



Buying, Boosting, and Building with the National Housewives' League *By Tamara Barnes*

Formed as an auxiliary to a Detroit men's group, the Housewives' League quickly evolved into a national organization dedicated to promoting black businesses during the Jim Crow era.

The inspiration for a national women's group dedicated to the advancement of black-owned businesses came from many sources. The first was black educator Booker T. Washington.

Washington—who lived through the upheaval of the Civil War and Reconstruction—believed that solutions to the problem of racial discrimination were primarily



economic, and that bringing African Americans into the middle class would greatly improve the situation. In 1900, he established the National Negro Business League (NNBL) “to promote the commercial and financial development of the Negro.”

The NNBL was followed in the 1920s by the Colored Merchants' Association (CMA), established to reduce the operating costs of black retailers through cooperative buying.

Reverend William Peck, pastor of Detroit's Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church, was familiar with both the

NNBL and the CMA. After the stock market crash of 1929, it became clear to him that the African Americans he served needed to organize in a similar manner if they were to expand their business community. In 1930, he founded the Booker T. Washington Trade Association with that goal in mind.

Believing in this cause as zealously as her husband was Fannie Peck, who established an auxiliary group—the Housewives’ League of Detroit—later that same year. Mrs. Peck had been inspired to act after learning from activist Albon Hosley that housewives in the Harlem section of New York City had collaborated with CMA on spending initiatives directed at black businesses.

Detroit Women Respond

Within just a few years, Peck had attracted thousands of supporters to her league. So large was the interest in Detroit that members divided the city into 16 neighborhood units in order to better manage activities there. Each unit formed its own leadership structure and regular meeting schedules.

Hosley was impressed with Peck’s efforts in Detroit and offered his assistance in expanding the league into a national organization. In 1933, a committee of interested women met in Durham, North Carolina and formally organized the National Housewives’ League of America, Inc. Fannie Peck was elected its first president.

In a newsletter from that year, she inspired members with these words: “A portion of the responsibility rests upon each member of the League, and every Negro woman in America owes it to herself and to her family to help promote the organization which is destined to reshape the economic life of the Negro.”

Early Growth

Within a dozen years, the National Housewives’ League had expanded into 25 cities. In response to an inquiry about starting a league chapter in Chicago, then-president Nannie Black wrote, “I certainly agree you need a League in



your city and feel you are moving in the right direction... there is much to learn about the work of the League since it is so different in its objective to Civic organizations... any woman proud of race identity and who believes in a program of self-help is good material for any officer.”

Throughout this period, the Detroit chapter maintained a consistently high level of activity in the national organization and was the main source for its leadership. Although annual meetings were regularly rotated through participating cities including New Orleans, New York, and St. Louis, none was so highly attended as those meetings hosted in the Motor City.



Facing page, top: The National Housewives’ League and the National Negro Business League often held joint conferences. Bottom: Booker T. Washington founded the latter organization. Courtesy of the Library of Congress. This page, top: Fannie Peck (left) led both the Detroit and national women’s groups. Left: This pennant promoted the Detroit chapter. Unless noted, all images courtesy of the Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

1949 ★ CALENDAR DIRECTORY ★ 1949

Housewives League of Detroit

and Booker T. Washington Trade Association

SCHEDULE OF MEETINGS

CENTRAL HOUSEWIVES LEAGUE OF DETROIT

Place of Meeting—Bethel A. M. E. Church.

Time — 2nd Tuesday, Executive Board; 3rd Tuesday, Regular Meeting 7:30 p. m.

President—Nannie E. Black—Address: 539 Melbourne. Phone: TR. 1-2085.

UNIT ONE

Uptown Section—Canfield to Blvd. and Russell to Woodward

President — Helen B. Watt—Address: 538 Smith. Phone: TR. 1-5436.

UNIT THREE

Northend Section—Blvd. to Woodward and Oakland to Woodward

President — Helen Malloy, 313 85th A. 8267, Phone: TR. 3-2808.

SLOGAN: "BUY -- BOOST -- BUILD"



TRADE WEEK COMMITTEE

Reading from left to right, seated: Josephine Smith, Hannah Parrish, Lucile Jones, Nell Mabry, Priscilla Dawkins, Helen Malloy, Mary Bensley, Brent Tee Ashford, chairman.

Standing: Margaret Tolbert, Thedra Wilson, Nannie E. Black, president; Gertrude J. Tolbert.

1949		JANUARY					1949	
Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday		
First Qu.	Full Moon	Last Qu.	New Moon					
2	3	4	5	6	7	8		
9	10	11	12	13	14	15		
16	17	18	19	20	21	22		
23	24	25	26	27	28	29		
30	31							

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Calendars were one tool that reminded Detroit women to use the power of their pocketbook to support black business owners.

Developing a Plan

The objectives of the National Housewives' League were clearly outlined in its bylaws. First, it would affiliate itself with the National Negro Business League's efforts to organize African-American businesses and to encourage more people to enter into those pursuits. Second, it would give preference in patronage to stores and business enterprises owned and operated by African Americans as well as those businesses that employed African Americans in various capacities according to their abilities.

The league would also "evaluate its progress by thorough research to determine its economic strength as represented in its buying power. It would employ every possible method to make America aware of its value as consuming and spending citizens. And, it would instill in its children that business and commerce are noble pursuits which offer numerous rewards."

More simply put was this popular motto: "Buy, Boost, Build."

Another bylaw discouraged boycotts or protests against businesses operated by other racial groups. This was somewhat overlooked during efforts to promote the African American-owned Parker House Sausage Company in Detroit. During the Depression, members of the local league would place huge daily orders of sausage at area grocery stores. At pick-up time, they would specifically request Parker House Sausage and then cancel the order when it could not be supplied. In this way, they were able to get Parker House on the shelves of mainstream markets.

The organization kept its focus mainly on supporting business owners in the black community rather than fighting those that discriminated. One of the most successful ways it achieved this goal was through spending drives. Annually, the Housewives' League joined with

the Booker T. Washington Trade Association to sponsor two trade campaigns—one in the spring and another in the fall. Participating businesses hung banners in their windows to draw attention to the event and encouraged customers to keep their receipts showing their expenditures. By the end of the 1942 spring campaign, 53 housewives had spent \$3,520 in support of their families, friends, and neighbors.



Establishing Committees

Throughout its existence, the organization was run completely by volunteers. In order to most effectively engage these volunteers, the Housewives' League developed an extensive system of regional and national committees.

The Program Committee was responsible for a variety of educational activities, including tours of business establishments to acquaint the public with places they should patronize. Business people were also invited to attend educational lectures on such topics as customer service, display methods, and sanitation.

In 1933, the Detroit Program Committee sponsored themed programs during every month of the year: "January has been designated as Thrift Month, at which time the housewife is to see the value of the budget, savings, life insurance, food, clothing, operating, and advancement. February there will be health talks... March carries a fire prevention program."

It was the charge of the Publicity Committee to provide newspapers and magazines with articles regarding the league's activities. The group also used radio and developed several member publications, including the bi-monthly *Housewives League Bulletin*.

A purse-sized directory of tradesmen was circulated by the committee with the following foreword: "We hope it will be carried by local consumers as a guide for purchases,

by travelers as a guide in obtaining services needed when in strange cities, [and] by business and professional people as a guide to better relations between business and the consumer."

Perhaps the most vital subgroup of the organization was the Research Committee, which was responsible for gathering data on black-owned businesses and measuring the success of the league's directed-spending campaigns. This was no small task. The committee sent out hundreds of surveys to area businesses. They also made personal visits and held meetings with owners and employees.

In response to an inquiry from the Research Committee, a representative from the *Michigan Chronicle* wrote, "The year 1951 was the best in its history. It saw advertising lineage almost double and circulation jumped from 24,000 copies to an all-time high of 33,000. Six new people were added to the paper's ever-growing staff." The *Michigan Chronicle* would go on to become one of the most influential black newspapers in the state.



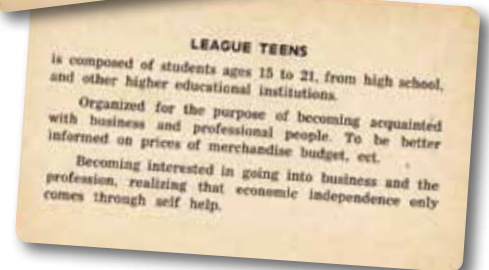
Top: The Parker House Sausage Company was one of many businesses that benefited from the league's spending strategies. Above: League members met regularly to share ideas for new programs.

"SEPARATE BUT EQUAL" BUSINESSES

The development of black-owned businesses in the U.S. was spurred by Jim Crow laws enacted between 1896 and 1965. These pieces of legislation mandated racial segregation in all public facilities—e.g., schools, hospitals, and businesses such as theatres, restaurants, and hotels—in Southern states, with a "separate but equal" status for African Americans. The separation in practice led to conditions for African Americans that tended to be inferior to those provided for white Americans,

systematizing a number of economic, educational, and social disadvantages. Northern segregation was generally *de facto*, with patterns of segregation enforced by housing covenants, bank lending practices, and job discrimination.

State-sponsored school segregation was declared unconstitutional by the U.S. Supreme Court in 1954 in its *Brown v. Board of Education* decision. The remaining Jim Crow laws were superseded by the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965.



Above: Teenagers belonged to a special Junior Unit that encouraged the study of business as an avenue to financial success. Facing page: In 1980, the league celebrated 50 years of accomplishment.

Educating Consumers

Achieving the objectives outlined in the league's bylaws required a concerted effort to educate the consumer as to which businesses were owned by or fairly employed African Americans. But the league did not stop there. They also aimed to improve consumer habits in other ways. For instance, the Housewives' League played an instrumental role in the passage of the Fair Packaging and Labeling Act of 1966. The women even amended their bylaws to incorporate such activities: "It shall be the duty of the Legislation Committee to be informed on laws affecting the home and to recommend the type of action that should be taken on pending legislation."

Because of its proven success in reaching both businesses and consumers, the organization was called upon by government to assist in a range of campaigns. During World War II, the federal government asked the Housewives' League to assist with bond drives and USO activities. The league was also the first African-American organization to train civilians in the use of ration stamps.

Reaching Out to Youth

The Housewives' League's interest in improving opportunities for black youth was central to its mission. A publication distributed by the Durham, North Carolina chapter elaborated on this goal: "Our children graduating from school are left helpless in our world because of our lack of vision and non-loyalty in support of such business efforts among us which promise for them a future."

In 1940, the first Junior Unit of the Housewives' League was organized in Detroit. "It was a definite step in helping youth develop a greater appreciation for business[es] owned

and controlled by Negroes," wrote Priscilla Dawkins, then chair of the local program committee. This appreciation was gained through tours of area businesses and the coordination of competitive quizzes.

By the 1950s, more elaborate programs included scrapbook and essay contests—all aimed at children and teens. The purpose of the contests was "to inform the children of the achievements of Negroes in business, professions, and other activities."

Older teens could take advantage of scholarship opportunities and a vocational school for training "in salesmanship and management of modern stores." The school was housed at the Detroit YMCA.

Changing with the Times

At mid-century, the league was at its height in terms of national influence. And the Detroit membership numbered in the tens of thousands. Its impact was keenly felt; as the owner of Malloy's Shoe Service noted in 1948, "Because of the untiring work of the Housewives League...Detroit has more businesses owned and operated by Negroes than any other city in the U.S."

Then, a series of economic changes began to impact the organization.

Recognizing the rise of chain stores in the 1960s, the Detroit chapter redoubled its efforts to help the city's small businesses. "We realize that just as 'Big Business' launches programs to attract the consumer, so must 'Small Business,'" wrote the chair of the local Trade Committee. "Therefore, from November 14, 1967 through the Holiday Season, we are launching a 'SPENDING SPREE.'"

During the 1970s, the league focused its educational

efforts on helping consumers combat inflation. Then, in the 1980s, the organization altered its name to better reflect its mission and its continuing relevance. It became the National Housewives League of America, Inc., *for Economic Security*.

Despite these changes, the next decade brought its struggles. Local participation dropped precipitously. And, after canceling the 1997 annual meeting and transferring the group's remaining funds to the United Negro College Fund, league president Magnolia Silmond wrote to the remaining members of the organization with sad news: "Being cognizant of your loyalty through the years, it pains me in this 63rd Year of the National to [inform] the Encyclopedia of Associations... that our National Organization is inactive. But like the poem 'Every Road Has an Ending'...we too must accept the inevitable."

Silmond pointed to an aging membership as the reason for the group's demise. But social changes suggest a different determinant. From the postwar period to the 1990s, the number of black women working outside the home rose from 33 to 58 percent, resulting in far fewer having the time to engage in league activities.

More importantly, federal legislation enacted in the 1960s (see sidebar) forced white-owned businesses to open their doors to all potential customers, giving blacks the freedom to shop wherever they wanted. And many took advantage of that freedom.

Though the National Housewives League no longer exists, its legacy is fixed and far-reaching. In the words of Fannie Peck, "its greatest accomplishments have been the vision of self-help it has given the Negro woman; the confidence it has inspired in Negro business and professional men and women; and the courage it has imparted to our young people to continue their education."

Tamara Barnes is the assistant director for diversity and outreach at the Historical Society of Michigan.



FOUNDER FANNIE PECK

Over the decades, the Housewives' League of Detroit was fortunate to have vibrant and effective leadership. No one would gain as much respect and praise, however, as its founder Fannie Peck.

Fannie McCampbell was raised in Kansas City, Missouri. Her mother helped organize a home for female wards of the court and her father was president of a local college. Throughout her early years, Fannie devoted much of her time to church activities, particularly those involving young people.

After marrying William Peck, an African Methodist Episcopal pastor, she moved with him around the country to postings on both coasts. She was especially proud of the classes of young boys she taught in Sunday schools at the churches to which her husband had been assigned. Some of these young men grew up to be businessmen, and her continued correspondence with them heightened her enthusiasm for the organization she later established.

She was not only a leader among African Americans, but also a leader among women. During World War II, Peck implored the league's members, "Will we be wise enough to take advantage of the many opportunities that are being made available to us at this time? ... Because of world conditions, women find doors of opportunity for participation opened to them that the most aggressive feminist a few years ago would have never imagined."

In addition to her involvement with the Housewives' League, Peck served on several boards including that of Detroit's Parkside Hospital and the Women's Missionary Society. In 1936, she organized the Fannie B. Peck of Bethel A.M.E. Church Credit Union. It remains a vital part of the Detroit community today with more than 300 members and assets exceeding a half-million dollars.