The National PTA, Race, and Civic Engagement, 1897-1970

Woyshner, Christine

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Many of the nearly two thousand women who converged on Washington, DC, that cold February day knew of the request. It had been well publicized a week before the first annual gathering of the National Congress of Mothers (NCM) on February 17, 1897, the gathering that would later result in the founding of the National PTA. Dr. Clara Bliss Finley, chair of the NCM Press Committee, forwarded the item to the major newspapers in the country: “hats off” was the unusual appeal of the NCM leaders. “I think that ceasing to be a nuisance to our neighbor is the place to begin,” Finley explained. “Of course, the matter of removing hats is really left to the judgment of the wearer, but we will request that all who can will remove the nodding plumes and flower gardens while they are in the Congress.” It was a somewhat curious request to ask of the upper- and middle-class women delegates. “No Hats to Be Worn,” proclaimed one headline in anticipation of the event. Yet, with the exception of the radical dress reformer Dr. Mary Walker, those who attended this assembly were not what we would call “bloomer women,” though they did generally support certain reforms, such as the anti-corset movement, for health reasons.

In the late nineteenth century, dress reform was by contrast a small matter, but it signaled the convulsing changes taking place on the American political, social, and economic landscape. No sector of life remained untouched. Urban centers flourished amid the pall of pollution, crime, and poverty. Millions of immigrants arrived on America’s shores, many of them poor and in need of work and housing. Racial relations were at their nadir, as the gains won by the
Civil War and Reconstruction had been lost to growing laws and practices pertaining to racial segregation. In the 1890s myriad Jim Crow laws were codified, relegating African Americans to special sections in railcars and public buildings and to separate schools. The economy fluctuated wildly as the nation’s leaders sought to bring the country through a series of depressions. There was a reason for the name “the Gilded Age,” for it reflected the millions earned by captains of industry and also mocked the widespread poverty and destitution of the era.

During this time, the lives of white, middle- and upper-class women were transformed, while their immigrant, rural, working-class, and racially and ethnically diverse sisters saw little improvement in their day-to-day lives. As the advancement of household technologies proceeded and domestic help became more affordable, even something as seemingly simple as indoor plumbing radically transformed the lives of privileged white women, since it reduced the effort needed for the most laborious and time-intensive household chores. As white women were left with more leisure time, they turned to self-improvement through study circles, which eventually led them out the front door into the public arena and community reform. Women formed clubs and associations across the country as they met together, worked together, and planned ways to remake society and to help the poor and underprivileged. From the 1870s through the 1890s, women's clubs spread quickly around the United States, following no discernible geographic pattern. Just as many organizations were created in California as in New England, and they were found equally in city, town, and rural setting. While many associations remained independent and local, many united to form national associations that linked women around the country.

By the 1890s, the height of the women's club movement had arrived, as the number and variety of women's organizations had increased exponentially and they became a common feature on the American political and social landscape. This was an era of large-scale organizing, during which it was not uncommon for white, middle-class women to start, join, and direct groups into a variety of public works. Women's clubs offered, according to Sheila Rothman, female fellowship as they protected women's virtues in an acceptable structure while allowing for increased involvement in community affairs. Women's associations during this era were to be taken seriously, as they became “nationally organized and civically assertive.” While the largest associations had their origins in religious causes, such as the Young Woman's Christian Association (YWCA) and the Woman's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU), a significant few were organized on behalf of social reform and self-education. By the 1890s the various causes became conflated into one broad-based agenda, as the leading women's organizations resisted being limited in scope. The WCTU,
founded in 1873, pioneered women’s organized efforts in influencing community and legislative reforms, work that ended up having an impact on the public schools. In the late nineteenth century, the organization had established kindergartens, shaped the school curriculum, and attempted to reform the public high school. Through their efforts on behalf of public education, many organizations sought to build bridges across difference, though these bridges often were inadequately constructed and ephemeral.

Thus the hat issue at the first Mothers’ Congress was promoted as a symbolic as well as literal gesture, one in which the white, upper-class society matrons leading the charge sought to render a display of unity across class, religion, and even race. The curiosity regarding the removal of hats was reported on widely in the press while the Mothers’ Congress sessions were being held over three days in mid-February. One newspaper reported that founding president Alice McLellan Birney took the lead at an early session and doffed her hat in response to an anonymous note that circulated among the crowd requesting that she do so. As one newspaper reported it, “Her example was quickly followed, and a flutter passed through the audience as hat pins were withdrawn and hundreds of hats removed.” The next day a newspaper reported in a patronizing tone that “more hats and bonnets went off today . . . and with better grace than yesterday, perhaps today the women were prepared—had arranged their hair in anticipation of the request.” In the days that followed, however, newspapers presented conflicting reports on whether the women indeed had removed their hats. Some explained that all stayed on, while others described the “well-shaped heads of the women who are making such a lot of history that is worth recording.”

It is not important to know whether indeed the women removed their hats, but to consider the fact that the issue received such wide coverage in the press. It did so because it reflected the public’s fascination with the Mothers’ Congress and inquisitiveness about what the women were attempting to accomplish. Some were concerned that the hats signaled a lowering of standards and propriety, while others were not fooled by the society matrons’ superficial gesture. The Socialist Labor Party went on record as denouncing the efforts of the NCM leaders. They charged, “The capitalist social system on which you thrive stands in direct hostility to the home of the large majority of the people, who constitute the working class, and its miasmas rise so high that it pollutes even the gilded homes of your own class.”

The publicity stunt succeeded in getting the nation’s attention as it reflected the goals of the Congress. As one organizer explained, “The hats of an audience . . . may create antagonism, but intelligence is sympathetic and contagious, and a hatless audience becomes at once human and responsive.” In particular, the gesture symbolized the hopes of NCM leaders. First, it reflected
their maternalist ideology, that each woman had an important societal role to fulfill as a mother; it was a responsibility that was to be approached with seriousness and it was something for which women needed to be educated. At the core of NCM leaders’ belief, mothering was a public endeavor, and all women should be instructed in the new scientific knowledge on parenting and childhood. Furthermore, it showed that the Mothers’ Congress leaders, at least in word if not in deed, were determined to go along with the appeal that differences be set aside for the duration of the Congress. That is, hats reflected one’s social class position, and asking the women to remove their hats would, at least symbolically, put them on equal footing in order to carry out the work. In fact, Finley’s request regarding hats was followed immediately by a pronouncement—liberal for its time, as Molly Ladd-Taylor argues—that received just as much attention in the press: “There will be no color line drawn.” Thus, the two positions articulated at the first Mothers’ Congress—the need for an educated motherhood and racial inclusivity—were considered complementary to those of the organization’s founders.

The maternalist ideology of the leaders of the National Congress of Mothers was the driving force for the organization; it held that motherhood was woman’s most important role, and that with mothering came an unequivocal public obligation. Maternalism also held that women were united across difference, in particular across racial and ethnic divides, as a result of their capacity for motherhood, and that women’s primary role in society was to raise “citizen-workers.” The Congress of Mothers, while forward-thinking on the position of race, could not bring its practices in line with its pronouncements, as few black women joined the organization that resulted from the first meeting. Overall, as curious as it may have been to request those attending to remove their hats at this large public gathering, there was no mistake that despite its proclamations, the NCM did not seek to challenge accepted cultural definitions of woman’s place. Thus, with this auspicious beginning, the organization made clear that it was not going to be at the vanguard of social change but would be a popularizer of existing ideas.

The Congress of Mothers emerged from among the legions of women’s organizations as it capitalized on both existing networks and the public’s interest in shaping public schools. At the beginning of the twentieth century the last of the three major women’s associations of the nineteenth century—the NCM, WCTU, and GFWC—were involved to varying degrees in public education, but by the mid-1920s, the PTA, as it had come to be called by that time, had begun to eclipse the other two organizations in its size, membership, and focus on public education. The early PTA was both similar to and different from the other major women’s organizations. It, like the WCTU and GFWC, was a large-scale federated association that was created by leaders’ implementation
of similar organizational strategies, and there tended to be much overlap in membership among these three and other women’s organizations. However, the NCM platform was perceived by contemporaries as relatively narrow, with its focus on parent education and child welfare. As Anne Firor Scott has posited, “women’s associations have been prolific builders of vital community institutions.” This chapter, therefore, explores the origins of home-school associations and the development of the PTA as a community institution that emerged from the women’s club movement vis-à-vis the rise of popular education. The impetus to organize parents and community members came just as much, if not more, from outside of schools as an extension of the women’s club movement and, therefore, it grew outward from cities in addition to gestating in rural areas. The origins of the PTA as an expression of civic engagement assured its success, not only by capitalizing on the club movement and the public’s growing commitment to public education but also by using existing networks to build a membership base and to create an educational institution.

“In the Home Lies the Only Solution”

As clubwomen found “their voices,” or learned new skills and cultivated friendships, some cast a critical eye on their sisters. One such clubwoman, Alice McLellan Birney, remarked on the multitude of women’s organizations at that time, noting their often exceptional attention to obscure and irrelevant matters: “The age in which we live is an age of ‘movements’—it is a time of specialized work and of organized effort. Every conceivable interest, from the clothing of the Hottentot to the study of occultism, has been the subject of attention, of inquiry, and often of organization.” Birney viewed no topics as being as important as parenting and childrearing, so she set out to generate public sentiment and support for them. She was among a multitude of women during this era to join organizations and public work with abandon, and she, too, emerged as a leader from among the many undertaking similar work. Anne Firor Scott writes that leadership was a “key factor in the growth, development, and effectiveness” of women’s associations and suggests it would be fruitful to find out who emerged as leaders during this period and how. What made them different? What led them to organize large-scale associations? One factor, according to Scott, is a “better than average education,” although, as this overview of Birney’s life reveals, social networks, life circumstances, and timing are additional factors to consider. In particular, her Southern upbringing and marriage into an abolitionist family shaped her views about race, which in turn influenced her vision for the Congress of Mothers. Nonetheless, Birney
remains an enigma, in large part because of the absence of documentation on her motivation, actions, and thoughts. Much of what we know of her life story is told in sympathetic accounts by family members and friends in local newspapers and PTA in-house histories. Nonetheless, what can be pieced together tells enough about Birney to help us understand the founding of the Congress and its early years.19

Alice Josephine McLellan, the oldest of three girls, was born in Marietta, Georgia, a town northwest of Atlanta, on October 19, 1858, during a time of rapid change in the South. Birney’s father, Leander McLellan, was a cotton farmer who was born in North Carolina, and her mother, Harriet Tatem—thirteen years her husband’s junior—who would later play a supporting role in the early Congress of Mothers, was of English origin, her family having immigrated to the United States via St. Croix. Marietta before the Civil War was a thriving town with a reputation as an appealing place to live, and it was an important trading center because of its location and climate. Prior to the Civil War, Leander McLellan was a slave owner who ran a small business planting and selling cotton, a fact that is virtually unremarked on in Birney’s many writings and the hagiographic portraits in PTA histories. She did not reveal this fact easily in her work with the NCM, but a biographical sketch written while she was president of the NCM explained that her father “owned only such slaves as were absolutely necessary to the conduct of his household.”20

Similar to that of many other women’s association leaders of the nineteenth century, Alice Birney’s education shaped her thinking about her work in organizations. As was not uncommon across the South, her hometown faced no shortage of schools, giving white families in antebellum Marietta several options for the formal education of their sons and daughters. They could choose the coeducational Cobb Academy, which was founded in 1833, or the Kennesaw Female Seminary, which opened in 1845, to prepare young women for wifehood and motherhood. Youn Alice received the bulk of her formal education after the Civil War, during a time when many Southern families educated their daughters to be teachers so they could support themselves. Certainly, however, like many young women of the South, Birney learned much informally from her mother’s affiliation with the women’s temperance and missionary societies of Marietta. As a result, she became used to seeing women in public roles through charity and volunteer work. However, Birney also learned what many Southern white women did, that her place was subordinate to men. As Anne Firor Scott explains, “Religious women were persuaded that the very qualities which made any human being a rich, interesting, assertive personality—a roving mind, spirit, ambition—were propensities to be curbed.”21

Birney’s formal education placed her and her family solidly in Marietta’s middle class as she matriculated into Marietta Female College in 1874, which
afforded her the label of a refined lady, or one who was “worthy of protection, admiration, and chivalrous attention.”

Marietta Female College educated young women to be teachers and provided a free education for those who could not afford to pay full tuition. She studied the standard curriculum, which focused on drawing, painting, needlework, instrumental and vocal music, and languages. Each spring the college would hold exhibitions and entertainments, which became a part of the social life of the town. Thus Birney became steeped in the Southern vision of education for women for wifehood and motherhood, which included making close ties with other women, meeting potential husbands, and preparing for the starting of her own family.

After leaving Marietta Female College, Birney traveled north to study at Mount Holyoke Seminary in the late 1870s. The trip north was not unusual for Birney to have made; Mount Holyoke was a popular choice for Southern residents, who favored the school’s emphasis on teaching and missionary work. Founded in 1837 by Mary Lyon in Western Massachusetts, it was extending its reach beyond New England farmers’ daughters to attracting middle-class women from around the country at the time Birney enrolled. At Mount Holyoke, Birney studied Latin, geometry, and algebra, a curriculum that was modeled on that of the male institutions of the period. The school likely appealed to the McLellans because of its emphasis on service to others and the useful education it provided; Birney would be able to support herself as a teacher if need be.

As it turned out, Birney did have to support herself and her family for most of her young adulthood. After having completed one year of study at Mount Holyoke, she returned to the Marietta and, with a friend, opened a school in a small house. Two years later Birney met and married her first husband, attorney Alonzo White, of Charleston, South Carolina. The marriage was short-lived; White succumbed to pneumonia in 1881, leaving the twenty-two-year-old Birney expecting her first child. Birney moved back home to Marietta to raise her daughter, Alonsita, and helped support her mother after Leander’s death in 1883. However, Birney made periodic sojourns north to try her hand at various ventures. After one year in New York City studying medicine, Birney could no longer afford the tuition, so she turned to a field that was called “advertising.” During the mid- to late 1880s, Birney remained in New York and worked for an apparel company that promoted less-restrictive clothing for women on the premise that the popular styles of dress were dangerous to their health. She toured the South, promoting the notion that woman “could be lovely without a tiny waist and emphasize[ing] the danger of tight lacing on the unborn child.” Ever resourceful and needing to support herself, Birney also wrote for popular magazines on motherhood and dress reform during these years, honing her public voice. Birney’s days of waged labor ended shortly
thereafter. While visiting her mother in Marietta she met Theodore Weld Birney, an attorney from Chevy Chase, Maryland—the grandson of abolitionist James Gillespie Birney—who was staying at her mother’s boarding house. The two married on December 6, 1892, and made a home in Chevy Chase, Maryland. Shortly thereafter, the pair added two more daughters to their family, Catherine and Lillian, born in 1894 and 1895 respectively.25

Alice Birney’s life was grounded in the ideals of Southern gentility and woman’s place. A persistent notion in the ideology of the Southern woman was the romanticization of motherhood as woman’s highest role and her ability to influence future generations. This was a lesson Birney learned from her Southern upbringing, family, and formal education. Yet she challenged social convention as she lived by its dictates, a theme that would later echo in her founding of the Mothers’ Congress. Birney’s education afforded her a measure of independence because it enabled her to enter the workforce as a teacher and to take on other ventures. She did not toil in a factory, but wrote, traveled, and taught women about health and dress reform. Her marriage to Theodore Birney added another layer to her thinking about motherhood and women’s place, as it added the necessary question of race. How could she marry into the Birney family and not be sympathetic to the cause of helping African Americans gain education and greater freedom and independence? Yet the belief in the equality of races was challenging for women like Birney, because it conflicted with their deeply held assumptions about the inability of some races to advance toward what they considered to be a more refined state of being. At the turn of the twentieth century, new ideas about race, womanhood, and social justice challenged Birney, and, like other middle-class women of this era, she sought to unite these notions into an organization that would work to ameliorate society’s ills.

**Advancing the Weal of Women**

Until the late 1890s, when the major women’s federations were organized, many local women’s clubs were not generally aware that there were others like them. As women moved around the United States, however, they started new clubs and associations and learned that there were other groups with similar interests. Sorosis, a New York City professional women’s club, was initiated by Jane Cunningham Croly in 1869. Barred from the New York Press Club the year before because she was a woman, Croly was determined to give working women in New York a venue of their own to develop professional contacts. At an early organizational meeting, she and her colleagues were surprised to find out that one member had belonged to the Minerva Woman’s Club in Indiana,
because they mistakenly thought that they were the first in organizing a new movement. As the years wore on, Sorosis members learned of many other women's clubs as they came to realize there was a critical mass of others like themselves.

For the twenty-first anniversary of Sorosis, Croly called a convention of women's clubs which women from nearly one hundred clubs around the nation attended. The agenda for the convention included “the enunciation of the woman's club idea and its point of departure from the society . . . and the influences exerted upon communities in which they exist.” The authors of the call set to work on drafting a constitution and electing officers for their General Federation, which was organized at the convention in 1890 to unite the many local women's study and service clubs around the country. With the goal of bringing together under one umbrella white women's clubs that were undertaking social, educational, and economic improvement projects, the General Federation of Women's Clubs (GFWC) quickly established itself as a major national force in community reform. By 1892 the GFWC had made a formal commitment to the cause of municipal housekeeping, or as one leader put it, the position that “housekeeping does not begin at the front door and end at the back door, but rather begins in the street, includes the back alley and all the vacant lots around.” Municipal housekeeping became the *raison d'être* of women's clubs during the Progressive era; it held that woman was the center of the home and also the shaper of the “moral tone” of the community. In other words, women's idea of domestic responsibility led them from their households out into the community.²⁶

Men and women who took on large-scale organizing employed similar techniques, such as letter-writing campaigns and circuit riding—traveling from town to town to give speeches—to create national associations and enlist members.²⁷ Shortly after the founding of the GFWC, the National Congress of Mothers was organized using the same strategies. In 1895, just after the birth of her youngest daughter, Birney traveled alone to Chautauqua, New York, the popular adult education center in the western part of the state. That summer a group of kindergarten educators had convened to discuss the importance of education for motherhood. Birney later claimed that she first generated support for her Congress of Mothers idea while at Chautauqua. After returning to Chevy Chase, she was “convinced that some workable plan for educating mothers could be found and developed.” That fall she spoke at a General Federation of Women's Clubs meeting in Atlanta, after which she sent circulars to educators and philanthropists seeking their opinion about whether a congress for mothers as a way to promote education for parenthood was of interest to them. However, Birney realized she could not carry the idea further without financial support. Relying on her social ties and the network of kindergarten
educators she met at Chautauqua, Birney gained an introduction to the philanthropist who would become a cofounder of the NCM, Phoebe Apperson Hearst, who contributed $15,000 to the first gathering of the Mothers’ Congress.²⁸

The daughter of a Missouri farmer, Hearst had been a teacher at a village school in Franklin County, Missouri, before her marriage in 1862 to the mining magnate and senator from California, George Hearst. Their only child, William Randolph Hearst, was born the following year. By the time she met Alice Birney in the mid-1890s, the widowed Hearst was a well-known philanthropist who subsidized various educational ventures, almost all of them related to her interest in the kindergarten. Her many undertakings included helping found the Columbian Kindergarten Association (1893), funding a training school for kindergarten teachers (1897), and opening the National Cathedral School for girls (1900). When Hearst met Birney in 1896 and agreed to back the NCM, she was supporting three free kindergartens in Washington, DC, two of them for African American children. Hearst stood out among the legions of upper-middle and middle-class white clubwomen because she had an extraordinary measure of clout as a result of her deep pockets and extensive social capital. Thus she was viewed among women organizers as someone who could help others realize their goals. If one enlisted the interest and aid of Phoebe Hearst, one could consider her project well on its way to success. After Hearst’s help was secured, Birney effused, “I am confident she is doing more good in the world today than any other one individual. . . . [Y]ou cannot wonder that I rejoice that she stands before the world as godmother for this plan for a National Congress of Mothers.”²⁹

Like many civic association organizers of this era, Birney and Hearst tapped into their networks to call together a group of like-minded women to convene the first Congress of Mothers. While Birney called on family members, Hearst turned to the female relatives of President Grover Cleveland’s cabinet members. Hence the founding group became known in PTA lore as the “Cabinet Ladies” (see figure 1.1). They included the wives of Vice President Adlai Stevenson, Postmaster General William L. Wilson, Secretary of the Treasury John Carlisle, Attorney General Judson Harmon, and Secretary of War Daniel Lamont. Although Hearst and Birney shared a common bond through their humble upbringings—both were from rural areas and had been trained as teachers—this is where their similarities ended. Hearst was reserved and solemn, rarely speaking publicly on any issue, even the Mothers’ Congress. Birney, though described as shy, was the ideological leader of the Congress and was prone to waxing sentimental on motherhood in her speeches and writings. Whereas Hearst lent her support to a variety of initiatives that captured her interest, Birney was a one-organization woman; all her energies for the rest
of her life would be devoted to the Congress of Mothers and to furthering its principles.\textsuperscript{30}

The small group of organizers began to meet regularly at Hearst’s Washington home through 1896, which became the Congress headquarters. Birney was the dreamer, Hearst the doer. Birney assured Hearst, the organization’s sole financial backer, that her money was being well invested: “There is no question in my mind as to our financial position after the public is thoroughly cognizant of the nature and scope of our work, as it will be after our first national meeting.” The team of about a dozen women worked through 1896, planning for the February 1897 Congress of Mothers. They sent circulars and spoke to women’s association gatherings, relying on the convenient and expansive network of the General Federation of Women’s Clubs. By the mid-1890s, the GFWC had experienced a surge in membership under the leadership of Ellen Henrotin, who doubled the number of state units in the organization. In 1898 the GFWC reported membership at approximately 60,000 women and a well-organized national network of 35 state units.\textsuperscript{31}

Beyond being visible in newspapers around the country, publicizing the Mothers’ Congress through GFWC members assured a successful turnout at the first convention. Emma J. Masters, a GFWC member from Illinois,
responded to the call with enthusiasm, noting how the idea would appeal to a multitude of women:

My plan for bringing this matter before the Women of Illinois would be to utilize the numberless State and Village organizations. It seems to me that a Mothers’ Congress is a sort of fulfillment of the Mother’s Meetings of the W.C.T.U. And certainly the Woman’s Suffrage Association would not delay taking part where there is to be such an opportunity for presenting that which they seek; then our Clubs big and little are always ready to push anything that will advance the weal of women.

Another GFWC leader, Janet Richards, addressed the delegates at the Biennial Convention of Women’s Clubs in Louisville, Kentucky, on May 28, 1896, and announced “a formal statement of the objects and organization of the new society and an urgent invitation to the women of the convention to attend the first Congress of Mothers.” Sensing that GFWC delegates perceived a rival in the NCM, Richards assured the crowd that the Congress had the backing of the organization’s president, Ellen Henrotin. Yet even though club leaders viewed all organizational work as a way to forge links among women around common interests and projects, Henrotin remained concerned about what she perceived as the NCM’s narrow focus on motherhood and child welfare. She cautioned Hearst, “Specialization . . . gives a one-sided and unnatural view of life and in no way do such organizations develop the capable and best women or comprehensive life.” Henrotin did, however, agree to continue to help NCM organizers by promoting the Mothers’ Congress to her members.

In general, Henrotin may not have seen a competitor in the NCM, both because of what she viewed as its narrow agenda and because Birney had conceptualized it as a one-time meeting of mothers, not as a rival organization. Beyond that, Birney envisioned a national clearinghouse based in Washington, DC, that would circulate information on parenting and child development to local mothers’ and women’s clubs. She believed that local mothers’ groups—such as those organized by kindergarten educators and the WCTU—had value as sources of information and support for women and that linking them together would unite these groups around the common focus of motherhood, rather than the broad-based agenda of the GFWC. The NCM idea proved to be a rousing success, in part because of the public relations campaign the Congress leaders launched, but also because it promoted one of the central tenets of the kindergarten movement: prevention, and not reform, as the means to a better society. The idea appealed to citizens of various political stripes.

Approximately two thousand women attended the first National Congress of Mothers on February 17, 1897, which was more than ten times the number
its organizers expected. The public relations campaign had the intended effect. Not only were Congress organizers able to capitalize on their own name recognition; their declarations on the removal of hats and being racially inclusive had caused enough of a stir to attract the attention of the earnest as well as the curious. Furthermore, it was not difficult to enlist the press, because by this time William Randolph Hearst was a well-known newspaper tycoon who had just extended his newspaper empire to the West Coast with the purchase of the *New York Journal* newspaper chain. In December 1896, two months before the Congress, Phoebe Hearst had sponsored a publicity event at the Waldorf Hotel in New York City that was well covered in the society pages, with prominent coverage in, of course, the *New York Journal*. Ten women, including Birney, her sister-in-law, Helen T. Birney, and some of the Cabinet Ladies, hosted a reception that was free and open to the public. The *Journal* reported that the NCM focus was “the children, but they wish to reach them through the hearts and lives of the mothers.” Another New York paper announced the Congress’s goals of eliminating “evils in the present methods of schools” and the NCM organizers’ hopes in bringing about a closer relationship between school and home. Without a word regarding nepotism, Birney later remarked that the press “stood valiantly by the cause from the very beginning.”

NCM officers had also mailed circulars to prominent men and women in communities around the country, including almost seven hundred letters to clergymen. The leaders had received confirmations from the majority of them, as the Congress of Mothers became the topic of a multitude of sermons that year. NCM officers also distributed information written by experts on advances in child development and parenting. By promoting books by educators, medical doctors, and those in the newly developing social science fields—such as psychology and anthropology—the NCM tapped an available market, finding a niche in forward-thinking, white, middle-class women who wanted the latest materials on childrearing. Such women were engaged in what Julia Grant calls “intensive parenting,” in which they focused on the emotional and physical development of their children.

As the Congress headquarters was flooded with correspondence from middle-class white women asking for reading materials and information on how to start mothers’ clubs, organizers affirmed their endeavors and remarked, “The responses which have already come from the women’s clubs and societies in various parts of the country, prove that hundreds have been waiting for some such movement.” Successful public relations campaigns, however, can sometimes garner unwanted attention. NCM leaders also were inundated with requests for monetary assistance after the first round of circulars was mailed. These requests came from individual women—not clubs—who sought
the financial aid of the society women. After deliberating on the role of the Congress in responding to such requests, the Board agreed that it could not “aid even a few of these applicants.” The assumption of the wider public that the NCM was there to help monetarily was an understandable one; women’s associations since the eighteenth century had been organized to provide such assistance. Plus, the leadership of a well-known philanthropist likely contributed to the assumption that the Mothers’ Congress would help individuals materially. Despite the sometimes negative attention and publicity they drew, the organizational strategies of Mothers’ Congress organizers were successful in laying the foundation for a new institution. As a result of the success of the first convention, the NCM became an organization instead of an annual meeting, as Alice Birney had originally envisioned.36

“A Race Full of Birthrights”

At the turn of the twentieth century amid concerns about immigration and health, and along with the push for universal public education, the Congress of Mothers offered a forum for women who wanted to join an association that emphasized their roles as mothers and nurturers first and who wished to improve the lives of other people’s children. Thus, the Congress of Mothers’ “three-fold” program—parent education, home-school cooperation, and child welfare—struck a chord with Americans of various political leanings. Theodore Roosevelt served on the Advisory Council until his death in 1919, promoting the NCM as an antidote to society’s ills in its valuing of women in their maternal roles and an antidote to the fears over “race suicide,” though he did endorse the idea of men joining the Congress.37 On the other end of the political spectrum, social reformer Florence Kelley also played a role in the early Congress, agreeing to serve as the Chair of the Committee on Child Labor in 1902. Kelley viewed the NCM as a vehicle for her work in child labor legislation, though her relationship with the Congress was short-lived.38

The original Declaration of Principles reads, in part, “The objects of this Association shall be to promote conference on the part of parents concerning questions most vital to the welfare of their children, the manifest interests of the home, and in general the elevation of mankind . . . which will make for enlightened parenthood and for a race full of birthrights.”39 Steven L. Schlossman thus characterizes the Congress of Mothers as embracing the “new racism,” which had less to do with overt acts of discrimination and more with eugenics, the movement that held that race determined one’s intellectual capacities and that the purpose of social reform was to encourage breeding among the racially fit and to discourage the unfit from procreating. However,
Congress of Mothers leaders were not blatant eugenicists but rather maternalists who believed that all women were mothers first. Therefore, Congress organizers maintained that African American children and mothers had a chance at racial advancement if they just heeded the advice of experts whose ideas were promoted through NCM meetings and publications.\textsuperscript{40}

For Birney and the NCM leaders, racial and ethnic inclusion were key dimensions of the organization’s program in the effort to create a better society through parent education and child welfare. Therefore, topics on race and ethnicity were included on the program in early years, exploring such themes as parenting styles in the “Hebrew Home,” presented by the noted clubwoman Rebekah Kohut. Local units just forming during these years found it challenging to put such ideals into practice because of the challenges of crossing the imagined but intractable boundaries of ethnicity and class. In other words, there were few if any means by which women from different walks of life could interact socially, given what the NCM perceived as the commonalities of motherhood. The Lockport, New York, Mothers’ Club pondered the request—the details of which are not specified in the minutes—of a mothers’ club from the “Italian district.” After some deliberation, the members decided, “As the club differed some in their opinions and as nothing definite was presented the subject was left for some other meeting.” The uneasiness in working across ethnic boundaries challenged the members and the matter was not returned to, or was not recorded in future minutes.\textsuperscript{41}

In keeping with the emphasis on racial inclusion, African American leaders were included in early NCM conference programs, giving a platform to prominent educators and activists such as W. E. B. Du Bois, Frances Watkins Harper, and Mary Church Terrell. However, the emphasis on racial equality was a distant second to topics such as motherhood, kindergartens and day nurseries, and child study. Furthermore, Birney was an enigmatic leader. She was the child of a former slave owner who married into an abolitionist family; as she assumed an inclusive posture she also espoused the ideals of racial determination. She was fond of quoting Frenchman Edmond Demolins’ treatise, \textit{Anglo-Saxon Supremacy}, on the causes of the superiority of English-speaking peoples, framing these superior traits as the ideal to which women of all races should aspire. Birney viewed his theory through her maternalist lens, claiming that although he “proves at some length that the supremacy of the Anglo-Saxon is due to his love of home . . . [t]he trait is not peculiar to this race, but it is developed in it to a marked degree.” Such statements reveal the complexity of thinking during this era and caution present-day readers to refrain from facile characterizations about the racial beliefs held by people in the past. As Glenda Gilmore argues in her discussion of the WCTU, one cannot call such women racist, because we know little about their actual practices and, furthermore, racism is not a static phenomenon.\textsuperscript{42}
Simplistic assumptions about gender ideology are also challenged upon a close read of NCM documents. In perusing the speeches and topics in conference proceedings, it is easy to come away with the impression that Mothers’ Congress leaders felt that woman’s place was in the home raising children, though this pronouncement did not match the reality of the public and active lives the women led. On the matter of woman’s place, an incident at a Congress meeting reveals the intricacies of organizers’ thinking as well as the limits of their willingness to challenge societal expectations. Dr. Oscar Chrisman, a professor of “paidology”—or child study—at the Kansas State Normal School, gave a talk at the 1900 meeting of the NCM. Not one to underestimate his own talents, Chrisman presented the importance of his work to the delegates, highlighting women’s emotionality against men’s rationality. Emphasizing the separate spheres trope, he explained that the reason universities were not crowded with women was that universities had “little or nothing to offer the average woman,” as she was best suited to the care of children. This may have gone over well enough, but once Chrisman declared that men reason and never love and that they were capable only of “sex-attraction,” the women seethed. One delegate recalled, “He might as well have tossed a live snake or box of mice into the auditorium for all the excitement he created.” Faced with gender expectations stretched to the proportions of caricature, NCM delegates were forced to reconsider their beliefs about women’s roles. The delegates responded to Chrisman that they believed men needed to share in child-rearing duties and that both sexes should be educated for parenthood. Amid the time allotted for questions, one of the few male delegates, Thomas Smith of Harlan, Iowa, was given the floor. Smith challenged Chrisman and argued for the higher education of women and asserted that a woman could be intelligent, educated, and a fine homemaker, thereby earning the support of the audience. Chrisman, however, was given the final word and responded summarily, “the discussion has proven exactly what I said to you[:], a man reasoned and a woman intuitioned. . . I wanted to get you to talk and I have.” The discussion carried over to the Board of Managers meeting following the conference, at which Birney refused to challenge Chrisman’s authority. She explained, “Dr. Chrisman was our guest, and if he held opinions not in accord with our opinions we could still be courteous and kind and discuss them with toleration and wisdom.”

Because Birney’s main goal was the viability of the Congress of Mothers, she sought to avoid controversy. Also, Chrisman was an expert in Birney’s eyes and was not to be challenged. It was the reason not only for her willingness to accept Oscar Chrisman’s point of view but also for her refusal to let the Congress endorse suffrage for women. At this time, members of suffrage organizations were far outnumbered by clubwomen, many of whom did not feel the need to fight for women to enter the realm of formal politics. Club-
women believed their feminine—read moral—influence, after all, was better served outside the confines of what her contemporaries perceived as the sullied male preserve known as the ballot box. Nonetheless, the WCTU had supported suffrage for years, and the GFWC rallied around the cause in 1914. When the formidable Susan B. Anthony asked Birney if the NCM could put its significant weight behind the fight for suffrage, Birney refused, claiming it was too divisive an issue. “We are a congress of mothers,” she explained, representing “all the mothers of the nation, and could we afford to champion a cause which all the mothers of the land do not advocate?” However, since Birney’s presidency was short-lived (1897–1902) and because of the federated structure, which allowed for local interests to drive local agendas, clubs at the local level did pursue suffrage at the dawn of the twentieth century.\(^4\)

Commenting on another major issue of the day, NCM leaders criticized higher education for women, claiming that it steered women’s lives away from traditional domestic roles and left educated women unprepared for “the realistic life choices available to their sex.” Ironically, the Mount Holyoke–educated Birney argued that a more appropriate education for women included the scientific study of all she would need to know in her role as mother. In 1897 she remarked, “The higher branches of book learning are well enough for the girl or woman who has the inclination or time for them, but they should be secondary in her education to the knowledge which shall fit her for motherhood.” She continued this line of thinking in later years, explaining, “I believe in higher education for women . . . but I claim that it is . . . unjust to place it before . . . [woman’s] maternal instinct.” In general, however, Birney was single-minded in her pursuit to put motherhood first in what she called women’s highest calling. Other Congress organizers and those who followed bought into this late-nineteenth-century belief to a lesser extent, since many of them had attended college and placed their public, or organizational, work alongside their parenting obligations.\(^4\)

Education for parenthood was so important to Birney and the NCM’s early leaders that they championed a school curriculum remade to serve this goal. By the dawn of the twentieth century, with the development of experimental psychology and the rise of secondary education for the masses, schools revised the humanistic or liberal arts curriculum to address more functional goals. The new psychology influenced educators’ thinking about curriculum and instruction, as a greater focus was put on the individual child, curriculum was organized around practical ends, and citizenship became one of the primary goals of education. While the main emphasis was on replacing the humanities with tracks of learning that would prepare workers for an industrial society, parent and homemlife education were promoted by the women of the Mothers’ Congress.\(^4\)
Therefore, the NCM embraced the new education, which emphasized the individual child and “an end to excessive memorization, recitation, and testing.” Instead, the new education emphasized kindergartens, vocational education, and nature study, and was necessarily a moral education. Women's and mothers’ club members read the works of English philosopher Herbert Spencer, American psychologist G. Stanley Hall, and German kindergarten innovator Friedrich Froebel and sought to bring their works and ideas to the schools to support parent education. In Spencer's best-known work among clubwomen, written in the mid-nineteenth century, he applied Darwinian thought to the development of knowledge and social relationships. His 1859 essay “What Knowledge is of Most Worth?” triggered a revolution in thinking about the school curriculum as it challenged the idea of a liberal arts education. Spencer's notions about the functional goals of school curriculum first made waves in his native England, after which they entered American educational parlance in the late nineteenth century. By the early twentieth century, Spencer’s functional criteria for the development of curriculum sparked a major revolution because they did not follow selecting the “great cultural resources of Western culture,” but instead focused on life experience and usefulness as the basis for determining what was worth knowing, and therefore teaching. His doctrine remade the American school curriculum by placing the sciences in a more prominent position in the secondary school curriculum, positioning curriculum around the development of the individual, and altering thinking about curriculum as a means to an end.

Of Spencer’s five criteria, the one that placed a value on child rearing as a central life activity resonated with Alice Birney and other white, middle-class clubwomen. Birney was especially fond of mentioning Spencer's influence on her thinking and reiterated his point that the education of women should eschew the ornamental in order to prepare them for future roles as wives and mothers. In 1905 she gave a speech in which she reminded her audience of Spencer's book *Education*, claiming, “If you think child-study through other mediums than your own limited experience a theory, read that book; it will change your conviction as no argument of mine could ever do.” As a result of her belief in Spencer's doctrine, Birney became an acolyte of the noted psychologist G. Stanley Hall, who around the time of the founding of the Mothers' Congress pressed for a curriculum influenced by Spencer's notion of natural law and for the education of mothers.

Hall is well known for creating the field of child study, which he first expounded on in an 1882 speech to the National Education Association. The focus of Hall’s child study program was that physical development and health were the proper foundation of mental and moral development. He believed health should be the primary factor in determining educational policy, since he
feared that an early emphasis on intellectual education would be detrimental to the health of children and young people. Hall viewed child study as a means by which educators could determine how to teach children and organize curriculum. As one historian explained, Hall wished to use “behavioral-science knowledge to create a science of pedagogy.” Though he abandoned the child-study idea in 1885, Hall reclaimed it in the early 1890s when it was embraced by the growing association of women's national organizations who favored it, in particular, the Congress of Mothers. Clubwomen had followed Hall's lead in interpreting the scientific psychology as a pedagogical enterprise, and Hall shrewdly capitalized on their zeal, exploiting it to further his career.\footnote{50}

The ideas of Spencer and Hall, and likewise the new practical emphases in the school curriculum, were thus spread to the American public in large part through the vast networks of women's associations. Hall's ideas also were promoted through the NCM's suggested reading lists for mothers, and he was a featured speaker at the early annual meetings. On occasion, he made the rounds to local clubs, where he may have faced his toughest critics. One member of the Lockport [New York] Mothers' Club recalled, “We had G. Stanley Hall [as a speaker] once and were quite disappointed for alas he was more interesting to read than to hear.” Nonetheless, clubwomen took up his cause with great energy and announced, “more women than men sympathize with the new education and are endeavoring to introduce art and utility into the fossil of public education. It is therefore particularly appropriate that the kindergarten and manual and artistic training should be placed in their hands.” To Hall, a practical education was by definition gender-specific and the education of women should be geared to “motherhood and homelife.” Hall responded to this interest by announcing that he saw “large promise” in both education and science through their child study circles, and he called child study the “woman's science,” a point relished by Birney and the other leaders of the NCM. Thus the goal of motherhood was likewise a suitable objective for the new functional curriculum that was designed to serve students’ future lives. In a speech on organized motherhood in 1900, Alice Birney spoke on behalf of the nation's middle-class parents, claiming that they “have regarded their children first of all as future mothers and fathers, next as citizens, and they are demanding that public educational systems adopt their standards of values in the adjustment of curricula.”\footnote{51}

Therefore, organization and efficiency were the guiding tools of motherhood and delineated not only the kind of education that girls and young women were to receive but also where it was to take place. These ideas did not originate with the NCM; they were borrowed from the GFWC, at the founding of which, in 1892, first president Charlotte Hawkins Brown commented on the
importance of mother education but suggested that it belonged in local clubs rather than in the humanistic curriculum of the schools. “Girls find good elementary instruction in schools, but only practice, such as clubs give can make that instruction available in the battle of life.” By 1900 the NCM had embraced the principles of a functional curriculum and sought to position schools as the proper places for parent education. Congress leaders argued that the ennui suffered by college women after graduation was reason enough for preparation for child rearing and other family duties. Birney claimed there was a “serious menace in any education which at the close of a four-year period sends a girl to her home discontented with her environment; unkindly critical of her parents and former associates; longing for a career; [and] impatient with the interruptions inseparable from family life.”

Alice Birney had conceived of the idea of a Congress of Mothers and developed its platform, but her sentimental rhetoric and single-minded emphasis on motherhood as woman’s highest calling were outdated among newly emerging ideas about woman’s place and role in society and the home at the dawn of the twentieth century. As a result, interpersonal differences challenged Mothers’ Congress leaders, as they might any other rapidly ascending organization. Even though the Congress’s first year was successful, many of the original leadership group dispersed, leaving Birney and the Congress of Mothers searching for replacements. Clara Bliss Finley, the outspoken press chairperson who acted also as treasurer and recording secretary as needed, left after an acrimonious dispute with Birney over her leadership style. In her letter of resignation, Finley “predicted failure for the Congress under the direction of the existing administration,” referring to Alice Birney, since Hearst had cut ties with the organization in 1898. Such an upset in leadership in the early years of an organization’s existence can present significant challenges to its direction and viability. For example, in reference to the continuity in leadership of the WCTU under Frances Willard, Ruth Bordin writes that it “insured efficient implementation of program goals, a rank and file that knew its leaders and frequently had some personal contact with them, and a national visibility that a constantly changing leadership could never have achieved.” Yet the NCM weathered the upset, as middle-class women replaced the “Cabinet Ladies” and redefined the Congress slightly to suit newer purposes and interests. The new leadership group was well versed in advocacy and community reform work and represented different regions of the country, rather than being concentrated on the East Coast, which set the foundation for the PTAs’ institutional infrastructure, making it truly national. Inasmuch as organization and efficiency described NCM leaders’ view of motherhood, it also reflected the way they approached building an association.
“From Center to Circumference”

At Hearst’s suggestion, NCM leaders adopted a constitution and mapped out the organization’s federated structure after the first gathering in 1897. Immediately, several states—New York being the first—organized Congress units. The constitution recognized state and territory unit representatives and required them to meet with the Board of Directors before and after each annual meeting and throughout the year at the president’s discretion. The constitution also outlined rules for delegates, committees, basis of representation, affiliation, dues, certificates, elections, amendments, organizers, and other official business that would guide the association for the next century, with slight modifications added over time. PTA members came to rely on these bylaws, turning to them on matters of principle and policy, because they afforded much stability to the organization’s infrastructure.54

Alice Birney remained affiliated with the NCM and promoted its platform from 1902, when she stepped down as its president, until her death in 1907. Speaking at a 1904 Congress meeting, she had little changed her sentimental maternalist rhetoric as she used terms like “mother-heart” and “mother-spirit” in reference to women’s work in education. She was a nineteenth-century women’s organization leader, and her maudlin waxings on motherhood and its purity sounded outdated next to the more businesslike speeches of her successor, Hannah Kent Schoff, who brought stability to the organization. Schoff led the organization from 1902 to 1920, becoming the longest-serving PTA president, and was responsible for crafting the program of the association for the twentieth century, with the public schools as its centerpiece. If under Alice Birney the early PTA developed its ideological moorings, it was under the second president that the organization took action on these ideals and established itself as an American institution.55

Born in 1853 near Philadelphia, Schoff was the oldest of five children and the daughter of a woolen manufacturer and a teacher. She married Frederic Schoff, an engineer from Massachusetts, in 1873, and the couple had seven children. In 1897 she attended the National Congress of Mothers as a delegate from the New Century Club of Philadelphia. Within two years, Schoff’s leadership capabilities were recognized when a vacancy occurred in the office of vice president of the National Congress of Mothers and she was offered the position. At the same time, she was a key figure in organizing the Pennsylvania Congress of Mothers in 1899, and led the fight to establish juvenile courts in that state in 1901. After she assumed the presidency of the Congress of Mothers in 1902, she developed its program in several key directions: the schools, the development of juvenile courts, and child labor legislation.56 Schoff knew well the commitment made by the GFWC in 1897 to concentrate its energies
on the public schools. One of her first acts as president was to compose a letter to all superintendents in the state asking them to “bring the literature and the work of the Congress to the attention of all teachers in your district, and [to] ask them to call a mothers’ or parents’ meeting in every school of your district, and organize a meeting of mothers, which may convene monthly with the teachers.” In 1897 GFWC President Henrotin had announced that the Federation would “exert their influence to secure needed legislation, good school boards, good superintendents, skilled teachers, improved sanitary conditions of schoolhouses, and should endeavor, above all, to co-operate with the school authorities.” The effort resulted in a revised program of the organization and the name change in 1908 to the National Congress of Mothers and Parent-Teacher Associations. That same year it joined forces with other white women’s associations to lead the Department of Women’s Organizations in the National Education Association.57

Under Schoff’s leadership the PTA grew exponentially from the top down, as local and state units took root around the United States. Membership data are virtually nonexistent for the first ten years of the association, with an estimated total of one thousand in 1897 and the next figure recorded in 1910 at approximately twenty thousand members. State-by-state membership data are not recorded on any consistent basis for another ten years after this. By 1918, the National Congress of Mothers and Parent-Teacher Associations stood at 98,000, only to double just two years later, Schoff’s last year as NCM-PTA president. Yet the National Congress of Mothers and Parent-Teacher Associations could not develop its institutional infrastructure without the help of other networks and organizations. Even though the association had begun by first creating a national-level office, it took nearly three decades for the majority of its state units to organize. During this time, the NCM-PTA relied on other women’s organizations and the clout and power of a major professional education organization, the National Education Association (NEA), to establish its network and expand.58

Building on William J. Reese’s argument that every major curricular and administrative reform of the Progressive era was accomplished by women’s associations, this section reveals the national coordination and direction of such efforts, showing that they were more widely directed by a national leadership group than previously contended.59 Their accomplishments were so notable that historian Mary Ritter Beard sought to catalog them in her 1915 book, Women’s Work in Municipalities. Beard organized her discussion into four categories: political activity, curricular innovation, structural innovations, and physical concerns. She noted that through parent-teacher associations “women participate on equal terms with men, where they do not direct the aims and activities themselves.”60 Overall, women’s organization members
sought to bring about greater attention to health in the school environment, to impose greater efficiency in the schools and curricula, and to ensure that the school curriculum met the goals of moral education. In these vast efforts to reform schools, women’s organizations did not intend to perpetuate long-term contributions to public education. As in their social welfare reform work, they sought to enact reforms that they hoped to hand over to school authorities and boards of education to run. In many cases they did, but as the NCM-PTA grew as an institution, it directed many initiatives beyond the Progressive era.\footnote{As urban schools were centralized under the purview of school boards, and school districts were consolidated in rural areas to make the best use of available funds, educational leaders worked to wrest control of local schools by instituting bureaucratic systems that would organize schooling and the curriculum. The only national coordination of such an expansive effort by professionals could come from the NEA, and the organization was working toward that end by convening a series of curriculum committees from the 1890s through late 1910s. However, the NEA, while able to prepare policy directives, did not have the communication and action networks of major women’s organizations in terms of being able to rapidly circulate ideas and enlist citizens in supporting them. A parallel can be found in the state-building campaigns of women reformers of the early twentieth century. As Theda Skocpol argues, “Especially from 1900 to the mid-1920s, federations of women’s voluntary associations enjoyed political leverage within U.S. federalism that was entirely unavailable to higher-educated reformist professionals—except when the latter cooperated with the voluntary federations on terms influenced by the federations’ own outlooks and organizational structures.” Likewise, women’s voluntary organizations shaped public education during the Progressive era through their well-coordinated networks and political strength, a strength that overpowered, for a short time, that of organized education professionals. Their accomplishments were evidenced in the curricular changes and structural improvements they supported with respect to schooling, health, and social service initiatives.\footnote{With the decision to become integrally involved in school reform work at the turn of the twentieth century, women volunteers of the GFWC, early PTA, and other organizations wished to form an alliance with the NEA. Representatives of the GFWC, the leading women’s voluntary organization undertaking school reform in the 1890s, began to attend NEA annual meetings and, on occasion, to speak at the gatherings of the Kindergarten Department of the organization. Founded in 1857 as a professional association dedicated to advocacy and research, the NEA was at that time a debating society run by elite male scholars and school administrators. Although women teachers in general were marginalized within the association, women volunteers were, for a time,}
able to carve out a niche in which they could share ideas with other organized women and have the ear of professional educators. The alliance between clubwomen and the professionals of the NEA lasted only a little more than two decades, after which the fissure between school volunteers and education professionals became permanent and fixed. During that time, however, two major goals were accomplished: clubwomen were able to coordinate national school reform efforts with the backing of teachers and school administrators, and the leaders of the PTA, unlike those of the other women’s organizations, made use of the opportunity to more fully establish the federation.  

Beginning in 1893 volunteers of women’s organizations earned a place on the NEA agenda, attending and presenting at the meetings of the Kindergarten Department. At subsequent annual meetings, women’s club leaders discussed child study circles and the spread of the kindergarten idea, and showcased the vast accomplishments of their associations in public schools. In 1897 speaker Mary Codding Bourland, an educator from Pontiac, Illinois, showcased the founding of the National Congress of Mothers as an example of women’s widespread interest in public education. As women’s voluntary associations generated momentum in school reform work in the early twentieth century, their leaders had become less content to give the occasional talk at annual NEA meetings. After over a decade of being guests, and recognizing that their efforts were integral to the shaping of public schools, the leaders of the major women’s voluntary organizations aspired to a more permanent place in the NEA. In 1907 Ellen Abbott, the chair of the Education Department of the GFWC, and the representatives of six other major women’s associations—the NCM-PTA, the Association of Collegiate Alumnae, the Daughters of the American Revolution, the WCTU, the National Council of Jewish Women, and the Southern Association of College Women—met with NEA officers at the Board of Directors meeting. Convinced that “by meeting each year with the National Education Association, these national societies of women may co-operate more successfully with each other and with the educators of the country in bringing the home and the school in more helpful relation,” NEA representatives petitioned for the women volunteers to be given their own department. The motion passed, the Department of Women’s Organizations (DWO) was formed, and clubwomen began preparations for the 1908 annual meeting in Cleveland, Ohio.

At the time the Department of Women’s Organizations was created, NEA membership was just over five thousand. This figure, which grew slowly in subsequent years, was eclipsed by the membership of women volunteers, which stood at nearly 300,000. In 1908 speaker Mrs. O. Shepard Barnum observed the power that was found in numbers by reminding members that the Department could coordinate vast networks of women rapidly. She argued that the
clubwomen represented in the Department wielded power through “their standing committees [ , which ] receive[d] impulse and instruction quickly and systematically from center to circumference.” Such communication and action networks were not possible among professional educators at this time.65

Through the DWO, volunteer and professional women as well as professional men were united around a common cause and had access to a forum for their ideas. It was not unusual to have women's club leaders as officers of the Department working alongside professional women who worked in colleges, normal schools, and classrooms, making the relationship symbiotic between the two groups. Also, given that volunteer work provided a training ground for nonprofessional women, officers in voluntary associations came to hone their leadership and organizational skills to a greater extent through their participation. The Dean of the Women's Department at the State Agricultural College in Fort Collins Colorado, Helen Grenfell, highlighted the importance of women's associations in educational work, explaining that the “woman of the future” has been “taught through association in mutual interests the value of united effort and thru [sic] wise direction the true needs of all children.” Thus, the new Department offered both fellowship and leadership training to those with a vested interest in public education.66

Subsequently, the NCM-PTA was vital to the running of the Department of Women's Organizations, as President Schoff served as its first vice president—until elections were held—along with Laura Drake Gill, the president of the Association of Collegiate Alumnae, and Mrs. Philip N. Moore, a trustee of Vassar College from St. Louis. State-level NCM-PTA leaders such as Cora Bright, from Illinois, were integrally involved with the DWO, serving on the nominating committee of the first group of officers. At the 1908 NEA meeting and at succeeding meetings, three officers were elected to run the department: a president, vice president, and secretary. In the fourteen years the DWO existed, leadership included a balanced representation of professional and volunteer women, as did the list of speakers at annual meetings. The Department's officers created a structure whereby representatives of the national women's organizations would plan together with the three officers the work for the coming year and would work to coordinate local and state women's club activities through the DWO.67

U.S. Commissioner of Education Elmer Ellsworth Brown addressed the DWO at the 1908 NEA meeting and offered his support to the organization's newest department. He reflected on the losses to education that came with the professionalization of teaching, remarking that as schooling increasingly became a function of the state it relied less on benevolent societies and voluntary organizations. He believed the DWO was trying to recapture the “shadow land,” as he called it, between professional and community responsibility,
“where some of the most vital questions of today are found.” Brown, however, made it clear that teachers and other education professionals had the last word on school matters: “Not a book should be placed in the school library nor a picture on the schoolroom wall . . . unless it have the approval of the teaching force within the school.” However, the women’s organization leaders saw things a bit differently. Recognizing that education was “a state affair,” they believed their position within civil society afforded them an opportunity to improve curriculum, standards, and resources nationally. At their first gathering they resolved to work for compulsory education laws around the country, support teacher preparation and increased pay, help provide adequate school facilities, and promote a curriculum that provided “training for the hand, as well as for the head, and definite instruction in ethics and civics.”

In the beginning, tensions were evident between the power of women’s civic associations and professionals’ desire to maintain control over education. At the annual meeting of the NEA in 1909, Department of Women’s Organizations president Laura Drake Gill reminded her audience, “The only real danger in this method is the chance of having the name of the National Education Association involved in some unwise state activity,” but she reassured her audience that since the work was organized by knowledgeable and experienced officers of the Department, that would not likely happen. Gill was also happy to report that year that there was “no friction with school officers” as the women carried out their work. Gill reflected the wider belief of women volunteers that they had a special capacity to carry out the work of school reform, in particular because men’s civic associations were not as well coordinated and established as women’s.

For the first two years the DWO coordinated the national educational reform efforts of the Department’s member organizations, reports of which were detailed at each annual NEA meeting. Department president Gill presented the long list of accomplishments of the twenty-five states with fully organized committees, through which women’s associations directed health, structural, and curricular reforms in public schools. She detailed how women’s organizations agitated for new or renovated school buildings and curricula, many of which were focused on manual and industrial training; and how they beautified and improved school grounds and established kindergartens and day nurseries for working mothers. They set up playgrounds and ran vacation schools to keep children occupied during the summer months; they conducted medical inspections of children at schools and supported education around civics and ethics; they worked to make white schools in the South attractive and comfortable. Speakers representing various regions detailed the work on the coasts and in the heartland, in the upper Midwest, and the Southwest.
In 1908, reflecting clubwomen’s influence on curriculum, Mrs. O. Shepard Barnum, of the Cumnock School in Los Angeles, pointed up the new demands on society that necessitated a move from the three R’s to the three H’s (training of the head, hand, and heart), the three C’s (character, conduct, and citizenship), and the three B’s (“the supplying of body, brains, and bringing-up”). Barnum thereby revealed the three-pronged and overlapping interests of women’s organizations: the functional—or practical—school curriculum, health, and civic education. The functional curriculum had a moral dimension for women’s club leaders in that it held the possibility to teach young citizens the proper morals by emphasizing parenthood over future employment. Clubwomen’s health reform efforts had the most significant impact on the school curriculum, including health inspections, better-ventilated schools, and school lunches. A multitude of women’s clubs put into place drinking fountains, school nurses, and playgrounds, since hygiene was of particular concern to limit the spread of disease. Like those of many women’s clubs around the nation, these curricular reforms involved updating or even installing school plumbing. For example, many women’s clubs accomplished what one club in Illinois reported: that it had introduced “bubble fountains and proper toilets for boys” in the early 1900s.

In 1910 the DWO became the Department of School Patrons (DSP) in an effort to be more inclusive in its membership. Moreover, since the goal of organized educational work was “effective citizenship”—of young people in schools as well as the members of the voluntary organizations—it necessitated the inclusion of men. By this time, the NEA had come to support vocational education as differentiated instruction, something the clubwomen of the new department promoted. There was a noticeable change in the way meetings were run after this point, as the role of speaker was reserved for men and women professional educators, supplemented with the lengthy reports of the DSP officers, the leaders of women’s voluntary organizations. The rhetorical shift did not effect an actual transformation regarding the name change, however, as the DSP continued to be run by volunteer and professional women and continued to represent several major national women’s associations.

The NCM-PTA continued to be central to the running of the Department of School Patrons. Cora Bright of Illinois—an officer with the National PTA—was its secretary. The DSP’s leaders had, by this time, honed their ability to communicate with and coordinate the activities of the state-level organizations of the representative women’s associations. At each annual meeting, the president gave an overview of the work of the DSP state-by-state, and each time the report became longer, even though some state committees did not submit reports. In Little Rock, Arkansas, women’s organizations published articles on the educational needs of the state that they then circulated.
through the newspapers. In California, organized women worked for teachers’ pensions, school bond issues, and the right for school boards to select superintendents. In Iowa, women’s clubs started school gardens, organized parent-teacher associations, and “Introduced some industrial work in twenty-four schools.” In New Jersey, women volunteers surveyed legislative matters regarding education, child labor, and juvenile court procedures. The work was well coordinated and efficient, since it was staffed by a representation of women volunteers from around the country who were invested in school reform work and who believed in the cause of public education to shape future citizens. Much of these efforts, however, required organized women’s input on and support of financial issues. Economic conditions were a main reason women should support manual training, according to speaker Helen Grenfell, since it met “the needs of the majority.”

NEA leaders acknowledged the power of women volunteers in 1910 when the president of the association, Ella Flagg Young, approached the Department of School Patrons for help with considering how the network of organized women could be put to work on school financing. Young, an experienced teacher and administrator who held a doctorate from the University of Chicago, was serving as the superintendent of Chicago’s public schools at the time. She was known for her support of teachers having a greater role in educational and administrative decisions, and she believed deeply in democratic decision making.

Given this, Young supported the efforts of teachers and organized women. Perhaps she took to heart DSP president Mrs. O. Shepard Barnum’s comment the previous year that educational reform from the top was “painfully slow” and that the Department of School Patrons was the best means by which educational reform would pass from the NEA “mountain top to the valley and the plains.” Responding to Young’s request, the DSP created a school revenue committee with NCM-PTA leader Helen Hefferan serving as its president. Within a year’s time, the committee prepared a survey to gauge the public’s involvement with school funding. Then, the DSP mailed the survey to school superintendents to get their input on how school revenue operated and how it was distributed in their states. The committee on school revenue prepared a summary and handbook report that was distributed at the 1911 annual meeting.

Almost immediately, the women’s efforts were met with success. Illinois clubwomen, along with the State Teachers’ Association, successfully waged a campaign to quadruple annual school appropriations. They were able to accomplish this feat by urging all parent-teacher associations and women’s clubs in the state to write their legislators and the Committee on Appropriations. Volunteer and professional united by taking the matter to the House and Senate committees in that state. The successful campaign was held up as
exemplary at that year’s DSP meeting, as Hefferan suggested other states take up similar work. The State Superintendent of Public Instruction in Illinois, Francis G. Blair, rallied around the DSP’s efforts and supported a campaign “to create sentiment among school patrons, taxpayers, and lawmakers.”

During this time, white women’s organized efforts to improve the nation’s schools reached their apex. The Department of School Patrons had expanded by organizing two committees to coordinate its work, school revenue and health, in 1913, and added a committee on rural schools the following year. Minnesota’s report from 1911 is reflective of efforts around the country:

> The individual drinking-cup, sanitary soap, and sanitary towels have appeared in our schools during this year. The temperature of our schoolrooms, which used to be kept dangerously high in the cold Minnesota winters, has been lowered, and fresh air from window and doors substituted for the air supposed to be made pure by ventilating systems. The medical inspector and school nurse are now a part of our school system. Playgrounds are multiplying. . . . The school census has been taken by members of women’s clubs and normal students in training. The truant, the backward child, the sick child have been discovered and relief has been undertaken. The social assistance rendered in quiet fashion by the best women in the community to young adolescent boys and girls without social opportunity, has been the result of circulars sent out through the clubs.

Women’s organized efforts showed no sign of abating during the years of great activity among school professionals and volunteers in regard to public education and the curriculum. Moreover, true to their goals of institutionalizing reforms, clubwomen around the nation built in their obsolescence as they turned to new projects. DSP reports document these successes, such as the vacation schools that were begun in Chicago in the 1890s by the woman’s club and turned over in 1911 to the board of education. And, in Minnesota in 1910, the medical inspector and nurse initiated by the NCM-PTA were taken over by the school system to maintain. The work continued through 1916 as the clinics started by the NCM-PTA in California were assumed by the schools. School meals, offered as early as the 1890s, expanded to the extent that by 1913, three dozen cities had meal services, each one having been initiated by clubwomen through the DSP. In general, by the time the United States entered World War I in 1917, schools took over the meal service, and at this time over one hundred cities had meals for working- and lower-class children. Even as municipalities took on the role of financing the meals, women volunteers continued to help administer them. With nurses, health checkups, lunches, and other innovations initiated by nonprofessional women and managed by school districts, the purpose and function of schools was shaped.
By 1915 the DSP decided the state-by-state accomplishments should include discussions of the particular national organization that carried out the reform, because it made more sense to use the networks already in place within each separate organization than to create additional administrative layers in the DSP. The PTA in Delaware held lectures and demonstrations on nursing and domestic science; the Council of Jewish Women in Kentucky “completely metamorphosed” a rural school; and the GFWC in Maine improved health conditions in and through the schools. Given this, the reports became lengthier, for each state-by-state account now included the accomplishments of the women’s organizations for each state. The reports consumed so much time during NEA sessions that DSP president Mrs. O. Shepard Barnum remarked in 1912, “It has proved impossible this year to incorporate or even to indicate in this summary all the many and full reports received.” She did attempt to give an overview; nonetheless, but she also directed those attending to read the GFWC Education Department reports for the biennial period 1910–12.79

As the DSP provided the means to coordinate national efforts in educational reforms, it legitimized women’s volunteer work in schools through their networks. As long as clubwomen worked with and through the NEA, accusations that they were meddlers were few and far between and were more the result of local clashes between volunteer and professional. In many instances, professional and volunteer dovetailed their efforts. Local networks, mimicking the relationship of women’s national organizations to the NEA, were often subsumed under state departments of education. Such was the case in Kentucky, when in 1911 the state’s school improvement leagues—the typical name for parent-teacher associations in the South—were placed under the control of the Kentucky State Department of Education. A clubwoman was then hired to organize and supervise the leagues as a paid officer. In this instance, as in others around the South, the school improvement league representative was funded in part by the Southern Education Board.80

In addition to the lengthy reports on the accomplishments of women volunteers, another important development was noted at NEA annual meetings: the need for parent-teacher associations in all communities. NCM-PTA leaders, therefore, used their position in the DSP to build the organization by establishing local units around the country. While undertaking the work of the coordinated women’s associations, they encouraged the founding of new local clubs among a variety of women, including women with grown children and immigrant women. In other words, as the NCM-PTA enacted reforms through the NEA Department, it worked to ensure the stability of its own organization by gaining affiliated local and state units. In 1909 a speaker at the Department of School Patrons meeting, Mrs. Henry J. Hersey of the Colorado Congress of Parents and Teachers, explained that the NCM-PTA was coordinating the efforts of local units in thirty-two states, even though the organization had
only half that number of affiliated state units. By 1915 the campaign to build
the NCM-PTA through the NEA Department of School Patrons had become
so successful that the organization claimed thirty-three state units. As a result,
it withdrew for a time from membership in the DSP. In 1915 no NCM-PTA
leader served as a DSP officer, a first since the department was organized in
1907. Beginning in 1916 NCM-PTA representation was dropped from the
minutes of Department meetings, even though the work of reforming schools
and curricula was still being carried out by the organization and the DSP.81
The NCM-PTA did not rejoin the DSP until 1918, the year after the United
States entered World War I. It was an act of patriotism, since at this time the
schools took on the work of national defense and preparedness. Furthermore,
given the fact that the U.S. Congress had organized women’s organizations
under the Woman’s Committee of the Council of National Defense, the PTA
would have been brought into the fold anyway. One speaker remarked on the
importance of organized women in the war effort, outlining that “Many addi-
tional school activities must be undertaken on a large scale as preparedness
measures.” These activities were the same as before—school gardens, physical
education, vacation schools, the support of vocational education—but had
the added urgency of helping the nation during the war. Again, DSP leaders
reiterated the importance of their networks and reminded school professionals
of their ability to spread ideas and to mobilize human and material resources.
One speaker went so far as to point out that she had “heard no mention of
ways and means for securing adequate funds for patriotic work except here in
the Department of School Patrons.” Clubwomen maintained that between the
research training of the members of the Association for Collegiate Alumnae
and the Southern Association of College Women and the far-reaching net-
works of the NCM-PTA, GFWC, and Council of Jewish Women, the nation’s
war needs could be met.82
After the war, the Department of School Patrons changed radically as the
school’s relationship to the home changed. Many of the changes brought about
by clubwomen’s Progressive-era reforms were either institutionalized in schools
or disappeared, such as the school as social center. Moreover, the war brought
an end to Progressive-era reform fervor. From that point on, only professional
educators served as speakers at annual meetings of the DSP. Volunteer women
were given less autonomy, and by 1920 only one officer was chosen to head
the Department of School Patrons. Within two years the NEA would decide to
discontinue the DSP. At this time, the PTA had a membership of over 400,000,
while the GFWC had approximately 420,000 members. Even though the NEA
had grown exponentially, from 8,400 members in 1917 to 118,000 members
in 1922, it was still markedly smaller than the major women’s associations.
A rhetorical shift connoted a change in relationship between volunteer and
professional, as the focus became cooperation between home and school. No longer were women’s club leaders championing their organizations’ far-reaching powers; instead speakers referred to the role of organized women in helping professional educators. Also gone were the lengthy reports of organized women’s efforts in securing health, curricular, and financial reforms in education.\textsuperscript{83}

In a final act of breaking with women volunteers, the NEA in 1922 disbanded the Department of School Patrons.\textsuperscript{84} The women’s associations that composed the Department continued nonetheless and even collaborated through other groups, such as the Woman’s Joint Congressional Committee, which was created to institutionalize women’s lobbying activities.\textsuperscript{85} Several factors accounted for the changed relationship between organized women volunteers and professional educators. In large part, America after the war was a different place. Also, with the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment in 1920, women’s lives changed drastically, as did their reform work; such gender-segregated activities had lost their appeal. Women having won the vote, their efforts in voluntary organizations were less urgent as additional outlets for political work became available to them, even though a female voting bloc did not materialize as expected. The maternalist line of reasoning that fueled municipal housekeeping became outdated as an ideological framework as more politically radical women turned to other justifications for their work in the public arena. Sheila Rothman claims that white, middle-class women became disillusioned with social reform in the post–World War I period, as a result of an emphasis on romantic marriage over motherhood as a unifying ideology and the fact that the reforms of the Progressive era did not “enhance opportunities for women in structural ways.”\textsuperscript{86} Finally, municipal and state governments did exactly what organized women wanted them to do: they assumed the work that the women had begun, thereby institutionalizing it into the school curriculum and administrative structure.

However, the end had not come to women’s community organizing on behalf of public education; on the contrary, this was just the beginning. This work paralleled the rise of activity among civic voluntary organizations through the 1960s.\textsuperscript{87} After Hannah Kent Schoff stepped down in 1920, women’s voluntary activism in public education became less intrusive in school affairs and was subsumed under the direction of the NCM-PTA. Schoff saw her association grow from eight state units and a little over a thousand members in 1902 to thirty-seven state affiliates and 189,202 members by the time she left office in 1920. She helped remake the organization from a small, national body to a thriving federation with a solid footing in public education. In the mid-1920s, President Margareta Willis Reeve (1923–28) directed the association to defer to the professional authority of school administrators and to embrace the
language of cooperation. As a reflection of this transformation, the organization became the National Congress of Parents and Teachers, or NCPT, in 1924. By the mid-1920s the association had three-quarters of a million members, and just five years later, by 1930, 1.5 million members. It had, by then, surpassed the GFWC’s 800,000 members.88

“This work above all others has seemed to me best worth doing. I started out as part of a little army—I march now with a great and growing one,” recalled Cora C. Bright, the Illinois organizer who had been active in the Department of School Patrons. Legions of women organizers like Bright took up their work with a zeal that was unrivaled in voluntary organizations dedicated to the cause of public education. Women such as Bright read the books recommended by the NCPT and hence became well versed in the latest thinking on education. They traveled their states and regions, presenting to school administrators and normal school graduates the plea for a parent-teacher association in every school. For Bright and tens of thousands of organized white women, the early twentieth century was a time of building the schools through their associations, while at the same time these alliances established an educational institution. The very public ascent of the National Congress of Mothers, along with the GFWC’s commitment to public education, was responsible for the groundswell of interest among women’s associations in public education in the 1890s. The Mothers’ Congress aided the GFWC in making schooling a priority for women’s organizations. Parent-teacher groups and mothers’ clubs were organized again and again in towns, cities, and rural areas around the country in the early decades of the twentieth century. Many of them affiliated with a national organization, usually the GFWC or PTA, while in many instances women held multiple memberships.89

By attending national meetings, clubwomen learned about the latest research and practice from experts, often other women. Muncy argues that because of male administrators, women teachers could not cultivate full professional autonomy. Therefore, they united with other women. Clubwomen and women teachers returned home from conventions and formed home-school organizations and created school departments within their existing women’s or mothers’ clubs, often to apply new educational theories, establish kindergartens, set up playgrounds, and help raise money for new school buildings. Women who could not attend national and regional meetings were informed by reading lists and periodicals shared at their regular meetings by those who had made the journey. The web of relations was tightly woven as the ideology, leadership, and goals of the major women’s associations overlapped.90

As the educational activities of the GFWC and other women’s associations dwindled through the 1920s, the PTA emerged as the major educational organization in the nation. It had established its infrastructure by uniting with
other women’s organizations and by using the opportunity it had as an affiliate of the NEA to create its own local and state units. The PTA thereby set a solid foundation that subsequently assured its continuation as a voluntary organization linked with the public schools after the other women’s organizations left this work behind. Perhaps most importantly, the PTA retained a working relationship with the NEA after the demise of the DSP, but it was a relationship in which the women’s organization had to remain in its place. Margaretta Willis Reeve appeared on the NEA program during her administration, articulating the role of the PTA and its relationship to education professionals, and emphasizing the common refrain of cooperation between home and school. The proximity of the two headquarters supported an ongoing working relationship, since the PTA in 1920 sold the Washington, DC, headquarters it had purchased in 1918 and rented an office in the NEA building until 1938.91

However, another, perhaps more subtle transformation had taken place in the PTA from 1897 to 1924. What originated as an association that would not discriminate based on race became, by the 1920s, an organization that barred black associations from its membership in practice. Faced with the contradiction of its commitment to democratic principles through public education and on behalf of children and families, the PTA helped found a segregated association for its growing black membership. Therefore, the 1920s would prove to be a pivotal time for the National PTA, as its segregated counterpart, the National Congress of Colored Parents and Teachers, was organized. The founding of a black PTA was not carried out entirely by white leaders, because a local-level, grassroots movement to organize parent-teacher associations in segregated schools had begun to take place around the South beginning in the 1890s.