

## **Modest Dreams and Grand Ambitions: Reconsidering Philadelphia's Black Catering Trade at the Turn of the Twentieth Century**

### *Introduction*

The son of a “once-prominent” Philadelphia caterer and the caterer Frank Bell spoke with a *Philadelphia Tribune* reporter in 1915. They each presented a different view of the city’s catering trade. The caterer’s son argued that the best days of the caterers existed in the past. He noted, “In my opinion, the day of making money for the colored caterer has passed away. It went with the decline of the rich aristocrats and commissioners.” Further, he felt that those entertaining in the present day had neither the taste nor discernment of previous generations. Frank Bell regaled his listener with a litany of catering appointments that had kept him busy throughout the summer. Bell finished his tale, “In my opinion, there is plenty of work left, yet, for the colored caterer at home and abroad.”<sup>1</sup> What do these conflicting reports tell us about the state of the catering trade in the early twentieth century?

Many have looked at this period and echoed the words of the caterer’s son. His words lend weight to those written by W. E. B. Du Bois fifteen years earlier. In short, they argued that the black caterers had lost their monopoly on the trade, especially in serving elite white patrons. The caterer’s son pointed to a shrinking elite class, a lack of taste on the part of the middle class, and an overall “decline of the colored caterer and cook” as a result. Du Bois added competition from European migrants and white prejudice to the list of challenges facing the black catering trade. Du Bois and the caterer’s son made valid points for understanding this era in the history of the catering trade, but their view tells only part of the story.

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<sup>1</sup> “Different Views Held by Colored Caterers,” *Philadelphia Tribune*, September 25, 1915; W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Philadelphia Negro: a Social Study* (1899; repr., New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

## Modest Dreams and Grand Ambitions

The years bracketing the turn of the twentieth century, the “nadir” in race relations, is perfectly framed for examining race prejudice and its material effects. This has shaped the narrative of Philadelphia’s black catering trade in this time period. However, a broader examination reveals much about the changing landscape of eating culture; about a particular type of racial animus that targeted food entrepreneurs and the hospitality industry; and about the modest dreams and grand ambitions that drove the actions of an increasingly diverse range of caterers in the first two decades of the twentieth century.<sup>2</sup>

### *Eating Culture in Transition*

Booker T. Washington called together the first meeting of National Negro Business League (NNBL) in Boston, Massachusetts on August 23, 1900. He wanted “every line of business that any Negro man or woman is engaged in be represented” for he envisioned both an inspirational and a practical organization, one in which black men and women in business could learn from each other’s experience and help grow black businesses through local leagues. Washington boasted that the NNBL would “present a great opportunity for us to show the world what progress we have made in business lines since our freedom.”<sup>3</sup> Chicagoan Charles H. Smiley, who had spent his formative years in Philadelphia, felt that such progress had been made in the catering trade that the “pioneers of the business” would scarce recognize it.<sup>4</sup>

Doubtless Smiley exaggerated somewhat. The Philadelphia pioneers he named, Peter Augustin and Major Layton, would have found the food preparation and presentation, the niceties of service, and the negotiations with clients very familiar. Caterers still made their way

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<sup>2</sup> Rayford Logan, *The Negro in American Life and Thought: the Nadir, 1877-1901* (New York: Dial Press, 1954).

<sup>3</sup> Booker T. Washington, “Introduction” in *Proceedings of the National Negro Business League Its First Meeting...* (Boston: J. R. Hamm, 1901), n.p.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 233.

## Modest Dreams and Grand Ambitions

to the buildings of businesses like the Mutual Assurance Company and the Pennsylvania Saving Fund Society to prepare and serve meals to the men of the board on at least a monthly basis and sometimes more. Companies such as these had by now relied on the black catering trade for almost a century. Board members still ordered and looked forward to dishes such as terrapin stew and chicken croquettes, specialties of the city's black caterers. While the caterers could rely on these elite, white male clients and the acclaim of favored dishes, they found themselves in a changing hospitality landscape that required some adjustment.

Individual elite white women in the early and mid-nineteenth century requested the services of black caterers for family meals and entertainments held at home. Now respectable women of all classes could seek entertainments outside of their houses. The department store proved welcoming to them, and many women looked forward to eating out in department store dining rooms and restaurants as an exciting part of the shopping experience.<sup>5</sup>

John Wanamaker's Grand Depot opened in the Centennial year of 1876. From that first year, Wanamaker boasted a restaurant where shoppers and passersby, male and female, could stop and refresh themselves. The store expanded its appeal with technological innovations such as electric lighting, installed in 1878, and telephones in 1905. Art and music also appealed to upper class women as culture elevated the commercial experience. By 1911 the store occupied an entire city block and supported over 7,000 employees.<sup>6</sup> Women might spend an afternoon at a department store like Strawbridge & Clothier, Gimbel Brothers, and Lit Brothers, immersed in consumption, but they also left the house to participate in social and philanthropic club culture.

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<sup>5</sup> John Henry Hepp, *The Middle-Class City: Transforming Space and Time in Philadelphia, 1876-1926* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), 152-154.

<sup>6</sup> *Golden Book of the Wanamaker Stores* (Philadelphia: John Wanamaker, 1911), 43, 67, 93.

## Modest Dreams and Grand Ambitions

A host of women's clubs, from college alumnae to benevolent organizations, joined the city's long-established men's clubs in seeking to provide food and drink at various entertainments. While the members might be elite, many of the clubs' membership lists contained those of a more middle-class background. For instance, some of the women of the Hahnemann Hospital Nurses Alumnae Association (HHNAA) were also members of the New Century Guild, a club founded for women of the working-class. Members of the HHNAA would bake and cook for themselves for regular meetings, but for special events they sought to hire a caterer and leave the work of the kitchen to others.

The HHNAA hosted a small succession of yearly events: a musical tea meant to help raise funds; a reception for the graduates of the nursing school, and an association banquet. The sitting president of the association appointed an entertainment committee whose job it was to coordinate the different aspects of the entertainment and reporting each step back to the membership for approval. The entertainment committee for 1900 sought to be frugal, but also to enjoy cultural entertainment suitable to both their stations and aspirations. In 1900 they booked the drawing room and kitchen at the New Century Club until midnight on the day of the reception for ten dollars and hired the white caterer Mrs. Wimley to serve a 10 p.m. supper, using the Hahnemann colors as decoration.<sup>7</sup>

Wimley, however, could not keep the custom of the HHNAA. By 1903, even with a drastically reduced menu, the entertainment committee felt Wimley's charges of seventy-five cents per plate, seven dollars for waiters, and five dollars for flowers too expensive. The committee investigated a number of caterers, and after trying Mr. Veit, a white male caterer who

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<sup>7</sup> Hahnemann Hospital Nurses Alumnae Association, Minutes 1898-1904, Acc.#6, Collection #OS 158, Box 4, Legacy Center Archives & Special Collections, Drexel University College of Medicine.

## Modest Dreams and Grand Ambitions

subsequently went out of business, the HHNAA hired Robert S. Jackson. Jackson provided “refreshments of Ice cream, cake, coffee, Bon Bons...also lemonade. Flowers for table” for twenty-six dollars and seventy cents. While hardly considered a princely sum, it was a cost that the HHNAA could pay and were willing to pay. Pleased with the arrangements, the HHNAA continued to use Jackson for several years.

Born around 1864 in Essex County, Virginia, Robert S. Jackson headed to Philadelphia at the age of seventeen. By the time the HHNAA hired him, he was well ensconced as a leader of the black community. He attended the First African Baptist Church, a church in which “the lessons of industry, thrift, and savings [were] taught and emphasized by the leaders of the church in the most practical manner.”<sup>8</sup> There Jackson would have networked with many men involved in the catering trade such as Nathaniel L. Taliver, Thomas L. James, William Newman, Alfonso A. Lee, Lewis J. Bivins, George W. Cook and John S. Trower.<sup>9</sup> Jackson, an officer of the Reliable Mutual Aid, an “Industrial Insurance Society,” and a charter member of the Cherry Street Building and Loan, served alongside men dedicated to the church, community, and their role as businessmen and caterers. As a noted and successful caterer, Jackson could count the HHNAA as part of a diverse clientele and not representative of his custom as a whole. Thus, he was able to meet their needs at the price they required without feeling compromised. Still the successful caterer had to think of the needs of this new class of client.

Money formed the centerpiece of the HHNAA’s concerns. After all, the organization taxed members for special events and each event required a certain number of members attend to make the work of planning and hosting worthwhile and to keep the balance sheet in the black.

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<sup>8</sup> Brooks, 69.

<sup>9</sup> “Rev. R. S. Jackson, Berean President, Business Pioneer,” *Philadelphia Tribune*, July 11, 1953; Charles H. Brooks, *Official History of the First African Baptist Church* (Philadelphia, 1922), 38, 95.

## Modest Dreams and Grand Ambitions

They had no clubhouse of their own and needed to consider venue, food, and entertainment.

Over time the HHNAA also had to consider new diversions as a generation gap opened between the current set of graduates and the alumnae. Younger women wanted to participate in co-ed affairs where they did more than sit sedately at tables waiting to be served. The old ways might be fine for their parents or the very upper-classes, but the young found themselves craving something different, something modern.<sup>10</sup>

Not far from the sprawling magnificence of Wanamaker's, Joseph Horn and Frank Hardart opened the first automat in the United States at 818-820 Chestnut Street. Americans had been reading about the automat in newspaper travel accounts. Caroline Lange described the new form of eatery for the *San Francisco Chronicle*. "Their advantages are obvious," she wrote. "One has never to wait to be served, needs spend no more than 2 ½ cents if he wants only that amount of refreshment, can get a satisfactory lunch for 15 or 20 cents, does not have to fee a waiter, and can see the food before he selects it." Moreover, she felt that the novelty of the experience itself whet one's appetite.<sup>11</sup>

Horn and Hardart took a tiny luncheonette with fifteen stools and transformed it into a progressive marvel. Philadelphians tested the food and efficiency of the automat for themselves at their establishment in the summer of 1902. The *Philadelphia Inquirer* described how a patron approached the glass-fronted machines, and confronted with an array of "sandwiches, pies, coffee, soup, ice cream and variety of unusual quick lunch fare," had only to insert a nickel for the chosen article to drop down onto a plate or for the coffee to pour from the spigot. While the

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<sup>10</sup> Hahnemann Hospital Nurses Alumnae Association, Minutes 1898-1904, Acc.#6, Collection #OS 158, Box 4, Legacy Center Archives & Special Collections, Drexel University College of Medicine.

<sup>11</sup> Caroline Lange, "How Americans Dine Automatically in Copenhagen," *San Francisco Chronicle*, August 18, 1901.

## Modest Dreams and Grand Ambitions

*Inquirer* marveled at service “as neat as it is rapid,” the headline of the article proclaimed, “Each man his own waiter.” As captivating as the novelty, speed, and affordability of the automat was, the perceived freedom from relying on service was a substantial part of its allure.

Modern times called for new or modified forms of leisure. Places such as the automat and department store challenged the primacy of the kind of catered meal that the hospitality entrepreneurs had built their livelihoods and reputations on. John S. Trower served Philadelphia as a delegate to the second NNBL held in Chicago in 1901. Trower had migrated north from his birthplace in Northampton County, Virginia, through Baltimore, where he worked as an oyster opener as a young man, before heading to Philadelphia and eventually settling in the Germantown area, just north and west of Center City. The location Trower secured for his business, opposite the Philadelphia and Reading train station, placed the caterer in an optimal position to serve not only businessmen and the monied elite of Germantown and Chestnut Hill, but a diverse clientele. When the Germantown Saving Fund building fell vacant in 1876, Trower had enough capital to purchase and renovate the building. His catering and restaurant business proved to be one of the most successful in the area.<sup>12</sup>

“There will always be large social functions,” a fifty-two year old Trower told the convention. “America will always have large hotels and restaurants and the homes of the wealthy will always demand help of ability.”<sup>13</sup> Trower, with his spacious locale in the upscale Germantown business area, could accommodate large functions of white diners. Booker T. Washington described the Trower business as “one of the most complete of its kind in the country,” and enumerated the dining rooms, the “delivery department and ice cream plant, which

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<sup>12</sup> Booker T. Washington, *The Negro in Business*

<sup>13</sup> Report of the Second Annual Convention of the National Negro Business League at Chicago, Illinois (Chicago: R. S. Abbott Publishing Co., 1901), 25. Microfilm.

## Modest Dreams and Grand Ambitions

is run by electricity,” and the baking department while enumerating the various offices, dining rooms. Many black caterers, operating out of more cramped quarters, their own homes, or situated in areas of the city known to be particular to Philadelphia’s African American citizens did not have the luxury of space that Trower enjoyed.<sup>14</sup>

Large events seemed to drive the social life of white elites and aspiring elites more than ever before. Regional and national clubs and organizations, from the professional convention to the college alumni club, pulled ever larger groups together from the east to the west, the north to the south. Advances in transportation, from the transcontinental railway to the automobile, made it easier than ever to travel long distances. While hotels had grown to be a feature of elite entertaining throughout the course of the nineteenth century, the twentieth century marked a new phase in hotel construction, the emergence of the grand hotel as a center of social life.

George Boldt, a Prussian migrant, and his American wife, Louise, opened the doors of the Bellevue-Stratford Hotel on September 20, 1904. The *Harrisburg Patriot* regaled it as “the most complete, next to the Waldorf-Astoria [in New York], the largest hotel in the world.”<sup>15</sup> The imposing structure, built in the French Renaissance style, adorned the city street, and served as a fitting backdrop against which the rich, famous, and privileged could see and be seen. At its opening the grand hotel welcomed “a roll call of those most prominent in society, finance, professional life, and literature.” Its three dining rooms received an estimated 4,500 guests during the day, a number which did not include the after-theater crowd who would be seated after 11 p.m.<sup>16</sup> Such hotels, with their sumptuous fittings, latest technology, and grand spaces

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<sup>14</sup> Washington, *Negro in Business*, 50-51.

<sup>15</sup> “Old Bellevue Closed, New Hotel Opened,” *Harrisburg Patriot*, September 20, 1904.

<sup>16</sup> “Beauty and Fashion Attend Hostelry’s Formal Opening,” *Philadelphia Inquirer*, September 21, 1904.

## Modest Dreams and Grand Ambitions

became spots of choice. They offered sleeping accommodations for those who had to travel, as well as meals served amid the proper atmosphere. By combining services the grand hotel could offer better deals to the money-conscious among elites when necessary, but could also command top-dollar to increase its revenues. The department store with its restaurant, the automat, and the grand hotel all changed eating culture as part of the urban landscape, a social and geographic topography that formed the center of the catering trade.

### *Old and New Forms of Racial Prejudice*

The declension of the black catering trade that contemporaries and scholars have noted was not about a loss of numbers. W. E. B. Du Bois noticed “a large number of caterers in the [Seventh] ward” in his sociological study *The Philadelphia Negro* published in 1899; William Potter reported to the NNBL in 1900 that Philadelphia supported more black caterers than he had seen in any city; Richard R. Wright, Jr., noted in his 1911 dissertation, which the A. M. E. Book Concern published the following year, “There are more Negro caterers in [Philadelphia] than ever before.” Du Bois felt that tastemaking received “its cue from New York, London, and Paris” and thus “local caterers [could] no longer dictate fashion for any single American city.” Wright felt similarly, but described the situation of the caterers in this way: “They are less conspicuous and less of a monopoly.” Thus, the decline attributed to this era centered on influence and importance.<sup>17</sup>

The transformation of eating culture not only heralded a new, modern age, it also brought along old racial ideas, and produced new forms of prejudice that affected the livelihood of the black caterers. Catering, in general, had achieved recognition as a part of the professional

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<sup>17</sup> Du Bois, 120; NNBL Proceedings; Richard Wright, Jr.

## Modest Dreams and Grand Ambitions

hospitality trade. No longer considered merely a line of domestic work fit only for black people, white women and men, both native born and immigrant, entered the field and increased the competition for the most lucrative and select contracts. If, as Du Bois argued, most black caterers did only a small business, then their fiercest competition existed “with a class of small white caterers, who, if they were worse cooks, were better trained in the tricks of the trade.” Increased competition also meant that the real battle took place over the growing numbers of the aspiring middle class. A larger clientele meant that the “personal relationship between the caterer and those served was broken up, and a larger place for color prejudice was made.” The old guard white elite tended to be loyal to the caterers who had served them for years. New money, aspiring middle-class climbers, and a growing managerial class of bankers and government officials had no such allegiance.

The 1888 laws around obtaining a liquor license especially disadvantaged small-scale black caterers who had a mainly middle-class clientele. It was exorbitantly expensive. The \$2000 bond and yearly fee were beyond the means of many. The earlier system had merely required a small fee and a politician’s letter, a task more easily accomplished for black caterers who had had a virtual monopoly on serving elite white patrons.<sup>18</sup>

In order to move into the top tier of the catering trade more and more capital seemed to be required. As the wealthy moved out of the city to more suburban locations, reliable and fast transportation was practically a requirement for caterers, whether that meant horses and wagon, money for the railroad lines, or as the twentieth century wore on, access to an automobile. The

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<sup>18</sup> Juliet E. K. Walker, *The History of Black Business in America: Capitalism, Race, Entrepreneurship* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1998), 179; Roger Lane, *William Dorsey’s Philadelphia and Ours* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 114. The liquor license may not have had as big an impact on caterers at the forefront of the business as their patrons, such as the Pennsylvania Saving Fund Society, had extensive collections of wines and liquors and the caterers who served these clients had no need to procure alcohol.

## Modest Dreams and Grand Ambitions

wealthy had the means and the interest in new technological marvels to adopt them in their early stages. They wanted to be able to contact the caterer by telephone and dine under electric lights. Elite patrons and increasingly, even middle-class ones, became accustomed to these innovations as they spent time in the department store and grand hotel dining rooms which featured them. It was not impossible for black caterers to acquire financial capital, but institutional racism made it much more challenging.

More insidious than the everyday forms of race prejudice that all black people and black business owners had fought in the past and continued to fight, were the forms of racism that attacked the occupational status and offerings of the black food entrepreneur. Advertisements for packaged food challenged and cast doubt on the quality and value of caterers' offerings. The J. S. Ivins Company sold pound cake in four and a half pound loaves at the grocers. Not only did they claim that their sixty-eight years "experience and our Specific Guarantee of Purity give IVINSPOUND CAKE ALL the superiority and wholesomeness of home cooking," but they set themselves up as an alternative to the caterer. "Worthy of the most pretentious occasions, but priced to suit the most informal ones. You'll prefer Ivinspound cake to expensive caterer's cake." The ad made much of the cake's ingredients: "the finest, whitest flour; sweet, pure butter; selected, tested eggs; clean pure milk. Each claim inferred that consumers should beware of costly caterers' cakes possibly full of shoddy ingredients—not pure, not clean, and not white."<sup>19</sup>

Black Philadelphians had battled a visual culture that lampooned black aspirations in caricature, cartoons, and blackface minstrelsy since Edward Clay's popular series *Life in Philadelphia* appeared in 1828. However, the introduction of Aunt Jemima at the Chicago World's Fair in 1896 by the R. T. Davis Company introduced a racialized character who

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<sup>19</sup> Ivinspound Cake advertisement, *Philadelphia Inquirer*, January 30, 1914.

## Modest Dreams and Grand Ambitions

connected elements of the work, not to the future, but directly to both a real and imagined slave and plantation past. The public waiters of the early nineteenth century and the caterers who succeeded them at mid-century had elevated their work and service in the kitchen and dining room as a necessary component of cultural capital for those wishing to prove their place in the upper class. Now the combination of advertising and national events such as the world fairs sought to recast and recreate a national hospitality experience based on the imagery of the plantation South.

The Centennial World's Fair, held in Philadelphia in 1876, contained no eating venues owned and operated by African American caterers and restaurateurs, even though they had garnered fame for the city. Instead black men served as waiters at a host of other eateries on the fair grounds. Black men served as entertainment and part of the dining experience at Restaurant of the South with its "old-Plantation Darcy band," whose members also illustrated "Southern plantation scenes."<sup>20</sup> The Centennial World's Fair and the 1896 World's Fair in Chicago, also called the World's Columbian Exposition, were meant to create and celebrate an imagined national past and to illustrate the progress of American civilization. The planners placed the role of African Americans squarely in the past and denied that they had a future.

Scholars such as Megan J. Elias and M. M. Manring have studied the effect of racialized ideas around food and eating culture that emerged at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries. Elias argued that in the 1880s, "by positing an inextricable link between slavery and the deliciousness of Southern food, Southern-themed cookbook writers

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<sup>20</sup> *Visitors' Guide to the Centennial Exhibition and Philadelphia* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott & Co., 1876), 19.

## Modest Dreams and Grand Ambitions

rejected African Americans as legitimate participants in contemporary American cuisine.”<sup>21</sup>

Manring argued that the plantation South grew to be a national symbol of an abundant and luxurious hospitality that celebrated white culture and required black service to happen.<sup>22</sup>

However, this celebratory narrative did not just center on black service, but on black subservience as an integral part of white eating culture.

Aunt Jemima conjured up the image of mammy, the enslaved superwoman who concerned herself with the well-being of her white charges. However, at the Columbian Exposition, Aunt Jemima did not remain in the white imaginary. R. T. Davis Company hired Nancy Green to embody the mythic figure. Aunt Jemima lived. She made pancakes that satisfied empty stomachs and had smiles for those hungry for an imagined time when black men and women knew their place and understood that their very being was meant to enrich the lives of white people in material, economic, emotional, and culinary ways. The caterers had insisted on their status as tastemakers and entrepreneurs, but maintaining that stance in the public mind became increasingly difficult as popular culture proliferated demeaning images of African Americans connected to food. Further, in a social scene that sought the new, the different, the cutting edge, the narrative which positioned black caterers necessarily outside of that based on race seemed especially damaging to the future of the trade.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Megan J. Elias, *Food on the Page: Cookbooks and American Culture* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017), 41.

<sup>22</sup> M. M. Manring, *Slave in a Box: the Strange Career of Aunt Jemima* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1998), 11.

<sup>23</sup> Marilyn Kern-Foxworthy, *Aunt Jemima, Uncle Ben, and Rastus: Blacks in Advertising Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1994), 45-49, 63-67. For further discussions of the racialized connection made between African Americans and food, especially through material, visual, and popular culture, see Kyla Wazana Tompkins, *Racial Indigestion: Eating Bodies in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: New York University Press, 2012) and Psyche Williams-Forsen, *Building Houses Out of Chicken Legs* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006).

## Modest Dreams and Grand Ambitions

### *Modest Dreams and Grand Ambitions*

While race prejudice and the white popular imagination had a real cultural and material effect on the black catering trade, these elements were never the only ones of importance to the black communities in Philadelphia or to the caterers themselves. They had their own ideas and beliefs about where their duty lay and where the catering business belonged among their priorities. In the same address to the NNBL where John Trower explained why there would always be a place for catering in the hospitality industry, he also spoke about the role that catering played in the black community.

The number of fortunes made through catering “in its various forms” for people of African descent would impress anyone, but that in and of itself was not the most important gift of the industry. Trower reminded his audience that “up to the present time this business has more than any other kind in Northern cities of work given to the race—more men of means, more men of the gospel ministry, and more men of the professions than any other vocation.” While professional black men stood high in esteem for the ways in which they embodied the progress of the race, many had gotten their start as caterers or working for caterers.

Trower continued, “Hundreds who now stand high in the ministry and in the professions earned their money in our business, and you would be surprised to know how many of our young men of to-day could not be pursuing professional courses if it were not for the opportunity we are affording them.”<sup>24</sup> Trower acknowledged that the most important aspect of catering may not have been as an end in and of itself, but as a stepping stone into professional work and as an entrée into other areas of the hospitality trade such as restaurant and hotel work.

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<sup>24</sup> *Proceedings of the National Negro Business League*, 1901, 23-24. Microfilm.

## Modest Dreams and Grand Ambitions

Trower's observations might not seem novel. African American men had known that catering could be a vehicle for social mobility early in the nineteenth century. Although he understood, it did not mean that he felt happy about it. Catering no longer seemed to be attracting the same level of enthusiasm from young black men as an occupational choice. Trower placed the blame squarely on the shoulders of those young men. Trower enumerated three reasons that he felt held back young men from entering the catering field in large numbers. Black men were "slow to branch out in business," had "failed to make a study of the work," and had "looked with more or less disgust upon this form of service."<sup>25</sup> William Potter held similar views. He also felt that black caterers were at fault for too many had "but little knowledge of the business, to the detriment of themselves and the regular caterers." Beyond this, Potter felt there were too many egos and too much self-interest that kept the caterers from working together, in spite of cooperative organizations such as the Caterers' Association and the Philadelphia Manufacturing and Supply Company.<sup>26</sup>

Trower and Potter were successful and had enjoyed long careers. They believed that if they could succeed, all could succeed. They did not take into account the changed circumstances of the twentieth century from the previous one or speak of structural racism that combined to erode the number of available and lucrative catering contracts. In 1820 the population of the city hovered around 64,000, but by 1910 the population had topped one and a half million people. It must have seemed more than difficult, especially for a new caterer, to build the connections necessary to a thriving business.

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 24-25.

<sup>26</sup> *Proceedings of the National Negro Business League* [...] (Boston: J. R. Hamm, 1901), 155-156. Microfilm.

## Modest Dreams and Grand Ambitions

Some of Trower and Potter's criticism may have been just, but it also exhibited a natural desire to have power over one's destiny, even if it meant blaming people for what they could not control. Trower concluded his remarks with the observation that "no man can become proficient in his work, or a master in his art unless he sees his future in that work." His conclusion begged this question: where did young black men and women see their future?

Over the course of the nineteenth century many catering concerns had been family affairs. James Prosser had partnered with son-in-law John McKee, and both his son James, Jr. and daughter-in-law Sarah had inherited and run the business. J. Prosser Osbourn, the son of Prosser, Sr.'s daughter, Hester Osbourn, ran his own catering business, no doubt excelling based on a lifetime of accrued knowledge. Henry Minton opened and ran a confectionary with his son William. Mary Frances Augustin worked with her husband and children until his death in 1843. She then continued the business, mainly with the help of her oldest son James. Upon James' death in 1878, Peter Jerome Augustin took up the mantle with his wife, Elizabeth Kennedy Augustin. Following his death in 1892, two years after the passing of his mother, Elizabeth ran the business with their son James for a few more years.<sup>27</sup>

In the twentieth century some children did follow their parents into catering. Nathaniel L. Taliver's three sons, Nathaniel, Jr., Lewis, and Julian, joined their father in the trade, as did Martin V. B. Cowdery's son Martin, Jr. and Charles Alston's son Samuel. Some catered for a

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<sup>27</sup> 1900 U. S. Census, Philadelphia County. Ancestry; 1910 U. S. Census, Philadelphia County. Ancestry; 1920 U. S. Census, Philadelphia County. Ancestry; *Philadelphia Colored Directory*, 1907; *Philadelphia Colored Directory*, 1910; *Philadelphia Colored Directory*, 1913; Deed to 1105 Walnut Street Property, James G. Augustin transfer from Elizabeth H. Freeman, April 13, 1864, Philadelphia City Archives; James Augustin, 1863, U.S. IRS Tax Assessment Lists, 1862-1918, Records of the Internal Revenue Service, Record Group 58, (Washington D. C.: National Archives and Records Administration), Ancestry.com (accessed April 24, 2015); James G. Augustin, will, W323-1878, Reel #3, 1878, Wills 249-381, Register of Wills, City of Philadelphia; St. Andrew's Society, "Extracts from the Minutes," in *An Historical Catalogue of the St. Andrew's Society of Philadelphia: with Biographical Sketches of Deceased Members* (Philadelphia: Loughhead & Co., 1907); Peter Jerome Augustin Obituary, *The Journal*, July 9, 1892 vol. 1, no. 20, p. 1, Philadelphia Archdiocese Historical Research Center.

## Modest Dreams and Grand Ambitions

short time, but went on to other pursuits, such as Andrew F. Stevens, Jr. who ultimately went into banking, development, and politics, representing the Seventh Ward of the city on the Common Council. However, many were like the caterer's son interviewed by the *Tribune* who saw no future in the business and elected a different path altogether.

As the social and cultural capital of the caterers declined black communities looked to men and women who had entered the professions for role models and leadership. Ministers and teachers had always held pride of place, but now black doctors, pharmacists, nurses, lawyers, journalists, and politicians joined them atop the pedestal. Admiration also went to those who successfully broke into niches formerly reserved for white people. Publications such as *Men of Mark: Eminent, Progressive, and Rising* published in 1887; *The Philadelphia Colored Directory* published in 1907, 1910, and in 1913; and *Who's Who in Philadelphia: a Collection of Thirty Biographical Sketches of Philadelphia Colored People* published in 1912 all celebrated and documented the progress of the race through the success of individual people. They contained facts about the black community, short history lessons, records of achievement and photographic portraits.

These books proclaimed a narrative that countered myths and stereotypes meant to demean African Americans. Professional men and women made up the majority of their entries. Few caterers graced their pages. As another example, caterers served as speakers and delegates in the early years of the National Negro Business League, but as time went on caterers and catering featured less and less on the agenda. People wanted to know about avenues that had previously been closed and newly emerging professions. Higher education was one way they could take advantage of new opportunities.

## Modest Dreams and Grand Ambitions

Women, in particular, to whom the domestic function of cooking had “naturally” fallen did not necessarily take advantage of greater access to education in order to start catering enterprises. A young woman in 1904 headed for the newly renamed Cheyney University (formerly the Institute for Colored Youth) would be more likely to hold the dream of teaching domestic science close to her heart rather than learning to be a cook or caterer. A philosophical battle which had its roots in earlier eras raged anew at the turn of the twentieth century. Those who argued that African American students needed manual and industrial skills had their thoughts magnified by Booker T. Washington and argued against those who wanted students of African descent to gain a classical education.

Leslie Pinckney Hill, president of Cheyney from 1913 to 1951, championed the role of teachers and wrote a letter to a colleague at the New York City Teacher’s College urging them to reconsider their decreased emphasis on teaching. He wrote, “I have been greatly distressed and somewhat depressed to think that your institution desires no longer to encourage the best of our young women and men to fit themselves...for the high profession of teaching.” Hill felt that the mission of teaching could combat the “rampant race-prejudice” in the country. He argued that race-prejudice made their mission as educators all the more important. “For us here at Cheyney this means that we must lose no time in trying to build here an institution that will supply all those professional opportunities which, as I gather from you, will no longer be offered at Teacher’s College, but more and more denied.”<sup>28</sup> College men and women, though they entered an institution like Cheyney from a variety of class positions, sought to grasp the totality of opportunities afforded to them. They wanted to be professionals, aspire to higher class positions,

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<sup>28</sup> Letter from Leslie Pinckney Hill to James E. Russell, November 24, 1913, Leslie Pinckney Hill Collection, Box 3, Folder 20, Cheyney University Archives.

## Modest Dreams and Grand Ambitions

and they fought for their chances, even if on a larger scale their choices remained somewhat circumscribed.

This is not to say that the women and men who learned domestic science and other industrial and mechanical skills did not go into catering or accept catering contracts. Cheyney fielded many inquiries from white people for domestic assistance, as well as temporary help to cook for events and summer excursions. Many students took these jobs as a way to fund their education. Still, the alumni did not seem to see these jobs as their ultimate goal, but as the stepping stone that Trower spoke about to the NNBL.<sup>29</sup>

While the previous discussion has explored those who chose other paths than catering, many men and women did choose catering as a career. Studies that include the caterers tend to focus on the most successful, even while acknowledging that they represent only a small fraction of the varied experience among caterers. The leaders of the trade are important to study, but placing their experiences within the context of a larger group is important for a better understanding of the trade in the early years of the twentieth century.

As much as organizations such as the Caterers' Association were meant for mutual help, they also served as gatekeeping organizations that set certain standards and held up those who could meet them while eschewing those who could not. The *Philadelphia Tribune* regularly carried news of the Caterers' Association such as who had won their yearly elections and features on their entertainments. Men like Potter, Trower, Jackson, and Peter Albert Dutrieuille appeared again and again. They were social, as well as commercial, elites.

Peter Albert Dutrieuille signed the papers purchasing the building at 108 South Eighteenth Street on July 24, 1873 for his café and catering business. His portrait appeared in

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<sup>29</sup> Hugh M. Browne Papers; Leslie Pinckney Hill Papers, Cheyney University Archives.

## Modest Dreams and Grand Ambitions

Charles Frederick White's *Who's Who in Philadelphia* published in 1912. Dutrieuille had apprenticed as a shoe maker to his cousin Stephen Cuyjet, but then had learned the catering business through the Baptist family who became his in-laws when he married their daughter Amelia. His biography contained a litany of achievements. He had been in the city militia, was a member of The Social Club, the New York, Philadelphia and Newport Fishing Club, and had been a founding member and officer of the Caterers' Manufacturing and Supply Company, the Philadelphia Caterers' Association, the Pioneer Building and Loan Association, the Fraternal Association, the Negro Historical Society, St. Mary's Catholic Beneficiary Society and St. Peter Claver Holy Name Society.<sup>30</sup> Dutrieuille and other leaders in the field found themselves serving on multiple boards and giving funds to a plethora of philanthropic causes.

Dutrieuille's portrait in *Who's Who* shows a man with hair cut short, shading down into apparent sideburns, but not enough to disguise the emergent wave. His moustache and the tuft of hair under his bottom lip are ample but groomed. He wears a vest under his jacket, and a patterned tie rests smoothly against his white shirt. Portraits such as this one of Dutrieuille provided a critique to popular visual culture. As scholar Jasmine Cobb argues, the portrait becomes "a palpable record of freedom and Black visibility that bolstered the contemporaneous displays of autonomy staged within Black communities." Dutrieuille's portrait framed a prominent caterer, prominent as a result of his involvement in business, church, and social clubs that elevated both him and the race.

John Trower had a similar record of autonomy and achievement, although his religious ties were Protestant and Baptist rather than Catholic. Trower had grand ambitions and the funds

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<sup>30</sup> Charles Frederick White, *Who's Who in Philadelphia: A Collection of Thirty Biographical Sketches of Philadelphia Colored People ... Together with Cuts and Information of Some of Their Leading Institutions and Organizations*, (Philadelphia: A.M.E. Book Concern, 1912), 49-50.

## Modest Dreams and Grand Ambitions

to back them as he satisfied what he believed to be his duty to the African American community. He partnered with his pastor at the Cherry Street Baptist Church, William A. Creditt, to found the Downingtown Industrial and Agricultural School. They were particularly concerned with young men and women who had dropped out of public school. Trower sought to give them a chance, explaining, “These young people have not been trained in any domestic work, they are too young for adult manual labor, skilled mechanics among us are so few that they may not be apprenticed: factories, stores, and shops are not open to them.”<sup>31</sup> Trower wanted his school to be “the Tuskegee of the North,” providing underserved black youth a means to make a living and a future for themselves.<sup>32</sup>

Most caterers in this era were not like Dutrieuille and Trower. The majority resembled this young man described by William Potter who

began work at \$2 per week and saved from that sum, later getting \$5, then \$8, has saved \$3000 by frugality, honesty, and perseverance, studies at night, when many of his young friends are roving the streets. . . . He dresses in good taste, does not expect to become a Rockefeller, but hopes some day to make for himself a home---for her and for him. This young man has the respect and confidence of his employers and his fellow employees.<sup>33</sup>

This was a modest, but achievable dream. Abram Pressey, born in Williamsburg, Virginia in 1861, was in business for himself as a caterer, but also served regularly as a waiter for the Dutrieuilles. He might not achieve the success of a William Newman or a John W. Price, but he made a comfortable living. In 1910 he and his wife Mary, owned their own home in a respectable black neighborhood on Addison Street.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> *The Philadelphia Colored Directory* [...], 1910, 36.

<sup>32</sup> Downingtown Agricultural and Industrial School, Box 1, Charles Blockson Collection, Temple University.

<sup>33</sup> *Proceedings of the National Negro Business League* [...] (Boston: J. R. Hamm, 1901), 156. Microfilm.

<sup>34</sup> Abram B. Pressey, 1910 U. S. Census; Pennsylvania Death Certificate. Ancestry; Albert Dutrieuille Catering, MSS 52, Ledger, Box 2, Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

## Modest Dreams and Grand Ambitions

Black women caterers have been underrepresented in discussions of the catering trade. Their participation also ran along a continuum. Clara Baptist was one of the most storied and famous. When she wed Alfred Theodore Augustin on October 6, 1870, their marriage joined two families who each carried on a successful catering business. Clara grew up as part of her family's enterprise. Her father Eugene practiced his trade as a cabinetmaker in the first quarter of the nineteenth century. Family lore names her mother, Matilda, as the de facto founder of the business, and it is not known how early or to what extent Eugene became involved in his wife's catering concern. Clara had a head for business.<sup>35</sup>

Theodore, the youngest son of Peter Augustin and Mary Frances Augustin was known for his prowess in the kitchen. Theodore and Clara combined their talents and names to begin Augustin & Baptist Catering and extend the business that Clara partnered in with her parents. When Theodore died in 1880 Clara continued running the business with her family and raised its reputation to new heights. She never remarried, and she had no children. Instead, she had an empire.<sup>36</sup>

Her great-niece, Bernice Dutrieuille Shelton, described Clara as “a diminutive, sharp-minded, dynamo, of whom everyone stood a bit in awe. She ruled the roost.”<sup>37</sup> And she had developed it into a formidable roost. In 1905 she designed a \$17,000 remodel of the properties at 255 and 257 South Fifteenth Street. Architect Walter F. Price had provided the drawings for “a

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<sup>35</sup> Biographical Data, Albert E. Dutrieuille Catering Records, MSS 52, Box 1, Folder 1, HSP; October 6, 1870 Alfred T. Augustine to Clara Baptist, Philadelphia Marriage Registers, Year 1870, Record of Marriage Registry, 113, Philadelphia City Archives. The Augustin, Baptist, Cuyjet, and Dutrieuille families, all with Saint Dominguan roots, intermarried in Philadelphia forming a large connected family. They created an important history in catering as well as in other fields.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Bernice Shelton to Robyn I. Stone, n.d., Albert E. Dutrieuille Catering Records MSS 52, Box 1, Folder 1, “Personal Papers,” Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

## Modest Dreams and Grand Ambitions

café, finished in quartered white oak, and a marble tile floor and a kitchen in the first story; a parlor, in quartered white oak; a dining-room, in chestnut, and a linen room, with the same kind of wood, will be fitted up on the second floor, and bedrooms will be located on the third and fourth floors. These will be finished in poplar.”<sup>38</sup> Clara Augustin had a firm grasp of the business that she had grown up in. She provided delicious dishes within sumptuous settings on a grand scale. The business represented, not just a family legacy, but a family livelihood. Eugene Baptist, Sr. wrote in his will, “It is of the greatest importance for the welfare of all my children that the business should not be endangered or crippled.”<sup>39</sup> The business provided a living and an income for Clara, Eugene, Jr., Tillie, and Jerome, the remaining children.

Women caterers such as Mary Rodgers, Ida Cokine, and Mary Clay, none of whom were as prominent as Clara Augustin, represent varied experiences in the industry. Mary E. Rodgers born around 1868 in Woodstock, Virginia, had been widowed. Her husband Joseph had catered before his death. Listed in the 1910 census as head of household, Mary Rodgers made a home for her only son Raymond and one lodger in the house that she paid the mortgage for on Locust Street. Rodgers had a membership in the local National Negro Business League.

Ida Cokine had been born in South Carolina in 1864. She had five children aged four to seventeen, all of whom lived with her in 1910, as well as a thirty-year old niece who worked as a clerk in an office. Her husband, James, had worked as a barber and a waiter until his death in 1908. Cokine paid a mortgage on her home in Carpenter Street. Unlike Rodgers, Cokine catered

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<sup>38</sup>“The Latest New in Real Estate,” *Philadelphia Inquirer*, July 24, 1905.

<sup>39</sup> Eugene Baptist, will dated April 27, 1892, proved August 17, 1904, *Pennsylvania Wills and Probate Records, 1683-1993*, Wills 1536-1904, 1904, Images 108-129. Ancestry.

## Modest Dreams and Grand Ambitions

part-time while plying her trade as a dressmaker. Both jobs could be done from home while caring for her family.

Born in Maryland in 1858, by 1910 Mary Clay had been widowed and buried both of her children. She rented her house on Thompson Street which she shared with four lodgers. The three male lodgers were all waiters—at a restaurant, a boarding house, and in a private family.

Rodgers, Cokine, and Clay who advertised their position as caterers in the *Colored Directory*, illustrate how important it was for women, especially those who were single or widowed to have flexible work that could be done from home. Neither Clay nor Cokine appear as caterers in Boyd's Business Directory. Perhaps they did not have the funds for both publications or maybe they confined their catering to the black community.<sup>40</sup>

These women, with the possible exception of Mary Rodgers, were part of the small scale entrepreneurs that Du Bois had written about. The women had migrated to Philadelphia joining the movement that increased the Southern sounds and culinary scents of the city's neighborhoods. Catering proved to be one path with many branches that was flexible enough to meet their varying needs and still enable them to maintain a vision of stable, middle-class respectability.

### *Conclusion*

Historian Roger Lane called late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Philadelphia “the metropolitan headquarters of Afro-American urbanity” because “it had the largest Afro-American population of any northern city—Chicago and New York would not match it, either absolutely or relatively, until sometime in the twentieth century—but also that it was central to

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<sup>40</sup> While elite black caterers may not have had black clients in the first half of the nineteenth century (I do not consider their donation of time and talent to churches that they belonged to, for instance), by the turn of the twentieth century there is some evidence that some caterers had both black and white clients.

## Modest Dreams and Grand Ambitions

the cosmopolitan web that tied so much of black America together.”<sup>41</sup> This sense of the cosmopolitan, of urbanity was a quality that the men and women in the Philadelphia catering trade had grasped and honed since the days of the early republic. It was part of the cultural capital they developed to help them move ahead and to move up.

The idea that catering was dying as a profession in the early years of the twentieth century holds true only when thinking about the highest pinnacle of the catering trade. Although Peter Albert Dutrieuille passed his business on to his son, Albert Eugene Dutrieuille who kept it thriving into the 1970s, the ilk of Robert Bogle, Peter Augustin, Thomas J. Dorsey, Henry Minton, and James Prosser, the pioneers and vanguard of the early to mid-nineteenth century, who had enjoyed high levels of social and cultural capital, would not be seen again. Still, the black catering trade continued to provide a livelihood for many African Americans. Because archival records favor those who are wealthy and prominent, and in the case of the catering trade, those who are men, it is difficult to ascertain the numbers and variations that existed within the trade in this era.

The catering trade built forms of capital that functioned best in the mid to late nineteenth century. As the number of wealthy Philadelphians dwindled, cut down by recessions and depressions, as the forms of entertaining that carried cultural capital changed, as the “New Negroes” of the twentieth century looked to other markers of success and embraced those who entered the professions or the arts as the fitting leaders of the new century, those in the catering trade had less cultural influence.

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<sup>41</sup>. Lane, xii.

## Modest Dreams and Grand Ambitions

The diminished cultural clout of the twentieth-century caterers suffers in comparison with that enjoyed by their early nineteenth century compatriots, but that doesn't mean that it was insignificant or nonexistent. Perhaps the caterers of this era "failed" because they succeeded too well. Distinction, which was central to the cultural clout the nineteenth-century caterers enjoyed, thrives on an element of exclusivity. By the twentieth century caterers could be had in any city and at every price point. The very distinctiveness that had made it such a successful occupation for African Americans, had been worn away by that very success. Perhaps the time has come for us to not only reevaluate the history of catering in this period, but what success meant to the men and women in the trade.