By Patricia Pugh Mitchell

Black journalism at the turn of the 20th century faced a daunting task. The aftermath of Reconstruction had ushered in a period where the gains of emancipation collapsed. In the South, footholds established by African Americans in politics, education, and business were removed through restrictive state "Jim Crow" laws. In the North, the white media attacked black images with degrading jokes, cartoons, and caricatures.

According to historian Rayford Logan, the power of negative propaganda, coupled with the 1896 Plessy v. Ferguson Supreme Court decision upholding segregation, "accelerated the descent of the Afro-American and brought him to his lowest and lowliest position since emancipation." Logan recognizes 1877-1901 as the "nadir" of the African American experience.

Typical is an ad in the New Haven Evening Register showing "a Negro eating a watermelon extolling the virtues of Sanford's ginger, a laxative." Logan notes "the largest number of derogatory stereotypes appeared in Harper's, Scribner's, and Century where blacks were lampooned and assigned..."
ridiculous titles such as George Washington, Webster, Lady Adeliza Chimpanzee, or Prince Orang Outan.”

African Americans’ work ethics were attacked in articles, stories, anecdotes, poems, and cartoons with black men depicted as superstitious, dull and stupid, imitative, ignorant, suspicious, improvident, lazy, immoral, and criminal. In short: liars, thieves, and drunkards. Portrayed using big words they did not understand and liking fine clothes, “they were the inevitable razor-totin’ Negro.” Black women were improvident, emotional, gossipy, high-tempered, vain, dishonest, idle, with a hearty appetite and “miz’ry in de bres.” Logan concludes that nearly every derogatory stereotype was affixed to African Americans.

In fact, more negative press was expended in degrading African Americans than any other ethnic group. Logan maintains that “while some articles and other contributions treated Chinese, Indians, Irish, Germans, and other immigrants in general in an unfavorable light, these aliens and the oldest Americans fared better than did the Negro.”

In fact, more negative press was expended in degrading African Americans than any other ethnic group. Typically CAM agents were college educated, the men engaged in other respectable professions, and the women members of community literary or social clubs. The following ad appeared in the magazine’s pages:

**“More negative press was expended in degrading African Americans than any other ethnic group.”**

The Colored American Magazine [CAM] exemplifies this effort, emerging in May 1900 in Boston, a hotbed of African American intellectual debate. At the turn of the century, five enterprising black Bostonians, one of them female, constituted the guiding force behind the Colored Co-Operative Publishing Company. CAM countered negative stereotypes with images and biographies promoting respectability, adamant in its quest to prove African American suitability for first-class citizenship.

The editors realized a collective effort was needed to undo the widespread defamation of African American character. Recruiting agents was a primary goal—both men and women, salaried to some degree. Typically CAM agents were college educated, the men engaged in other respectable professions, and the women members of community literary or social clubs. The following ad appeared in the magazine’s pages:

WANTED, AT ONCE.
Active and energetic agents in every town and city in this country, to represent The Colored American Magazine.... We are the only publishing house in the world that are issuing exclusively, publications devoted to the Negro race.

Booker T. Washington’s ideas dominated southern black thought at this time. Washington, a southerner keenly aware of the decline in African American’s national progress, said the pursuit of advanced degrees by African Americans was a frivolous venture that only led to disappointment since black professionals lacked the support of white patrons. He argued that black Americans should seek agricultural and industrial pursuits fostering self-help and job readiness for industrial opportunities available in southern cities. By 1904, CAM came under Washington’s control, but in 1901, before his takeover, the city of Pittsburgh figured prominently in the magazine’s attempt to debunk unfavorable white perceptions by publishing a lengthy four-part study of model African American behavior, achievement, and daily life in Pittsburgh.

In Lives of Their Own: Blacks, Italians, and Poles in Pittsburgh, 1900–1960, John Bodnar and his co-authors identify Pittsburgh’s African American population at the turn of the century as the sixth largest of any U.S. industrial city. The city’s population in 1900 was 451,000 of which blacks comprised...
Proportionately, this growth exceeded that of both Italians and Poles, since African Americans represented 4.5% of Pittsburgh’s population, Poles, 2.6%, and Italians 1.4%. The Industrial Revolution beckoned blacks and immigrants alike to the steel capital of the world.

Pittsburgh offered a longstanding African American community, and at the turn of the century, it was one of the nation’s most industrialized cities, commanding the attention of aspiring business people at home and abroad. Simultaneously, opportunities opened for unskilled native white sons, as well as European immigrants and southern migrants. Pittsburgh’s black middle class emerged as early as the 1830s; undoubtedly many African Americans who migrated to Pittsburgh were aware of the city’s strong abolitionist history.

Prior to CAM’s appearance, the primary source of news in Pittsburgh’s black community came from a newspaper column titled “Afro-American Notes,” published each Sunday in the *Pittsburgh Press*. This column devoted exclusively to disseminating news of race in the Pittsburgh area trumped earlier attempts during the 1890s to establish independent race periodicals. “Afro-American Notes” ran from 1896 until 1932. An ad promoting the column in the November 1896 edition encouraged readership:

> For all of the news concerning the colored people of Pittsburgh read the Sunday Press, the only paper published in this city devoting any space whatever to colored people exclusively and the only one giving employment to a colored man whose position is above that of a menial. These facts merit the support of all loyal colored citizens.

In view of the sizable African American population, economic opportunities, and established community, CAM may have seen Pittsburgh as unique in attitude and offerings toward its black population. Mrs. W. H. Jones was the first Pittsburgh agent to join forces recruiting authors for the magazine. Not much is known of Mrs. Jones beyond her address: 705 Wylie Avenue. Her association came before the four-part series, seven months after the Colored Co-Operative Publishing Company’s founding. The fact that an African American woman took the first step in leading Pittsburgh’s...
Pittsburgh—from accounts reported in both CAM and "Afro-American Notes"—created an impressive social environment for leisure pursuits.

The "Smoky City" series ran from October 1901 through February 1902. In addition to his role as general agent and series architect, Waters authored the first two issues: "The Smoky City" and "Glimpses of Social Life." Of Waters himself, CAM reports:

Oliver G. Waters, our hustling general agent for Pittsburgh, Pa., and vicinity, is one of the most efficient of our representatives. He is a young man, having received a thorough education as a chemist, but who has thrown his lot in with us, to assist in making The Colored American Magazine a large national success. Mr. Waters handles his corps of agents with a Napoleonic sway ... we can name no agent in whom we put more confidence and from whom we receive more satisfactory results. Mr. Waters covers more territory than any agent in our employ, and is an example in strict promptness in all business dealings.

Each agent provided a photograph and brief autobiographical sketch, edited by R. S. Elliott, the magazine's white publisher.

There was also much hype within the advertisement page of CAM about the forthcoming series. Waters encouraged readers to subscribe to all four issues:

This series ... will be the finest ever undertaken by any colored publication in the world. It will tell of the colored men among the iron and steel workers in the great manufacturing center. It will be a vivid portrayal of the life and industry in Pittsburgh in general, among our people. It will give a very, comprehensive view of "our" businessmen, government, and municipal clerks, and both club and social life. The series will be profusely illustrated with many photographs taken specially for these articles.

Waters further claimed that the series was a feat never before undertaken by any black news publication in the world and was the first attempt by CAM to promote progress among race in any city. The fact that Pittsburgh was given the honor of being the "first" in such a detailed focus of African American city life is worth noting. Indeed, close scrutiny reveals there was no other urban center during this period receiving such concentrated and extended focus, not even Boston, the magazine's host city.

The series stressed five points. First, that Pittsburgh possessed a color-blind attitude towards race. Second, it was a city of opportunity for professional and working-class African Americans. Third, African Americans had organized social and cultural clubs. Fourth, a significant number of educated black professionals thrived there. And fifth, the "new Negro" woman played a critical role in racial uplift. A thread of optimism existed throughout each issue of the series—even as authorship shifted halfway through.

"The Smoky City"

The Colored American Magazine had been in print a little over a year and a half when the "Smoky City" series began. The magazine's new illustrator, Alexandre Skeete, changed the cover design just prior to the series' publication. Images of flowers, which adorned earlier editions, were enhanced with sketches of abolitionist Frederick Douglass and poet Phillis Wheatley. Douglass and Wheatley, history and literature: two of the magazine's primary themes. Their placement on the cover debunked white stereotypical depictions of black Americans as incapable of embracing arts and culture.

The first issue in the series features a portrait of an African American steelworker with a steel mill as the backdrop, along with a sketch of the Greek god Vulcan, breathing flames, anvil clenched tightly in his right hand.

The opening essay extols the history of Pittsburgh: "the Capital, it might be said—of the greatest industrial empire on the globe," where African Americans held an uncontested place within the steel industry. Step-by-step details of steel processing, along with the history of the industry and formation of the city ran along with 22 illustrations depicting...
The Smoky City logo after Ewell took over the series. The collection of The Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library.

The three rivers of Pittsburgh, the confluence at the Point, views from Mt. Washington, and African American steel laborers. A Fourth Avenue image caption touts “the Wall Street of Pittsburg.” In his acknowledgments, Waters’s successor and general agent Thomas Ewell noted the contributions of William Nelson Page of the Carnegie Steel Company. Page, a respected member and officer of the Loendi Club (the leading club for the city’s black elite) was hired as the first black stenographer, his position giving him access to imagery, text, and statistics that were helpful in illustrating the African American presence in the Carnegie Steel empire. To say Waters was proud of Pittsburgh would be an understatement:

Turning aside from the vision of Washington standing on the uninhabited point of land, we pass a century and a half, and as we draw aside the curtain of smoke the wonderful spectacle which meets our bewildered gaze, soon begins to reveal to us why over 50,000 colored people have found here such a ready outlet for their labor and skill. [21]

Waters offered a swift reprimand to journalist James Parton, who, in an 1868 issue of Atlantic Monthly, equated the Smoky City to “hell with its lid off.” [22] In the city’s defense, Waters claimed,

Having no means or expectation of being able ever to make such comparisons, the good people of Pittsburg cannot judge of the accuracy of the dreadful assertion of the writer alluded to. No tourist in Pittsburgh should miss the remarkable scenes (of the steel furnace) from these heights at night. [24]

In his opening remarks, Waters made his purpose clear:

In the work now set before us, it is our object to touch upon the wonderful resources that have made Pittsburg in such a manner as to convey to the reader an intelligent picture of the material state of this section; and then to give an idea of the transportation facilities that have sprung from these resources; the manufacturing power resulting there from, and the commercial activity engendered by such; to the end that we may clearly demonstrate the great factors that have made this section, above all others, the elyrium [sic] of the colored laborer. [26]

Waters concludes that Pittsburgh is the elysium of African Americans, the place where true happiness can be found. Of particular note is his insistence that race is less a factor in Pittsburgh than elsewhere:

Nationality and color probably play less part here in the matter of employment than in any other city... The prime questions are: Do you want to work? and can you put out the goods? [27]

Yet, he exaggerates black employment in the steel mills:

In the iron mills alone there are nearly six thousand Negro laborers, skilled and unskilled, employed as puddlers, rollers, heaters, melters, engineers, and in various other capacities. The wages of these men range from two to six dollars per day. [28]

Even as these statistics enhanced the number of blacks in steel prior to World War I, Waters establishes that African American men secured a variety of mill positions that were beyond merely janitorial. [29]

Waters’s history of the “Pittsburgh Negro” in the steel industry credits Park Brothers and Company as the first to hire “colored iron workers” in 1876:

[W]hen the Irish puddlers drew their heats and declined to work, Mr. Park, the father of the present members of the firm, had colored men brought in and taught to work. His experiment proved quite profitable, and the men were found to be apt and many became quite skilled. [30]

Waters also reported that African Americans were employed “at the Homestead, Braddock, Etna, Sharpsburg, Duquesne, Temperanceville, and Solar mills and in various smaller manufacturing plants.” [31]
Glimpses of Social Life

November 1901 marked the second installment, "Glimpses of Social Life," which shifts in focus from Pittsburgh as the "Sheffield of America" to a city with a reputation for culture and refinement. In fact, Waters concludes, there were few cultural areas in which African Americans had yet to make an appearance:

There are few things, if any, in the great make-up of life, in which a representative of the colored race does not appear. From the hod-carrier to the senator, Ethiopia is well represented. If it is to paint a picture, the representative is ready to give it the touch of the artists; if it is to write a book, he has long ago proved himself master; thus in every walk of life the gentleman of color has taken a prominent part. Whether it has been a work of genius or a game of skill he has accomplished it with credit.32

Within the socioeconomic sphere, African Americans demonstrated competence and success.

Waters maintained that "Pittsburgh affords excellent opportunities for the study of the different phases of the Negro character"33 and offers up the city's African American population as case study in terms of progress over time. He contended that what the majority of blacks across the nation had realized was:

[Waters's] preeminence as the Industrial Mart of America, possibly of the world, has brought within its borders, men of all nationalities, in quest of work, the influx of Negroes being greater than that of any other race.34

Waters asserts that Pittsburgh attracted more African Americans than any other ethnic group, another overstatement since census figures show in 1900 African Americans represented 20,355 out of a total population of 451,000. Waters claimed over 50,000 blacks called the Smoky City home.

At the base of Waters's concerns was overcoming the reality of the "nadir" of the African American: in spite of the "shadow of the plantation," blacks in Pittsburgh established an economic and social life worthy of celebration, the crux of which he eloquently expressed:

While only in an abstract way does the character of the Negro differ from that of any other race, yet we, at times are pleased to group our People into one separate body, and view them as different from all others. And then, the members of the opposite race force us into this error because of their failure to view us as differing from them in color only. The Negro who has accomplished something, who really has arrived at success, is looked upon as a Rara Avis by the white man, who does not seem to recognize in him a prototype of his own race.35

His theory was that access to culture and refinement for African Americans created a desire to make contacts within his [or her] community:

In every walk of life contact is an important factor in the developing of character. As men advance in thought and refinement the desire for congenial contact often finds expression in the formation of clubs.36

Pittsburgh was reasonably liberal in sanctioning African American's access to the professions and education; it limited, however, entrance to white social organizations.

Quite aware that Jim Crow laws had, for the most part, outlawed black membership in white clubs, the formation of secret societies, fraternal alliances, and women's clubs manifested in African American society.37 Waters implied that any individual who experienced a modicum of success and desired furthering his or her aspirations needed to make contacts among those (within the race) who reflected the same goals: to embrace racial uplift and secure restoration of liberties granted all Americans under the nation's constitution.

Waters rejoiced at the "encouragingly rapid rate at which young colored men are moving into positions of importance."38 He brought to readers' attention Ralph Jackson's significant strides in bicycling, a sport to which few African Americans had been granted access.39 Jackson surfaced as Western Pennsylvania's champion bicyclist in 1897. In 1901, he emerged victorious with "a handsome diamond won in the race at Schenley Park on the 4th of July."40 Waters reported that young Jackson hailed from a
family of achievers, his father a prominent businessman and owner of a successful bicycle shop in the East End.

Waters reiterated that in Pittsburgh, race was not an issue:

[M]ore and more the fact is being realized that it is not so much a question of color as it is a question of ability in the business world. Where one door is closed another will be opened, and if a young man have the ability to do, it will not be long before his merit will be recognized and rewarded.\textsuperscript{41}

Waters's position that it was less a question of color in Pittsburgh than ability is a key theme throughout the series.

Admittance to Pittsburgh's Loendi Club was one way African American men were recognized for ability and merit among their peers. Established August 13, 1897, by businessman George W. Hall, the Loendi Club became Pittsburgh's most exclusive African American male club for more than 50 years. At the time of the Smoky City series' publication, the club was in its prime—nationally known and respected. According to Waters, it possessed a wide reputation as "one of the most prosperous organizations of its kind in the country; no gambling was permitted."\textsuperscript{42}

Waters's sketches mostly feature businessmen with ties to the Loendi Club with pages of photographs accompanying the nearly-dozen profiles. Some born in Pittsburgh were descended from families labeled affectionately "Old Pittsburghers," that is, families who had been in the city for many years.

One example is William H. Stanton, born in 1873 and educated at Pittsburg Central High School. In 1892, he was the first black American to pass, on his first attempt, the examination for registration as a law student. Stanton entered the office of Charles F. McKenna as stenographer and completed his studies in January 1895. Stanton ranked highest of the 29 in his class. That same year he was admitted to the Pittsburgh Bar, tried his first case four days later, and opened a Fifth Avenue office. At the time of publication, Stanton's office was still in operation. Waters notes that in Stanton's early career, he appeared before the Supreme Court in "one of the most notorious murder trials on record." Stanton served as legal counsel for a great many of Allegheny County's successful black business institutions.\textsuperscript{43}

Another Old Pittsburgh family progeny, Howard Dilworth Woodson, was descended from early abolitionist and civic leader Rev. Lewis Woodson. Born in 1876 and graduated from Pittsburg Central High School with high honors in 1897, Woodson entered Western University of Pennsylvania, now University of Pittsburgh, receiving his degree in Civil Engineering in 1900. He held several positions of distinction with both Pittsburg Plate Glass Company and, at the time the article was published, as transitman and assistant engineer with the Pittsburg Coal Company.\textsuperscript{44}

Of Woodson, Waters wrote,

Where there is merit, prejudice cannot long remain. It is encouraging to note that, although the only colored student in his class, Howard Woodson won a place among his fellow students in the Western University of Pennsylvania that few students attain. Of his textbook he was master.\textsuperscript{45}

Dr. Robert Brady from Virginia served as valet to his slave master in the Confederate Army until his owner's 1862 death. Afterward, he settled in Pittsburgh, serving as porter in a dental office where he won favor and eventually apprenticed. Brady experienced blatant prejudice from his co-workers. To remedy this situation, he stayed after hours, disassembling his colleagues' work in order to figure out how to reassemble it. He became proficient in anesthetics, and is credited with making "the first laughing gas ever manufactured in the city of Pittsburg."\textsuperscript{46}

By 1884, Brady was the first African American
dentist serving both blacks and whites in the city. An ad for his office was one of the first from Pittsburgh to appear in CAM.

The profile of John M. Clark demonstrates African Americans' ability to develop successful professional and business lives in Pittsburgh where ability, not color, was the measure of the person. At 17, Clark traveled by foot to the "growing city of iron." His first job, a blacksmith's helper, paid $12 a month. Clark attended a black school in Allegheny City at night managed by Professor Samuel A. Neale. Eventually, he owned and controlled his own blacksmith and wagon-making shop. He attributed his success to "persistent endeavor, sobriety, economy and honesty," stating these values enabled him to simultaneously manage a general hauling business and a blacksmith shop. Clark reportedly had 30 to 50 people on payroll. In addition, he operated a stock farm, which included his prize stallion, "Braden Pointer," and "was the only colored man in the country controlling a half-mile race track." Clark exemplifies pride and possibility for both black and white readers of CAM: "such character as exemplified by Mr. Clark tends to acquaint members of the other race with the fact that opportunity is all that we need. To his own race, he is as a beacon light, showing forth their possibilities...." Worth and merit will not remain buried; it will sprout and raise its head above its surrounding whether it is embryonically held with a colored skin or otherwise.

Some were accomplished professionals before arriving in Pittsburgh. Attorney William Maurice Randolph, Loendi Club's first president, came from Richmond, Virginia, and attended the University of the City of New York. After arriving in Pittsburgh in 1891, Randolph was admitted to the Allegheny County Bar. Active in politics, he spoke before the National Republican Committee on behalf of Pittsburgh as the location for the National Republican Convention of 1896. Eventually, he accepted an appointment to a commission dividing the city of Pittsburgh into election districts. In 1897, Randolph married Mary Durham, the sister of John Durham, the former minister to Haiti.

Randolph, Stanton, and other Loendi Club members pooled their personal resources and acquired a three-story brick building on Fulton Street, "one of the prominent thoroughfares of the city." The club spared no expense in its interior design:

> It is magnificently furnished throughout at a great expense. The furnishings of the parlor, particularly, have been most harmoniously selected and most beautifully arranged. The rich carpets, fine tapestries, beautiful pictures, rosewood piano, and all the furniture and decorations have been selected with rare taste.

Loendi Club housed a dining room, a second floor billiard and pool room, along with a card room and bathrooms. There was also a third floor steward's apartment for Mr. Stirling Austin, who lived on the premises.

Waters paints a picture of upper middle class attainability that was not the experience of most. Trips to Paris, the purchase of fine art, acquisition of the pressed brick building, and the exquisite furnishings symbolize success. These material acquisitions solidified attainment and respectability for a group otherwise ignored.

The series also pays tribute to African American women. In spite of the odds, many black women across the nation established a foothold within mainstream society through persistent pursuit of education, often achieved through a nationwide network of women's clubs. CAM and its contributors diligently worked to negate the notions of disrespect for African American women nurtured by the white press.

The beginning of the 20th century marked a critical moment in the role of women in the U.S. The suffrage movement, in motion even before the Civil War, intensified as it was embraced by both black and white women during post-Reconstruction.

From 1900 to 1910, African American women formed more than 25 literary and social clubs. Prime among these was Pittsburgh's Narcissus Literary and Musical Club. Organized by Miss Elfrieda Hamilton, the club comprised 15 young ladies, all affiliated with the "Smart Set," another popular social club. Miss Pauline Writt, daughter of John T. Writt, the city's most distinguished caterer, was the club's first president.

Purely cultural in nature, the Narcissus Literary and Musical Club explored the "works of the best authors, both literary and musical."
It is to be hoped that young women of the race, all over the country, may speedily fall in line, and organize themselves into bodies having for their object the cultivation of the higher faculties. By so doing they will not only lift themselves, but mankind with them, for such organizations must produce the best thinking women for all time to come.  

Waters, a man before his time, recognized that the world was changing and along with those transformations came an increased recognition of woman's intellectual input.

**Glimpses of Social Life**


Writt came to Pittsburgh in 1864 and worked for a wealthy white family for several years. During this period, he developed the skills needed for his future catering business. Writt was meticulous and took care with the presentation of food, crystal, and cutlery. He remained modest in spite of his meteoric success among both black and white clientele: Thus throughout the evening the comfort of the guest is at the mercy of the waiter, but at the head of all is the man upon whom rests the responsibility of the whole affair. His brain is kept ever busy; he must have experienced men; he must have reliable men; he must have honest men. His ware must be "up to date"; his service must be of the latest style; a thousand and one details he must keep in his head, at his tongue's end.... He understands what the people want, and spares no pains to supply that demand.

Posey was "the first colored man in the United States to receive a license as Chief Engineer." A builder of boats and an astute businessman, he invested in the coal and coke industry. Ewell commented:  
Pittsburgh as the world knows, is a wonderful place for the production of coal.... For this purpose there must be a great supply of substantial boats and the man who figured most conspicuously in meeting this demand is Captain C. W. Posey.
Ewell also proposed a formula for Posey’s success:

The question of color never enters his business; he is a boat builder, and master of his profession. Pittsburg needs boats; Posey supplies them; hence his success. In this age of keen competition the man who can do a thing best is usually the man sought. There is, perhaps, no city in the United States where competition is keener than it is in Pittsburg. But the man who comes into the world with no other heritage than a sound body, and a sound mind, and who learns to grasp opportunities as they come, thus building the ladder upon which he climbs, is truly the greatest exponent of human development.

In the early 1890s, Posey organized the Delta Coal and Coke Company and later the Posey Coal Dealers and Steam Boat Builders, where he supervised all construction. He undertook ventures, including real estate and banking. He was, at this time, the wealthiest African American in Pittsburgh.

Ewell described Posey’s home: “I went where the man directed me, and standing back in a beautiful lot on one of the most prominent streets, was a mansion which, from appearance, might have been the home of a prince.”

He continues:

I was ushered into a tastefully furnished room, where my attention was first attracted by an unusual number of current periodicals on the center table. I then noticed the elegantly bound volumes of general literature in other parts of the room—all of which portrayed the home of culture. Here I met the man whose life has been interwoven in the history of Homestead.

Posey and Writt represent the best of Pittsburgh’s African American “Race Leaders.” Both were models of respectability within their communities, having serviced both blacks and whites in their lines of business. Both experienced a middle-class existence in neighborhoods not restricted to them on account of race and were fluid in their social comings and goings and business ventures.

African American women in Pittsburgh made progress towards uplift through local women’s clubs, namely the Aurora Club and the Tuesday Evening Study Club, established in 1894 and 1900, respectively. Fourteen portraits of Pittsburgh’s finest and most accomplished black women filled the pages of this edition. Ewell took special care to provide photographs of many.

The Aurora Club, founded in the home of Mrs. Rachel Jones, had several co-founders: Mrs. Willie Austin Wagner, Mrs. Dr. J. P. Golden, Mrs. Thomas Johnson, and Mrs. Virginia Proctor. The Club’s membership totaled 25, many of them wives of prominent businessmen and race leaders. Anna Posey, wife of Captain C. W. Posey, is one example. Others were in business for themselves. According to Ewell, Virginia Proctor was “the foremost business woman of color in the city of Pittsburg. She conducts one of the oldest and most reliable hair dressing establishments.”

The club pursued cultural interests as well as charitable endeavors, such as helping to establish the Aged Women’s Home, dedicated in 1901. CAM notes, “the women took great pride in furnishing and beautifying the rooms they have furnished, and see that they are kept pleasant and comfortable for those old ladies who are spending their last days in this Home.” The Aurora Club’s motto “lifting as we climb” was also the slogan of the National Association of Colored Women. In fact, Anna Posey represented the Aurora Club as a delegate at the 1901 NACW convention held in Washington, D.C.

The Tuesday Evening Club’s goal was to cultivate independent, intellectual minds. Ewell stresses equality between women and men in their pursuit of racial uplift:

The great Creator of us all fixed their place in the beginning, and eternity cannot change it. While the brother is cultivating the higher faculties, that he may be fitted to direct and rule, the sister is equally preparing herself that she may guide and counsel. And who shall say which of the two is the more important?

Unlike the Loendi Club, the women’s clubs had no permanent residence, meeting in members’ homes and at the Carnegie Library Wylie Avenue Branch. The Tuesday Evening
Study Club comprised 13 young women, "some who had already graduated from high school or college."

The club's course of study included historical novels, current events, and notable worldwide cities. The overall purpose was establishing a "love for the best and noblest of literature," with each member reporting on assigned topics. Often with nationally known speakers, the club extended an open invitation to the community.

**Public Schools: Business and Professional Life**

The January/February 1902 edition of CAM titled "Public Schools: Business and Professional Life," marked the final installment in the series:

In closing this series of articles on the "Smoky City," I wish to record the fact that my aim has been to paint the progress of the various persons described in such a way as to inspire other young men and women, who are struggling to make their lives successful.

In so far as I have accomplished that, I feel the articles have been a success. Ewell's narrative admonished readers to move forward with persistence and purpose while they "strive to make the most of [their] opportunities."

CAM's goal was to alter anti-black sentiment and educate its white readership concerning the past and present advances that African Americans had made and could make. In both Waters's and Ewell's eyes, one colored American's success was a gain for the race and a mark against stereotype:

Let our aims and ambitions be high, our minds broad, and cultivate the very best that is within us. He who strives hardest to better conditions around him is himself lifted the highest.

Ewell alluded to earlier generations with limited access to education, adamant that their children "be equipped with the best educational advantages that their means could give them." He vividly described a framed photo of a pioneer school hanging in a place of honor within Central High School's corridor as a remembrance of earlier generations' trials in securing an integrated education for their children; many profiled matriculated from this school.

The Central High School of Pittsburg was far from being modern, but it, and the city's African American predecessors, made educating their offspring and those of others who followed possible. Ewell offers no dates; however, separate schools for black children in Pittsburgh were abolished in 1874.

Ewell defended the need for integrated schools, and scorned those against them, suggesting that when black and white students share similar experiences, bonds were formed promoting good will "that years will not erase." Pittsburg Central High School had a stellar reputation, its graduates of the caliber granted admission to college. Walter E. Billows, a graduate of Pittsburg Central's class of 1889, became a successful attorney after being named class orator during his high school days. W. H. Stanton, class of '93, a high honor student, also became an attorney. James Wiley, a whiz in math and the sciences, graduated in the class of '99, then entered Western Pennsylvania University (later the University of Pittsburgh) in 1899 to pursue a Civil Engineering degree.

Robert Jackson, father of young champion bicyclist Ralph Jackson, was profiled as a champion in his own right. He advised the school board in remediing the typhoid disease spreading through the school's water system, insisting they provide water filters to control and eventually eliminate the disease. The city's newspapers applauded his efforts.

CAM claimed that Pittsburgh afforded advancement to those who were patient, persistent, wise, and willing to put forth the effort in seizing opportunities. To these individuals, the city offered more than other urban areas.

**Reflections**

In *The Philadelphia Negro: A Social Study*, W. E. B. DuBois looked at the progress of blacks socially, politically, and economically at about the same time as CAM. DuBois, like the architects of the Smoky City series, embraced the assimilation of African Americans into mainstream society. He, too, believed that the model of respectability demonstrated by African American elites was critical in generating uplift within the race and advancing its acceptance by white society.

One can only imagine the enthusiasm
with which Oliver G. Waters approached the editors of CAM, sharing his idea for an incredible series that would increase magazine membership in addition to aiding efforts in advancing the race. Waters may also have wanted to attract more upwardly mobile blacks to the city. Whatever the rationale, both he and Ewell were not hard pressed to find successful African Americans walking Pittsburgh's streets.

Clearly, the “Smoky City” series examines middle to upper-middle-class African Americans. Other than accounting for working class blacks as puddlers, melters, hod-carriers, professionals or business people, neither Waters nor Ewell mentioned those removed socially or economically from privileged circles. The final issue of the series states as much:

In closing this series of articles on the "Smoky City," I wish to record the fact that my aim has been to paint the progress of the various persons described in such a way as to inspire other young men and women, who are struggling to make their lives successful."

At the turn of the century, African Americans in Pittsburgh shifted from protesting political and social injustice to promoting race pride and respectability, embracing the ideology of racial solidarity and self help. Black Chicago, according to historian Allan Spear, likewise shifted from the “abolitionist tradition ... of militant protest for the attainment of equal rights ... to the dominant national ideology of accommodationism and self-help ... keeping in step with the times.”

This theory helps account for the upbeat tone and optimism with which CAM reported the achievements among members of their race. It was an enormous opportunity provided to Waters and Ewell, heralding these achievements in a national publication.
The primary goal identified by the magazine editors was to rally against Jim Crow. A lot of time and energy went into gathering and creating photographs and in canvassing the community to interview individuals. They must have created quite a stir.

Other sources on the Negro community of this era such as the Pittsburgh Press’s “Afro-American Notes” column, The WPA History of the Negro, and “The Negro in Pittsburgh” by Helen Tucker substantiate some of Waters’s and Ewell’s claims. “Afro-American Notes” echoes the upbeat tone and content of the “Smoky City” series, highlighting Robert Jackson and family, as well as the Tuesday Night Club.

An informal porch party was given last Friday evening by Miss Hadesha Jackson at her home on Claybourne Street, Shadyside.... The house and grounds were illuminated with Chinese lanterns and a collation was served.

The Tuesday Night Club will discuss “Boston and Vicinity” at its next meeting. Miss Emma Writt will read a paper of “The Pilgrim Fathers.” Miss Sallie Fowler one on “Historic Boston.” Miss Myrtle Lett will present it as a literary center. Miss M. Lanier will speak of its churches and Miss Nana Johnson will tell of Harvard University.

The magazine’s biographical sketches provide otherwise largely unavailable information on the personal and professional lives of African Americans at this time.

Ultimately, the difference between what was reported in the white press and rebutted by The Colored American Magazine is that CAM substantiates truth through evidence in the form of biographies and photographs, as opposed to caricatures accompanied by unmerited attacks on the intelligence and morality of African Americans.

Waters and Ewell’s reports were at times exaggerated, but except for overstating the African American population’s size and the number of black males employed in the mills, neither Waters nor Ewell deviates too far. Captain Posey was indeed an astute businessman and shipbuilder, John T. Writt a successful caterer with daughters who were members of the Tuesday Night Study and Aurora clubs.

For historians, the challenge in mining this four-part series is separating credible from incredible. In cross-referencing information, it is clear that Waters and Ewell try to render honest factual background information. In some areas their heightening of facts might have been wishful thinking, for example, the ease with which Waters reports African Americans assuming a variety of skilled and unskilled positions in the mills, when this information contrasts with statistics reported by other authorities. Historian Frank Couvares states that blacks in positions other than those on the fringe were the exception rather than the rule, and that they were not given jobs in the steel industry. Helen A. Tucker claims the numbers of black men employed in the mills were significantly less in 1900, as does The WPA History of the Negro in Pittsburgh, which puts blacks employed in steel mills in 1907 and 1908 at less than half of the 6,000 reported by Waters.

Both Waters and Ewell report surprising racial openness in terms of housing and business. Robert Jackson’s daughter Hadesha operated a hair-styling service frequented primarily by white women in the East End. Hadesha’s father, Robert Jackson, moved his family into the exclusive area of Shadyside on Claybourne Street, home to many of Pittsburgh’s upper-middle-class whites. Jackson operated a successful bicycle shop in the East End, perhaps near his home. His clientele would most likely have been predominantly white. Jackson’s older son entered Western University of Pennsylvania’s medical school, where he was surely one of the first blacks. His younger son Ralph, the champion bicyclist, competed in a sport that was almost exclusively off-limits to blacks.
Jackson's presence there along with his family attests to a fluidity of movement with which a select few African Americans could operate, provided they had the means.

“Pittsburgh may have been the exception in its attitudes and offerings toward these select blacks at a critical time in history.”

Dr. Brady, the city's first African American dentist, counted whites as well as blacks among his clientele; Posey built boats for a white clientele; Mary Writt was seamstress to Mrs. Pitcairn, whose husband owned Pittsburgh Plate Glass Company; Louis Woodson, descendant of well-known Old Pittsburgher Reverend Louis Woodson, worked as an engineer for PPG—all reasons why Waters and Ewell considered Pittsburgh special in its attitudes and offerings toward African Americans.

Unquestionably upbeat, the “Smoky City” series does not dwell on issues of prejudice. On the contrary, Waters and Ewell use the few situations that they report to show triumph over racism.

Some may argue that this indifference toward race was propaganda. And yes, the series is overly optimistic in its cadence. Yet, given the poor reception of blacks in other urban industrial cities, Pittsburgh may well have been the exception rather than the rule in its attitudes and offerings toward these select blacks at a critical time in Pittsburgh history.

Clearly, the best method of proving respectability and first-class citizenship, in addition to negating caricatured images of blacks portrayed in the white press, was through publication of impressive photographs in which subjects are well-dressed, well-groomed, and dignified. Although some argue these images simply emulate elite whites, it could also be said that emulating white culture gave this segment of the black population access to upward movement in American society at this time.

Strides that may appear small to us now loomed large to Waters and Ewell in a period in which success of one meant victory for all. To think otherwise would be to go against ideas that permeated African American culture at this time, not only in Pittsburgh, but throughout the nation in combined efforts to “negate the nadir.”

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1 Rayford Logan, The Negro in American Life and Thought: The Nadir, 1877-1901 (New York: The Dial Press, Inc, 1954) p. 83. Logan sampled 12 northern newspapers in an attempt to gauge northern sentiment regarding African Americans. One of those newspapers sampled was the Pittsburgh Dispatch, a firmly Democratic newspaper whose loyalties shifted around the mid-1890s. Logan reported what he deemed “a rare example of a joke against discrimination which appeared in the Pittsburgh Dispatch in 1895: A traveler asked: ‘What’s the reason I can’t get a meal here, I’d like to know.’”

2 Ibid., p. 216.

3 Ibid., p. 241.


5 Ibid. Interestingly, Logan argues that “Jews received more favorable treatment than did other minorities because the articles written about them were written by Jews.” (Logan, p. 242)

6 Ibid., p. 268.

7 Ibid.

8 Founders of The CAM included: Walter W. Wallace, Walter A. Johnson, Jesse S. Watkins, and Harper S. Fortune. The fifth and equally vital contributor/editor was Pauline S. Hopkins also of Boston. Although Pauline’s photo and bio. appear in the May 1901 anniversary issue and her contributions are acknowledged, the title of editor does not appear in print. Over time, Hopkins’ colleagues attested to her significant role in charting the editorial direction of The Colored American Magazine. (See: Martha Hopkins, “kin’ o’ rough jestice fer a parson’; Pauline Hopkins’ Winona and the Politics of Reconstructing History,” African American Review, Volume 32, Number 3, 1998, p. 645). As a writer, however, Hopkins’ novels and short stories were serialized in The CAM, often under an assumed name. Eventually, the stress associated with the expense of publishing literary works in addition to printing the magazine adversely affected the publishing company’s stability.


10 Ibid.

11 However, African Americans did not represent more than a token number in mill and factory work until World War I. See Laurence Glasco, ed. The WPA History of the Negro. (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2004), p. 217-218.

12 In 1896 the Pittsburgh Press committed a column of its Sunday edition to “news and comment of special interest to colored readers,” edited by Dr. John W. Browning. Browning’s career as editor of “Afro-American Notes” was cut short by his sudden death in 1897. Abram Hall took over as editor until the column ceased in 1932. See Laurence Glasco, ed. The WPA History of the Negro in Pittsburgh, (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2004), p. 248.


14 Ibid., p. 241.

15 Pittsburgh Press, “Afro-American Notes.” November 1, 1896, p. 17. The man referred to is editor Dr. John W. Browning.
However, in further reading when a Mr. W. H. Jones was prominently featured in one edition of the Smoky City series, with a similar address, it is reasonable to assume that the two were husband and wife. Her name did not appear in any association with social, literary, or music clubs highlighted in the Smoky City series. Neither did her picture appear in The CAM’s May 1901 anniversary issue. Mrs. Jones’ tenure with the magazine lasted five months. By March 1901 Waters was listed as the sole agent from The Smoky City.

This address was probably Waters’s home address, as well.

By May 1901, [The CAM’s first anniversary year] Pittsburgh is listed as a branch office and Oliver G. Waters its general agent and sole representative for the Smoky City. No photo appears of Mrs. Jones in the May 1901 Anniversary issue, or any reason given for her departure.

The Colored American Magazine, May 1901, p. 73. Waters tenure with The Colored American Magazine spanned a period of approximately ten months (January 1901 – November 1901).


After 1904, The Colored American Magazine shifted location as well as editorship, moving to New York City. Issues from 1900 to 1904 in this study cover only those through 1904 with the magazine under the editorship of its original owners, i.e., Wallace, et.al. Booker T. Washington, who also secretly underwrote the financing of the magazine for his friend when it assumed new ownership, was critical of the magazine’s original focus on historical achievements and literature. He influenced a new direction that embraced his own agenda.

The Colored American Magazine staff artist Hanson is responsible for the artwork on The CAM covers prior to the arrival of Alexander Skeete, December 1900. Although not mentioned as a staff artist in the May 1901 anniversary issue, Hanson’s art work graces the covers of The CAM through March 1901. Thereafter, Skeete’s illustrations appear on the covers of The CAM beginning in May 1901. However, Hanson is credited with creating the sketch of what appears to be the mighty Vulcan with anvil in hand and flames pouring from his mouth amidst a backdrop of smoking stacks that appears throughout the four part series on The Smoky City and with the cover drawing of the African American steelworker on the first issue of the four-part series, titled “The Smoky City.”


The Colored American Magazine, October 1901, p. 419.

Here, Waters mistakenly uses the word “elyrium” when the proper choice would have been “elysium” “a place or condition of ideal happiness.” Elysium is not a word.


Ibid.

Ibid.

Waters’s claim of “nearly six thousand laborers” in the mills is not substantiated by other authorities. J. Ernest Wright in The WPA Study of the Pittsburgh Negro reports less than half that number employed by 1907-1908. Bodnar, et. al. in their study report “only 507 blacks were found among the 19,686 men working in Pittsburgh’s blast furnaces and rolling mills.” Further, Bodnar states that blacks “exclusion from steel production in Pittsburgh was characteristic of the general exclusion of blacks from industrial occupations throughout the North.” (Bodnar, et. al. Lives of Their Own, p. 60, 61.) While Helen A. Tucker in her report “The Negro in Pittsburgh” cites only “1,365 Negroes employed in the manufacturing and mechanical pursuits in 1900.” (Helen Tucker, “The Negro in Pittsburgh” in the Pittsburgh Survey, 1909). According to J. Ernest Wright, not until 1918 do the numbers approach 7,000. (Laurence Glasco, ed. The WPA History of the Negro in Pittsburgh, p. 218) Couvares maintains that the African American “was never patronized as a community. Most filled the pool of casual, unskilled laborer in the mills. Couvares cites the Pittsburgh Survey’s claim that “As a rule, Negro boys do not remain in the mills long, nor work up in them.”


Ibid., p. 420.

Ibid.


Ibid. p. 20.

Ibid.


Ibid., p. 11.

Ibid., p. 11.


Pauline Wirt would eventually become the wife of Howard Woodson, also profiled in The Smoky City Series. See The CAM, November 1901, pp. 19, 20.


Ibid.

Ibid., pp. 11, 14.

Ibid., p. 11.


Bodnar et. al. report that “John T. Writt was born in 1848; his wife, Susan, was born in Pennsylvania the same year. The couple married in 1873 and had six children, but two died before 1900. In 1883 Writt purchased 7225 Susquehanna Street in Homewood for $1,900 ($2,346) with only a $200 ($247) down payment. In the 1890s Writt was listed in the city directory as a janitor, but in the mid-1890s he entered the catering business and advertised his downtown location in the city directory.” (Bodnar, et.al. Lives of Their Own, 1983, p. 177.)

In further research, I was able to uncover a great deal of additional information about John T. Writt and his family that validates the information that Ewell shared with the readers of The Colored American Magazine, having interviewed the great-granddaughters of John T. Writt: Martha Richards Conley of Pittsburgh, who lives in Pittsburgh, and Margaretta Richards of New York City. They shared stories and critical photographs of John T. Writt's home life, business, and family. His son, John T. Writt, Jr. was one of the first African American firemen in Pittsburgh. All the Writt women were involved in women's social clubs of the day (i.e., the Aurora Club, the Narcissus Musical and Literary Club, The Tuesday Evening Study Club). Daughter Emma taught English after graduation from Pittsburgh Central High School and at Charles Avery Institute, the first school of higher learning established for the colored American in Pittsburgh. This information substantiates the views of Waters's regarding the role and "place" of African American women not only within his family but in society at large.

There is some discrepancy here as to the actual founding date of the Aurora Club. Actual members have documented the founding as early as 1894 and not 1897 as reported by Ewell. In The WPA History of the Negro in Pittsburgh, J. Ernest Wright lists 1898 as the date the club was formed (Glasco, ed., p. 295).

Ibid., p. 142.

Ibid.


Ibid., p. 145.

The Colored American Magazine, January/February 1902, p. 171.

Ibid.

Ibid., p. 172.

Laurence Glasco, ed. The WPA History of the Negro in Pittsburgh (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2004), p. 244. Pittsburgh Public Schools did not hire their first African American teacher until 1937. Colored students who were permitted only to do observations of classes in session but never participate in student teaching.


The Colored American Magazine, January/February 1902, p. 171.


In 1957, sociologist E. Franklin Frazier published the extremely controversial Black Bourgeoisie that claimed middle-class blacks were not living in the real world, but one which they created for themselves. Emulating mainstream white society, they denied the reality that whites would never accept them. Frazier also claimed that black newspapers had a tendency to exaggerate the success of black businesses. Frazier's work was published over 50 years after the "Smoky City" series appears in The Colored American Magazine. I argue, however, that while it may appear that the goal of upwardly mobile blacks at the turn of the century was to imitate white culture, one must take into consideration that this was the only culture that dominated mainstream society, which set the norms for what was and was not acceptable. Given that fact, blacks were content to enhance to some degree a facsimile of white culture for their own well-being and enjoyment within their own communities. Also, at this early period blacks still believed that total acceptance and assimilation into white society was a possibility. It was not until DuBois (successor to B.T. Washington) had exhausted all possible faith in the humanity of white America that the reality of hardened segregation against the black race became a harsh reality. Regarding Frazier's claim about the exaggeration of the press as to the success of black businesses, we do see some of that in the "Smoky City" series; it may or may not have been intentional. Considering the authors' efforts to present the best possible picture of the Afro-American in Pittsburgh, it is obvious to the writer when cross-referencing sources that some exaggeration was employed. See E. Franklin Frazier, The Black Bourgeoisie (New York: The Free Press, 1957).

Pittsburgh Press, "Afro-American Notes," August 25, 1901, p. 15. Hadesha Jackson was the daughter of businessman Robert Jackson; both are featured in The Smoky City series.

Myrtle Lett was secretary to Captain C. W. Posey.

Ibid. October 27, 1901, p. 13.

For detailed information, see footnote on page 22.