'Informal' organizations nurture the community

By Simmona Simmons
Special to the AFRO

Many informal community-based organizations which evolved because of segregation, sustained and nurtured the black community from the Civil Rights Era to the present.

These organizations gave directions and goals to many individuals and made significant contributions to the social and cultural tapestry locally and nationally. Two such groups are the Arena Players and the Arch Social Club.

The Arena Players, which is an intrinsic part of Baltimore, was founded in 1953. The original premise was to provide a platform for expression of individual and combined talents and to share them with friends and community.

The initial production, William Saroyon's "Hello Out There," was presented to a small audience which was outnumbered by the performers on the stage.

The performance was free, however it was still difficult to fill the one hundred fifty rented chairs.

This effort was to take place on the campus of Coppin State Teachers College now Coppin State College.

The President, Dr. Miles W. Connor and Mrs. Ethel J. Day, administrative assistant gave the group their support and by the end of the first season, their audience increased and they presented their first full length three act play, "Bell, Book and Candle" by John Van Druten.

As the group became more successful, before the sixth season, fall 1958 began, they left Coppin and relocated at the Druid Hill Avenue YMCA.

The group engendered many relationships with local churches, schools and other community groups.

The Sixties ushered in increased activities and larger audiences to such proportions that their location was not adequate to accommodate the patrons.

So the Arena Players moved to the Great Hall of the Church of Saint Mary the Virgin in the Walbrook area of the city. Later they moved to an abandoned church hall at 406 Orchard Street.

It is evident how important this group has become to the community by the demonstrated dedication of friends, families, and members who assisted in scrubbing, painting, moving, hauling and totally renovating the second floor of this building.

In 1969 as a result of cooperation and contribution from friends, members, board of directors and the community at large, the group was able to procure a building.

The Arena Players has served as a mechanism to instill pride in black culture, to bring together neighbors and friends.

MEMBERS of the Arena Players perform in "Happy Ending," a one-act comedy done recently at the playhouse. From left to right are Cynthia Frances Forbes, Sam Washington, and Harold Cornish.

BLAST FROM PAST—Charles T. Gamble and Robert Elliot relive old memories as the two long-time Arch Social Club members examine old pictures of the organization.

According to a News American Story, March 7, 1971, written by John Robinson, "Now poeple can come to the Arena Playhouse and see their neighbors on the stage and the coziness establishes a rapport between the actor and the spectator.." "The Arena Players are a sort of missionaries introducing live plays to church clubs and even at banquets. ... spreading the black art form to all and they give many benefit performances for those who cannot afford to see a play."

Consequently, the Arena Players play a vital social role.

The Arch Social Club captured unity and brotherhood when it was established March 15, 1912. Ms. Dona Hollie who was intrigued with the club pursued the history of the club and recreated it in writing so that is history could be preserved.

Ms. Hollie noted that the constitution of the Arch Club states that the purpose of the club is for promoting social, moral and mental uplift of members.

The original founders were George Bailey, Raymond Coates, Jeremiah Hill and Samuel Barney.

Hollie stresses that the club transcended all classes because in the early days there were individuals who were illiterate as well as professionals such as doctors, lawyers, etc.

This club was important in the community because it provided resource sharing as well as entertainment.

Hollie stated that one man learned to improve his reading skills, by his membership. Hollie says that the club is a black man's country club. The club recently celebrated its 75th anniversary. One member is now a third generation member.

"All social clubs should be about doing something ... we need to get back to a classless society," she said. "We ought to be a mixture of classes. We have an obligation to help society," says Dona Hollie.

She sees the significant role of clubs such as the Arch Club and other clubs such as the Jack and Jill Club, Teens and Tots, and DuBois Circle. These clubs exposed children to cultural activities to which children would not normally be exposed.

The Arena Players and the Arch Social Club and other clubs have contributed significantly to the community by providing mentors as well as forum for culture enrichment.

One cannot diminish the value of these organization which grew out of an era, of segregation and because of the friendship, and harmony, closeness, still survive and continue to shape the city.

Story teller to speak

The Maryland Historical Society presents storyteller McGill in "Black Heroines and Songs and Tales of Afro-American Folk Culture" on Sunday, February 14 at 2 p.m. Although the program is free and open to the public, advance registration is required by calling 685-3750 ext. 322.

Abolitionist Harriet Tubman, anti-slavery/anti-child abuse spokeswoman Sojourner Truth, and anthropologist Zora Neale Hurston are the heroines Ms. McGill will portray. "Old John Brown" and "I Smell Mama's Biscuits Burning" are just some of the chants and call and response tunes Ms. McGill will involve the audience in.

Alice McGill has been a storyteller, folklorist, poet, narrator and actress for 11 years. She appeared in the movies "Pudd'n Head Wilson" and "Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy," and served as a narrator for the Smithsonian Institute on black artists.

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Maryland's place in black history...then and now...

By James Abraham

The land of pleasant living hasn't always been very pleasant for black Baltimoreeans. But despite the Southern sentiments and ingrained racism experienced by our ancetors, black Baltimoreans were able to forge a vital community which produced leaders and movements of national stature.

Baltimore's contributions to black history are numerous. Either by birth or migration, men and women who later made their mark on the nation were nurtured here in the Monumental City.

The key to the vitality and strength of Baltimore's black community lies in a confluence of circumstances. The busy port and thriving industry attracted men and women from other towns.

The large free black population, the largest in the nation before the Civil War, provided a solid base from which to build strong institutions.

And the growth of strong institutions such as Morgan State University, Coppin State College, the Cortez Peters Business School, St. Frances Charles Hall Academy and Douglass High School gave the nation a steady stream of talented black men and women.

Baltimore's black community had its roots in the common denominator of the black experience: hard work. The only way for a black man to make it in the city during its early days was through labor or domestic service. But from those meinal beginnings grew strong fruit.

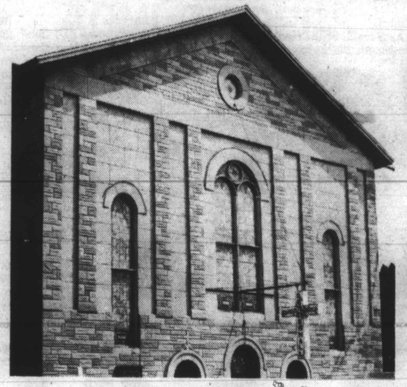
Historian Martha Putney recounts the story of Nelson Welles, a black man born in Baltimore in 1786. Welles was a "havler" who parlayed his meager possessions-a horse and wagon, into a small-time real estate empire stretching along Charles Street near the Inner Harbor. Welles left more than $8,000 when he died in 1843.

He decided to invest his money in the black community, and left a provision in his will that $3,500 be used to start a black school. The Welles Free School lasted until 1869 and trained about 40 students a year. His legacy also helped fund the Ellen Wood Infant School, another antebellum black institution.

Welles' story illustrates the central point of the black experience in Baltimore. At a time when there were no strong black communities in most American cities, Welles and others were laying the groundwork for black achievement and progress in education and commence.

Black people found little solace from the grinding wheel of racism and disenfranchisement, and turned inward to seek comfort. Probably the most enduring relief was that found in religion.

In Baltimore, black people eagerly joined the African Methodist Episcopal Church. The church was founded by Philadelphian Richard Allen in 1794 and by 1820 there were nearly 2,000 black parishioners in the Baltimore district alone. (Ebony)



LEADENHALL is one of the oldest churches in our community.

POLITICAL POWER—The culmination of the three-decade-long quest for political power was the appointment of Clarence "Du" Burns as mayor in 1986. Burns later lost the mayor's seat to former states attorney Kurt Schmoke, who became Baltimore's first elected black mayor in 1987.

Photo courtesy of Enoch Pratt Free Library

SLAVE QUARTERS — This 1910 photograph shows old slave quarters located at the southeast corner of Windsor Mill Road and Wetheredsville Road.

Black schools such as Welles' grew before the Civil War, at a time when little public funds were expended for black education. One indication of the strength of the free black community and their willingness to learn was the 1,400 black students enrolled in black schools by 1850. (Ebony)

Blacks also began to pool their money in orer to stimulate their meager economy. The Maryland General Assembly prohibited the founding of black corporations, as did the legislatures of several other states. The law specified that blacks could not have "lyceumsn, lodges, fire companies, or literary, dramatic, social, moreal and charitable societies."

But the desire to organize was too strong. To get around the law, blacks formed "benevolent organizations" which pooled members for insurance, burial expenses, and communal enterprises. By 1835 there were more than 35 such organizations in Baltimore. (Ebony)

Blacks invested their money in the community, primarily because few whites would sell to them or buy from them. Restrictive housing, Jim Crow laws and ostracism were bitter pills, but the sugar coating was the inward growth of Baltimore's black community.

Morgan University-trained historian Leroy Graham summed up the bustling black community of the last century in the title of his most recent book, "Baltimore: 19th Century Black Metropolis."

The Fifties also saw the emergence of another major force for national and local change - the Baltimore branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. The local NAACP had been in existence since the early part of the century, but the chapter grew to national prominence during the Great Depression.

As the Depression grew more severe, black activists began calling for economic justice in a shrinking job market. Lillie Carroll Jackson, leader of the local branch of the NAACP, initiated a campaign in 1933 aimed at boycotting merchants who refused to hire blacks. The boycott was one of the first modern black protest movements in Baltimore, and symbolized the new spirit of economic and social militancy engendered by the depression across the nation.

By 1934, the boycott was so successful several merchants sued the NAACP leadership. But the civil rights organization prevailed, and the effort led to black hiring along the Pennsylvania Avenue shopping corridor.

The May 1935 edition of the NAACP's monthly magazine, "The Crisis," noted that similar movements had sprung up in cities such as Chicago, Washington and New York (Aptheker)

The movement also swelled the ranks of the Baltimore chapter of the NAACP. By the end of World War II, the branch was one of the strongest in the nation with a membership of more than 2,000.

The talent of NAACP leaders such as Lillie Carroll Jackson, her daughter, Juanita Jackson Mitchell, and Clarence C. Mitchell, Jr., would make the Baltimore branch the focal point of the civil rights movement's legal struggles through the fifties.

Baltimore was the birthplace of the NAACP's 19 year fight to desegregate public schools. The first test case involved Donald Murray, a student who sought admission to the University of Maryland. In 1935, an NAACP defense team led by Howard University law professor Charles Houston and Thurgood Marshall, a longtime Baltimorean and Douglass High School graduate, smashed the separate-but-equal requirement barring blacks from graduate schools.

Ironically, the case was heard in Marshall's hometown. Much of the legal effort and logistic support of the NAACP lawyers during the landmark Brown vs Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas battle were furnished by the Baltimore chapter. The 1954 ruling by the high court is commonly considered to be the starting point for the modern civil rights movement. Some of the Baltimore lawyers involved in the case were Marshall, Tucker Deering and Juanita Jackson Mitchell.

Other Baltimoreans with national ties to the civil rights struggle include 40th District State Sen. Troy Brailey. Brailey, at one time, was considered one of labor leader A. Phillip Randolph's top aides, and did much to unite organized labor and the black community in Baltimore.

Baltimore was largely untouched by the rioting and protests which accompanied the decision in other Southern towns. The black and white school systems were merged quietly, although more subtle forms of racism, such as white flight from city schools, continued to the present.

Portions of this article are from a forthcoming biography of former state Senator Verda P. Welcome.

BILLIE
Drawing courtesy Heritage Greeting Cards, Inc.