright's life illuminates the risks for teachers who engaged in political and social activism beyond the schoolhouse doors. Bright first learned the importance of this engagement from her parents. When she moved to Philadelphia, she witnessed poverty that she had never encountered in her middle-class, predominantly white Savannah neighborhood. At the Normal School and the University of Pennsylvania, Bright cultivated relationships that she would rely on later in life as one of the only Black, female principals in the city. As an editor and writer, she used her pen to document and challenge the racism that she and others experienced in their daily lives. She used her education to acquaint a national audience with her ideas and travel abroad on her own. As an educator, she viewed her work as a form of racial uplift and social action. Under her leadership, students found a sanctuary to learn about Black history and literature and to understand the ways that racial inequity barred their families' economic and social mobility. Students at the Hill and Harrison Schools not only learned about racial inequality but also, with Bright's support, documented it through their surveys and models. Bright understood the power of this work to push students to act in their own lives.

Bright remained committed to a radical vision of social change and racial justice. When her students contracted tuberculosis, Bright refused to remain silent. Unlike many of the bourgeois teachers on her staff, she spoke with her students and gave lectures to the Black community detailing the connections between poor housing and poor health. When the community raised concerns about juvenile delinquency, she enlisted her students' help to conduct a survey to prove that these problems stemmed from larger forces—racist policies and practices that barred Blacks from better jobs, homes, and schools. Finally, she used this knowledge to act. Her work with the GCHHC pushed Germantown residents to realize that their Black neighbors did not have the same housing options as whites due to racial discrimination on the housing market and absentee landlords who were not always committed to maintaining their properties. For decades, Bright engaged in a radical critique of the structural forces that limited Black advancement and educated her students so that they might one day carry on her legacy. Her identity as a Black, female, unmarried activist, coupled with her political dissent and social action, made her a natural target for the Second Red Scare, ultimately ending her career. The unfounded accusations that Bright faced in 1952 stemmed from the radical activism that

these teachers engaged in—activism that many at the time believed (and many still do) represented an affront to democracy rather than the ingredients to guarantee its future.

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