

“How Jennie C. Lee’s Scrapbook Captured New Negro Womanhood in the South”

Compiled By:

Cierra Shakur Roberson

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During the subsequent years following the ending of slavery and the citizenship of Black people, came the New Negro Movement. It was during this era, an era usually referenced juxtaposed to the Harlem Renaissance, that Black people focused on reimagining themselves “acceptable” and “beneficial” members of a society that continued to refuse to acknowledge their humanity. Most memory of this time period is spent in regards to the ways in which Black men contributed to the New Negro movement. In doing so it erases the efforts Black women took to claim autonomy over their bodies and leadership roles taken up to help “progress” the Black community at this time.

Black women have always been pillars of the community, finding ways in which to uplift their own voices and claim autonomy and defy erasure. This claim Black women to be in roles of leadership yielded the New Negro Womanhood. Referencing and expanding what Treva Lindsey refers to in her book *Colored No More* as New Negro Womanhood, the following essay examines the lives of Black women in the south, specifically Black women at The Tuskegee Institute as they claimed their citizenship and their place in spaces that wanted to erase them. By focusing on scrapbooks by Jennie C. Lee, Tuskegee Institutes’ second choir director, the ways in which Black women, through education, arts, and even fashion helped to shape the next generation of Black women into their idea of respectable citizenship will be examined.



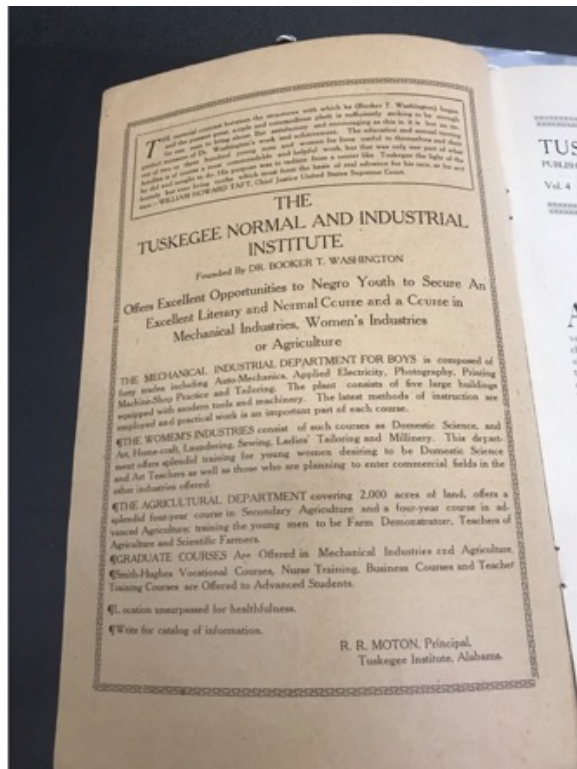
“Radio City Music Hall Performance”¹

New Negro womanhood expanded from a need of Black women to be able to claim autonomy over their bodies. Something that was erased during the general New Negro movement’s image in which was constructed and curated mostly by Black men such as Booker T. Washington, W.E.B. Dubois, and Alain Locke. So what exactly was New Negro womanhood? And why was it such an important integral part of the “progress” Black woman sought? The combination and re-imagination of ideas from rhetoric about the New Woman and the New Negro among Black women communities resulted in the materialization of New Negro

¹ Jennie C. Lee papers, The A. S. Williams III Americana Collection, University Libraries Division of Special Collections, The University of Alabama.

During Lee’s tenure as director, the Tuskegee choir garnered national attention. They were invited to many places to perform, throughout her scrapbook there is mention of their travels, this program is one of the larger venues in which they performed.

womanhood in the early twentieth century². The melding of cultural, social, and political currents captured the challenges that Black women faced in achieving both racial and gender equality³. Arising out of a desire of some Black women to attain authorial control over their obstructed passageway to the modern world. These autonomous societies were not just distancing themselves from whites but also from Black men.



“Goals and attributes of Tuskegee Institute”⁴

² Lindsey, Treva. “Climbing the Hilltop: in Search of a New Negro Womanhood at Howard University .” In *Escape from New York: The New Negro Renaissance beyond Harlem*. University of Minnesota, 2013.

³ Lindsey, Treva. “Climbing the Hilltop: in Search of a New Negro Womanhood at Howard University .” In *Escape from New York: The New Negro Renaissance beyond Harlem*. University of Minnesota, 2013.

⁴ Jennie C. Lee papers, The A. S. Williams III Americana Collection, University Libraries Division of Special Collections, The University of Alabama

“Offers Excellent Opportunities to Negro Youth to Secure the An Excellent Literary and Normal Course and a Course in Mechanical Industries, Women’s Industries or Agriculture.” The Institute, through the goals of Booker T. Washington sought to ensure their students would become productive and useful members of society. This is shown through the educational offerings listed in this booklet.

Identity politics played a major role during this period. As stated above Black women made a point of reinventing themselves, *humanizing* themselves. Through modes of respectability, Black people made every effort possible to show that they too *deserved* the citizenship that was *granted* to them after the war. A keyword during this movement was: *progress*, during this time, Black people made a point to set themselves apart from their enslaved ancestors.⁵ Attempting to “reconstruct” their image to the larger (re: white) population. Doing all they could to redefine the racist stereotypes associated with them. Instead of becoming a class of people who had risen since the war, with education refinement and money.



“Lee and her car”⁶

Though Black women and their impact in the south are often referenced little in the discussion of New Negro Womanhood, there is evidence of the movement’s impact in the south

⁵ Gates, Henry Louis. "The Trope of a New Negro and the Reconstruction of the Image of the Black." *Representations*, no. 24 (1988): 129-55. doi:10.2307/2928478.

⁶ Jennie C. Lee papers, The A. S. Williams III Americana Collection, University Libraries Division of Special Collections, The University of Alabama.

It was a rarity for Black people to own a car, and yet throughout her scrapbook Lee has quite a few pictures of her and her friends with their cars. Demonstrating the wealth mentioned within the essay that helped to procure “status”.

and the ways in which Black women took the effort to archive such memories. The scrapbooks kept by Jennie Cheatham Lee when she was the choir director at The Tuskegee Institute from 1903-1928) show such practices.

Jennie C. Lee was born on November 16, 1866, in Tennessee to parents Anderson and Elizabeth Cheatham.⁷ She would go on to graduate from Fisk University.⁸ In 1903 she was asked by Booker T. Washington to come to the Tuskegee Institute to be the choir director. She would remain the director for twenty-five years (1903-1928).⁹ From 1891 to 1938 Lee's scrapbook contains a multitude of photos, programs, letters, and newspaper clippings, she details Black life emerging at a time in which slavery was over but segregation and racial violence were eminent. Transitioning in the scrapbook shows the modes of Black identity was formed through fashion, education, and the arts.

⁷ Vogelius, Christa. "The Jennie C. Lee Papers at the A.S. Williams Collection." (2014)

⁸ Vogelius, Christa. "The Jennie C. Lee Papers at the A.S. Williams Collection." (2014)

⁹ Vogelius, Christa. "The Jennie C. Lee Papers at the A.S. Williams Collection." (2014)

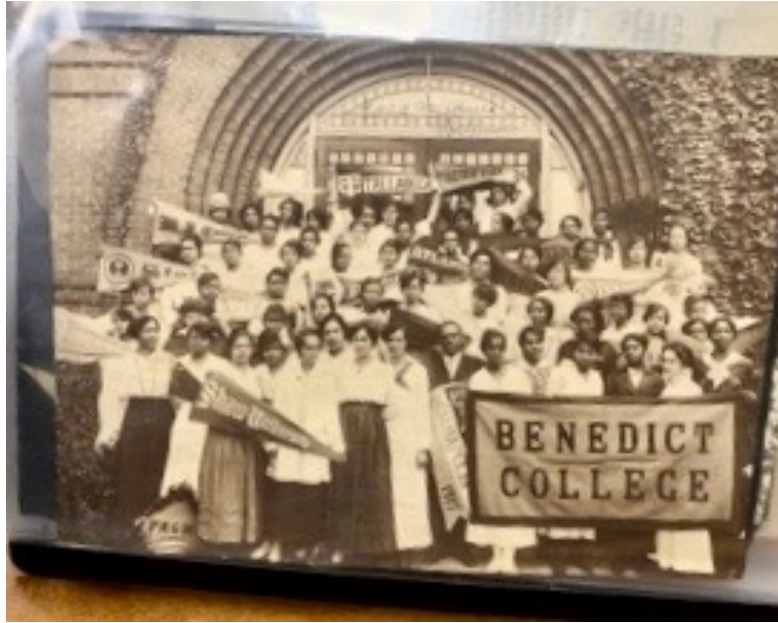


“The Choir”¹⁰

Jenny C. Lee, Choir Director, sits in front of her choir as they prepare for a performance.

¹⁰ Jennie C. Lee papers, The A. S. Williams III Americana Collection, University Libraries Division of Special Collections, The University of Alabama

Here, Lee and her choir are about to perform. The important note of this picture is in reference to the fashion in which the women here are donning. They are all dressing in white, their hair neatly tucked back. White as a color references “purity” and a “lady-like” quality that is not attributed to Black women. In this picture, with the decision to wear these colors, the women in this picture are asserting their womanhood.



“The Graduates”¹¹

Jennie C. Lee and her scrapbooks offer a window into the counter archival practices for the persistence of memory. Even though the scrapbook belongs to one woman, it opens a portal to what life looked like for Black people at the time. And the ways in which they asserted themselves and their humanity into American culture.

¹¹ Jennie C. Lee papers, The A. S. Williams III Americana Collection, University Libraries Division of Special Collections, The University of Alabama

This picture shows roughly twenty women holding up signs to various colleges. It can be assumed these are the colleges to which they will be attending or have already graduated from. Education was a major component of the New Negro Womanhood movement. And solidified leadership status within the community. Black women who were educated, were expected to educate future generation of Black people to becoming more well-rounded citizens.

Extended Readings:

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