

A CASE STUDY OF AFRICAN AMERICAN “GOVERNMENT GIRLS:” UNSPOKEN NARRATIVES

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The present historical case study was conducted in order to examine the unspoken narratives of six African American Government Girls who worked for the federal government during World War II. The present study documented the lives and experiences of six women employed by the U.S. federal government. Their deliberate decision to become civil service employees interrupted the expectation for Black women to work in domestic service positions. The story of African American Government Girls offers a counter-narrative of Black women in the diaspora. Results indicated a dramatic shift in the personal lives and professional careers of African American Government Girls. Federal employment allowed Black women to achieve financial emancipation, upward social mobility, and ultimately, a shift in the formation of their identity—no longer burdened by the limited vocational role imposed on them by society. These findings provide a more accurate and truthful account of the historical role and contribution of African American Government Girls to World War II.

The iconic image of Rosie the Riveter often represented the role and experience of U.S. women during World War II. As men went to war, women took on blue-collar jobs in the war industries (Wynn, 2010). This image, however, does not account for the more than 1.5 million women who filled white-collar jobs in the federal government (Women’s Bureau, 1945). Few know the story of African American Government Girls employed in white-collar positions by the federal government during World War II (Gueli, 2006). In fact, during World War II, the federal government employed between 1.5 and 2.1 million African American women in civilian positions (Women’s Bureau, 1945). According to U.S. Labor statistics, the federal government service employed approximately 8,300

Negro women (term used during this period) in 1940 (Women’s Bureau, 1945). Records classify almost 1,000 women served in the postal service, 218 served in the national defense, and over 7,000 women were classified as government (Women’s Bureau, 1945). In 1940, 1.5% of Black women worked in clerical positions as compared to 26.9% of White women in the same position (King, 1993). Wilkerson (2010) explored the migration of three African Americans in their quest to emancipate themselves from the oppressive environment of the Jim Crow South. Hine and Thompson (1998) and Hine (1994) contributed historical studies focusing on the multi-dimensional lives of African American women. However, although these scholarly works reflect a significant addition to women’s history, they fail to describe the lived experiences of Black women working in white-collar occupations.

Perhaps the lure of affordable housing, independence of being single, government

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Table 1
1940 Black Women Professional and Semi-Professional Workers (66,000)

Population	Profession
50,000	Teachers
900	College presidents, professors, and instructors
6,700	Trained nurses and student nurses
1,960	Musicians and music teachers
1,700	Social and welfare workers
400	Librarians
129	Physicians and surgeons
120	Dentists, pharmacists, osteopaths, or veterinarians,
39	Lawyers and judges.

Note. Adapted from United States 1940 Government Bulletin

benefits, or the dream of seeking emancipation from Jim Crow laws resulted in the mass migration of young, single, African American women seeking employment in white-collar positions in various federal agencies during World War II. Whether because of pride, politics, or patriotism, these African American women found themselves sitting alongside White women in the workplace. While their peers worked the second and third shifts, punched time clocks, and in some cases earned below minimum wage, Government Girls signed in at work, worked regulated hours, and earned an average wage of \$1,440.00 per year (Gueli, 2006). Government Girls resisted the societal expectation to become domestic workers and exchanged tools of their former trade (e.g., mops, brooms, and blowtorches) for typewriters, steno pads, and Dictaphones.

Giddings (1984) noted the duality and complex nature of Black women at the beginning of the 1940s. Black women who graduated from Washington, D.C. Public Schools were more academically qualified for clerical positions than their White peers (Height, 2003). This factor could be due to the fact that segregated public schools in Washington, D.C. provided vocational skills (e.g., typing and clerical training) to Black students in spite of Jim Crow laws. When clerical positions were posted for federal positions, Black women passed the civil service test and received appointments to work for the government. Despite this fact, racism and sexism continued to play a dominant role in employment options, housing, and social endeavors of Black women. As women of color

fought for and supported democracy at home, they also attempted to find a niche for themselves in a White, male-dominated workforce (Wynn, 2010).

African American women adjusted from domestic service to working in clerical positions due to mistreatment (Hine, 1994; Hine & Thompson, 1998). Their experiences caused a significant shift in the level of resiliency and coping skills needed as African American women survived in a new environment. According to Branch (2007), the labor market shifted from an agrarian model and domestic service to more desirable occupations such as paid employment in the private and public sector. The Women's Bureau (1945) of the Department of Labor tracked and recorded the statistical employment status of African American women during World War II. In order to better understand the scope and depth of Black women's work during World War II, I have included a 1940 Federal Bulletin of the Negro Women Workers in Table 1.

Contemporary scholars and authors (e.g., Gluck, 1987; Honey, 1984, 1999) created a discrete historiography of working women during World War II. Although these scholarly works contribute to our knowledge of women's history, they focused on the experiences of White women and failed to offer qualitative or quantitative research regarding the lived experiences of Black women who worked in white-collar occupations. Little work addressing the experiences of African American women during this period exists. In 1945, the Women's Bureau documented that 13,000 clerical workers

Table 2
Negro Women Federal Clerical Government Workers

Population	Profession
13,000	Clerical and kindred workers
6,500	Clerks
4,100	Stenographers, typists, and secretaries aggregated
2,100	Bookkeepers, accountants, and cashiers
267	Telephone and Telegraph

Note. Adapted from United States 1940 Government Bulletin, 1940, p. 17

were employed in the federal sector (see Table 2). Parenthetically, 25% of Black clerical workers were employed in the public sector (King, 1993).

Dalfiume (1968, p. 91) described the absent narrative regarding the contributions of African Americans during 1939-1945 as “the forgotten years” in African American history. Dalfiume (1968) also argued that World War II served as the period of discreet and restrained militancy of African Americans. Military service of African Americans during World War II laid the groundwork for the modern-day Civil Rights movement (Kimble Jr., 2000; Shockley, 2004; Wynn, 2010). Although Shockley (2004) agreed World War II profoundly affected the Civil Rights movement, she also noted military service added to the invisibility of Black women during this time. Researchers and historians alike ignored the labor contributions of African American women.

Black women who found work in the clerical field under the auspices of the federal government improved their social and economic status considerably (Anderson, 1982; King, 1993). Chafe (1972) noted a dramatic increase of more than 70% for African American women who were classified as domestic servants during World War II. As men went off to war, new employment opportunities became available to Black women in the manufacturing industry and other occupations, as was also the case for their White counterparts (Chafe, 1972).

The lives of the Government Girls represent journeys out of domestic service and poverty and into professional careers and middle-class lives. In order to contextualize these journeys, it is important to note the federal employment of the Government Girls occurred a decade before the Montgomery Bus Boycott and two decades

before President Lyndon Baines Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Ironically, World War II was not the first time period the District of Columbia failed to adequately prepare for women war workers; Buchholz and Lehmann (1989) noted during World War I, White Government Girls flooded the nation’s capital to fill federal civil service clerical positions. Years later, photojournalist Esther Bubley also captured similar conditions such as cramped living conditions for White Government Girls during World War II (Davol, 1998).

During World War II, African American Government Girls resided in segregated dormitories. Located in the enclaves of Washington, D.C.’s Black communities, Midway Hall, Slowe Hall, and Wake Hall were erected during World War II in order to house African American Government Girls who arrived in the District to work as government appointed civil servants. These dormitories wrapped their arms around these young women and provided safe, affordable, and practical housing during their early years of employment in the days before the Civil Rights Movement. The genesis of how segregated dormitories evolved as optimal places for Government Girls who migrated from the South began with three prominent women: First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt, educator Mary McLeod Bethune, and Dorothy Height, the future President of the National Council of Negro Women. These three women leveraged their political muscle in order to ensure African American Government Girls resided in comparable housing as White Government Girls (Williams, 2004).

Strict rules regarding social behavior, house-keeping, and visiting hours for male guests helped to maintain a decorum of respectability. Male guests were restricted to the first-floor sitting room. Couples conducted their courting

rituals under the vigilant eye of the housemother. Weekday and weekend curfew hours were strictly enforced. Any breach of the contract resulted in immediate dismissal from the dorms. For African American Government Girls, clean dorms and good government jobs did not automatically grant acceptance into mainstream America. After all, there were no guarantees of what post-war America would offer Black women.

News from relatives living and working in Washington, D.C., announcements in local post offices, and newspaper advertisements were some of the different ways in which African American women found out about the Civil Service test, which is an entry level test for government civil service employment (“AKA’s List Prospective Jobs in Civil Service,” 1942; “Civil Service Clerk Jobs,” 1958; “Civil Service Exams Posted,” 1941; “Civil Service News,” 1930; “Post Two New Federal Exams,”; “13 Get Jobs,” 1942). Historically Black Newspapers, such as the *Chicago Defender* and the *Pittsburgh Courier*, routinely advertised clerical examinations and civil service job openings. Civil Service exams were also announced in the newspapers for chemists, physicists, mineralogists, nurses, and engineers. Journalists with the *Opportunity Journal of Negro Life*, *The Aframerican Woman’s Journal*, and the Washington, D.C. edition of the *Chicago Defender* wrote eye-witness accounts which captured the experiences of the young Government Girls in order to inform Black readers across the nation (Wharton-Beck, 2015). These newspapers and journals provided readers with real-time information regarding employment opportunities and national issues.

For a small number of African American women, white-collar employment opportunities arose. Hesse-Biber and Carter (2005) noted the minimal number of female African American clerical workers, thereby pushing the existence of Government Girls into the margins of history.

However, historians, in general, missed the story of Government Girls, as evidenced in the following quote: “Before the 1960s, they [African American clerical workers] were completely excluded from clerical occupations” (Hesse-Biber & Carter, 2005, p. 143). Despite the statistically insignificant number of Black clerical women in the federal sector, Hesse-Biber and Carter (2005) acknowledged that clerical

positions for Black women served as a viable entry point into the federal workforce, therefore offering an alternative from domestic or blue-collar employment.

U.S. Government reports validated the presence of Black women who worked in semi-professional and professional positions during the war years, both in public sector and government jobs. The data also served as a counter-narrative to the widely held belief that Black women worked only as domestic help during the war years (Women’s Bureau, 1945). Scholarly literature points to a strong propensity towards patriotic assimilation, making African American women invisible. Overall, African American women found themselves immersed in dual roles during the war. African Americans supported the Double V Campaign which leaned into the logic of fighting for democracy abroad and on U.S. soil. As women of color fought for and supported democracy at home, they also attempted to find a niche for themselves in a White, male-dominated workforce. While these employment opportunities were important, they also invited racial discrimination (Wynn, 2010).

Shaw’s (2004) study of the Jim Crow era revealed how racial discrimination during this time adversely affected African Americans in all aspects of their lives. According to Shaw (2004), African American women defied the socially constructed rules of the Jim Crow era. When the Government Girls gained employment, African American women’s participation in a paid labor work force created a new *Black proletariat*. Women experienced a different set of issues (e.g., employment, childcare, housing, and fiscal benefits) not faced by the previous generation of workers (Shockley, 2004).

The purpose of the present study was to uncover absent narratives of African American women who lived and worked in white-collar jobs during World War II. This absence is not particularly surprising since African American women received little attention or credit from the federal government or society at-large at the time. Limited research exists regarding women who migrated to work in various federal agencies in Washington, D.C. Since the experiences of African American Government Girls appear largely absent in history, the present study extends the literature on the lived experiences of

women who faced both gender and racial discrimination in the workforce. As a testimony to their perseverance, these women found ways to manage the discrimination and advance as government employees. Their determination influenced their lives, their families, and others who followed them.

Through the experiences of six African American women who worked for the federal government during World War II through their retirement, I sought to establish a more accurate historical record and to examine how social issues, such as racial segregation, gender inequity, and the effects of social mobility affected the Government Girls and their families. Historical case study research produces more than a chronological listing of events; it results in a researcher's descriptive interpretation of factors that both cause and result from the events (Hancock & Algozzine, 2017). The untold stories of African American Government Girls during World War II occurred before the Civil Rights Movement. Their stories illustrate how the community played an important role in helping Black women adapt to their roles as civil servants living and working in Washington, D.C. during the Jim Crow era.

Method

The following research questions were used to guide the present study: (1) What are the experiences of African American Government Girls employed by the federal government during World War II?, and (2) How did the employment of African Americans during World War II affect the economic and social mobility of Government Girls and their families after the war? I selected qualitative research because it allowed me to describe the unmeasurable aspects of the studied phenomenon. In order to answer these questions via the present case study, I adhered to Yin's (2018) advisement regarding bounding the case in order to make it clear who was included in the case and who was outside of it. Bounding the case also limits the area(s) of research. For example, I collected data from the participant's photographs, employment records, and national awards in order to explore a more complete story about their lived experiences as African American Government Girls. For my participants, this exploration included their early lives, family life, formative academic experiences, their journey from high school to

government employment, their work life, and their social and civic participation in their community. In addition, an ever-present context for the present study was the Jim Crow era and its effects on the lives of African American Government Girls.

Recruitment and Selection of Participants

I employed purposeful sampling in order to identify individuals with an opportunity to contribute to the present study. Purposeful sampling enables the researcher to select participants who are experts and have a deep connection with the studied phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This non-probability sampling technique provided a certain level of autonomy needed to conduct my study, allowing me to decide whether the participants' experiences served the goals of the present study. I selected participants based on the following criteria: (1) the participants worked as a Government Girl for the U.S. federal government and received a Civil Service appointment during World War II and/or the Korean War, or (2) although deceased, the participant's story was fairly represented by a family member/friend who possessed intimate knowledge of the individual's experience of working as a Government Girl during this same period with some corroborating data.

After establishing the criteria for participants in the present study, I then set out to locate and recruit participants. This process proved more difficult than I imagined due to several factors, including: the age of retired African American Government Girls (now aged 90 and above) and the difficulty encountered in recruiting them to participate in the present study. Additionally, I did not reside in the Washington, D.C./Baltimore area and had no social capital with the participants.

I was eventually able to recruit four living retired African American Government Girls. I also included the stories of two deceased Government Girls, for which I interviewed the children of the women. Due to the advanced age of the participants, I knew the limited sample size and availability of participants would pose some difficulties in data collection. After receiving permission from the Institutional Review Board (IRB), I followed procedures associated with the protection of participants based

on the guidelines established for conducting human subjects research. I assessed the risk of discovery and took steps in order to protect confidentiality. Personnel data uncovered during the data collection segment remained anonymous. Participants took risks in telling their stories since revealing personal and professional challenges may have put the them in an uncomfortable position. In order to protect anonymity, I used pseudonyms for all participants due to the small sample size and their fear of retaliation if their identities were uncovered. For my participants, Judith Humphrey, Mabel Robbins, Philomena Rios de Melendez, Ethel Smithfield, Bertha Mae Jackson, and Esther Campbell, this exploration included their early lives, family life, formative academic experiences, their journey from high school to government employment, their work life, and their social and civic participation in their community.

Data Collection

I adopted two methods for data collection: interviews and documents (including print and non-print media). A primary source of data included several rounds of individual interviews as well as a focus group interview with three participants. When conducting interviews, I adopted a systematic approach, beginning with demographic data (in the first round of interviews) and then issuing an invitation for participants to tell a story about their career experiences. I developed a series of questions in order to help participants re-construct their experiences, encouraging them to tell their stories in the way they wanted to tell it. Simons (2009) warned case study researchers to exercise caution, due diligence, and good judgment in “constructing a fair account” of the person’s life (p. 78). All interviews in the present case study were recorded, transcribed, and inspected for accuracy. Each participant reviewed their individual transcript and returned the corrected or amended transcripts to me via mail.

An important part of data collection included the review of documents provided by the participants to describe their employment history and professional/personal lives. For example, the participants shared archival copies of their official letters of federal employment appointments. These documents served to verify facts related to job postings, entry level salaries,

job classifications, and job descriptions and created a timeline to mark significant and transformational events in the lives of the participants. In addition to inspecting personal photos, personnel records, and the *1946 Whirl-i-Gig, a Pictorial Story of Midway Hall for Government Girls*, numerous archival articles from historical African American newspapers also validated the lived experiences of the Government Girls. In addition, the documents allowed participants to share more of their stories because the document review facilitated the recall of certain events, adding to the rich data collected regarding participants’ experience.

Data analysis

In order to analyze the data, I used a method called life-line in order to construct, conceptualize, and analyze the lives of the participants. Developed by Davies (1996), this method helps the researcher use the life-line to connect significant social and historical events to the participants’ lives. However, Davies (1996) cautioned researchers to understand the limitations of the Western and socially constructed view of time. This recommendation encouraged me to use a culturally competent and historical lens in order to understand the lives of African American Government Girls. As a graphic tool, the life-line method simplified the task of summarizing the participants’ lived experiences while also providing depth in understanding the accuracy of their narratives. I created a timeline for each participant including their family history, their birth circumstances, school experiences, initial introduction to the federal labor force, work history, and life after retirement. I used the inductive process throughout my data analysis, reviewing the data multiple times until I gained an understanding of the individual stories. I also noted common themes emerging across the data. As themes emerged from interviews, I categorized and coded each theme. Coding helped me to discover relevant information in order to interpret the data and chronicle the story of how each of the Government Girls gained information regarding how to apply for civil service examination, became inculcated into the federal workforce, lived in segregated Washington, D.C., and managed change in a pre-Civil Rights era. I went one step further with the analysis by examining a federal policy

related to workplace treatment of African American workers during World War II. One federal government's policy of segregation came under the leadership of President Woodrow Wilson. Rothstein (2017) explained:

In 1913, Wilson and his cabinet approved the implementation of segregation in government offices. Curtains were installed to separate Black and White clerical workers. Separate cafeterias were created. Separate basement toilets were constructed for African Americans. Black supervisors were demoted to ensure that no African American oversaw a White employee. (p. 43)

This specific policy of intentional or deliberate segregation in the federal workplace was already in force prior to civil service appointments of United States federal employees.

My data analysis was rooted in two theoretical perspectives: Black feminist thought (BFT; Collins, 1989) and social mobility theory (Cole & Omari, 2003). Black feminist thought addresses the issue of the invisibility and confluence of power, gender, and socioeconomics of Black Women (Collins, 1989; Johnson-Bailey, 2006). Using BFT as a theoretical lens assisted me in examining and understanding the unique employment and social needs of Black women during the 1940s. Johnson-Bailey (2006) cited three themes emerging from her research of African American adult education programs from 1920-1945, including: education for assimilation, education for cultural survival, and education for resistance. These themes may serve as the catalyst for explaining the transition of Black women into the ranks of the white-collar workforce. Black feminist thought requires examining, exploring, and validating Black women's experiences, emphasizes the unique experience of African American women, and seeks to affirm and advocate for the description and interpretation of Black women's experience as a distinct and neglected area of scholarship. African American Government Girls who gained secretarial skills changed the course of their own and future generations of their family's economic destiny.

Cole and Omari's (2003) "uplift ideology" extended the concept of social mobility theory to Black Americans when they "adopted the culture and values of White middle

class" (p.788). Educational attainment became a socially acceptable marker to becoming middle or upper class in the Black community between the 1940s and 1960s. Cole and Omari (2003) also argued personal identity, often ignored in studies of social mobility, plays an integral role in understanding social mobility and its hidden effects in the Black community. Employment in federal agencies signaled a new employment trend for their generation. The option and opportunity of clerical work broadened the employment landscape beyond manual labor/blue-collar work. For the African American Government Girls who remained with the federal government after World War II, social mobility offered them an opportunity to gain access into the Black middle class.

Internal Validity and Reliability

Following Yin's (2003) advice, I used methodological triangulation in order to enhance the validity of the present study. Simons (2009) also recommended triangulation of the data as a method to cross-check critical junctions in the lives of the women. I used interviews and archival data (including articles from historically Black newspapers and data from the Library of Congress), and artifacts such as employment records and photographs. Second, I employed reflexivity regarding my assumptions related to the data collected throughout my research journey (checking for bias and striving for accuracy). Third, I engaged in member-checking as suggested by Creswell and Poth (2018) who advised researchers to verify the interview data with participants. Over the course of the present study, I contacted the participants via phone or email in order to review interview transcripts and clear up any misrepresentation in the data.

The nature of using a case study approach in researching the unspoken narratives of African American women led me to using ethical validation as a standard procedure to evaluate the internal validity of the research. Ethical validation means all researchers must question the underlying moral assumptions of their research agendas and their political, ethical, and equitable treatment of diverse voices (Angen, 2000). Creswell (2013) also suggested qualitative researchers must disclose their role in the study to the participants. Therefore, I disclosed my identity as both a researcher as well a daughter

of one of the research participants. I used my knowledge in both roles to interpret the data, but also acknowledge the potential for bias due to my personal relationship with my mother. In all cases, I strove to produce an accurate, sensitive, and scholarly narrative of the Government Girls while protecting their identities and clarifying all interview transcripts.

Results

The volume and depth of data, when combined, told a compelling story of perseverance, ingenuity, and achievement. Initially three major themes emerged from the data, including (1) humble beginnings and life in Washington, D.C., (2) micro/macro-aggressions in the early years of employment, and (3) retirement years and contributions. Upon further inspection and disaggregation of the data, additional more salient themes emerged from the interviews and data from primary sources (e.g., civil service personnel data from participants, photos, etc.): (1) evolution and transformation of a new self-identity, (2) resisting dominant narratives, and (3) economic emancipation.

In the present study, I feature the stories of six African American women in order to illustrate how these African American women seized the opportunity to break the cycle of domestic service. The work experiences and federal employment of the Government Girls changed the course of their future and the future of their children. Their careers as Government Girls paved the way for them to become part of the Black middle-class in the late 1940s and 1950s. Arriving in a city with no social networking infrastructure, these women forged a path to survive in a new environment.

Evolution and Transformation of a New Self-Identity

I first introduce you to two Government Girls, Philomena Rios de Melendez and Ethel Smithfield, who traveled from their place of birth in order to accept their positions as civil servants in the federal government. These young women traveled from southern towns and neighboring northern cities in order to seek employment in various branches of the federal government. They rejected the opportunity to work in factories, to serve as domestics, or to find other blue-collar jobs.

Philomena Rios de Melendez lived in the segregated dormitories for federal civil servants. She graduated from Munoz High School in Mayaguez, Puerto Rico in 1942. After graduation, Philomena worked at a hospital in the neighboring town of Cabo Rojo. One afternoon, while working as a medical secretary, she noticed an advertisement in the local paper announcing the U.S. Federal civil service examination for clerical positions in Washington, D.C. With her father's blessings, Philomena took the written, typing, and oral English fluency test in her high school alma mater, Munoz High School. A few weeks later, the results of the exam arrived in the mail, and Philomena had passed all three tests by earning high scores. Philomena later accepted an appointment to employment offered by the federal government, requiring her to move to Washington, D.C.

Another Government Girl, Ethel Smithfield, arrived in Washington, D.C. from Tampa, Florida to accept her federal appointment. According to her son, Dr. William Smithfield, Ethel arrived in the District of Columbia in her brand new 1952 Pontiac Chieftain. Some of Ethel's cousins had already established roots in the District of Columbia. Ethel served as a military secretary for the Navy and, like most of the other participants, resided in Slowe Hall, one of the four segregated government sponsored dormitories for African American women for which the monthly rent was affordable. Ethel's cousin, Francine Ransom recalled the experience of living in the dormitory: "It was a fact that we were segregated. There were four dormitories for Negro women: Guam, Midway, Slowe, and Wake Halls. Rent was \$24.50 per month." I discovered an interesting pattern in the transformation and evolution of the self-identity of the African American Government Girls as they settled into their civil services careers. Instead of adopting an identity imposed by a patriarchal and racist system, they were in pursuit of establishing their own identity.

Mabel Robbins, for example, recalled the living conditions after arriving in the District, describing how her parents took pride in keeping a home nice. Mabel remembered the early years, saying: "We could only afford a home in an alley. We kept our place clean. My mother planted flowers and shrubs around the house."

Mabel recalled her early days in the South during segregation, as follows:

I was born under segregation. Segregation was strong. We were supposed to be in the field picking cotton. An office job, no way. We were not supposed to be in an office. You could always get a cleaning job. I was glad that I had that skill. Remember it was not until 1965 that we were allowed to vote. Even though we worked for the federal government, we could not vote. We were often embarrassed. The world was really treating us badly those days.

Segregation, for all participants, carried many limitations and frustrations. The first job Mabel Robbins secured out of high school did not last long, as she recalled: "My very first job only lasted two days." The recent high school graduate did not have the financial resources to attend college, so an opening at a local dress shop presented the perfect employment opportunity for Mabel. The reserved 17-year-old Mabel knew after working two days in downtown Washington, D.C. she would never return to work for a third day because of how the shop owner treated her. Mabel shared her encounter with the owner of the dress shop. Mabel spent the first day of work laying out the merchandise, taking inventory, and learning other duties in the retail establishment. The first day ended unceremoniously. Poised to return to the shop the next day, Mabel went home excited about her new employment status. Mabel's dream of becoming a salesclerk abruptly ended on the second day on the job after being asked to do a task she was unwilling to do. Mabel remarked: "I went back the next morning to be greeted with a broom. The owner said, 'I want you to sweep the pavement in front of the store.' I said, 'I am sorry I can't do this.'"

Mabel later discovered her poised and quiet manner made her the perfect candidate to attract Negro clientele to the shop. The reality of Jim Crow shattered her hopes of becoming a salesclerk. Mabel denied the offer to sweep the sidewalk. Her brief tenure as a salesclerk reminded her she still needed to seek employment. Armed with marketable skills, Mabel intuitively knew she had options. She stated: "I learned shorthand and typing in high school. I will go and find a typing job. I would like a

typing job." Since working at the dress shop failed to meet her employment expectations, Mabel took the civil service examination.

Childhood friends, Judith Humphrey and Mabel Robbins, sought positions in the federal sector upon graduation from District of Columbia high schools. Despite their humble beginnings, both women enjoyed the strong support of their family. Judith Humphrey, whose mother and grandmother worked as domestic servants, anticipated the day when they would begin their apprenticeship as maids, as she stated: "My mother was a maid. My Aunt Harriet worked as a maid, too. I was going to be an educated maid." Judith described her initial experience as a maid by saying: "When I was 16, I was being trained to be a domestic. My mother was waiting for me to become a domestic. I worked one week as a domestic."

Judith's tenure as a maid was short-lived. Her father interrupted the induction plan by insisting Judith go to college, declaring: "You are going to college. No one in this family went beyond the third grade." Despite her mother's insistence on her becoming a domestic maid, Judith responded her agreement with her father by declaring: "'No, I am going to go to college!' I knew my Daddy wanted me to go to college." Determined to fulfill her father's dream of going to college, Judith decided to secretly take the civil service test in order to make enough money to afford college.

Resisting Dominant Narratives

African American Government Girls in the present study recounted various incidents of racist behaviors towards them. A typical example was shared by Judith Humphrey. On the first day of work at the War Production Board, someone in management ordered a wall of file cabinets to be erected in an effort to shield White workers from Judith Humphrey's face. The sounds of pounding hammers and saws gnawing away at lumber interrupted Judith's concentration. Judith recalled the incident:

On the first day of work at the War Production Board, I had on bobby socks and penny loafers. I was sitting there and a White woman came in said: "[Judith], you have to move over. You can't stay here." I said: "What did I do?" The White woman repeated: "You can't

stay here. You have to sit in here.” She pointed to a sterile, singular, and government-issued chair. The carpenters came to build a wall that separated me from the White co-workers. I had no desk.

Temporarily dazed by the incident, Judith found comfort by reaching deep into her childhood memories. She tried to sort out her feelings. Her maternal grandmother warned her about engaging with White employees. Discussing topics such as religion, politics, and family matters were off limits. In addition to the warning her grandmother gave her, there were other things Judith needed to know; things like Blacks were not allowed to eat in the cafeteria. Similarly, Esther Campbell remembered: “They hired Blacks, but you had to face the wall.” She also encountered the same rules regarding restricting Blacks and Whites from eating together. Esther said: “A co-worker who regularly had lunch with me was told not to have lunch with me. They threatened her job.” Additionally, Judith learned about these hidden rules as she continued her employment with the federal government. African American Government Girls often began their Civil Service careers working in low-level jobs such as delivering mail or reading complaint letters. Employers routinely failed to provide adequate job orientation to Government Girls.

Government Girls, as they accepted positions with the federal government, traveled and/or lived in the District of Columbia or, in the case of one participant, in Cleveland, and started new careers as *permanent* federal employees. Learning about opportunities for employment through published advertisements and networks, some Government Girls took the civil service test at the urging of family and friends, while others sought employment as a pathway to achieving the dream of a college education. Conditions in Washington, D.C. demonstrated the city was unprepared to meet their needs. The Black women who traveled from the South during the Great Migration encountered a new and different culture. As African American Government Girls became federal civil service workers, they encountered segregated working conditions and blatant racism from White co-workers and supervisors.

Career experiences. Jim Crow practices of sitting in the back of the bus remained in effect even in the nation’s capital. As a native of Washington D.C., Mabel crisscrossed the streets of the District of Columbia in order to deliver inter-office mail for various federal departments. She routinely used public transportation to execute her duties as a mail carrier yet she faced discrimination. She said: “Even delivering mail for the federal government, I still had to get on the back of the bus.” Delivering mail in inclement weather eventually convinced Mabel to seek another job in the federal workforce.

Mabel found employment in a relatively new federal department, the Rural Electrification Agency. In a department dominated by White male engineers, Mabel found herself in an uncommon position. She was the sole woman and Black in the office. Raised in rural South Carolina, Mabel also understood the plight of rural farm families. Until the creation of the Rural Electrification Administration (REA) in 1935, power companies had the prerogative to serve farmers but they were slow or unwilling to do so because of the high cost involved (Brown, 1980). Mabel realized her good fortune when she accepted a new position where she found herself shoulder-to-shoulder with the White men in the REA department. Taking pride in her work, Mabel knew the importance of accuracy in processing the REA loans. The margin for error became clear as she stated: “I did the typing and checked every engineer’s work before it was taken to the director.” The benefits of electrical technology such as running water, refrigerators, radio, and sanitation lifted farm families out of preindustrial life and enabled them to enjoy a lifestyle conforming to the standards of an industrialized society (Brown, 1980). Living in Washington, D.C., with the benefits of appliances and modern amenities, she sometimes took electricity for granted. However, working in the Rural Electrification Administration served as constant reminder of the days she spent without electricity in the South. Mabel remained determined that her work reflected her compassion for the rural families. Mabel continued to work in this federal agency until her retirement.

Judith secured her second position as a coding clerk for the U.S. Air Force for the Sick and Wounded in the Biometrics Division. Judith’s

skill with numbers and memory served her well. The clerks coded the medical records of veterans from the Korean War. She recalled:

In 1957, soon after the Russian Sputnik launch, I was transferred to the Pentagon where I started working for Mr. Beverly. He never hired any Black people. He brought in construction workers to build a wall around my desk so that he didn't have to look at "that Ni**er." He had his desk turned around so that he would have his back to me.

Within this position, Judith's threshold of tolerance eventually reached a boiling point due to discrimination. One day she decided she could not endure the hostile work environment any longer. With a strong and resolute voice, Judith explained she found the courage to apply for a position as a statistical clerk at the National Institutes of Mental Health (NIH) in Bethesda, Maryland. She took an extended lunch break and placed a phone call which would ultimately change the course of her life.

Judith interviewed for a position in the Theoretical and Mathematics Branch at the NIH. In a bold and unscripted move, Dr. Daniel Q. Price, the head of the department, placed Judith Humphrey in the front office as a mathematical statistician. Her unblemished work ethic and professionalism laid the foundation for her career at the NIH. Judith became the face of the department and an invaluable asset in calculating the data gathered in the research. Judith recalled: "At the NIH, I worked on Friden calculator. It is a big machine. It was bigger than two computers. You would press the button for the math. They brought me out a huge computer. I was a mathematical statistician."

Government Girls recalled how mentors recognized their intellectual potential. Mentors encouraged them to seek post-secondary degrees or enroll in advanced technical classes which provided the participants with long-term job security. Defying gender and racial stereotypes while expanding their knowledge base essentially leveraged their earning power thereby paving the way for their entry into the middle class. Finding and trusting the right mentor altered the course of their lives and affected the career choices of their children.

Employment in the federal government for African American women continued as the

United States entered the Korean War in 1950. Of the six Government Girls in the present study, Bertha Mae Jackson, the youngest of the participants, did not work during World War II. Her government appointment occurred in Cleveland, Ohio and her civil service career began during the Korean Conflict. After passing the clerk typist test in Cleveland, Bertha Mae Jackson received a letter advising her to report to the Personnel office at the Veterans Administration Regional Office (VARO). Bertha Mae Jackson recalled her first experience working for the federal government by citing the importance of a changing political landscape. Bertha Mae Jackson remembered: "My promotions involved combinations of re-organization within the VARO and proven application of knowledge, skills, and ability to perform assigned duties." As an alumna of Lincoln High School, Bertha Mae placed high premium on hard work and producing quality results. Over the next two decades, these qualities would prove to be valuable assets in the workplace.

World War II and the postwar decade were seedtime for the modern Civil Rights and Women's Liberation movements (Jones, 2010). Long before the second wave of the Women's Liberation Movement, African American Government Girls applied for loans through the Federal Employee's credit unions, which translated into purchasing first homes, buying cars, and financing the education of their children. Rising from humble beginnings and attaining their definition of the American dream enabled them to provide their families with new opportunities. Judith Humphrey held a strong belief in the following tenet: "If I am standing tall, I stand on the shoulders of my mother and aunts, who worked tirelessly for others and still managed to have the energy to care for me."

Economic Emancipation

Retired African American Government Girls interviewed for the present study indicated they enrolled mid-career in college in order to enable them to advance in their careers and serve as an example for their children and extended family members. Collectively, these women knew the value of a post-secondary education. Monthly pensions and annuities ensured financial independence during their retirement years for African American Government Girls. Judith

acknowledged these types of retirement benefits and resources never existed for her parents or their peers.

In 1955, Judith fulfilled her father's dream by attending college. Recognizing Judith's intellectual curiosity and natural ability for understanding statistical computations, Roger Groveland suggested she enroll in night classes offered through the Department of Agriculture at Ivory State University (ISU; pseudonym). Judith recalled being a bit isolated since she was the "only Black in the class." Attending ISU enhanced and refined Judith's ability to use her aptitude in mathematics to calculate complex statistical equations while working as a mathematical statistician in the Department of Human Aging at the NIH. On February 4, 2020, the Chair of the American Statistical Association's Biometrics Section established a new national award from Judith's early career innovations. This innovator award recognized her as a trailblazer in the field of statistical biometrics and serves as an inspiration for women who want to excel in the fields of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics.

The transition of processing payroll by hand to teaching a new generation to adapt to a digital platform fell under the watchful eyes of Esther Campbell. Esther's knowledge of the Treasury Department cast her in a new role during her later years of government service. She recalled:

I was a financial computer analyst. That was my final job. When computers first came out, all the information came out on a card. The information was punched into the card. I ended up training people to do that job. The Treasury Department sent [us to] school... to learn how to do card punching and how to use the new machines. At that time, the computers had to be wired so it could read the card. We had to know how to wire the machine. I learned a lot from the man who came to fix the machine. I paid close attention to how he fixed the machine. I taught the payroll area how to convert to computers. If I did not balance my tickets, 5000 people would not get paid. I handled millions and millions of dollars.

A sudden and catastrophic illness landed Esther Campbell in the hospital. The long road to recovery included physical and occupational therapy. Becoming ill served as a watershed moment for Esther Campbell. Retirement was her only option. She retired at 55 years of age and was eligible to receive full retirement benefits.

Mabel Robbins also received full federal employee benefits when she retired at the age of 62 from the Rural Electrification Administration. She recalled: "The government had good retirement. We were looking at the future. We bought war bonds." Mabel remained resolute in sharing her legacy of survival with her children and grandchildren, stating: "My children did not go to college but my grandchildren went to college. But they have done well." Delivered in a slow and methodical manner, she also shared the following message: "Always do your best. Leave with something better than you found it." Mabel's husband passed away when their three children were small but employment with the federal government provided her with retirement benefits. Mabel purchased a home and remained independent until her death in 2018. Employment in the federal civil service provided Government Girls with an umbrella of protection. Unlike women working as domestics with stagnant wages, promotions based on work performance dramatically changed the course of their careers and the vocational opportunities for their children. Taking calculated risks such as asking for a promotion heralded a new era for Mabel and other Blacks.

In 1984, Philomena Rios de Melendez ended her career as a paralegal technician in the Regional Attorney's Office in Chicago, Illinois. She filed her retirement forms and said farewell to the attorneys and other paralegal technicians. During her early retirement years, Philomena enjoyed gardening, traveling back to Puerto Rico during the harsh winter months, and participating in senior citizens groups. Philomena died in 1993 of complications due to sarcoidosis. Recognizing the shift in the demographics of the United States and knowing the value of speaking a second language, her daughter, Teresa Rios de Melendez, established a memorial scholarship in Philomena's name for students who desired to major in Spanish in college.

Finally, Ethel Smithfield used her Government Girl position as a natural stepping-stone

to later become a respected and accomplished chemistry teacher in the Washington, D.C. public school system. After 13 years as a public-school teacher, Ethel Smithfield founded the Hurston Academy in Washington, D.C., which served inner city and, later, suburban African American students. After retiring from her teaching career and returning to her hometown to take care of her elderly mother, she became active as a civic leader in Tampa, Florida. Ethel served on the board of the York Theatre, the Tampa County Library Board, and the Florida Academy of African American Culture. Civic involvement became a passion for Ethel Smithfield; giving back to the community and fostering a love for education fueled her spirit.

Taking advantage of job-embedded professional development or enrolling in universities, African American Government Girls made an indelible mark on the lives of their families and ushered in a new reality for obtaining the American dream. The deliberate, intentional, and transformative act of entering the workforce and becoming white-collar workers served as silent defiance to a system immersed in institutional sexism and racism. Remaining in federal employment served as the catalyst for climbing up the socio-economic ladder.

Discussion

The evolution and transformation of a new self-identity, resisting dominant narratives, and economic emancipation served as dominant themes in the present historical case study. The presidential Executive Order 8802 to halt discriminatory practices in the federal workplace was issued on June 25, 1941; however, incidents of typical and veiled elements of Jim Crow practices existed before World War II (Villard, 1913). Although the women in the present study successfully passed the civil service written exam, the timed typing test, a background check, and, in some cases, a move to a new city, they still experienced discrimination. They often lacked support when they entered their positions and faced various roadblocks to promotion. The signs of discrimination appeared in the form of verbal insults and the construction of barriers to separate and isolate African American workers from White co-workers and supervisors. Their stories reveal little had changed despite the president's Executive Order 8802.

It was never the intent of the federal government to employ and retain women, especially Negro women, on a long-term basis or in the workforce in post-World War II (Jones, 2010). African American women arrived in the District of Columbia ready to work for various branches of the United States' newly formed Department of Defense. There were no housing provisions for these women. According to the late Dorothy Height (2003), the federal government, under pressure from prominent African American leaders, built respectable housing for government girls. A spirited and tenacious Height (2003) maintained:

I knew that new housing facilities had been built for White girls and when I asked why no provisions had been made for young women of color, I was told, "The Blacks always look after their own," I was outraged. These girls had left home, many of them for the first time in their lives and some girls having given up pretty good jobs, to respond to the summons to contribute to the war effort, only to find themselves unwelcomed by the very government that had called them. Armed with documented complaints about their living conditions, Government Girls made their circumstances known to a Black housing agent. They were not going to tolerate substandard living conditions. The federal government, not wanting to risk public embarrassment, approved the building of female residence halls (p. 99).

Eventually, the Public Buildings Administration of Federal Works Agency erected Slowe Hall and Midway Hall in northwest Washington, D.C. The friendships made in these dorms served as a safety net for the participants in the present study as they transitioned into adulthood.

Long-Term Impact of Federal Employment

Social constructivism sets the stage for unpacking the long-term impact of the employment of African American Government Girls during World War II. With a good retirement health plan, Social Security benefits, and Thrift Savings Plan (tax-deferred retirement savings and investment plan), Government Girls reaped the long-term benefits of working for

the government. Under the Civil Service Retirement System, and as members of the Federal Employees Retirement System (FERS), they received retirement benefits as well as cost of living increases. In the early part of the 20th century, these financial options for the majority of African American women did not exist. The financial emancipation for these women represented a shift in the upward social mobility for themselves as well as for their children. It is important to understand that these women were in the process of establishing their own identity. They resisted the temptation or urge to accept an identity that was imposed on them by a patriarchal and racist system.

Their careers as Government Girls enabled them to become part of the Black middle-class in the late 1940s and 1950s. According to Kenney (2010), in the historical sense, generations are created by shared dramatic events. Thus, for example, people who experienced World War II as their first major life crisis (those individuals who were 18–30, perhaps in 1945) might come to share certain perspectives regarding politics, among other things, that would not be shared by individuals older or younger than them. Based on the findings of the present study, I argue that the lived experiences of these retired Government Girls served as a dramatic event in their family history.

Resisting Gender and Racial Expectations

The role of racial and gender expectations emerged as dominant themes in the present study. In an era of racial segregation, participants spoke of challenging pre-conceived notions of their intellectual capabilities. These women, who found themselves surrounded by hostile co-workers, quietly and intentionally interrupted racist behavior designed to suppress their potential. As the women sharpened and refined their professional skills, they developed the confidence to defy the expectations of women of color during the war years. All participants candidly spoke of surpassing low expectations of their employers and co-workers. They routinely out-performed their colleagues and learned to advocate for themselves.

Few, Stephens, and Rouse-Arnett (2003) explained the complexity of Black feminist thought “as a field of inquiry that emerged from both feminist and critical race theories. Black

Feminist Thought validates the experiences of Black Women in the creation of knowledge” (p. 210). The common theme of overt racism and sexism during their government employment uniquely linked the participants. The narratives of the African American Government Girls I interviewed revealed how gender, race, and socioeconomic status affected Black women during this period in history. They used the knowledge gained from living in a racist and sexist society in order to adapt and survive under difficult workplace circumstances.

Relegated to living in segregated and impoverished communities, the women defied conventional practice and refused to take jobs as domestic servants. Even though the African American Government Girls experienced economic hardships (except for one woman), their families placed a high premium on obtaining a college degree or advancing their education. In an unconventional and bold move, some fathers of the Government Girls played a pivotal role by insisting on raising their daughters’ aspirations and level of educational attainment which changed their futures. In an era when the education of boys took precedence over girls, the fathers of the Government Girls encouraged their daughters to ignore boundaries to their success, and even leave their communities in search of better occupational opportunities. Fortified by a strong academic foundation in high school, the Government Girls possessed the needed academic talents and marketable skills necessary to pass the government-administered civil service test. Each received an appointment to work in the federal government and each supported the war effort. In just one generation, they changed their economic and social status through civil service employment.

Serving the government and its citizens exposed the contradiction in American beliefs and the reality of racism. The presence of overt racism and micro-aggressions (Sue et al., 2007) became an everyday reality for African American Government Girls. Daily and routine acts of racism dominated the early experiences as the women began their careers. With every racist encounter, the African American Government Girls in the present study tested their perseverance and confidence. Combating racist behaviors in order to keep a job became a way of life and a matter of survival for African American

Government Girls. Performance appraisals became critical tools in coping and resisting racial hostility and discrimination on the job. When the job market shifted into periods of reduction in the workforce, Government Girls relied on excellent performance appraisals in order to save their positions. Their solid work ethic protected them from losing a job. As the civil servants learned new skills on the job, these women demonstrated a strong work ethic and an ability to become competent in their positions. Copies of their outstanding performance appraisals proved that these African American Government Girls became invaluable assets to their employers, thus overcoming some of the blatant racism and sexism existing in the workplace and society.

The analysis of the data also revealed a common denominator: the will needed to survive in a hostile and unwelcoming environment. As participants recounted incidences of socially constructed rules about race and gender expectations, they described their survival and coping strategies. They displayed strength, confidence, and courage in the face of adversity. The Government Girls advocated for themselves by learning how to work within the system as well as resisting limitations imposed by supervisors and peers. They created a counter-narrative by joining with others, keeping their jobs, and advancing in the system. Their success and increasing awareness of their circumstances and power helped them serve as early pioneers in the Civil Rights and the Women's Movements of the 1960s. Collins (1989) theorized that the suppression of Black women's ideas "has stimulated African-American women to create knowledge that empowers people to resist domination" (p. 234). Their stories and experiences helped them remain employed by the federal government and, in some cases, receive support from women's organizations, finding friendships and mentors during times of adversity.

Economic Emancipation

As the Government Girls attained additional academic credentials and acquired technical skills on the job, they learned how to navigate the federal employment system, to earn promotions, and to benefit from steady employment. De jure discrimination and segregation (i.e., the

sanction of law and policy), directly impacted the ability of African Americans to ascend on the social ladder. American society institutionalized the practice of training young Black girls to become domestics. Choosing to become civil service employees interrupted the powerful and dynamic economic institution of domestic service for this generation of women. According to Chafe (1972, p. 142), clerical work served as a "second emancipation" for Black women. Breaking into this formally White-dominated profession interrupted the cycle of domestic work. Setting goals for high academic achievement became the standard for the children of the Government Girls. Unlike their mothers and grandmothers who worked as domestics, earning steady and predictable wages signaled a new era in the economic emancipation for the African American Government Girls. Receiving their first paycheck served as a significant rite of passage for Government Girls and paid employment set the stage for previously unimagined opportunities. This financial emancipation gave these women greater power to control their destiny. Paid employment decreased the probability of another generation of poverty.

This new generation of women realized the unintended consequences of World War II, namely a rise in the socio-economic status for Black women. Once Government Girls secured a position in the federal government and began to advance through the civil service grades, domestic service ceased to exist for them and their descendants. The African American Government Girls generally reminisced about returning to college as a way of self-improvement and career advancement. In turn, completing a degree or attending classes to enhance their skills on the job created new opportunities and changes in their identity from civil service workers to professionals and women in charge of their future. Academic attainment increased their confidence and transformed the Government Girls into role models for their children and families.

Limitations & Future Research

One of the most compelling limitations resides in the small sample size. Increasing the sample size would add more data to support the findings of the participants. Additionally, the present study could be improved by using social media in order to locate participants and their relatives. It is quite possible the children

and relatives of Government Girls may be able to share additional stories and provide archival data through an oral history method via secure social media platforms. Acknowledging the fact that time is running out to capture the remaining stories of other women who worked for the federal government during World War II and the Korean Conflict is an ever-present reality.

I believe the present study sets the stage for future researchers to begin to close the gap in scholarly literature on this subject. Documenting additional narratives marks a new chapter in women's history and African American history. Now is the time for their unspoken and unrecorded stories to come out of the shadows and take their rightful place on the pages of history. We are in an era when the untold narratives of the African American experience take center stage in the national conversation on race. Their lives exemplify how unexpected opportunities can radically change the course for generations to come. It is my hope that the lived experiences of these Government Girls will serve as a backdrop for the current discourse on what it means to be Black in America.

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