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Steady Through Time: Ella Barksdale Brown and the Perception-Based Politics of Black Women’s Racial Uplift in 20th Century America

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Steady Through Time: Ella Barksdale Brown and the Perception-Based Politics of Black Women’s Racial Uplift in 20th Century America

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Introduction

In March 1944, actor Paul Robeson spoke at the annual fellowship breakfast of a local professional women’s sorority in Jersey City, New Jersey. In his speech, Robeson “paid tribute to a Mrs. Ella Barksdale Brown, civic, social welfare, and interracial worker,” and acknowledged that as one of his teachers, Barksdale Brown “had played an important part in his education which enabled him to become a leader and spokesman for his people.”¹ Though he might not have known it at the time, Robeson’s recognition of his former teacher would have filled her former teachers with the utmost pride; as a member of the first graduating class of Spelman Seminary, now Spelman College, Barksdale Brown was raised and educated to learn how to raise and educate the future leaders of the Black community, and in doing so, become one herself. At the very breakfast where Robeson spoke, Barksdale Brown received an award for her dedication to the Jersey City community. The occasion of Robeson’s speech, then, along with its content, underscore the ways in which Barksdale Brown’s life and work were products of the education and socialization she received at Spelman.

Faced with the pervasive racial hostility that characterized the decades surrounding the turn of the twentieth century, Black intellectual leaders developed an ideology of racial uplift that posited that both individual self-betterment and the commitment of Black elites to elevating the Black masses around them were central to advancing the race.² Though it originally developed as an antislavery tactic, the concept of racial uplift as we know it today largely grew out of the post-Reconstruction era.³ And while racial uplift ideology is often associated with prominent political figures like W.E.B Du Bois and Booker T. Washington, Black leaders and

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¹ “Urges Modern Structure For Friendliness House: Mayor Pesin and Paul Robeson Call For Recognition of Colored People,” Jersey Journal, March 27, 1944, NJ.com Newspaper Archives.
³ Gaines, 1-2.
white missionaries had begun implementing uplift ideology when Du Bois was barely a teenager and Washington had just started his career. In particular, the founding of prestigious schools for Black students in the South was a cornerstone of the racial uplift movement and began well before either man rose to prominence.

As the seeds of post-Reconstruction racial uplift ideology found fertile ground in the South, they likely made their way into the home of Julia and Jefferson Barksdale who were raising their daughter Ella in Milledgeville, Georgia. Born in 1871, Ella Barksdale was the only child of her parents, who themselves had been born into slavery. Historians know little about the early years of her life, though broader research on Black family dynamics in this era has allowed scholars to gain a sense of how the Barksdales raised their daughter. Black parents in the 1870s and 1880s often impressed on their daughters the importance of attainment in both the public and private spheres. Parents taught their children that they must behave respectably and present themselves as upright in order to achieve their desired familial and career goals. This unique socialization was a precursor to what scholar Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham would eventually term the “politics of respectability,” a social strategy historically employed by Black women in which they deployed a rigid adherence to mainstream values and behaviors as a means of gaining social approval and advancement. This strategy was a gendered sub-strategy of the overall philosophy of racial uplift, and is critical to understanding the way that Black women fit into Black political ideology after Reconstruction.

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6 Shaw, 15.
Educational attainment was a key part of how Black families conceptualized respectability politics. It was likely with this in mind that Julia and Jefferson Barksdale sent their daughter to school at Spelman Seminary in Atlanta. Attending Spelman, a school founded by two white Baptist missionaries from Massachusetts, shaped the ideologies by which Ella Barksdale Brown would live the rest of her life. At Spelman, she learned that it was her duty to lift the Black community up from the legacy of slavery. In preparation for this mission, she would receive a stellar education and, upon graduation, was expected to dedicate her life to leading, advocating for, and reforming the Black community from within. Armed with these lessons and the privilege that came with a Spelman degree, Barksdale Brown embarked on a decades-long career of service in Black women’s organizations, educational advocacy, and local journalism in Jersey City. By immersing herself in Black women’s groups, she became part of a nationwide Black women’s club movement that was comprised of local organizations dedicated to racial advancement and social reform.

The roles that Barksdale Brown and other Spelman graduates played in their communities have been largely overlooked by historical scholarship. Though in 1984 Paula Giddings published an early survey text of Black women’s history that included a chapter on the Black women’s club movement, it took another decade until a substantial amount of scholarship emerged about the way in which Black women interacted with racial uplift politics at the turn of the twentieth century. Two seminal books in this field, Stephanie K. Shaw’s *What a Woman Ought to Be and to Do: Black Professional Women Workers During the Jim Crow Era*, and Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham’s *Righteous Discontent: The Women’s Movement in the Black*

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Baptist Church, were published in 1996 and 1993, respectively. In the former book, Shaw studied the way that Black girls’ education and socialization in the later decades of the nineteenth century affected the roles that they came to hold in their communities.\(^9\) In the latter book, considered a groundbreaking work in Black women’s history, Higginbotham first coined the term “politics of respectability.”\(^10\)

Later texts built on and challenged the work of Higginbotham, Shaw, and other key historians including Deborah Gray White and Anne Firor Scott.\(^11\) As more scholarly attention focused on Black women, and especially Black club women, in the Progressive era, these women faced criticism for the classist attitudes embedded in the racial respectability that they practiced. In her 2017 text *Beyond Respectability: The Intellectual Thought of Race Women*, however, Brittney Cooper argued against the dismissal of Black club women because of their elitism. Cooper instead suggested that because respectability served to reshape the public perception of Black women, it was essential to their self-definition.\(^12\) More broadly, she reimagined the National Association of Colored Women (NACW), the umbrella organization for much of Black women’s club work in the twentieth century, as its own school of political thought, and she

\(^9\) Shaw, *What a Woman Ought to Be and to Do*, 7-9.


identified the organization’s core mission as the improvement of white society’s public opinion of Black women.¹³

Cooper’s text, like many before it, focused almost exclusively on national leaders, organizational architects, and well-known Black female intellectuals. This essay aims to build on existing scholarship by using previously unexplored primary sources about the life of Ella Barksdale Brown to understand the influence of racial uplift and respectability ideologies on the ordinary women who were educated, socialized, and lived their lives within these ideologies’ spheres of influence. Indeed, from her education at Spelman, once considered the training grounds for respectable Black women, to her work at her own local NACW affiliate, Barksdale Brown’s life was deeply intertwined with and shaped by the principles and values that these ideologies championed. This essay draws inspiration from Shaw’s methodology, using Barksdale Brown’s life as a case study to examine the impact of an early Spelman education and the ways in which the school’s graduates used respectability politics and the ideology of racial uplift throughout their lives.

This analysis of Barksdale Brown’s papers reveals how she channeled what she learned at Spelman into her life’s mission of improving the perception of the Black community in the eyes of white society and how this goal drove much of her work both within and outside of the Black women’s club movement. In doing so, this analysis supports Cooper’s argument for the centrality of the reformation of public opinion to the Black women’s club movement and the work of the women who composed it. Barksdale Brown’s lifelong commitment to racial advancement grew out of the understanding of race, religion, and duty that she developed at Spelman. As an adult, her Spelman degree, her husband’s job, and the latent racism that resulted

¹³ Cooper, 29-30, 34, 36-37, 43, 46, 48.
from the Jim Crow culture that pervaded the twentieth century shaped Barksdale Brown’s social and economic status in Jersey City. These influences laid the groundwork for her activity in club work, educational advocacy, and journalism. In each of these three endeavors, her desire to enhance the public image of the Black community as a means of racial advancement motivated her work.

Ella Barksdale Brown witnessed extraordinary change in her world throughout the 95 years of her life. As part of the first generation of Black children born free in Georgia, she was raised in a deeply racist South, lived through the anti-lynching movement, experienced two World Wars, watched the Supreme Court rule in *Brown v. Board of Education*, and died only at the height of the civil rights movement of the 1960s. From the moment she was born to the day that she died, Black leaders and laymen alike argued intensely about how to best advance the Black race. These debates unfolded against the backdrop of post-slavery challenges, the institutionalization of Jim Crow laws, and eventually the evolving dynamics of the civil rights movement. Yet while the world changed and men fought around her, Barksdale Brown remained steadfast in her beliefs. The essay aims to highlight how Barksdale Brown represented a unique archetype of civic leaders. She was a resolute woman who, even in the midst of societal changes, remained unwaveringly committed to her belief that the Black race could best advance by improving its own public image, and she was intent on actively shaping her environment rather than passively adapting to it.

**The Impact of a Spelman Education**

Spelman’s founders and early teachers fostered an environment of religiosity and public service that reflected the school’s origins within the Baptist missionary community. Spelman’s faculty sought to inculcate “proper” Baptist values in their students and train them to become
teachers with the hope that they would impart these values to the Black masses they encountered. The school’s leaders consistently stressed the importance of students’ duty to their race as secular and religious leaders.\textsuperscript{14} They instilled in Barksdale Brown a commitment to racial uplift and respectability ideologies that profoundly shaped her understanding of her place within the Black community.

When Barksdale Brown arrived at Spelman Seminary in the fall of 1884, the school was undergoing a major transition.\textsuperscript{15} Having outgrown the church basement in which it was founded, the seminary had only recently relocated to a permanent campus on the site of former Union Army barracks. John and Laura Rockefeller funded this move, and in recognition of their support, the school renamed itself Spelman Seminary for Women and Girls in honor of Laura’s parents Harvey and Lucy Spelman.\textsuperscript{16} The timing of Barksdale Brown’s arrival, then, occurred at a moment which was deeply symbolic of Spelman’s roots in white missionary work.

Founded as the Atlanta Baptist Female Seminary in 1881 by Sophia Packard and Harriet Giles of the Women’s American Baptist Home Mission Society (ABHMS), an overwhelmingly white organization, Spelman aimed to prepare Black women for the responsibilities that they would face in the home and workplace.\textsuperscript{17} Beyond their core responsibilities to their husbands, children, and employers, the school’s founders believed that Black women had a unique responsibility to their race. In the domestic sphere, Black women could influence the behavior of the men and children in their lives. In the public domain, the founders envisioned, Black women

\textsuperscript{14} Shaw, \textit{What a Woman Ought to Be and to Do}, 74; Higginbotham, \textit{Righteous Discontent}, 35.
\textsuperscript{15} “Fourth Annual Catalogue of the Spelman Baptist Seminary for Women and Girls in Atlanta, Georgia. 1884-5” (Constitution Publishing Co., Printers, 1885), Spelman Catalogs, Atlanta University Center Robert W. Woodruff Library, https://radar.auctr.edu/islandora/object/sc.001.catalog%3A1884.01.
could reach the Black masses and rid them of the legacy of slavery.\textsuperscript{18} The founders of Spelman sought to train their students to achieve these dual goals.

At the heart of Spelman’s academic endeavors in its early years was the “normal course,” a program designed to train young girls to become teachers. When Barksdale Brown arrived at Spelman at thirteen years old, she joined the senior class of the normal course.\textsuperscript{19} The year before her arrival, Spelman opened a Model School where Spelman students could teach elementary school students under faculty supervision.\textsuperscript{20} Barksdale Brown taught at the Model School during her second and third years at Spelman.\textsuperscript{21}

Packard and Giles believed that training their students to become educators would best position the girls to uplift the Black masses. ABHMS wholeheartedly supported this vision as the organization had focused its efforts on educating a Black elite that could reform the Black community from the inside instead of prioritizing widespread Black education. Creating teachers was essential to this work.\textsuperscript{22} At the turn of the twentieth century, Du Bois would coin a version of this strategy as his “Talented Tenth” philosophy in which a small group of Black individuals would be taught to serve as leaders and advocates for the advancement of the entire Black community.\textsuperscript{23} But two decades before Du Bois first wrote on this topic, white northern

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item[\textsuperscript{18}] Brazzell, 37; Shaw, \textit{What a Woman Ought to Be and to Do}, 81.
\item[\textsuperscript{19}] “Fourth Annual Catalogue of the Spelman Baptist Seminary for Women and Girls in Atlanta, Georgia. 1884-5,” 7, Atlanta University Center Robert W. Woodruff Library.
\item[\textsuperscript{20}] Higginbotham, \textit{Righteous Discontent}, 35.
\item[\textsuperscript{21}] “Fifth Annual Catalogue of the Spelman Seminary and Normal School for Women and Girls in Atlanta, Georgia 1885-6” (Constitution Publishing Co., Printers, 1886), 7, Spelman Catalogs, Atlanta University Center Robert W. Woodruff Library, https://radar.auctr.edu/islandora/object/sc.001.catalog%3A1885.01; “Sixth Annual Catalogue of the Spelman Seminary and Normal School for Women and Girls in Atlanta, Georgia 1886-7,” (Spelman Messenger Office, 1887), 9, Spelman Catalogs, Atlanta University Center Robert W. Woodruff Library, https://radar.auctr.edu/islandora/object/sc.001.catalog%3A1886.01.
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missionaries like those at ABHMS founded elite Black secondary schools and colleges in pursuit of this mission.\textsuperscript{24}

By preparing the students at their schools to become members of the Black elite, ABHMS hoped that their graduates could become a “buffer,” or mediating class, between white and Black society.\textsuperscript{25} As noted in ABHMS’s 1871 Report of the Executive Board, the organization believed that establishing Black schools in the South provided benefits “not to the colored race alone, but to the white race” as well.\textsuperscript{26} The graduates of their schools, they trusted, would help calm racial tensions and prevent them from boiling over.\textsuperscript{27} Thus, from the time they were young girls, Spelman implicitly taught its students that they occupied a special position in between the Black masses and white society. Throughout their education, they often received conflicting messages about being both a “part of and apart from” the Black communities in which they had grown up.\textsuperscript{28} Whether consciously or not, Barksdale Brown would spend much of her life struggling with this balance.

The work of educating future educators and molding the female sect of the talented tenth was, to Spelman’s founders, an inherently religious endeavor.\textsuperscript{29} Packard and Giles believed that teachers and missionaries were to be one and the same.\textsuperscript{30} Students attended daily Bible study classes, participated in regular worship exercises, and frequently attended Young Women’s

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\item \textsuperscript{24} Higginbotham, \textit{Righteous Discontent}, 25.
\item \textsuperscript{25} Higginbotham, \textit{Righteous Discontent}, 26.
\item \textsuperscript{26} Higginbotham, 26; American Baptist Home Mission Society, \textit{The Thirty-Ninth Annual Report of the Executive Board to the American Baptist Home Mission Society}, 1871, 27, https://books.google.com/books?id=g8U3AAAAMAAJ&printsec=frontcover&source=gbs_ge_summary_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false.
\item \textsuperscript{27} Higginbotham, \textit{Righteous Discontent}, 26.
\item \textsuperscript{28} Shaw, \textit{What a Woman Ought to Be and to Do}, 67, 91.
\item \textsuperscript{29} This belief is well encapsulated in an 1885 edition of the \textit{Spelman Messenger}, the school’s newspaper and circular. “While the aim is to make their education practical, their spiritual welfare is first in the minds of the teachers,” the newspapers’ editors wrote. “Spelman Seminary,” \textit{Spelman Messenger Vol. 1 No. 1}, March 1885, https://radar.auctr.edu/islandora/object/sc.001.messenger%3A1885.01/.
\item \textsuperscript{30} Higginbotham, \textit{Righteous Discontent}, 35.
\end{itemize}
Christian Association (YWCA) meetings. The school proudly reported the number of religious conversions among its students (over 100 students in 1884) and encouraged its girls to spread the Baptist teachings that they were learning by visiting local homes, teaching at Sunday schools, and organizing for the temperance movement.\textsuperscript{31} Packard and Giles viewed the Black Christian tradition that many of their students had been raised within as too rowdy, expressive, and emotional.\textsuperscript{32} Drawing on internalized anti-Black stereotypes, the pair sought to eradicate alleged negative traits and behaviors that they believed had been carried over from slavery into the lives of their students, including tardiness, immorality, and dishonesty.\textsuperscript{33} Packard and Giles, therefore, insisted that all students board at Spelman in order to separate them from their family homes, which the faculty viewed as unrefined and degenerative environments.\textsuperscript{34} At Spelman, students were to learn how to be “real” Christians with proper Baptist principles, “refined” behavior, and “civilized” manners.\textsuperscript{35} Packard and Giles believed their pupils had to be reshaped and remolded into proper vessels for Baptist teachings and the Spelman message so that they could go forth and spread them to the masses.

Inextricably tied to the school’s religious teachings was the notion that all Spelman students had a duty to themselves, to their community, and to the race at large to live service-oriented lives. This duty was at once secular and religious. As the privileged few to receive a formal education, the girls were expected to use their education and credentials to work towards a better collective future for Black Americans.\textsuperscript{36} At the same time, they were to devote their lives towards serving Christ and working to bring about his kingdom on Earth.\textsuperscript{37} This notion of

\textsuperscript{31} Higginbotham, 34-35.
\textsuperscript{32} Higginbotham, 34-35.
\textsuperscript{33} Guy-Sheftall, Daughters of Sorrow, 136-37.
\textsuperscript{34} Higginbotham, Righteous Discontent, 34-35.
\textsuperscript{35} Higginbotham, 34-35; Guy-Sheftall, Daughters of Sorrow, 136-37.
\textsuperscript{36} Guy-Sheftall, 133-35; Shaw, What a Woman Ought to Be and to Do, 73.
\textsuperscript{37} Shaw, 74.
religious and secular duty was inseparable from the racial uplift ideology that Spelman students lived and breathed. As those who had received the gift of a Christian education, they were to be the “instructors of a race numbering seven million, of which only one million have any education.” Spelman girls had to overcome the “ignorance and superstition” in the Black community with “wisely directed Christian effort.”

In short, Spelman’s founders and their supporters at the Women’s ABHMS believed that if they “Educate[d] and Christianize[d] the women, [] you save the race.” This line, found in the March 1885 edition of the Spelman Messenger, encapsulates Packard and Giles’ view that their students had to be made into proper Baptists as the girls were not full, true Christians when they arrived at the school. It also demonstrates the immense pressure placed on Spelman students; the rhetoric of Spelman classes, pamphlets, lectures, and ceremonies emphasized the responsibility that students held as saviors of their communities and their race as a whole. Spelman graduates left the school with a deep understanding of the massive responsibility they held on their shoulders.

The impact that the Spelman environment and teaching had on Barksdale Brown is made evident by a poem titled “The Halo” that she submitted to the Spelman Messenger for publication in 1914, almost three decades after her graduation. Initially, the narrator of this poem felt burdened by the lot she had been given in life and wanted to fill a “higher station” as a

39 Untitled, Spelman Messenger Vol. 2 No. 7. In addition, the duty that Spelman girls had to their community and their race was inseparable from their own success and religious salvation. Spelman students were taught that they would be forever judged by their race as a whole, regardless of their individual accomplishments, and thus their personal success relied on their success in uplifting the Black masses. And by working to uplift others and spread the word of God, the women could at the same time demonstrate the faith in Christ necessary for their own salvation. F.J. Washington, “Letter to the Messenger,” Spelman Messenger Vol. 2 No 6., April 1886, http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12322/sc.001.messenger:1886.04; Stephanie J. Shaw, What a Woman Ought to Be and to Do, 74.
painter or a sculptor.\textsuperscript{41} She admitted that this desire was “self-fixed,” or self-centered.\textsuperscript{42} This admission reflects the ethos of service that teachers at Spelman had instilled in their students; the desire to work as an artist without regard to Christ or the community was fanciful and represented a failure to live up to Spelman’s motto, “Our Whole School for Christ.”\textsuperscript{43} Responding to the narrator’s prayer to become an artist, a halo “crown[ed] her brow” and introduced her to “resignation,” a two-fold concept that refers both to an individual’s dedication of their life to God and to their readiness to face adversity in service of their community.\textsuperscript{44} The halo’s “glow” encouraged the narrator to pursue God’s work. She reconceptualized her personal desire to become an artist to align with her religious charge: “On God’s gifts, minds, I ideals paint.”\textsuperscript{45} The image of painting ideals onto others’ minds reflects the teacher training Barksdale Brown had received at Spelman. This notion is reinforced by the poem’s next line, “And molding souls like unto Him,” which evokes imagery of a teacher shaping her students to be more Christ-like, the heart of the charge that Spelman faculty put on their student-teachers.\textsuperscript{46} The Spelman ethos of service to others and the importance of importing Baptist ideals onto the masses shines through these words.

Barksdale Brown’s poem’s final stanza highlights the importance of duty instilled in Spelman girls. She wrote, “The halo’s taught some tasks are hard / Because no plaudits them attend, / That work well done for duty’s sake / May angels’ heads in homage bend.”\textsuperscript{47} Barksdale Brown, “The Halo,” \textit{Spelman Messenger Vol. 30 No. 7}, April 1914, http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12322/sc.001.messenger:1914.04.


\textsuperscript{42} Barksdale Brown, “The Halo.”

\textsuperscript{43} “Spelman College History and Traditions Reference Guide 2023,” 28. “Our Whole School for Christ” had long been Spelman’s motto; see the subheading of any early edition of the \textit{Messenger}. For example, \textit{Spelman Messenger Vol. 1 No. 2}, April 1885, https://radar.auctr.edu/islandora/object/sc.001.messenger%3A1885.02?search=%2522soul%2522%2520%

\textsuperscript{44} Barksdale Brown, “The Halo.”

\textsuperscript{45} Barksdale Brown, “The Halo.”

\textsuperscript{46} Barksdale Brown, “The Halo”; “Woman’s Work,” \textit{Spelman Messenger Vol. 1 No. 2}, April 1885, https://radar.auctr.edu/islandora/object/sc.001.messenger%3A1885.02?search=%2522soul%2522%2520%

\textsuperscript{47} Barksdale Brown, “The Halo.”
Brown acknowledged that much of the work she and her fellow Spelman graduates had set out to do could be thankless work, receiving no applause, or “plaudits.” However, she stressed the importance of a selfless and principled approach to work “for duty’s sake,” rather than for the sake of external validation. This attitude represents a marked shift from the narrator’s perspective at the beginning of the poem where she had confessed that her station in life felt too burdensome and desired an artist’s job where she would receive more praise and admiration. The power of the halo that taught resignation was to demonstrate that she must only derive motivation from a desire for God’s admiration or that of his angels.

Barksdale Brown’s choice to publish “The Halo” in the *Spelman Messenger* suggests that her poem functioned as a reflection on her own time at Spelman. However, when analyzed alongside an essay that she published over 25 years later, it becomes clear that in “The Halo” Barksdale Brown was writing about the influence that Spelman’s teachings had on her after her graduation. In an essay called “Erasing the Color Line,” Barksdale Brown described how in her adolescent years growing up in Georgia, her “idea of race relations gradually became fixed on discrimination,” and that when she and her Black friends met up, “the talk sooner or later centered on the meanness of white folks.”48 The pervasive sense of discrimination that Barksdale Brown described in “Erasing the Color Line” parallels the burdensome lot in life that she had described at the beginning of “The Halo.” In the essay, she recalled her first time experiencing racial discrimination as occurring when she was fourteen years old, when she was already a Spelman student.49 She also detailed other experiences of discrimination that likely occurred in her Spelman years or shortly after her graduation, including memories of being unable to borrow...
the books she wanted to from the *de facto* white library in her hometown and being embarrassed to share a train car with members of a chain gain although she paid the same fare as the white passengers who sat in nicer cars. Analyzing “Erasing the Color Line” and “The Halo” together, therefore, suggests that the shift in Barksdale Brown’s conception of race occurred after, rather than during, her time at Spelman.

Throughout the rest of her essay, Barksdale Brown detailed a change in her perspective on race that began with a surprisingly pleasant interaction she had with the women at a local white church in Jersey City. After this interaction, Barksdale Brown began to focus on interracial relations work both within her church and the broader New Jersey church community; this transition closely aligns with the narrator of the poem’s transition from feeling burdened by her lot in life to understanding the importance of giving herself up to God. Most importantly, in her essay, Barksdale Brown lauded moments of teaching her white church counterparts about Black history and culture as the most formative moments in her new racial consciousness. These experiences gave her faith in “Christ’s teaching of brotherhood.” This detail is reminiscent of her language in “The Halo” about the narrator learning the power of painting “ideals” onto minds and “molding souls” in the image of Jesus’s soul.

Taken together, Barksdale Brown’s two writings suggest that she truly felt the power of the “halo of resignation” and properly devoted her life to Christ’s work not during her time at Spelman or while teaching in the early years following her graduation, but during her interracial relations work in New Jersey in the second decade after her graduation. Still, the poem’s

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50 Barksdale Brown, 6.
51 Barksdale Brown, 7.
52 Barksdale Brown, 7-8.
53 Barksdale Brown, 8.
54 Barksdale Brown, “The Halo.”
language makes abundantly clear that Barksdale Brown was reflecting on the lessons she learned at Spelman. Publishing the poem in the *Spelman Messenger*, then, suggests that it was not a reflection on how she changed *during* her time at Spelman, but a musing on how the ideals, teachings, and ideology that she learned there affected her life in the decades to come. By publishing the poem in the *Messenger*, Barksdale Brown availed herself of an opportunity to send a message to the school’s current students, advising them that even if they felt burdened by their race and did not want to take on the charge that Spelman assigned to them, Spelman’s ideology would eventually positively impact their lives.

This interpretation is supported by a 1913 letter that Barksdale Brown wrote to Lucy Hale Tapley, the school’s then-president. Tapley had asked Barksdale Brown to write a message to the readers of the *Spelman Messenger*, and Barksdale Brown responded that she was “sending a few lines which I hope will be worthy of the space you desire [to] fill and will carry content to the dissatisfied.”*55* Her hope that her contribution would “carry content to the dissatisfied” aligns with the poem’s message and the interpretation of Barksdale Brown’s intention as reflecting her desire to reach Spelman students who might be unhappy in order to instruct them that eventually Spelman’s teachings would come to hold personal meaning for them.

This letter was not the only time that Barksdale Brown corresponded with a Spelman president. For over sixty years after her graduation, Barksdale Brown remained connected to Spelman and kept an active, if intermittent, correspondence with each of the school’s presidents that served during her lifetime. In 1911 she visited Spelman and spoke briefly at the school in

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*55* Ella Barksdale Brown Letter to Lucy Hale Tapley, 1913, Ella Barksdale Brown Alumna Folder, Spelman College Archives, Atlanta, Georgia. The letter does not include the lines Barksdale Brown wrote for Tapley to include in the newspaper; they were likely written on a separate piece of paper that did not make it to the archives. However, Barksdale Brown almost certainly had enclosed “The Halo” in her letter, as the poem was the only time she was published in the *Messenger* in the months following her letter to Tapley.
celebration of its thirtieth anniversary, and in 1915 she wrote to Tapley offering to help with Spelman’s fundraising efforts. Barksdale Brown’s 1911 visit to the school, her publication of “The Halo” in 1914, and her 1915 offer to Tapley suggest that it was around this time that Barksdale Brown began to truly internalize the lessons she received at Spelman and act on them.

Barksdale Brown’s documented connections to Spelman occurred in waves throughout the decades. After her active correspondence with Tapley in the mid-1910s, little record of her interaction with the school exists until the 1930s. In 1932, Barksdale Brown met Florence Matilda Read, President Tapley’s successor, at an Atlanta University alumni dinner in New York. After the dinner, the two corresponded regularly throughout 1932 and discussed Barksdale Brown’s plan to visit the school in late April of that year. Their correspondence picked up again in the 1950s when Read invited Barksdale Brown to attend the commencement of the class of 1952. Barksdale Brown and Read’s correspondence tracks the former’s connection to the school over time as it includes details about the two times the alumna planned to visit her alma mater after 1911. In addition, throughout their correspondence, Barksdale Brown joyfully described herself as a “daughter of Spelman” and “the only living member of our school’s first

58 Florence Matilda Read Letter to Ella Barksdale Brown, July 7, 1951, Ella Barksdale Brown Alumna Folder.
59 Barksdale Brown did not ultimately make it to Spelman Commencement in 1952 due to the death of her husband, John M. Brown, a few months prior. Florence Matilda Read Letter to Ella Barksdale Brown, July 3, 1952, Ella Barksdale Brown Alumna Folder.
class,” demonstrating how she continued to proudly identify with her school even late into her life.\textsuperscript{60}

Barksdale Brown’s habit of writing to the school’s presidents or newspaper with updates about her life further underscore her continued connection to Spelman. In 1931, the \textit{Spelman Messenger} reported that Barksdale Brown had been “the principal speaker” at a local Federation of Church Women meeting; such a mention indicates that Barksdale Brown had written to the school or the paper with this update.\textsuperscript{61} In 1951, Barksdale Brown sent Read an unsolicited, though appreciated, letter full of news about her life’s work, her children, and her grandchildren’s accomplishments. (“I thought you might like to hear something of me,” she wrote.\textsuperscript{62}) After receiving Read’s response to her letter, Barksdale Brown followed up with a second letter detailing more accolades, including her recent attendance at the New Jersey State Federation of Colored Women’s Clubs convention.\textsuperscript{63} The persistence and detail with which Barksdale Brown wrote to update the school about her latest accomplishments and activities not only illustrates the longevity of her connection to Spelman but also suggests that in some way, she might have aimed to demonstrate to the school and its leaders that she had lived up to the responsibility with which they charged her.

This desire to live out the values she had been taught at Spelman was shared among Barksdale Brown’s peers. The early graduates of Spelman charted different courses in life, but almost all committed themselves to the Christ- and community-oriented work that their teachers

\textsuperscript{60} Ella Barksdale Brown Letter to Florence Matilda Read, April 11, 1932, Ella Barksdale Brown Alumna Folder; Ella Barksdale Brown Letter to Florence Matilda Read, March 21, 1951, Ella Barksdale Brown Alumna Folder.
\textsuperscript{61} “Alumnae Notes,” \textit{Spelman Messenger Vol. 47 No. 3}, April 1931, https://radar.auctr.edu/islandora/object/sc.001.messenger%3A1931.02?search=%2522ella%2522barksdale%2522.
\textsuperscript{62} Ella Barksdale Brown Letter to Florence Matilda Read, March 21, 1951, Ella Barksdale Brown Alumna Folder; Florence Matilda Read Letter to Ella Barksdale Brown, July 7, 1951, Ella Barksdale Brown Alumna Folder.
\textsuperscript{63} Florence Matilda Read Letter to Ella Barksdale Brown, July 7, 1951, Ella Barksdale Brown Alumna Folder; Ella Barksdale Brown Letter to Florence Matilda Read, July 1951, Ella Barksdale Brown Alumna Folder.
at Spelman had trained them for. This pattern was a testament to the long-lasting influence the school and its values had on its students. Every student in Barksdale Brown’s graduating class became a teacher, at least temporarily.\textsuperscript{64} Afterwards, at least one worked at an ABHMS school, one was a Baptist missionary in Africa before joining the Spelman faculty, and another became a preacher’s wife.\textsuperscript{65} The class that followed Barksdale Brown’s year included a missionary in Africa, a journalist, a teacher at the Georgia Academy for the Blind, the proprietor of a Sunday school, and a woman who committed her life to working for social causes like temperance and social purity.\textsuperscript{66} Many of these women were likely also involved in club work. Most of the women in Spelman’s first five graduating classes were married, and almost all had children, though many lost children who were still in infancy.\textsuperscript{67} An alumnae pamphlet claimed that of the graduates from these first five classes, 96% had taught after graduation, 66% owned their homes, and 94% “have made good.”\textsuperscript{68} The high percentage of students who “made good” after graduation, as well as the very fact that the school calculated that specific statistic at all, is emblematic both of Spelman’s values and the graduates’ commitments to them.

\textbf{A Note on Wealth and Status}

To fully understand Barksdale Brown’s life after her graduation from Spelman and the perspective from which she approached her work throughout the twentieth century, it is important to understand her position as a member of the educated Black upper-middle class. Though historians know little about Barksdale Brown’s early childhood, records from 1888

\textsuperscript{64} “Spelman Graduates 1887-1891” (Atlanta, Georgia, n.d.), Lucy Hale Tapley Presidential Collection, Spelman College Archives, Atlanta, Georgia, 2-6.
\textsuperscript{65} “Spelman Graduates 1887-1891,” 2-6, Lucy Hale Tapley Presidential Collection.
\textsuperscript{66} “Spelman Graduates 1887-1891,” 8-11, Lucy Hale Tapley Presidential Collection.
\textsuperscript{67} “Spelman Graduates 1887-1891,” 3, 9, 10, 15, 21, Lucy Hale Tapley Presidential Collection.
\textsuperscript{68} “Spelman Graduates 1887-1891,” 24, Lucy Hale Tapley Presidential Collection.
document her father’s occupation as a Pullman porter. While porters received low salaries and most of their income depended on variable tips, the job was widely regarded as one of the best attainable for Black men, and it often afforded porters and their families high social status within their communities. When she graduated from Spelman with her high school diploma in 1887—as a member of the school’s first graduating class—Barksdale Brown assumed her own social status as a member of the small group of Black women who were formally educated at a prestigious institution.

After graduation, Barksdale Brown taught in schoolrooms throughout the South. In 1898 she married John Brown, the proprietor of a broom shop, in Macon, Georgia. The couple

72 “Spelman Graduates 1887-1891,” Lucy Hale Tapley Presidential Collection; Spelman College Alumnae Record form (n.d.), Box 1, Folder 2, Ella Barksdale Brown Papers, Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library; “Vacant Teachings,” *Macon Telegraph*, September 1, 1888, 5, https://macon.newspapers.com/newspage/825361138/; “The Board of Education: A New Member—Fixing Salaries—Time for Opening the Schools, Etc.,” *Macon Telegraph*, July 11, 1888, 3, https://macon.newspapers.com/newspage/825353093/; “New School Teachers: What Was Done by The Board of Education Last Night,” *Macon Telegraph*, February 12, 1890, 6, https://macon.newspapers.com/newspage/825348501/. Barksdale Brown’s time as a teacher is not well-documented and there appear to be years-long gaps in her teaching career. Barksdale Brown herself rarely acknowledged the years she spent teaching—if not for a two-line mention of her work as an educator on a Spelman alumna form, there would be almost no record of her teaching at all. This alumna form, along with two brief news clips from the *Macon Telegraph*, reveal that Barksdale Brown taught at the Hazel Street Colored School in Macon, Georgia from about 1889-1890, and at Fessenden Academy in Martin, Florida in 1895. She was also elected to be an assistant teacher at the Howard Chapel School in Macon in 1888 but declined the position. What little scholars know about Barksdale Brown’s postgraduate teaching career suggests a continuing connection with her alma mater. Fessenden Academy, where Barksdale Brown taught when she was 24 years old, was founded by the American Missionary Association (AMA), an organization with ideals and goals similar to that of the ABHMS that founded Spelman and Morehouse. In addition to academic subjects, Fessenden students about the importance of “thriftiness, personal responsibility, leadership, racial uplift, and good morals,” some of the very core values that were instilled in Spelman girls. Maxine D. Jones and Joe M. Richardson, *Education for Liberation: The American Missionary Association and African Americans, 1890 to the Civil Rights Movement* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2015), https://muse.jhu.edu/pub/181/monograph/book/45588, 51.
73 “Mrs. John Brown, at 95; Was Journal Contributor,” *Jersey Journal.*
bore their first child in Georgia before moving to Jersey City where they welcomed three more children into their family over the course of a decade.74 Around 1899, John Brown became a Pullman porter himself.75 Brown’s occupation, combined with Barksdale Brown’s education, afforded the couple middle-class status in their community.76

Barksdale Brown and her family first lived at 343 Halladay Street in Jersey City, a large property in a neighborhood full of churches, schools, and community buildings.77 Around 1920, the family moved to 120 Glenwood Avenue, a home valued at $7,700 in 1924, just a few hundred dollars more than the city’s average home value that year.78 Their property records suggest that the couple was financially comfortable, though perhaps not well-off. Their financial

76 As scholar Larry Tye noted in Rising from the Rails, despite relatively low wages, porters were considered to be “as solidly middle class as anyone with black skin.” Larry Tye, Rising from the Rails, 92.
78 “City of Jersey City, Department of Revenue and Finance, Bill for Real Estate Taxes (120 Glenwood Ave.),” 1924, Box 7, Folder 173, Ella Barksdale Brown Papers; “City of Jersey City, Department of Revenue and Finance, Bill for Real Estate Taxes (343 Halladay St.),” 1924, Box 7, Folder 173, Ella Barksdale Brown Papers; “City of Jersey City, Department of Revenue and Finance, Bill for Real Estate Taxes (120 Glenwood Ave.),” 1925, Box 7, Folder 173, Ella Barksdale Brown Papers. Until at least 1924, Barksdale Brown and her husband still owned the Halladay St. property, though they appeared to be living at Glenwood Ave. The average value of a mortgaged home in Jersey City, NJ in 1920 was $6,691 in 1920 according to a Census Bureau report. Another government report calculated that housing prices increased about 11.3% from 1920 to 1924. Combining these figures suggests that the estimated value of a mortgaged home in 1924 in Jersey City, based on the increase in the housing price index, would be approximately $7,446. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, Mortgages on Homes in the United States. (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1923), 173, https://hdl.handle.net/2027/uiug.30112104080475?urlappend=%3Bseq=175; Department of Commerce, Bureau of Foreign and Domestic Commerce, Statistical Abstract of the United States: 1924 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1925), 310, https://www.census.gov/library/publications/1925/compendia/statatab/47ed.html.
status, however, was far from the final indicator of their social status; indeed, Brown’s job and Barksdale Brown’s education and work as a club woman were more indicative of the couples’ standing in the community than their material assets. The type of leadership Barksdale Brown assumed in local Black and interracial women’s organizations and her Spelman diploma were indicators, if not generators, of an upper-middle-class status.

Under Jim Crow, however, upper-middle-class status within the Black community did not necessarily afford Barksdale Brown respect or stature within Jersey City at large. When Barksdale Brown and her family moved to Jersey City at the turn of the twentieth century, the city was an emerging industrial powerhouse. Full of industrial plants, shipyards, bakeries, and laundry facilities, Jersey City’s proximity to New York City allowed for economic growth and trade opportunities that solidified its role as a vital industrial hub. Jim Crowism and segregation in restaurants and accommodations were less prevalent in Jersey City than elsewhere in the state largely due to the city’s mayor and Democratic party boss Frank Hague, who strove to gain the loyalty of the city’s Black residents. Nevertheless, the small Black community faced consistent prejudice and challenges throughout Barksdale Brown’s lifetime. In 1920, the city’s chief of police ordered a 9:00 PM curfew for all Black individuals, the Klan marched in the city in 1939, and Colgate-Palmolive Company—one of the city’s largest blue-collar employers—refused to hire its first Black employees until 1941. These examples, and the undercurrent of racial

prejudice that existed more broadly throughout the twentieth century, serve as a reminder that
despite Barksdale Brown’s high status in the Black community, she remained a second-class
citizen in the context of Jersey City at large.

**Perception and “The Negro’s Burden”**

Barksdale Brown’s lifelong commitment to racial advancement, and the way it was
influenced by her Spelman education, did not become evident in the archive until about a quarter
century after her graduation. For many years, her “first care” was managing her household and
raising her children.\(^8^4\) The papers that she left behind rarely discuss her personal life or family,
and as such there is almost no archival record of the first thirteen years of her life in New
Jersey.\(^8^5\) Beginning in 1914, however, Barksdale Brown’s public life began to take off, allowing
historians to render her world from the letters, newspaper articles, and essays that she filed away.

In the mid-1910s, Barksdale Brown began to lecture about Black history and culture,
write a column for the *Jersey Journal* about events in the local Black community, and get
involved with women’s social and club organizations. Ideas about racial uplift and her duty to
the Black community heavily influenced her education advocacy, journalism, and club work. In
particular, her work was driven by her belief, derived from what she learned at Spelman, that
improving the perception of the Black community in the eyes of white society was key to Black

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\(^8^4\) “Spelman Graduates 1887-1891,” 5, Lucy Hale Tapley Presidential Collection.
\(^8^5\) There is some evidence that Barksdale Brown continued to work as a teacher after moving to Jersey City. In a
March 1944 speech, actor Paul Robeson referred to Barksdale Brown as his former teacher, and Robeson was only
known to have gone to schools in New Jersey. However, there is no record of Barksdale Brown teaching in New
Jersey schools in her papers at the Yale Beinecke or in the Spelman Archives, excepting her participation in a public
lecture series in 1914 and 1915. “Urges Modern Structure For Friendliness House: Mayor Pesin and Paul Robeson
Call For Recognition of Colored People,” *Jersey Journal.*
advancement. Her unpublished essay “The Negro’s Burden” from 1914, around the same time that she began to dive into this work, explores this belief.86

Barksdale Brown opened “The Negro’s Burden” by positing that God had “assign[ed]” a specific burden to Black individuals. “We occupy a position unique, unenviable, we carry a burden we’d like to discard, but dare we question God’s wisdom or justice in assigning it,” she mused.87 Barksdale Brown asked the proverbial reader, “How are you carrying your burden?” and described “the women of the West Indies” who “place their burden on the head, balance it and walk erect and even gracefully.”88 To Barksdale Brown, these women modeled the proper way for Black individuals to carry their symbolic burden. Black individuals were not to “show[] the drain of their effort” and complain of the challenges they faced due to their race, but rather navigate them with dignified composure.89 Her emphasis on maintaining a graceful demeanor, even in the face of the pervasive racial discrimination represented by the titular “Negro’s burden,” demonstrates her commitment to propriety and the politics of respectability. In the opening of this essay, readers see hints of Barksdale Brown’s belief that by changing the behaviors and attitudes of Black individuals, race relations could be restructured and the rationale underlying the societal inferiority placed upon the Black community could be challenged.

86 “The Negro’s Burden” was dated by this author. In the essay, Barksdale Brown described billboards that were hanging “in various parts of the city” that featured the “honorable beginning and notable success” of General Ulysses S. Grant. The arrival of these billboards in Jersey City was covered in a February 1914 Jersey Journal article. The article noted that the billboards featuring Grant were part of a four-part series of billboards (dubbed “uplift posters”), and as such were set to be replaced in a few weeks’ time. In “The Negro’s Burden,” Barksdale Brown described the billboards as if they were still hanging, suggesting that she wrote the essay in late February or early March of 1914. Jersey Journal. Ella Barksdale Brown, “The Negro’s Burden” (n.d., ca 1914), Box 6, Folder 162, 12-13, Ella Barksdale Brown Papers; “Uplift Poster Is Displayed Here: Bill Board Men Reform and Will No Longer Display Beauty Unadorned in Ads,” Jersey Journal, February 23, 1914, NJ.com Newspaper Archives.
88 Barksdale Brown, 3-4.
89 Barksdale Brown, 3-4.
Barksdale Brown dedicated much of “The Negro’s Burden” to refuting, one by one, accusations that she thought were unfairly levelled against the Black community. These accusations of “ignorance, dishonesty… immorality, untruthfulness, laziness, extravagance and coarseness,” Barksdale Brown argued, formed the very burden that weighed on each Black individual and on the race as a whole. To counter prevailing ideas of Black immorality, for example, Barksdale Brown wrote “We have our clean lives to offer in refutation.” By emphasizing the pure and moral lives of Black individuals, Barksdale Brown aimed to dismantle the accusations underlying the titular burden of her essay and improve the perception of the Black community among whites. This work is the same work that, through different means, Barksdale Brown sought to do as a journalist, educator, and clubwoman.

Barksdale Brown’s essay can be understood as a call to the fellow members of her race to join her in the continued work of admonishing the burden they all carried through self-improvement. She viewed education as integral to this work, as she emphasized that “Schools are free, books and paraphernalia supplied, you have access to libraries. All works of reference for the asking and answers containing … results of investigation and discovery may be visited without cost.” She challenged her readers, asking “Are you taking advantage of these means of strengthening yourself for destroying the burden?” Her focus on the individual and each person’s responsibility to improve themselves for the benefit of the race exemplifies the basic tenets of the politics of respectability.

Ultimately, Barksdale Brown’s work in the public sphere was motivated by her understanding that there would be no change in the attitudes towards or treatment of the Black

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90 Barksdale Brown, 16-17.  
91 Barksdale Brown, 19.  
92 Barksdale Brown, 11.  
93 Barksdale Brown, 11-12.
community without deep shifts in social sentiment, shifts that only could occur as a result of relationships built at the individual level. While Barksdale Brown viewed legislative and legal reform as necessary to promote structural change, she recognized that “Legislation may aide us but enactment, unless sentiment favorable accompanies, is ineffective – loopholes for violation will be discovered.” Unless white Americans truly came to see their Black neighbors as equals, or at least came to regard them with favorable sentiment, the lived experiences of Black Americans would not reflect these legal changes. Barksdale Brown instead argued that “[t]he only permanent safeguards will be those built by our merits—like all strength must come from inward development.” Each Black individual had to focus on their individual development, she believed, in order to cultivate a meritorious self that would serve as a positive representation of the race as a whole. The only protection against an increasingly heavy burden of pervasive racism, discrimination, and subordination would be white recognition and acceptance of this laudable Black internal manner.

Barksdale Brown’s valuation of internal development and her reluctance to rely only on legal and legislative protection grew out of the broader Jim Crow climate of the Northeast. Growing up in Georgia, Barksdale Brown was exposed to much more formal segregation than she would face as an adult in New Jersey. For example, while Georgia law did not bar Black and white passengers in Georgia from riding in the same streetcar and railroad cars until 1891, railroad companies had forced Black passengers to ride in separate “Negro cars” for decades. As a young girl, Barksdale Brown experienced this type of discrimination firsthand.

94 Barksdale Brown, 10. The second comma in this quote was added by the author of this essay for clarity.
95 Barksdale Brown, 10.
97 Barksdale Brown described being forced to share a train car with Black members of a chain gang despite the fact that she paid the same fare as the white passengers who got to sit in separate, nicer cars. Barksdale Brown, “Erasing the Color Line,” 6.
Northeastern states, however, Jim Crowism flourished even in the absence of laws and company policies that required segregation. Drivers for the Nevin Bus Company, for instance, were infamous for pressuring Black passengers to sit in designated seats in the backs of their buses when traveling up the East Coast, despite the company’s insistence that it would not segregate its buses outside of the Southern states where it was legally required.\(^9\) Barksdale Brown thus keenly understood that the absence of segregationist laws, or even the presence of laws banning segregation and discrimination, would not alone prevent society from treating Black northerners as second-class citizens.\(^9\) Drawing on her Spelman education, instead, she emphasized the importance of respectability in changing white attitudes.

The titular burden that Barksdale Brown developed in this essay aligns with the burden that she discussed in her poem “The Halo,” which she published in the *Spelman Messenger* around the same time that she wrote “The Negro’s Burden.” While in “The Halo,” Barksdale Brown addressed the burden of racial discrimination by discussing a religious journey, in “The Negro’s Burden,” she addressed this burden in largely secular terms. Nevertheless, Barksdale Brown viewed the work of uplifting individual members of the race and improving the perception of the Black community at large as an inherently religious project. In one of only two brief mentions of Christ in “The Negro’s Burden,” Barksdale Brown proclaimed that “with the impulses of honest, ambitious, right, christian manhood,” members of the Black community “can stand erect under the burden of public sentiments.”\(^10\) This line encapsulates Barksdale Brown’s

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essay and demonstrates that despite only sparing mentions, religion remained at the core of both the piece and of her overarching belief in the importance of respectability politics.

**Club Women’s Work**

The two organizations that best reveal the way in which Barksdale Brown’s work embodied her Spelman education and commitment to racial uplift were the New Jersey State Federation of Colored Women’s Clubs (NJSFCWC) and the New Jersey Interracial Committee of Church Women. In both organizations, Barksdale Brown and her fellow clubwomen diligently practiced the politics of respectability to demonstrate an adherence to prevailing white manners and morals. The women who worked with the NJSFCWC often looked inwards towards the Black community in an attempt to shape Black individuals into ideal representatives of the race. In her work with the New Jersey Interracial Committee of Churchwomen, however, Barksdale Brown attempted to improve the perception of the race and foster interracial relations by displaying her already-uplifted self and by fostering personal connections with white members of the organization. Both tactics were crucial in the context of New Jersey’s growing Black population in the early and mid-twentieth century. As poorer Black families moved to New Jersey’s metropolitan areas from the South during the Great Migration, club women like Barksdale Brown used an adherence to middle-class values and morals to challenge negative racial stereotypes, enhance economic opportunities, and empower the growing Black community.101

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101 E. F. White, *Dark Continent of Our Bodies*, 35-6. In 1910, there were 89,760 Black individuals in New Jersey, making up 3.5% of the state population. In 1920 there were 117,132 (3.7%), in 1930 there were 208,828 (5.2%), and in 1940 there were 226,973 (5.5%). United States Census Bureau, “1940 Census of Population: Volume 2. Characteristics of the Population. Sex, Age, Race, Nativity, Citizenship, Country of Birth of Foreign-Born White, School Attendance, Years of School Completed, Employment Status, Class of Worker, Major Occupation Group, and Industry Group,” 917-918, https://www.census.gov/library/publications/1943/dec/population-vol-2.html.
Motivated by a sense of duty to her race, Barksdale Brown became a local leader within the Black women’s club movements and the interrelated church women’s movements in her city. She held positions in the NJSFCWC, an affiliate organization of the National Association of Colored Women’s Clubs (NACWC); the New Jersey Interracial Committee of Church Women; the local Women’s Christian Temperance Union (WCTU); the Jersey City NAACP; the local chapter of the Circle of Negro War Relief; and the Jersey City House of Friendliness, the local Black YWCA affiliate.102 If there was a Black women’s club, a Christian organization, or another opportunity for Barksdale Brown to serve Jersey City, she almost certainly was involved in one way or another.

Scholars treat organizations like those that Barksdale Brown was a part of as key vehicles for racial uplift in their communities.103 Deborah Gray White argued that middle-class club women not only provided welfare services for the poor, but also “educated blacks, particularly black women, on the means and benefits of achieving the moral life.”104 And Kevin Kelly Gaines posited that the Black women’s club movement served as a vital platform for the racial uplift endeavors of politically engaged Black women intellectuals and activists years before Washington and Du Bois rose to prominence.105 Taking it upon themselves to lift up the less fortunate members of their communities, middle-class Black club women personified the ideology underlying Du Bois’s talented tenth philosophy. By focusing on the home and the

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community, these women worked in the very arenas that Washington identified as crucial to racial progress. 106

Barksdale Brown was involved with the umbrella Black women’s club organization in New Jersey, the NJSFCWC, from its earliest days. Black women formed the NJSFCWC in response to their frustration with the blame that white women had placed on them for the failure of a 1915 state referendum on women’s suffrage. After Black women campaigned for the referendum, white suffragists claimed that their presence at the polls had dissuaded voters from supporting suffrage. 107 Recognizing the ballot as a vital tool in the fight for respectability and protection from violent men, Black women in New Jersey formed their own WCTU which developed into the NJSFCWC. 108 In 1916, Barksdale Brown became “second vice president” for the organization’s first year. 109 She was the president of the Friendly Big Sisters, the Jersey City Chapter of the NJSFCWC, for fifteen years, and she also served as the Northeastern District Vice President of the statewide organization. 110 Barksdale Brown spoke at the organization’s second annual convention, and for at least one year in 1940, she served as the chair of the organization’s interracial department. 111 Her commitment to the NJSFCWC and her local affiliate chapter was

106 Gaines, 132; D. G. White, Too Heavy a Load, 44, 49-52.
108 Livingston Adams, 146 -147.
lifelong, and her involvement with the organization’s founding places her at a key moment in the
political and social mobilization of Black women in New Jersey.

The activities of the NJSFCWC and its local branches were grounded in racial uplift and
respectability ideologies. One Jersey City journalist writing about the Friendly Big Sisters in
1940 noted that the group was active in “the preventative and rehabilitation phases of social
work” and worked in particular “with maladjusted youths.” This type of work, and club
women’s motivations for taking it on, was multifaceted. Black middle-class clubwomen sought
to better the lives of others in their community as part of their Christian duty to help the
economically disadvantaged. At the same time, this social work related to the members’ goals of
racial uplift. In accordance with the tenets of respectability politics, the Big Sisters hoped to help
“maladjusted youths” create respectable selves that adhered to prevailing societal values and
behaviors. A fundraising drive held by the Big Sisters in 1940 exemplified these dual
motivations. The group sought to provide local Black high school seniors in need with
clothing appropriate to wear to their graduation ceremonies. This drive not only arose from a
genuine desire among the Big Sisters to help Black graduates dress appropriately but also from
their goal of improving the status and perception of the Black community by ensuring its
members, especially its future leaders, looked presentable and respectable at their public
graduation ceremony.

The historical context surrounding the Big Sisters’ drive for respectability provides
insight into the organization’s mission and strategy. During the 1940s, the “Double V” campaign
pervaded public discourse, aiming for dual victories against fascism in Europe and racial

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112 “Tea Held by Big Sisters,” Jersey Journal, June 3, 1940, NJ.com Newspaper Archives.
113 D. G. White, Too Heavy a Load, 71-2.
114 D. G. White, 71-2; “Tea Held by Big Sisters,” Jersey Journal.
115 “Tea Held by Big Sisters,” Jersey Journal.
injustice in the United States.\textsuperscript{116} It called out the hypocrisy of the United States condemning Nazi racism while allowing a similar breed of racism to flourish at home.\textsuperscript{117} This increasingly militaristic civil rights rhetoric contrasted starkly with the Big Sisters’ dedication to respectability politics, which could seem meek or even outdated in comparison. However, the Big Sisters’ desire to demonstrate the respectability of the Black community is inseparable from Black soldiers’ and veterans’ attempts to demonstrate their worthiness as citizens by enlisting in the military.\textsuperscript{118} The very founding of the NJSFCWC in the middle of World War I and its core commitment to racial uplift and respectability politics reflected this same dynamic.\textsuperscript{119}

The NJSFCWC’s commitment to the philosophy of racial uplift within the Black community surfaces in the lyrics to the Federation’s song written by Esther Yates. In these verses, Yates evokes a sense of purpose and urgency: “For the ultimate salvation, / For the uplift of the throng, / Comes New Jersey’s Federation / Formed of women true and strong. / All around us, glowing, burning, / Flames the sign of racial need; / Silently and ever turning, / Waiting for our word and deed.”\textsuperscript{120} The song’s opening lines demonstrate the religious motivations behind the NJSFCWC women’s work; though the NJSFCWC and the NACWC of which it was a member were secular organizations, their work was closely connected to that of Black soldiers enlisting in order to improve their own station and the status of their race, and gain respect as citizens existed in the United States as early as the Revolutionary War when Black men joined the Continental Army with the hope of gaining even limited rights as citizen-soldiers and improving perceptions of their race. It was undoubtedly present during WWI as well. James, 4.

\textsuperscript{117} Kersten, 13.
\textsuperscript{119} James, \textit{The Double V}, 61. The tradition of Black soldiers enlisting in order to improve their own station and the status of their race, and gain respect as citizens existed in the United States as early as the Revolutionary War when Black men joined the Continental Army with the hope of gaining even limited rights as citizen-soldiers and improving perceptions of their race. It was undoubtedly present during WWI as well. James, 4.

\textsuperscript{120} “New Jersey State Federation of Colored Women’s Clubs Official Program, Thirty-Second Annual Convention” (Newark, NJ, July 16, 1947), Ella Barksdale Brown Alumna Folder.
churchwomen.\textsuperscript{121} The subsequent lyrics paint the women of the Federation as saviors answering the “sign of racial need,” and the stanza’s last line, “Waiting for our word and deed,” suggests that the women viewed themselves as singularly capable of uplifting the rest of their community. Yates’ lyrics “All around us, glowing, burning” place the Federation’s members at the center of inward-oriented work; the NJSFCWC focused on putting out fires \textit{within} the Black community in order to improve the overall perception of the race. This goal relates, but is distinct, from the work which Barksdale Brown aimed to accomplish with the New Jersey Committee of Interracial Church Women.

While Barksdale Brown’s work with the NJSFCWC centered on uplifting individuals in the Black community, her work with the New Jersey Interracial Committee of Church Women focused on improving the image of the Black community by introducing white church women to exemplary Black individuals, herself included. Barksdale Brown’s essay “Erasing the Color Line” provides a unique window into how she viewed the Committee and the importance of her work within it. Upon Barksdale Brown’s move to Jersey City, she began to attend the local white church out of convenience.\textsuperscript{122} Though nervous at first, she later felt “welcomed” and soon found herself leading a meeting of the church women’s auxiliary.\textsuperscript{123} Barksdale Brown was eventually invited to join the local Federation of Church Women. She noted that most of the organization’s members were “offish” at first and “unaccustomed to Negroes in any position other than

\textsuperscript{121} On a national level, the NACWC had a strong relationship with the National Baptist Convention’s women’s auxiliary chapter, known as the Women’s Convention (WC), and the NACWC’s ideology was rooted in the principles of respectability politics first pioneered by Black Baptist women and the WC. Black church women’s work laid the groundwork for the community and organizational work the women’s club movement took on, and churchwomen themselves became very involved in the secular club movement. Higginbotham, \textit{Righteous Discontent}, 16-17, 182; Livingston Adams, “Fighting the Color Line in the ‘Ideal Suburb,’” 3, 8, 10, 23-24. Reflecting on the Black women’s club movement, Bettye Collier-Thomas noted that “Black religious women and their organizations were the foundation for a significant portion of what has been defined as nonreligious or secular in nature.” Collier-Thomas, \textit{Jesus, Jobs, and Justice}, xxii, xxx.

\textsuperscript{122} Barksdale Brown, “Erasing the Color Line,” 7.

\textsuperscript{123} Barksdale Brown, 7.
domestics or laborers.” At one meeting, she “timidly” suggested bringing the principle of the state school for Black children to speak, and the other women reluctantly agreed. His talk was so moving that many of the Federation’s members said it “meant more in changing their racial attitudes than anything that had happened to them.” This experience confirmed for Barksdale Brown the effectiveness of respectability politics; the attitudes of upper- and middle-class white women towards Black people could actually be changed through positive experiences with respectable Black individuals.

Barksdale Brown further realized the potential impact of respectability politics when she joined the New Jersey Interracial Committee of Church Women. On this committee, Barksdale Brown engaged in meaningful work on interracial relations both on a personal and organizational level. She described witnessing firsthand “how easy it is for our members, white and Negro, to work together and in so working to forget race and to become friends just because we learn that we are alike in our vital interest.” These interracial friendships epitomized respectability politics—there was no greater validation of Black women’s success than the friendship of white women similarly dedicated to interracial work.

Barksdale Brown’s interracial work and her work with the NJSFCWC, however, left her vulnerable to a common criticism levelled against those in the Black women’s club movement: that they claimed, as leaders of the race, to represent the collective aspirations of the Black community, yet often instead derided poorer Black individuals while simultaneously reaching for the affirmation of upper- and middle-class whites. The NACWC was often accused of this
behavior and scarcely tried to remedy it. These accusations were levelled by, among others, the women’s auxiliary to the National Baptist Convention, which despite its close relationship with the NACWC, found the “identity of affluence and aloofness from the masses” present in the NACWC’s members to be concerning.\textsuperscript{129} For many club women, the line between attempting to improve white perceptions of the Black community and pandering to white elites was blurry.\textsuperscript{130} Barksdale Brown’s description of her work with the Interracial Committee of Church Women most starkly displays her vulnerability to criticisms concerning her desire for white affirmation at the expense of true, positive representation of the Black community.

Barksdale Brown published “Erasing the Color Line” in a mainstream Protestant women’s magazine that had substantial white readership, and as such historians can understand it as part of her endeavor to improve white perception of the Black community and see how in this pursuit, she fell short of true representative leadership. In her essay, Barksdale Brown acknowledged the difficulties of interracial work, specifying that “oftentimes members of my own race are critical.”\textsuperscript{131} She contrasted the “easy” work of white and Black members of the committee collaborating as friends with the challenge of navigating “mass judgment” from outsiders, which was “quite as prevalent among Negroes as among whites.”\textsuperscript{132} Barksdale Brown failed to mention the countless reasons why Black Americans might be hesitant about Black outreach to the white community including racial violence, Jim Crow, and the not-so-distant memory of institutionalized slavery. With this omission, she drew a false equivalency between Black and white behavior and privileged the work of her white peers in combating racism at the

\textsuperscript{130} Gaines, \textit{Uplifting the Race}, 129-130.
\textsuperscript{131} Barksdale Brown, “Erasing the Color Line,” 8.
\textsuperscript{132} Barksdale Brown, 8.
expense of the Black community she claimed to represent. Barksdale Brown’s critiques of the Black community’s hesitancy to support interracial work were likely part of her effort to appeal to white readers. However, her willingness to publish an essay with such language suggests that a disconnect existed between Barksdale Brown and the average Black individual that she sought to uplift.

Barksdale Brown’s struggle with representative leadership seems par for the course for a woman educated at an institution that viewed its students, perhaps first and foremost, as envoys from the Black community to white society. Spelman faculty talked openly about representative leadership and the danger of class divides that could result from it. Teachers warned students against becoming aloof and disconnected from the Black masses, and Spelman’s leaders hoped that the school’s service-oriented, faith-based mission would dissuade girls from showing contempt to those they were trying to serve. Yet the status afforded to Spelman girls by their education, along with constant reminders from the school that if they worked hard enough, they could become leaders within the larger Black community, created the potential for graduates to feel superior to the average Black individuals whom they were supposed to represent and lead.

Barksdale Brown’s language in “Erasing the Color Line” suggests that some Spelman alumnae struggled with these inconsistent messages and how to find their place in between Black and white society for many years after their graduation. More broadly, the essay highlights a particular challenge that arose from Barksdale Brown's focus on how Black Americans were

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133 Shaw, *What a Woman Ought to Be and to Do*, 91; Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent*, 39-40. In an 1885 edition of the *Spelman Messenger*, one author noted that acting with “pretended importance” and “condescension” would only harm how others viewed a person. This warning not only appealed to readers’ egos but also Spelman girls’ service-oriented mindsets—they would not be able to effectively uplift a member of the Black masses if the individual they sought to help looked down on them. N.M.K., “Be What You Are,” *Spelman Messenger Vol. 2 No. 2*, December 1885, https://radar.auctr.edu/islandora/object/sc.001.messenger%3A1885.04.

134 Shaw, *What a Woman Ought to Be and to Do*, 91.
perceived: the task of authentically representing the Black community while also ensuring it appealed to the sensibilities of elite whites.

**Educational Advocacy**

In February of 1940, the *Baltimore Afro-American* reported that “Mrs. Ella Barksdale Brown was victorious in her one-woman fight to have Negro history made a required course in all Jersey City high schools.” For two years, Barksdale Brown had mailed pamphlets about Black contributions to American history to school superintendents, sent the Jersey City Board of Education historical works written by famous Black authors and scholars, and advocated tirelessly for the importance of educating all students about Black history and culture. She believed that a mandatory course about Black history would “not only contribute to the race’s self-respect, but to the understanding and good will of other races.” Barksdale Brown’s campaign was grounded in her beliefs about racial uplift. By teaching Black history in schools, she hoped to improve both the way that Black students saw themselves—an important step in students’ development of respectable selves to present to the world—and how others viewed them. This campaign was only one part of her lifelong project to use education as a means to improve the societal perception of the Black community and foster positive interracial relations.

As Barksdale Brown was pushing for Black history to be taught in her local schools, an important shift was occurring in Black America. The convergence of factors such as the “Double V” campaign, the assertive activism of Black- and left-led unions, the return of Black veterans

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135 “Woman’s Fight Puts History in Schools,” *Baltimore Afro-American.*
137 “Woman’s Fight Puts History in Schools,” *Baltimore Afro-American.*
from World War II, and a broad frustration over the discrimination encoded into the New Deal order collectively fostered and justified a militant Black working-class strand of activism. This political landscape, influenced by the aftermath of the Great Depression and the ongoing war, puts in stark contrast Barksdale Brown’s commitment to the same notions of respectability politics that she had touted three decades earlier.

Indeed, her campaign to mandate a Black history course in Jersey City’s schools was far from Barksdale Brown’s first foray into advocating for education about Black history and culture, nor would it be her last. In 1914, just as she began her work at the Jersey Journal, Barksdale Brown participated in a public lecture series run by the Jersey City Board of Education; she was one of the only Black presenters. She gave three lectures in November 1914 on “Negro Folk Lore and Music,” “Negro Education in the South,” and “Negro Industry and Self Help.” She gave the “Negro Industry and Self Help” lecture again in February 1915. In preparation for these talks, she wrote to various institutions and companies in the South, including her own alma mater, asking for pictures, postcards, and other materials for her lecture slides.

Because Jersey City’s Black population in was small in 1914—the city had about 6,000 Black residents in 1910 and 8,000 in 1920, only 2.7% of the city’s total

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139 “Board of Education Jersey City Bulletin of Free Lectures to the People to Be Delivered in Public Schools” (1915), Box 5, Folder 138, Ella Barksdale Brown Papers.
140 Henry Snyder Letter to Ella Barksdale Brown, October 21, 1914, Box 1, Folder 52, Ella Barksdale Brown Papers.
141 “Board of Education Jersey City Bulletin of Free Lectures to the People to Be Delivered in Public Schools,” Ella Barksdale Brown Papers; Henry Snyder Letter to Ella Barksdale Brown, December 31, 1914, Box 1, Folder 52, Ella Barksdale Brown Papers.
142 Booker T. Washington Letter to Ella Barksdale Brown, November 19, 1914, Box 1, Folder 57, Ella Barksdale Brown Papers; WM. J. White, Jr. Letter to Ella Barksdale Brown, October 30, 1914, Box 1, Folder 59, Ella Barksdale Brown Papers; Lucy Hale Tapley Letter to Ella Barksdale Brown, October 24, 1914, Box 1, Folder 55, Ella Barksdale Brown Papers.
population—Barksdale Brown likely saw her lectures as a way to introduce Black history and culture to those unfamiliar with the subjects.143

The topics of Barksdale Brown’s lectures demonstrate her commitment to showing a comprehensive view of Black life and culture; she did not only focus on elite institutions like Spelman, but also sought to illuminate the richness of traditional Black music and folklore that originated in the days of slavery.144 Her choice to title a lecture “Negro Industry and Self Help” underscores Barksdale Brown’s resolve to dismantle negative stereotypes about the Black community. The title suggests that she planned to highlight individuals and enterprises that exemplified how Black individuals in the business world achieved self-advancement. Ultimately, Barksdale Brown sought to use this educational forum to show the Black South, and Black America, in a positive light. Her goals were well summarized by the manager of the Georgia Baptist Printing Company, who wrote in response to Barksdale Brown’s request for lecture materials. “I hope these slides will be successes,” he stated, “and that they may be the means of enlightening some of our northern friends as to what we are doing down here.”145

Over thirty years later in 1947, Barksdale Brown still strove to educate the Jersey City public about the contributions that Black Americans had made to society. By the late 1940s, New Jersey public schools were fairly racially integrated. Black and white students studied in the same elementary, junior high, and senior high schools, and they were taught by teachers of both

144 These lectures may have been inspired by an interaction Barksdale Brown had when leading the women’s auxiliary of the white church that she had attended. When leading the group, she read from a Bible that had been passed down through slavery. After the meeting, “so many people came to look at the Bible and to comment on the fact that there were Negroes of education nearly a hundred years ago.” These comments led Barksdale Brown to her resolve to “educate white people in regard to the true facts of Negro life and history.” However, historians do not know the precise year in which she had this interaction. Barksdale Brown, “Erasing the Color Line,” 7.
races. Still, Barksdale Brown believed that there was more work to be done. She convinced the New Jersey City librarian to “observe Negro History Week by featuring books by and about Negroes.” The library’s curator asked Barksdale Brown to select a few works of art to accompany the exhibit, and thus began a Jersey City tradition that lasted over a decade. Over the years, the annual exhibit featured dozens of artists, hosted many speakers, played traditional African and African American music, and received an official commemoration from Jersey City’s mayor. Like Barksdale Brown’s other educationally-oriented endeavors, this exhibit was designed to dismantle negative stereotypes about Black Americans, among other goals. She believed that this work was paramount to fostering positive interracial relations. Speaking about the 1951 exhibit, she declared, “When all racial groups know of each other’s history, then, and only then, will it be easier to get along together as true Christians.”

In pursuit of this goal, Barksdale Brown and the other curators focused on highlighting individuals that they considered to be the best and the brightest of Black America. In the 1951 exhibit, photos of Dr. Ralph Bunche, a Black American diplomat and Nobel Peace Prize winner, were on display, as was a photograph of Black scientists working on the Manhattan Project. This exhibit also featured Black figures who made historical “firsts,” from Jackie Robinson breaking the baseball color line (in Jersey City nonetheless) to Hiram Revels becoming the first

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147 Barksdale Brown, “Seventy Years in the Life of a Graduate.”
151 Meyer Rowan, “Many Visit Library to See Exhibit of Great Negroes.”
Black man elected to the United States Senate, and even Black millionaires who made history. Barksdale Brown’s display tied Black excellence to American patriotism by spotlighting Black individuals who made unique contributions to the country, strengthening the grounds for the implicit argument that Black Americans were worthy of respect.

Barksdale Brown’s final educational advocacy endeavor was her success in convincing the New Jersey state legislature to unanimously approve the observance of Crispus Attucks Day in schools throughout the state in honor of the Black and Indigenous man who was the first person to die in the Revolutionary War. Two years after school integration occurred statewide, Barksdale Brown knew that there was still work to be done with respect to elevating the perception of Black people and Black students in the minds of their white peers. She worked with the NJSFCWC to lobby the legislature for the commemorative day, and in 1949, the Governor signed the recognition of Crispus Attucks Day on March 5 into law. Two years later, Barksdale Brown recalled how “schools, clubs, and churches held exercises” to commemorate the day. In a letter to Florence Matilda Reed, then-president of Spelman, Barksdale Brown confided that she hoped Crispus Attucks Day “brought to public attention the fact of the Negro’s participation in America's founding and defense.” In a similar vein as her work on the 1951 Black history week exhibit, Barksdale Brown hoped that Crispus Attucks Day would remind the

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152 Meyer Rowan, “Many Visit Library to See Exhibit of Great Negroes.”
153 In an interview about the 1951 exhibit, Barksdale Brown discussed her aim of tying Black excellence to American excellence: “Our Negro history committee prides itself in arranging to have the public see the advancement made throughout this country and the world by colored people,” she said. Meyer Rowan, “Many Visit Library to See Exhibit of Great Negroes.”
154 “Spelman’s Oldest Graduate Dies,” Spelman Messenger, November 1966, Box 1, Folder 1, Ella Barksdale Brown Papers.
public that Black people had been integral to the nation since its founding. She hoped to use this patriotic narrative to help establish a broader air of respect for the Black community.

A Journalist, Too

In 1914, Barksdale Brown began to write a regular newspaper column for a local Jersey City paper. Her turn to journalism seamlessly aligned with her overarching philosophy concerning the importance of positive representations of the Black community. And like her educational advocacy work and club work, Barksdale Brown’s newspaper column served dual purposes. She aimed both to include positive Black representation in the press in order to dispel negative stereotypes about the Black community and to provide Black readers with a reliable source of important Black news, even in a white newspaper. The ways in which Barksdale Brown’s column differed from similar columns published in other papers further highlight these two goals.

Almost every Black newspaper in circulation in the early twentieth century featured a page or column devoted to covering Black club meetings, Black high society events, and the social lives of Black elites. These pages also often highlighted Black club women engaging in “valuable race work” by providing social services to poorer Black families and attending benefits and receptions to raise money for charity. Scholars have argued that these society pages and columns held significant cultural influence within and outside of the Black community and were often intended to cultivate visual depictions that disproved anti-Black stereotypes. By focusing on the lives and work of the Black upper and middle class, society pages curated an image of the

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local Black community as a genteel group worthy of white respect. They have been recognized as a key tactic for enacting the “antiracist work” of deconstructing negative beliefs about Black Americans.162

From her early years in Jersey City, Barksdale Brown expressed frustration with what she saw as an inadequate portrayal of the Black community in the press. In August 1913, she received a letter from Arthur Brisbane, a then-editor in the Hearst media empire, in response to a complaint she had made about the portrayal of the Black community in one of his newspapers. “I agree with you that it is unfortunate that so much should be printed concerning one side, the unpleasant side, of an important race, and so little on the side of accomplishment and good order,” he wrote.163 Around the same time as this exchange, Barksdale Brown began her own column, the “Colored Folk of Jersey City,” in a local Jersey City paper. Decades later, in a piece published in the Spelman alumnae magazine, Barksdale Brown explained that she had started her “Colored Folk of Jersey City” column because she was “concerned over the presentation of the Negro in the press where little but unfavorable facts and crime news were given space.”164 This reflection, along with Brisbane’s letter, suggest that Barksdale Brown began her column to engage in the same work of dismantling anti-Black stereotypes that scholars have attributed to Black society columns more broadly.

Though Barksdale Brown shared the same goals as many of her peer journalists who also wrote society columns, “Colored Folk of Jersey City” was unique among Black society columns. First, Barksdale Brown’s column was not published in a Black-owned paper. Instead, her column appeared regularly in the Jersey Journal, a Republican paper founded by former Union army

163 A. Brisbane Letter to Ella Barksdale Brown, August 26, 1913, Box 1, Folder 7, Ella Barksdale Brown Papers.
164 Barksdale Brown, “Seventy Years in the Life of a Graduate.”
officers and Republicans who supported Black civil rights.\textsuperscript{165} Despite the lack of secondary literature focusing on Black society columns published in white papers, historians can surmise that Barksdale Brown’s column had a broader reach than columns published in Black newspapers as the \textit{Jersey Journal} enjoyed significant white readership.\textsuperscript{166} Like other society columns, Barksdale Brown’s column covered local banquets, teas, and other social and fraternal club meetings. It often included lists of individual social visits and a who’s-who of those coming and going from Jersey City.\textsuperscript{167} However, her column was decidedly less focused on the pomp and extravagance of Black high society than other similar columns published in Black newspapers. Furthermore, Barksdale Brown’s column lacked much of the language and content that often led Black and white elites alike to negatively judge Black society columns for portraying the Black community in an “affected manner.”\textsuperscript{168}

Typical society columns published in the \textit{Pittsburgh Courier}, \textit{New York Amsterdam News}, and other Black papers focused on the extravagance and elegance of society events. At the “fashionable wedding” of a “well known and popular” couple in New York City, the \textit{New York Amsterdam News}’ society column reported that the “charming bride wore white Remey crepe, beaded with crystals.”\textsuperscript{169} That same column detailed another wedding and noted the “beautiful ring of diamond clusters” gifted from the groom to the bride.\textsuperscript{170} This emphasis on material

\begin{itemize}
\item\textsuperscript{165} Patrick Villanova, “For 150 Years, The Jersey Journal Has Been the Voice of Hudson County,” \textit{Jersey Journal}, April 27, 2017, https://www.nj.com/jerseyjournal150/2017/04/from_1867_to_2017_the_jersey_journal_has Been_the.html. The \textit{Jersey Journal} was the “most influential daily” in Jersey City by Barksdale Brown’s own assessment. Barksdale Brown, “Seventy Years in the Life of a Graduate.”
\item\textsuperscript{168} Gallon, \textit{Pleasure in the News}, 38.
\item\textsuperscript{169} “Society News,” \textit{New York Amsterdam News}, September 26, 1923, ProQuest News & Newspapers.
\item\textsuperscript{170} “Society News,” \textit{New York Amsterdam News}, September 26, 1923.
\end{itemize}
wealth and luxury created a visual representation of a Black high society that defied stereotypes of poverty, unsophistication, and crude behavior. Beyond weddings, society columns also highlighted the elegant events hosted by Black social, fraternal, and activist organizations. In her *Pittsburgh Courier* column on “New York Society,” Geraldyn Dismond covered the NAACP Benefit Gala (a “brilliant affair”), and once detailed the music, attendees, and outfits present at each of five dances in the same evening.171

In contrast, Barksdale Brown’s columns lacked this type of detail and coverage both in tone and in quantity included. When writing about a wedding reception, for example, Barksdale Brown wrote only that “the reception was held Thursday evening, Nov. 8,” provided the event’s location, and noted that “Many gifts accompanied the good wishes of the friends who attended.”172 Her description lacked details about the specific attendees, the wedding attire worn, and the social status of the couple being celebrated. While this discrepancy may have arisen simply because this reception was more modest than those covered by the *New York Amsterdam News*, such an explanation is unlikely. The *News*’ society columns primarily covered weddings that could illustrate how the Black community could have fancy and dignified events like white high society, so modest affairs like the wedding reported on by Barksdale Brown would not have received the *News*’ attention in the first place.

The contrast between Barksdale Brown and other columns’ coverage of weddings elucidates how Barksdale Brown viewed her column’s purpose. When reflecting on her column decades later, she described it as a “weekly letter about our normal activities.”173 The word

173 Barksdale Brown, “Seventy Years in the Life of a Graduate.”
"normal" illustrates how Barksdale Brown saw her column both as an opportunity to keep the Black community updated and to humanize the Black community in the eyes of white readers in order to combat racist stereotypes. The name of Barksdale Brown’s column itself demonstrates this point. While other papers’ columns were titled “Society Whirl,” “Society: Here and There,” “Chicago Society,” and “Society News,” Barksdale Brown titled hers “The Colored Folk of Jersey City.” Comparatively, “folk” feels like a down-to-earth way to describe Barksdale Brown’s subjects.

The most significant difference between Barksdale Brown’s columns and other Black society columns, however, was not the language she used to describe weddings and galas (or whether they were described at all), but rather the structure of her column. She almost always began her columns with a story of national or local interest to Black readers such as updates on the Tulsa race massacre or reports concerning the winner of an NAACP award. Opening with Black news stories, rather than relying on the allure of high-society extravagance to capture readers’ attention, was a unique and even radical approach. Barksdale Brown not only included important stories for her Black readers that might have been otherwise overlooked by the white paper in which she published, but also highlighted instances of both Black excellence and anti-Black discrimination in order to portray the “normal” lives of Black Americans to white readers in particular. This section of Barksdale Brown’s column, coupled with her departure from the


lavish detail typically associated with Black high-society coverage, created a more casual, holistic, and human portrayal of the Black community.

However radical Barksdale Brown’s *Jersey Journal* column was, it occasionally read as pandering to her white audience in a manner consistent with a strategy that scholar Nancy Marie Robertson termed “backleading.” When employing this strategy, Black club women refrained from openly criticizing their white counterparts and instead commended them when positive changes were made.177 In one column, for example, Barksdale Brown wrote about the controversy that ensued when the Drama League invited Charles S. Gilpin, a Black actor, to be a guest of honor at a League dinner. She explained that some members of the League publicly refused to attend the dinner if the League invited Gilpin, and others declared they would not attend in protest should the League exclude him. Barksdale Brown listed the League members who “championed Mr. Gilpin’s cause” by name, yet she did not identify any members who spoke out against his invitation to the dinner.178 This discrepancy demonstrates the subtle lopsidedness present in Barksdale Brown’s column; even her column written to serve the Black community gave subtle concessions to the white community. Using Robertson’s “backleading” as an analytical framework for Barksdale Brown’s column suggests that Barksdale Brown’s differential treatment of those who supported Gilpin and those who opposed him was an intentional tactic to make the Black community look better.179 Should she have scolded, or even named, the white men who opposed Gilpin’s attendance, she might have lost respect in the eyes of her white audience.180 Like with her “Erasing the Color Line” essay, this aspect of Barksdale

179 Robertson framed the use of “backleading” as a strategic part of Black club women’s engagement with the “choreographed dance” of interracial relations. Robertson, *Christian Sisterhood, Race Relations, and the YWCA*, 65.
180 Robertson, 65.
Brown’s column demonstrates the way that she sometimes struggled with balancing fair representation for the Black community and appeasement of the white community in her attempts to improve the perception of the former by the latter.

**Conclusion: Remembering Ella**

Ella Barksdale Brown died in 1966 at the age of 95, the last surviving member of Spelman’s first graduating class. Her obituary in the *Jersey Journal* remembered her contributions to the paper, as well as her involvement in several community organizations. No mere list of her accomplishments, however, could comprehensively trace the arc of her life. From her upbringing in Milledgeville, Georgia to her schooling at Spelman, Barksdale Brown was educated and socialized to become a member of the Black elite. Spelman taught her that it was her secular and religious responsibility to lift the Black race up from the heritage of slavery. She also learned, both implicitly and explicitly, about the importance of racial uplift and respectability politics. Barksdale Brown emerged from her time at Spelman with the belief that improving the perception of Black people among white society would advance the status of the race as a whole. Though Barksdale Brown did not take what she learned at Spelman to heart immediately after graduating, by the time she was married with four children and living in Jersey City, she had cemented this belief and began to embody it in her work.

As a club woman, Barksdale Brown aimed to uplift members of the Black community one by one, as well as display the “best side” of the race to white women in her church organizations. As an educator, she hoped that teaching those in Jersey City about Black history and culture would improve the public perception of the race and improve self-respect among young Black individuals. As a journalist, she sought to provide important news updates to Black

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181 “Mrs. John Brown, at 95; Was Journal Contributor,” *Jersey Journal.*
readers and humanize the Black community in the eyes of white readers. Barksdale Brown remained committed to her perception-based approach to Black advancement even as more assertive, explicit, and energized forms of Black activism and protest came to the forefront during the mid-twentieth century.

Barksdale Brown was by no means perfect, and the papers she left behind reveal how she struggled to be a truly representative leader. Charges of elitism and pandering to the white community made against her may be tempered by an understanding of Barksdale Brown and her peers’ resolute belief that all of their work ultimately served racial advancement, a belief reinforced by the NACWC’s focus on cultivating a positive public image of Black women. Barksdale Brown’s time at Spelman influenced her shortcomings as educators there taught her competing messages about her roles as a representative leader and an envoy between Black and white society. Additionally, the school’s founders and early faculty often approached the education of their Black students with a paternalistic attitude and saw them as culturally and religiously inferior, which undoubtedly shaped Black students’ perspectives and subsequent engagements with their own racial identity.

Remembering Ella Barksdale Brown, therefore, requires remembering that multiple approaches to Black activism existed at any and every point during the twentieth century and that Black thought concerning how to best advance the race was not monolithic but nuanced. It requires understanding that gender and generation both played an important role in dictating how Black individuals improved their communities, and that this work was not the exclusive domain of young men, returning soldiers, or leaders who worked on a national scale. To remember Ella Barksdale Brown is to both appreciate and critique Spelman, and to give grace, where possible,
to upper- and middle-class Black women who occasionally stumbled in their quests to be representative leaders.

Most importantly, remembering, investigating, and honoring the life of Ella Barksdale Brown provides a small window into the complexity that historians discover when centering Black women in their own history. By tracing the impact that a Spelman education had on just one of its earliest graduates, this paper demonstrates the need for more scholarly research on the impact of white missionary education on young Black girls following Reconstruction. In addition, it makes the case for more academic attention to be given to the ways in which women like Barksdale Brown held steadfast to their beliefs concerning the importance of racial uplift and respectability politics to Black advancement well into the mid-twentieth century, even as many Black leaders and intellectuals abandoned these ideas in favor of a more militant activism. Studying the life of Ella Barksdale Brown not only enriches historians’ understanding of her individual experiences, but it also prompts critical reflection about the broader historical trajectories of Black social and political movements, and where Black women fit within them.

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Bibliographic Essay

The day that I officially declared my History major over Thanksgiving break my sophomore year, I began to keep a list in my phone’s Notes app of potential senior essay topics. I considered writing about the relationship between Jewish women and their bodies during the Holocaust, what role sex workers played in the history of reproductive health, and even the history of the term “Judeo-Christian.” But as I sat in the Music Library in Sterling last spring, I felt overwhelmed. There were so many options, a million unknowns, and more possible archives to work with than I had ever imagined. At the same time, I worried about finding the right archive for my chosen topic. I feared that I would work on my senior essay for months before realizing that the archives I truly needed did not exist or were not available to me. As I poked around online, looking through Yale’s own collection of archival materials, I had what felt at the time like a revolutionary idea: I would pick an archival collection to work with and build my topic and argument around it.

Excited by my new idea, I immediately went onto archives.yale.edu and sorted every archive housed at the University by alphabetical order. I was looking for an archive that might let me write about an aspect of American women’s history, but beyond this guiding principle I had minimal criteria; I just wanted to write about someone or something that excited me, that I thought was important, and that I thought would be well-suited for a project the length of the senior essay. I resolved to go through the alphabetized list of archives one-by-one until I found one of interest. I only made it to the B’s.

When I reached the Ella Barksdale Brown Papers, a collection housed at the Beinecke, I knew I had found my archive. The Beinecke’s archive summary explained that like me, Ella Barksdale Brown was a journalist and was passionate about education. Though she spent most of her life in Jersey City, New Jersey, she was born and raised in Georgia where my own family
had deep roots, and we shared a passion for civil rights activism. Of course, in the grand scheme of things, Barksdale Brown and I could not be more different. She was a part of the first generation of children born free in Georgia—both of her parents had themselves been born into slavery—and after graduating from Spelman Seminary, spent most of her adult life engaged in Black women’s club work in Jersey City. I, on the other hand, was born to white parents in a privileged suburb of Washington, D.C. and could not tell you what I plan to do after I graduate in May. While it might have been my own similarities to Ella Barksdale Brown that ultimately caught my eye, it was every way that her life differed from my own that ultimately drew me to dive into her archives for my senior essay.

The first day that I returned to campus for my senior year, I beelined for the Beinecke reading room. During the first week of class I visited the Beinecke almost every day and dove into Barksdale Brown’s papers. I tried to get into her mind and render her world around me. I also found hundreds of iterations of the regular column she wrote for the Jersey Journal—her main journalistic endeavor—on a local Jersey City online archive and read through each and every one. At the same time, I began to survey secondary sources about the Black women’s club movement and racial uplift politics at the turn of the 20th century. Most importantly, I read Uplifting the Race by Kevin Kelly Gaines and Righteous Discontent by Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham; these two texts were greatly influential in my early exploration of Barksdale Brown’s world and became key sources in my final essay. Gaines’ and Higginbotham’s discussions of the important roles that educated upper-middle-class Black women—particularly those who graduated from Spelman—played in advocating for racial uplift made me realize that I needed to dig deeper into Barksdale Brown’s time at the school. So, with a Mellon funding application in hand, I booked a flight down to Atlanta.
I arrived at the Spelman College Archives hoping to learn more about what the school was like from 1884 to 1887, the years that Barksdale Brown attended. I had no expectation of finding any information about Barksdale Brown in particular as the archive’s finding aid did not indicate that there were student records or collections of student papers dating back to her time. However, upon my arrival, the archivist informed me that Ella Barksdale Brown had an alumna file full of letters she had sent to Spelman presidents after her graduation. While this file (and the rest of the materials I found at Spelman) did not tell me much about Barksdale Brown’s day-to-day life as a Spelman student, it was invaluable in understanding the deep and enduring connection she had to the school and how it continued to shape her even in old age. While Barksdale Brown’s papers at Yale (understandably) consisted almost entirely of letters she had received, her alumna file contained letters that she had written. These letters allowed me to clearly see Barksdale Brown’s perspective and fill in gaps in her correspondence. Her letters, along with other materials I found in her alumna folder, revealed clear and important connections between what Barksdale Brown took from her time at Spelman and the work she carried out as a journalist, educator, and club woman in Jersey City. These sources helped shape the question that would ultimately guide my senior essay: How did the education and socialization that Barksdale Brown received at Spelman impact her life and work into adulthood?

Upon my return to New Haven, I searched for secondary literature that could help me answer this question. After some digging, I found Stephanie J. Shaw’s *What a Woman Ought to Be and to Do*, a book that explored how the education and socialization that Black girls in Barksdale Brown’s generation received impacted them later in life. The content of this book, as well as its historical and structural approach, greatly influenced my work. In particular, Shaw’s text helped me see how I could use Barksdale Brown’s life as a case study to understand how
respectability politics and racial uplift were put into practice by an early Spelman graduate. I also read Brittney Cooper’s text *Beyond Respectability: The Intellectual Thought of Race Women* which taught me about the centrality of improving the public perception of the Black community to the Black women’s club movement. This context would be important as I worked towards developing a central argument for my paper. Influenced by these two texts, I felt like I had finally found my footing. I approached my primary and secondary source research with a new resolve and more clear direction.

Throughout my senior essay research and writing process, I faced two main challenges. The first one was entirely logistical: I could not read Barksdale Brown’s handwriting. I love cursive script and have used it to write for over a decade, but her script was so loopy, messy, and difficult to read that it often took me upwards of an hour to transcribe a single page of writing. This issue was most prominent with Barksdale Brown’s unpublished essay, “The Negro’s Burden.” I knew that this essay would be central to understanding Barksdale Brown’s personal philosophy of racial uplift, but because the essay was written only for herself, it was even more difficult to read than her letters. After weeks of trying to tackle the problem on my own, asking friends for help, and heavily consulting the internet, I called in reinforcements. Over parents’ weekend, I brought my wonderful parents to the Beinecke reading room where they patiently transcribed over fifty pages of Barksdale Brown’s writing, the vast majority of which were pages of “The Negro’s Burden.” While none of my friends at Yale, even those who regularly write in cursive, could decipher Barksdale Brown’s handwriting, my parents read it with ease. I could not have been more grateful for their help. In addition, this roadblock brought to my attention the challenge that future generations of historians will face when working with handwritten archival
sources—the ability to read cursive has clearly declined from my parents’ generation to mine, and the trend does not seem set to reverse any time soon.

The second challenge that I faced while working on my senior essay was more substantive: there is almost no information about Barksdale Brown’s interpersonal relationships in her papers. The letters, flyers, programs, magazines, bills, and tax forms that fill her archival boxes tell a compelling story of Barksdale Brown’s professional life but provide almost no personal details. I could not tell you who Barksdale Brown’s best friends were, how her relationships with her four children evolved over their lifetimes, how well she kept in touch with her parents and former Spelman classmates, or with whom she most enjoyed spending her time. Whereas other archives I have worked with in my time at Yale often hid hints of the ups and downs of interpersonal relationships within them, Barksdale Brown’s papers felt almost sterile. As a result, it has felt nearly impossible to glean with whom Barksdale Brown allied, with whom she disagreed, and where the conflict and contention lied in her life.

My desire to know the contentious aspects of Barksdale Brown’s life was not for my own entertainment or because I believed it would make interesting fodder for my essay. Rather, throughout my research I came to understand Barksdale Brown as a strong, resolute figure who maintained a consistent idea of how best to help advance the Black race for over sixty years as she lived through an incredibly tumultuous century. I sometimes think of Barksdale Brown as a Du Boisian figure—that is, one who embodied Du Bois’s early ideas about the talented tenth, racial uplift, and the importance of the Black elite. But while Du Bois’s own ideology evolved dramatically throughout his lifetime, Barksdale Brown had the same priorities in 1957 as she did in 1914. To hold her ground while the world changed around her, Barksdale Brown must have fended off plenty of individuals who disagreed with her approaches, who saw her as antiquated,
and who wanted to fight for different things in a different way than she did. But as to these challenges and sources of contention, the archive is silent. In my opinion, this is the biggest weakness of the archives I’ve used, the research I’ve conducted, and the essay I’ve written. I have tried to compensate for this archival gap by analyzing Barksdale Brown’s work and writings within the context of the criticisms that were broadly levelled against upper- and middle-class Black club women of her time, as discussed in secondary literature.

It has been an honor and a privilege to work with Ella Barksdale Brown’s papers, to learn about her life, and to do my best to understand the motivations behind her work. I have been exposed to worlds I did not even know existed—before embarking on this journey, for example, I had never heard of the Black women’s club movement—and have become a better researcher, student, and historian for it. I feel confident that my senior essay is an important contribution to the literature about Black women’s political history around the turn of the 20th century, and I sincerely hope that I have been able to honor Barksdale Brown’s life and emphasize her incredible devotion to her local community as well as to Black America at large. Ella Barksdale Brown was one of countless Black women whose lives have not received the scholarly attention they are due, and it has been a joy to contribute to moving the needle on that ever-important project.

I owe immense gratitude to Professor Matthew Jacobson for guiding me throughout this project and encouraging me to trust my own instincts even, and especially, when I felt lost. I would also like to thank all of the librarians and staff members at the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library and Nicole Carr of the Spelman College Archives for helping me navigate my primary source research. I am of course grateful to my family for their never-ending support, and I am particularly grateful for the countless hours my parents spent helping me transcribe
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# Application Forms

## Kaplan Senior Essay Prize

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