

# The Power of Sisterhood

## The Palm Leaf Club

BY VALERIE EAGLIN

### A Historic Beginning

The Palm Leaf Club is one of Michigan's oldest African American women's civic organizations. Birthed out of a charitable heart of service and generosity, the Palm Leaf Club made its debut on October 30, 1904, in Ypsilanti, Michigan, under its former name, the Trustee Helpers.

In 1843, Brown Chapel African Methodist Episcopal (A.M.E.) Church organized through informal meetings at the homes of its founders, Sylus Jones and Florence Thompson. By 1847, congregants had filed papers of incorporation with Washtenaw County for the African Methodist Episcopal Society, making it the oldest African American church in Ypsilanti and the second oldest active A.M.E. church in Michigan.

Jesse and Isa Steward donated two plots to the church on the southwest corner of Buffalo Street and South Adams Street in Ypsilanti, where Brown Chapel members built their first church, in 1870. Membership continued to grow, so they constructed a larger brick church at the same location, which was completed in 1904 under the leadership of the late Reverend Lewis Pettiford.

The Trustee Helpers, an auxiliary organization to Brown Chapel A.M.E. Church, was created to assist in managing the church's secular business. The Trustee Helpers raised the money to buy the church's pews and chandeliers and contributed to paying off the church debt following the building construction.

The founding members included: Mrs. Emma Anderson (President), Mrs. Nellie Green, Mrs. Mary Jones, Mrs. Amanda Moore, Mrs. Temperance Woods, Mrs. Mary Ann Kersey, Mrs. Rebecca Ward, Mrs. Elizabeth Martin, and Mrs. Mary Eleanor Delaney McCoy (wife of Elijah McCoy, who was "The Real McCoy").

### **African American Women's Clubs**

As early as 1793, Black women started to come together to create organizations that looked after their community's welfare. Black women's clubs helped raise money for the anti-slavery newspaper the *North Star* (published by Frederick Douglass). Many Black churches owed their existence to the dedicated work of African American women organizing in their communities.

After ratifying the Thirteenth Amendment in 1865, Black women continued to organize and often worked with churches to ensure the care of their communities. The club movement for Black women in the 1890s became more secular and began to expand its focus to include social and political reform.

Black women found themselves standing between the movement for civil rights (supporting their Black men) and the women's suffragist movement, but they were not fully embraced by either. In 1895, Florence Bargarnie of the English Anti-Lynching League sent a letter to James Jacks, the president of the Missouri Press Association, asking journalists to help battle lynching in the United States. He responded with the following:

The Negroes in this country are wholly devoid of morality. They know nothing of it except as they learn by being caught for flagrant violations of law and punished... They consider it no disgrace but rather an honor to be sent to prison and to wear striped clothes. The women are prostitutes, and all are natural liars and thieves... Out of 200 in this vicinity, it is doubtful if there are a dozen virtuous women of that number who are not daily thieving from the white people.

His response to Florence Bargarnie triggered Black women into action. Mrs. Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin, the leader of Boston's New Era Club, sent a national "Call to Confer" to women's organizations of color to resist negative representations of Black women.

Black women and organizations met in Washington, D.C., in July 1896, at the First Annual Convention of the National Federation of Afro-American Women. Out of that conference, the National Federation of Afro-American Women (Boston), the Woman's Era Club (Boston), the Colored Women's League (Washington, D.C.), and other smaller clubs merged to form the National Association of Colored Women (NACW). Notable founders of the NACW include Mary Church Terrell, Harriet Tubman, and Ida B. Wells. NACW adopted the motto "Lifting as we climb." In 1904, the organization incorporated itself as the National Association of Colored Women's Clubs (NACWC).

Trustee Helpers/Palm Leaf Club founding member, Mrs. Mary McCoy, and her good friend Mrs. Lucinda "Lucy" Smith Thurman founded the Michigan State Association of Colored Women's Clubs (MSACWC). The new organization was under the umbrella of the NACWC. The Michigan State Association of Colored Women's Clubs

dedicated its mission to the welfare, rights, and education of Black women and families.

Mary Eleanora Delaney McCoy came to Ypsilanti in the early 1870s. In the 1880s, she became an activist, suffragist, philanthropist, and club woman known as the “Mother of Clubs.” Mrs. McCoy established the Sojourner Truth Memorial Association of Michigan, which provided scholarships to children of the former enslaved to attend the University of Michigan. She financially supported the McCoy Home for Colored Children and established the Phyllis Wheatley Home for Aged Colored Women, in Detroit. Mrs. McCoy marched in the 1913 Suffrage Parade in Washington, D.C., and attended the National American Woman Suffrage Association’s Victory Convention in Chicago. She brought this spirit of service through clubs to the Trustee Helpers.

### **The Club Expands Its Mission**

Over the years, the Trustee Helpers realized the necessity for an organized and systematic effort to promote the general welfare of African Americans in the city of Ypsilanti and surrounding communities. Combating the stereotypes of the mass media of that era, they recognized the urgency to furnish evidence of their moral, intellectual, and material strength and the progress of Black people.

In 1934, the Trustee Helpers changed their name to the Palm Leaf Club and opened their membership (by invitation only) to other African American Christian women in the community. The Palm Leaf Club became a member of the Ypsilanti Association of Women’s Clubs (YAWC), the MSACWC, the Central Region Association of Colored Women’s Clubs, and the NACWC. The Palm Leaf Club’s motto is “With God as our guide, our motto is success.”

The Palm Leaf Club has been instrumental in many community projects and activities. In 1942, the club helped to establish the Carver Community Center, first located at Harriet Street in Ypsilanti, and then later, at 401 Armstrong Street. The Carver Community Center would later evolve into the Parkridge Community Center. The community center symbolized a beacon of hope, and it became a staple on Ypsilanti’s south side. It served as a recreation center and meeting place for the community’s youth. It also served as a classroom for multiple grades in the early years.

In 1943, Mrs. Gertrude Francois Warren initiated the Palm Leaf Club Scholarship for young African American men and women graduates of Ypsilanti High School to help further their education. This scholarship continues to this day.

The Palm Leaf Club and other member clubs of the Ypsilanti Association of Women’s Clubs worked together to purchase property for its first clubhouse at 426 First Avenue in Ypsilanti. After outgrowing that building, the YAWC purchased a larger home at 319 South Washington Street as its meeting house. The newer clubhouse had an apartment for a family and space for other African American organizations to meet and hold events.

The Palm Leaf Club has always worked with young women, involving them in



Palm Leaf Club, c. 1940s. First Row (L to R): Amanda Whitclip, Thelma Goodman, Mary Jones, Gertrude Francis, Bessie Starks, Mrs. Ward, Minnie Neely, Liz Martin, and Florence Harris. Second Row (L to R): Unknown, Ethel Neely, Mrs. Day, Edna Kersey, Margaret Russel, Grace Aray, Erma Freemon, Hazel Reid, and Mattie Carter. Third Row (L to R): Mrs. Upthegrone, Lucille Andrews, May Freeman, Martha Jackson, Ethel Williams, Viola Carter, Anna Van Gleyke, Evelyn Beatty, and Lucille Richardson

local club activities. Club members invited young ladies, pre-teen through high school, to participate in state, regional, and national conferences. The club also supports The Women of Poise and Prestige, a group of collegiate women, at Western Michigan University.

The Palm Leaf Club has always helped families in Ypsilanti. A nursery school found its first home at the First Avenue clubhouse. It outgrew that house, and the club moved the nursery school to the Carver Community Center on Harriet Street.

When the community center could no longer meet the needs of the expanding nursery school, Mrs. Louise Lane Bass petitioned the State of Michigan (on behalf of the Palm Leaf Club) for a license to provide children's daycare services. The state granted the permit, and the club moved the nursery school to the basement of Mrs. Bass's home at 738 Harriet Street. Mrs. Bass became the unofficial director (unpaid) of the nursery school. Other members of the Palm Leaf Club, such as Mrs. Mary Louise Foley, also helped to take care of the children. The club financially supported the nursery school and donated food and beverages for the children's meals.

### **The Work Continues Today**

Through the years, the Palm Leaf Club has contributed food baskets and donations to needy families, working with organizations such as Stand for Children and events like Make a Difference Day. The club distributed books to the Parkridge Community Center, the West Willow Neighborhood Association, the Washtenaw County Head Start Program, and People to People, a humanitarian organization, in Johannesburg, South Africa.



The Palm Leaf Club House, 319 South Washington Street



Palm Leaf Club after the annual Club Retreat, 2022. Sitting (L to R): Darlene Ladson Barbosa, Paulette Dozier, Eloise Johnson (President), Valerie Eaglin, and Donna Mitchell. Standing (L to R): Lois Allen Richardson, Candice Spencer, Danielle Stephens, Judy Jackson, Stacey Mack, Linda Horne, Amarie Eadie, and Ramona Eadie



In 2017, the Palm Leaf Club began servicing Parkridge summer camps by preparing and serving nutritious breakfasts. In 2018, they donated school supplies for the Totes4Teachers project and Estabrook Elementary School.

Other organizations have invited Palm Leaf Club members to present on a variety of topics, such as: “Race Relations in Ypsilanti: Turning Women’s Clubs into Allies” for the Ladies’ Literary Club of Ypsilanti, in 2021; “Women and the Vote” for the League of Women Voters, in 2020; and “Remembering Ypsilanti’s African American Civil War Veterans,” at the dedication of the Memorial at Highland Cemetery, in 2022. The Palm Leaf Club maintains the memorial.

The Palm Leaf Club has been honored many times, most recently by the Annual Parkridge Summer Festival, Joe Dulin Community Day, and Eastern Michigan University’s Martin Luther King, Jr., Humanitarian Award.

The women of the Palm Leaf Club have all been impressive women and community leaders. The club has sustained itself through the decades by investing in the youth of the community and inviting younger generations of women to join the cause.

### **A Note on Sources**

Information for this essay comes from Palm Leaf Club minutes, Ypsilanti District Library, the Palm Leaf Club Historical Committee, A. P. Marshall African American Oral History Archive, NACWC history, MSACWC history, and newspaper articles. All images are from the Palm Leaf Club archive.

### **About the Author**

Valerie Eaglin was born and raised in Ypsilanti, Michigan. She is a graduate of Ypsilanti High School. Eaglin earned a BA in Education from Western Michigan University and an MA in Guidance and Counseling from the University of Michigan. She worked as a youth counselor with the Washtenaw County juvenile courts, as a counselor and coordinator at Washtenaw Community Service Agency, and, later, as a senior counselor and program specialist for the University of Michigan Center for the Education of Women. Valerie has been a member of the Palm Leaf Club, the national, regional, and state associations of Colored Women’s Clubs for over twenty years. She is currently the Palm Leaf Club parliamentarian.