"We Are As Grand As We Want to Be": African American Mutual Aid Groups in Murfreesboro

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Graduate Assistant, Center for Historic Preservation
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Thank you to the following for the assistance in learning more about these groups

- Center for Historic Preservation
- Bradley Academy Museum
- John Lodl and the staff of the Rutherford County Archives
- Rutherford County Register of Deeds
- Historical Research Room, Linebaugh Library
- Walker Library, MTSU
View of Murfreesboro, Tennessee
Image courtesy Historic Murfreesboro Postcard Collection, Center for Historic Preservation

Bird’s-eye View of Manufacturing Plants, Murfreesboro, Tenn.
Murfreesboro Street Scene, 20th century

Image courtesy Center for Historic Preservation, Historic Murfreesboro Postcard Collection
African American Schools

Bradley Academy. Image courtesy Center for Historic Preservation.
African American School located on Sevier Street (between Church and Spring Streets)

From the 1914 Sanborn Map.
Tornado Damage to the Square

Image courtesy the Center for Historic Preservation, Historic Murfreesboro Postcard Collection
Industry in Murfreesboro

Images courtesy the Historic Murfreesboro Postcard Collection, Center for Historic Preservation
African American Churches

Mt. Zion Missionary Baptist
*Image courtesy Center for Historic Preservation*

Allen Chapel AME
*Image courtesy Center for Historic Preservation*
Known by terms such as benevolent societies, mutual aid societies, voluntary associations, and fraternal organizations.

- Place for socialization
- Allowed for men and women to exercise leadership roles
- Some provided members with sickness and burial benefits
- Probably thousands of these groups existed in the United States from Reconstruction through the mid 20th century.
Some of Murfreesboro’s Aid Groups

- Benevolent Society
- Working People’s Labor & Art Association - also known as the WPLAA (later changed name to Sons and Daughters of Cyrene)
- Working People’s Labor Aid Association (splinter group formed by unhappy members of the Working People’s Labor Art Association)
Purchased the land for a cemetery on the Shelbyville Highway in 1897
Trustees included Alexander Simmons, William Jordan, Samuel Curren, George Allen, Berry Seward, and Henry Moore.
Mix of occupations – doctors, farm laborers, etc.
Cemetery has World War I veterans and Spanish-American war veteran internments
Over 650 internments
Who were the members of the Benevolent Society?

- Mix of occupations – teachers, farmers, laborers, factory workers, cooks, laundresses, etc.
- Berry Seward was the first African American electrician in Murfreesboro.
- George C. Harden was a medical doctor and graduate of Meharry Medical College.
- Dr. John McClellan, a medical doctor. He graduated from Meharry in 1880 and worked his entire career in Murfreesboro.
- Dave Ransom was a railroad laborer and worked for the Nashville, Chattanooga and St. Louis Rail Road.
Dr. G. C. Harden

Photo from the Constitution of the Working Peoples Labor and Art Society. In addition to being a member of the Benevolent Society, Dr. Harden was a member of the Working People’s Labor Art Association (Sons and Daughters of Cyrene), serving as an officer.
Dr. John B. McClellan

- Dr. McClellan graduated from Meharry in 1880 and began his medical practice in Murfreesboro. He remained in Murfreesboro for his entire career.

- “He states that he is not miserably rich but happily poor.” Murfreesboro Union, October 13, 1928.

Photo from Murfreesboro Union
The Nashville Colored Benevolent Society formed in 1868

By 1873, the society had 27 branches throughout Tennessee and a membership of 2,000.

There is a Benevolent Cemetery in Madison, Tennessee.

A Benevolent Lodge (Benevolent Lodge No. 210) still exists in Port Royal, TN.

http://benevolentlodge210.org/
Benevolent Cemetery - Madison
Benevolent Lodge No. 210

The Benevolent Society purchased a lot in town in November 1917.

Lot located on State Street and one of the adjoining property owners was the Sons and Daughters of Cyrene.

Owned lot until 1931.

Sold lot to Preston Scales and wife, Willie Scales.
Location of Benevolent Lodge?
Benevolent Lodge site as it appears today
Benevolent Cemetery today
Benevolent Cemetery today
African American benevolent society formed in 1890 in Nashville, Tennessee

Founders began the group because “they had borne the sting of oppression until they could hold out no longer.”

Evidence suggests lodges existed throughout the mid-state – Murfreesboro, Alexandria, Cemetery, Eagleville, Chapel Hill, Bell Buckle and Wartrace.

Emphasis on assisting each other and uplift.
REPORT OF THE G. F. S.
From Aug. 14th, 1913 to Aug 12th, 1914.
Receipts as Follows:

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<th>No.</th>
<th>Location</th>
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<td>Cemetery (Juvenile)</td>
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<tr>
<td>No. 78</td>
<td>Overall</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Overall (Juvenile)</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>No. 204</td>
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<td>Total collected before the Convention</td>
<td>299.95</td>
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—18—
Membership – WPLAA

- Offered sickness and burial benefits
- Temperance aspect – no members allowed that drank or sold alcohol
- To become a member, your application for membership had to be supported by at least one current member.
Who were the members of the WPLAA?

- Some variety of occupations but, looking at the leadership of the local lodge, most members were laborers.
- Dr. George C. Hardin (also a member of the successor group, Sons and Daughters of Cyrene) a prominent member and held state office in the group.
- F. Woodson was a grocery store merchant.
- Other members included a brick mortar maker, cooks, laundresses, laborers and dressmakers.
Other members of the WPLAA

- Dave Ransom (railroad worker and also member of the Benevolent Society)
- Minnie Shane (census records indicate she was washer woman and later a dressmaker to a private family)
- Susan Randolph (laundress) – married to a farm laborer
- Samuel and Lucy Hodge – they lent the WPLAA money to renovate the lodge hall in 1901. He was a laborer and she was a cook.
In 1896, the Working Peoples Labor and Art Association purchased a lot and building on West Main Street.

Around 1903, the group renovated the building for their meeting house by Pete Guy, local carpenter/contractor.

After a lawsuit in 1914, the Sons and Daughters of Cyrene sold the land in 1917 to Henry King, owner of a wholesale grocery business. The lodge building no longer exists.
WPLAA Lodge Location?

Image from 1924 Sanborn Map
WPLAA Lodge site today
Changed name to Sons and Daughters of Cyrene in 1914
Some members of the lodge in Murfreesboro objected – they felt the name change was done to attract more middle-class members
Harvey Childress and John Watkins, leaders in the Murfreesboro lodge, began a new group, the Working Peoples Labor Aid Association
The two groups sued each other in 1915 for rights to the lodge and money
Names of the Murfreesboro groups

- **Working People’s Labor and Art Association (WPLAA)** – the initial group formed in Nashville in 1890. They bought property in Murfreesboro in 1896.

- **The Sons and Daughters of Cyrene** – The WPLAA changed their name to this in August 1914. This led to factions in Murfreesboro and elsewhere, and a new group formed.

- **The Working People’s Labor Aid Association** – led by Harvey Childress and John Watkins. This group was formed in October/November 1914.
Who remained in the Sons and Daughters of Cyrene?

- Dr. Hardin remained and was a prominent member.
- Other members and leaders included Dave Ransom (railroad worker), Berry Seward (first African American electrician in town), Lula Brown (cook), Cindy Ransom (Dave’s wife and a laundress), Millie Moore (a servant in a home), Hattie Hickman (cook) and Annie Stevenson (cook in a private home).
- Mix of occupations and ages.
Sons and Daughters of Cyrene purchased a lot in Murfreesboro for a lodge in 1917
- Lodge located on State Street, beside the present day Scales and Son Funeral Home
- Sold the property in 1943 to R. H. Harrison, who later sold it to Preston Scales.
Sons and Daughters of Cyrene Lodge Site

Image from 1931 Sanborn Map
Sons and Daughter Site today
Working Peoples Labor Aid Association

- Formed in 1914 in reaction to the name change of the Working Peoples Labor and Art Association and other reasons
- In 1915, John Watkins, the president, reported they had 800-900 members with 14 subordinate lodges across the state
- Offered sickness and burial benefits like the Working Peoples Labor and Art Association
- Purchased a lot in Murfreesboro in 1918 – located on Maple Street.
- The lot purchased by the Murfreesboro Housing Authority in 1953 in their “slum clearance” efforts.
Working Peoples Labor Aid Association location?

Image from the 1924 Sanborn map
The Working Peoples Labor Aid Association lodge may have been in this area of town. Photo taken during the construction of Broad Street.

Image from photos taken by Dr. Charles Jenkins of the construction of Broad Street. Courtesy the Center for Historic Preservation.
Working Peoples Labor Aid Association today (rough approximation)
Who were the members of the WPL Aid Association?

- Mostly laborers of various types. Harvey Childress remained involved – he drove a wood wagon for Earthman Lumber. Nannie Cator, a cook in a private family, was a trustee.
- Jesse Marable was a factory laborer and his wife a cook for a private family. Charlie Williams was an odd jobs laborer. Nellie King was a laundress and her husband a furniture store porter.
- Other members included a farmer (N.C. Crutcher), odd jobs laborers, and factory laborers.
There was a thriving lodge/aid group community in Murfreesboro at the beginning of the 20th century. These aid groups provided a safety net for their members in terms of sickness benefits and burial benefits. The groups allowed a space for African Americans to socialize, to exercise leadership roles and to build communities within the larger community.
Questions/Comments