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Audacious Alliances

By Mark H. Jones

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In early 20th century Hartford, Mary Townsend Seymour fought battles and formed daring alliances to promote the cause of local African Americans. She was a charter member of the Hartford chapter of the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) and, during the First World War, served in various war relief groups. Her public life even extended into the arenas of union organizing and politics—she was the first African American woman to run for state office. The years 1917-1920 were Seymour's most concentrated in terms of her public advocacy, but she remained influential in Hartford's African American community for decades afterward. Hers is the remarkable story of the rise of an African American woman into a position of community leadership during the early decades of the 20th century.

Mary Seymour's origins were humble. She was born in Hartford May 10, 1873, the youngest of seven children of Jacob Townsend and Emma Smith, who had come to Hartford from Flushing and Brooklyn, New York, respectively. By 1880 Jacob Townsend had disappeared from the city directories and his fate is unknown. In August 1888 Emma Townsend died, leaving 15-year-old Mary with an uncertain future. However prior to her mother's death, the Lloyd G. Seymour family had her taken in.

On June 3, 1888 Mary visited the city's old Halls of Record at Trumbull and Pearl streets to see her birth record. Since her first name was not listed, she asked the clerk to write in "Mary Emma" in the appropriate column. The clerk also wrote in the margin that on this date the young woman had given her name as "Mary Emma Townsend Seymour." It was an emphatic declaration of selfhood. Perhaps it was her difficult childhood, tempered by her adoptive family, which led Mary Seymour to develop her empathy for impoverished mothers and children and her fierce independence.

While a member of the family, she began a friendship with Frederick Seymour. In 1891 he landed a position with the U. S. Postal Service, one of the better jobs African American males could obtain at that time. The relationship between the two blossomed, and they married on December 16, 1891. Mary was 18 years old, but the marriage register listed her as 22. In 1892 the couple had a boy they named Richard, but he died within the year and was



Mary T. Seymour in the only known photograph of her extant. (Hartford Courant Sunday Magazine, Sunday, September 14, 1952)

buried in Old North Cemetery next to Mary's mother. Though Frederick and Mary were childless for the rest of their marriage their tragedy freed her to work on social causes.

Hartford's African American Community

African Americans had lived in Hartford since colonial times and over the years had achieved a tenuous peaceful coexistence in a White city. African American men found jobs as messengers, porters, cooks and chauffeurs, while African American women worked as domestics and laundresses. On October 24, 1915, the Hartford Courant ran an article entitled, "The Colored People Who Live in Hartford." A sub-headline declared, "They Have Their Own Churches, Fraternities and Other Organizations and Have Been and Are a Peaceful and Orderly Contingent, Industrious and a Credit to the City in Which They Live."

Yet this so-called harmony was relative. Hartford's African Americans resided in poor housing, paid exorbitant rents, and were not hired for better paying jobs. When investigating serious crimes, police cordoned off African American residential areas and checked every person coming in or going out.

Within a year of the Courant's assessment of them the world of these Yankee Blacks would change dramatically, and that change brought about Seymour's awakening to political and social activism. Across the industrial North, a great migration of thousands of African Americans from Dixie transformed the cities. In 1916 and 1917, hundreds of African Americans from the South moved to Hartford for better jobs and education for their children and to flee lynchings. At first, students from southern African American colleges came to work in the local tobacco fields, but letters and word-of-mouth descriptions about opportunities soon attracted families and entire church congregations. By 1917 the city's African American population more than doubled, rising from 1,600 to, according to the highest estimate, 4,000. Overnight the African American Yankees in Hartford were outnumbered by southerners who dressed differently, worshipped in a more exuberant style, and spoke with a noticeable dialect.

Whites noticed this influx and worried about its effects. For example, 700 to 800 African American students had entered Hartford schools in 1917/1918. In order to protect these students, many of whom attended evening classes, from harassment by Whites Superintendent of Schools Thomas Weaver announced that he would introduce a proposal for consideration by the Board of Education to segregate evening school classes by race. In a letter, the African American Ministerial Alliance vigorously condemned segregation, and Weaver dropped the idea. Instead, in one district there was a separate room for students of color, which educators referred to as "specialization."

Cofounded NAACP Chapter in Hartford

It was during this time that Mary Seymour emerged as a leader in her community; she led 20 Whites and African Americans in the formation of a chapter of the NAACP in Hartford. Back in January 1917, after attending an NAACP fundraiser against lynching, she and other attendees had discussed forming a local chapter. During the school controversy, they put their plan into action.

The NAACP was a fledgling national organization formed in 1909 by Whites and African Americans. By 1917, local chapters had multiplied, and it had gained a reputation as an active opponent against discrimination and lynching. Its field secretary was James Weldon Johnson, a former teacher, novelist, poet, musical lyricist, and diplomat. Mary White Ovington, a White Socialist and settlement worker, was a vice president of the organization who worked out of the New York City headquarters. Another leading force behind the NAACP's founding was Dr. W. E. B. Du Bois, a pioneering African American sociologist and eloquent advocate for equal rights for African Americans. He edited *The Crisis*, a magazine associated with the organization.

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On October 9, 1917 these three officials came to Hartford and spent an evening in the living room of Frederick and Mary Seymour at 420 New Britain Ave. Others present included Reverend R. R. Ball of the A. M. E. Zion Church; Dr. Rockwell H. Potter, Dean of the Hartford Theological Seminary and a leading White reformer; and three White female reformers and suffragists: Mary Bulkeley, Josephine Bennett, and Katherine Beach Day. They agreed to form an NAACP chapter, and elected an African American, William Service Bell, as president. On November 26, Johnson, Du Bois, and White returned to Hartford to attend the chapter's first open meeting held at Center Church.

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Like other African American female members of local NAACP chapters across the country, Mary Seymour carried out the day-to-day administrative work of the chapter. In the early days of the chapter she also served as its spokesperson in the absence of Bell, who was fighting overseas. In the 1920s this dual work would become a burden for her.

During the war years, women in African American Hartford formed clubs to address the problems of caring for soldiers and their families and helping the newcomers from the South assimilate into the urban North. But Mary T. Seymour went further than that. She joined the home service section of the Red Cross and observed the wretched conditions of African American soldiers' families. In the spring of 1918, she was instrumental in forming a local chapter of The Circle for Negro War Relief, Inc. to care for soldiers abroad and stateside and their families. Seymour and two allies from the NAACP, Rev. R. R. Ball and William S. Bell, served on the executive committee. Around this time, Seymour joined the newly formed Colored Women's League of Hartford. The League intended to teach the newcomers basic "domestic sciences" and bought a house on North Main Street with donations from the city's Whites and Blacks for meetings and classes.

In May 1918 Seymour corresponded with Caroline Ruutz-Rees, a suffragist, scholar and educator, who was chairperson of the Woman's Committee of the Connecticut State Council of Defense. Seymour informed Ruutz-Rees about the Hartford chapter of the Circle for Negro War Relief, and wrote a report on its activities. She also detailed the discriminatory practices that African American men and women faced from the army, navy, and the Red Cross. Seymour referred to the lynching of a pregnant African American woman in Georgia a few days before while the victim's brother was serving the cause of "freedom" abroad. "If we are to win this war," she exhorted Ruutz-Rees, "this thing of color prejudice has got to be reckoned with by those friends of your race who have the courage of their convictions to talk about it."

Involvement with Labor Issues

Her war relief work led Seymour to become interested in labor issues-especially regarding African American women working on the tobacco warehouse assembly line, whom she had visited in her capacity as a Red Cross home service worker. Seymour and Josephine Bennett interviewed African American female tobacco workers and learned how White warehouse foremen, some from the South, were cheating them out of an honest wage. The workers were never told what the piecework rate was each day and they never knew whether those who weighed each worker's tobacco leaves were ensuring an honest total. In a long letter sent to the NAACP that was later published in the June 1920 issue of *The Crisis*, Seymour described her own experience on a tobacco warehouse assembly line: She appeared at a warehouse in working clothes and spent time tobacco stripping and stemming. In this manner she was able to verify the women's complaints.

Seymour and Bennett urged the African American female tobacco workers to organize their own union to fight for

their rights. This was a daring notion because, as Seymour noted, the idea of forming a union was not supported by the local African American clergy, who railed against unions from their pulpits. Bennett and Seymour were able to secure the signed union cards from sixty courageous African American women; Seymour served as the local's secretary. However the local remained stagnant, members became discouraged, and within a year it fell apart. In Hartford, as well as other cities in the North, White unions viewed the migration of southern Blacks as a threat. Certainly racism was one reason for this viewpoint-the bosses and the white unions believed that African Americans did not have skills or aptitude to work on the assembly-line machines-but there were also economic reasons. Industrialists had used the African American migrants as "scab" labor to break strikes.

Bennett and Seymour, on the other hand, believed in a different vision. They foresaw a day when African American and White workers would form an alliance to advocate their shared rights and defend their common interests. As an officer of the local, Seymour sat on the Central Labor Union, an assembly of representatives from the city's locals. During meetings, she discussed the racial attitudes of White workers and the common stake of the two races. Mary T. Seymour even read articles from *The Crisis*.

African American Women and the Vote

Seymour also worked to enfranchise African American women, particularly after WWI ended. For her generation of White and African American female reformers, the suffrage movement should have been a unifying cause. But unlike their White counterparts African American women had to fight gender and class as well as racial barriers. After the Armistice, as women revived the fight for the 19th amendment, many White suffragists, such as Alice Paul, head of the National Women's Party, declared that they were interested only in removing the gender requirement for the vote. How states chose to qualify voters was of no interest to them. They announced this position in order to retain the support of southern White women and to reassure southern senators and congressmen that extending the suffrage to women would not enfranchise African American women. It was a stance that African American suffragists like Seymour naturally opposed.

On February 18, 1919, *The World* quoted Alice Paul's remarks regarding the intention of "Negro women" in Carolina to vote if the 19th amendment were passed. Paul reaffirmed that if passed, the amendment would not enfranchise these women. "We are organizing the White women in South Carolina but have heard of no activity or anxiety among the negresses." The article inflamed Mary Seymour so much that she wrote to Paul demanding an explanation and called the NAACP headquarters. As a result NAACP national leaders did ask Alice Paul and the National Woman's Suffrage Association to clarify their stands on votes for African American women. But their responses were evasive and unsatisfactory.

In April 1919 Seymour wrote NAACP national headquarters assessing the commitment of prominent White suffragists in Hartford for extending the right to vote to all women. She noted that Josephine Bennett, a member of the Hartford NAACP and the Women's Party, who knew Alice Paul, did not engage in "expediency" in order to get the 19th amendment passed. Katharine Houghton Hepburn (mother of the actress), on the other hand, who served on the executive board of the Woman's Party, was "very democratic in some things-but not to be trusted too far on the Negro question. She is a politician," Seymour cautioned, "in every sense of the word."

There is much more to Mary Seymour's story. The 1917 Hartford school controversy notwithstanding, Seymour knew that she must address the issues of education and literacy among the newly arriving southern Blacks. Having learned how to work the system, Seymour formed one of her more audacious alliances when she convinced Hartford's Americanization Committee (entrusted with teaching English and reading to immigrants and instilling patriotic values) to sponsor literacy classes for the African American newcomers. In 1920, she ran for state representative on the Farmer-Labor Party ticket. Though the party did poorly in the election, Seymour had the distinction of being the first African American woman to run for the Connecticut State Assembly. She remained active in the local chapter of the NAACP in the 1920s and continued to exert influence behind the scenes long after she had resigned as chairperson

of the chapter's executive board in November 1926. Her word was trusted, and for years she recommended African Americans for jobs in the White community, a duty usually reserved for the male African American Ministerial Alliance. At her death on January 12, 1957 newspapers eulogized her. In 1998, My Sister's Place in Hartford dedicated a new apartment building, named the Mary Seymour Place, on North Main Street as a shelter for women. Seymour would have approved.

Mark H. Jones is state archivist at the Connecticut State Library. He also teaches a course on Hartford history at Trinity College and is a member of the Hog River Journal staff. He holds a Ph.D. from Northern Illinois University.

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