
Maria Alexandria Kane
College of William & Mary - Arts & Sciences

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.wm.edu/etd
Part of the African American Studies Commons, African History Commons, and the United States History Commons

Recommended Citation
https://dx.doi.org/doi:10.21220/s2-w7yp-9727

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Theses, Dissertations, & Master Projects at W&M ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in Dissertations, Theses, and Masters Projects by an authorized administrator of W&M ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact scholarworks@wm.edu.
A WORLD IN MINIATURE: James Butcher and the Transformation of
African American Politics & Society in Washington, D.C., 1900-1940

Maria Alexandria Kane
Sugar Land, Texas

Master of Divinity, Duke University, 2006
Bachelor of Arts, History & Classical Studies, Howard University, 2003

A Thesis presented to the Graduate Faculty
of the College of William and Mary in Candidacy for the Degree of
Master of Arts

Department of History

The College of William and Mary
May, 2008
This Thesis is submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

Maria Alexandria Kane

Approved by the Committee, January 2008

Committee Chair
Associate Professor Cindy Hahamovich, Department of History, College of William & Mary

Legum Professor of History, Scott Reynolds Nelson, Department of History, College of William & Mary

Assistant Professor, Robert Trent Vinson, Department of History, College of William & Mary
ABSTRACT

As Jim Crow segregation spread across the United States at the end of the Nineteenth and beginning of the Twentieth centuries, many African Americans sought creative ways to respond to the injustices they faced. James W. Butcher, a native Washingtonian, was one of these determined citizens. Born at the end of the Civil War in 1865, James Butcher would go on to become a part of a growing number of African Americans in Washington, D.C., who worked for the federal government and created an active middle-class life in Washington's Northwest neighborhoods. Butcher also became an international entrepreneur when he opened Butcher-Built Dollhouses in 1926.

He serves as prism through which we can understand the growth of African American society in the nation's capital at the turn of the twentieth century in its diverse manifestations. In three parts, this thesis explores another side of African American history often ignored—the social and personal interactions of the local community and how it complemented the political struggle for equality.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dedication</td>
<td>v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgements</td>
<td>vi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>List of Figures</td>
<td>vii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter I. “Not Quite Forty Acres”: Finding a Home in Freedom, 1850-1900</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter II. “A Place to Call our Own”: The Evolution of Black-Owned Businesses in Washington, D.C., 1900-1930</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter III. “A World in Miniature”: Butcher-Built Dollhouses</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bibliography</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vita</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
DEDICATION

To the Memory of:

My grandmothers,
Damie Katherine Kane, who never tired of telling me stories that tickled my imagination;
and
Madelyn Yvonne Lord, who believed that I could one day write my own.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I was fortunate to write this project under the wisdom of three wonderful professors. My advisor Cindy Hahamovitch taught me how to ask the hard questions and offered the gift of her time, wisdom, and good cheer. Scott Nelson and Robert Vinson also contributed their invaluable expertise and support to this project, especially in its formative stages. My deepest gratitude to each of them.

My family and friends have provided warm places to lay my head and delicious meals when I needed to work...or rest. Molly Levine and Bernard Richardson have dreamed dreams with me and never stopped believing they could come true. My sister Katherine has cared about this project since the first day I moved to Williamsburg and was a great interlocutor during the brainstorming process. My mother continues to amaze and humble me with her generosity, wisdom, and indefatigable love.

You all are everything good and wonderful in my life. Thank you.
# LIST OF FIGURES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Map of Washington, D.C., circa 1877</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Photograph of “The Arcadia”</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Advertisement for Folding Desk in <em>Deltagram</em></td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Photograph of James Butcher at work</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
A WORLD IN MINIATURE

James Butcher and the Transformation of African American Politics & Society in Washington, D.C., 1900-1940
INTRODUCTION

On a frosty November evening in 1938, a young couple entered James Butcher's Washington, D.C., basement—cash in hand—to finalize plans for what they hoped would be the perfect Christmas gift for their young daughter: a handcrafted, fully furnished four foot dollhouse. At first glance the young wife exclaimed, “How perfectly darling! Look at that utterly perfect staircase!” Her husband, however, struggled to muster the same excitement for fear of succumbing to his wife's costly penchant for details. But despite his best efforts, he, too, quickly found himself in awe of the miniature home. It wasn’t just a “little girl's toy.” Enamored with the model’s beauty, the young father joined his wife in finalizing the details of the house, turning to Mr. Butcher, the designer and builder, with an array of questions: What kind of curtains are going to be placed in the windows? How will you keep the fire in the fireplace “dancing?” Where is the best place to install the guest bathroom? Where will all of the electrical wiring go?1

By the 1930s, exchanges like this were quotidian encounters for James Butcher. But it hadn’t always been like this. A thirty-two year federal government

civil employee, Butcher originally constructed dollhouses in his spare time as gifts for his family. After leaving his post as a clerk in the Government Printing Office in 1926, Butcher's part-time hobby became a fulltime livelihood. In the basement of his two-story home in northwest Washington's LeDroit Park neighborhood, Butcher crafted Victorian, contemporary, and Tudor model homes for customers up and down the Atlantic seaboard. The homes, scaled "an inch to a foot, [were] about three feet high and from three to seven feet long," and took an average of four to six weeks to complete. Butcher's popular model, "Arcadia, for example, consisted of seven furnished rooms, electrical lighting, and a "lighted hearth." At seventy-five dollars, it was in the middle of Butcher's pricing range, as homes ranged from thirty to upwards of one thousand dollars. Yet when we look past the cordial exchange between a businessman and his customers, we catch a glimpse of a rare social interaction. For James Butcher was a black man living in the politically charged atmosphere of Jim Crow Washington, D.C., and his eager customers were white.

After the Supreme Court's 1896 Plessy vs. Ferguson decision legalizing segregation, many locales in the United States began segregating their public facilities creating the culture we know refer to as Jim Crow. This included hospitals, schools, swimming pools, beaches, churches and trains. By 1900, white church leaders in Washington, who had once invited blacks to join, were urged to no longer accept black membership. More than physically separating

---

blacks and whites from one another, Jim Crow created *de facto* justification for the inequality between two races.³ Episcopal Bishop Henry Saterlee, who once advocated missionary support for African Americans, declared that African Americans were “morally and intellectually a weaker race, and...even if they should become great landowners, men of wealth and of education, race antagonism would only become stronger and more sharply defined.”⁴

Many restaurants, barbershops, and hotels also refused to accept black patronage despite the defeat of laws in 1913 that sought to outlaw miscegenation and legalize segregation on streetcars and in neighborhoods. As a result, local residents simply took matters into their own hands through selective interpretation and enforcement of the District’s civil rights laws, many of which were passed during the Republican led period of Radical Reconstruction. Some white residents interpreted these laws to mean that they could use any means necessary, short of violence, to enforce discrimination as they saw fit.⁵ An editorial in the *Washington Bee*, the city’s black-owned newspaper, referred to this as “The Cracker in Evidence.” On “the Washington Railway and Electric Company...the cracker is very much in evidence. Last Tuesday evening...several

⁵ Ibid., 175-78.
colored ladies were boarding the car, when one of these crackers uttered some very insulting remarks to them.⁶

Many neighborhood associations in Washington embodied the culture of Jim Crow segregation through the creation of covenants that barred black residents from moving into their communities. They also relied on unwritten agreements between owners and sellers to either charge higher rents for African Americans or simply refuse to sell property to them.

Washington’s public schools also enforced segregation in an equally demeaning way. Unlike white schools, which met all day, most elementary schools for black Washingtonians met only for half the day. Many of these facilities were overcrowded, understaffed, and poorly maintained. Adding to the disparities was the insufficient number of schools for African Americans and their inconvenient locations from black neighborhoods. At district-wide training and conferences, black and white educators were separated from one another, and blacks earned nearly ten percent less a year than their white peers despite their heavier teaching loads.⁷ A Columbia University survey measuring the adequacy of facilities and resources in District schools revealed that on a rating scale of 1,000 points, white schools scored “well above the satisfactory level” with 717 points; black schools scored only 404.⁸

⁶ Washington Bee, May 18, 1918.
While by the end of the nineteenth century the federal government had become a steady source of employment for many African Americans—including James Butcher—the inauguration of Woodrow Wilson as president resulted in a crisis for black Washington. Under Wilson the federal government increased segregation in its offices and decrease the number of available jobs to African Americans. Ultimately, this helped launch black Washingtonians to the forefront in the fight against racism across the country and forced different social classes within Washington’s black community to come together in ways they hadn’t before. Black Washingtonians were forced to reconsider and negotiate different strategies to combat institutionalized racism in their city that would create new places of consumption, recreation, and intellectual stimulation for its black residents.

One of these well-known strategies was political agitation. Through the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), some black Washingtonians turned to political mobilization, collective organization, and later economic boycotts to agitate for civil rights. Other organizations, such as Marcus Garvey’s Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) emphasized racial solidarity and black nationalism upon its founding in 1914. Reflecting the model of process advocated by Tuskegee founder Booker T. Washington, the UNIA originally stressed “values such as thrift, sobriety, industry, and Victorian standards of morality.” Yet just as Garvey stressed black vocational initiative, his organization also embodied the thought of W.E.B. Du Bois, who stressed higher
education and political pressure to achieve civil rights. At its height, the UNIA would quickly become known for its stress on an international African brotherhood, self-determination, racial purity, and anti-colonialism.\(^9\) Other black Washingtonians turned to their churches to fight segregation.\(^{10}\)

James Butcher, a third generation Washingtonian did not belong to any of these political organizations. Nor did he rely on his church as a place for political mobilization. He went there to worship. Butcher was also neither completely beholden to the philosophies of Du Bois or Washington. But James Butcher wasn't impervious to racism of his city. So how did he, and the thousands of black Washingtonians not actively engaged in political agitation, live? What choices did they make sunrise to sunset? James Butcher offers an alternative to the well-known historiography of political protest and resistance. Indeed, Butcher's life offers a window into a new cadre of middle class black Washingtonians who found a new way to navigate segregation through federal government employment, entrepreneurship, and communal recreation.\(^{11}\)

---


\(^{10}\) Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham writes that central to the fight for civil rights and black communal formation was the church as a political center. I want to suggest that despite the attention given to the political machinations of the church, its spiritual offerings, often taken for granted and ignored, were just as formidable. *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1890-1920* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 7-9.

By concentrating only on the nation’s capital non-traditional responses to segregation, such as entrepreneurship, can be studied in detail. In 1967, Constance McLaughlin Green chronicled the carefully crafted ways that white Washingtonians sought to subvert the gains of African Americans and how black residents responded in the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth centuries in her work *Secret City*. Because she focused more on the politics and demographics of race relations, she, too, did not consider the social and cultural developments among black Washingtonians during Jim Crow. *Secret City* also offers little insight into the role of federal government in the employment of African Americans, which, as two recent studies have argued, was a pivotal force in the economic sustainability of African Americans. By integrating the findings of individual studies on Washington’s black-owned businesses between 1910-1935, the rise of social outlets, such as libraries and theatre, and the changing nature of work in the federal government, this thesis offers a more cohesive picture of how Butcher and other black Washingtonians lived amidst and responded to Jim Crow. In turn this aids us in understanding the role of middle class African Americans during this time, an area of study that has been overlooked in the focus on either Washington’s elite black aristocracy or poor. As Butcher

---

12 See Greene, *Secret City*.

8
illustrates, life for African Americans, though riddled with the racism that was Jim Crow, flourished with meaning and purpose through their work and the sense of financial stability. For Butcher, this manifested in his employment with the Government Printing Office and later in the design and manufacture of Butcher Built Dollhouses. Ever an exacting record-keeper, James Butcher’s personal papers provide the largest body of information on the dollhouse builder’s life, beliefs, and the nature of his relationship with blacks and whites as it draws us closer to the community that he and many others called home. Mr. Butcher’s life as a child and an adult also illustrates the social and economic changes within the black community in Washington, D.C., during the early twentieth century and how an individual relied on family, work, and community to persevere, and in some cases, flourish amidst segregation. And though Butcher’s life does not suggest that all individuals responded in the same manner, his devotion to creating memories and making dreams come true through his dollhouses, in conjunction with the rise of black businesses, suggests that Jim Crow paradoxically spurred the creative and economic development of African Americans as they sought to navigate and overcome the limitations imposed upon them.

Accordingly, the first part of this thesis will look at the demographics, class division, and vocational opportunities for African American Washingtonians from the Civil War until the 1910s, and in doing so introduce us to Butcher’s family. In the second section, the rise of black owned businesses in Washington, and
Butcher’s own development during this time will be studied. The final section of this study will carefully examine Butcher’s own business in light of the changes taking place in Washington and its implications for Washington’s social and economic sectors.
Between the beginning of the Civil War and the end of Reconstruction, Washington, D.C., underwent a radical transformation that would play a crucial role in the formation of its black communities. Until the War began in 1861, Washington D.C.'s African American population hovered around twenty-five percent of the city's total population, with two-thirds of that twenty-five percent free.¹⁵ (Only St. Louis and Baltimore had similar ratios of free blacks at this time.) Many of these free blacks began settling in either southeast Washington by the Eastern Branch/Anacostia River or in Georgetown near the Maryland-Washington border (see Figure 1).

According to Letitia Woods Brown, the significant population of free blacks in Washington may be attributed to the "confusion, [the] loopholes, the oversights in the laws, the scattered, episodic, [and] uncoordinated physical development of the Federal facilities [that] created a propitious setting for the individual Negro

whose claim to freedom might not be clear."\(^{16}\) Indeed, many free blacks were
former slaves of mixed-race ancestry who had been manumitted in nearby
Virginia or Maryland but found their mobility and economic opportunities severely
restricted there. The large percentage of free African Americans in the nation’s
capital has also been attributed to the number of mixed raced children born to
white mothers, a process that automatically granted children freedom upon birth.
That is not to say that free blacks in Washington found themselves treated fairly
by white Washingtonians, but they were granted a chance to establish
themselves outside the confines of slavery’s physical limitations and degradation.

Figure 1: Map of Washington in 1877

Indeed, the influx of immigrants into the nation’s capital from Europe,
especially Ireland, limited the availability of jobs in the city and heightened
already strained race relations, such as in Anacostia.\(^{17}\) Those who were able to
find employment usually worked as house servants if they were women or

\(^{17}\) Ibid., 72. Constance McLaughlin Greene, \textit{Secret City}, 93.
unskilled laborers if they were men. Others found employment as carpenters, coopers, painters, and caulkers in the fishing yards of Washington, D.C. and Alexandria, Virginia. Some women served as teachers to other African Americans in church sponsored schools. Though small in number and often of mixed ancestry, these blacks steadily increased the amount of land ownership by free blacks between 1840-1860. This increase, most evident between 1850-1860, when black land ownership increased by sixty percent, suggests a gradual improvement in the economic status of black Washingtonians. These black Washingtonians, many of whom could read and write were the forerunners of economically mobile middle class African American community. Among them was James Butcher's family.

James's father, James William Butcher, Sr., a "mulatto," was born to a slave mother and white father in Alexandria, Virginia around 1849. Five years later, his family moved to Washington, D.C., when his mother was granted her freedom. In 1867, James Sr., met and married Christiana Nichols, also a "mulatto" who was born in Alexandria, Virginia. Christiana's mother, Annie Nichols, a nurse, was born in Maryland and was the slave of George Lee. At Lee's death, Annie was willed her freedom along with $1,000 in property, a

---

19 Ibid., 68-70.
significant amount of money at the time.\textsuperscript{21} Annie Nichols moved from Prince George’s County Maryland to Washington, D.C., and gained employment as a house servant after giving birth to Christinia.\textsuperscript{22}

James, Sr., who was evidently literate, found employment as a clerk in the United States Treasury department. His wife Christiania, who was taught to read by her mother Annie Nichols, was a teacher at the Lincoln School, a private grade school for African-Americans.\textsuperscript{23} That both of the younger James’s parents could read and write, suggesting that they had some form of education.\textsuperscript{24}

The sense of control and respect that many black Washingtonians felt through their education and employment would drastically change with the Civil War and the arrival of thousands of African Americans who fled from the South to seek freedom and refuge in Washington. In 1862, enslaved African Americans in the District were emancipated and soon after the National Freedmen’s Relief Agency was founded to provide food, shelter, clothing, reading, writing, jobs, and “moral” training for the more than 4,000 escaped slaves known as contrabands. In 1863, Congress authorized the establishment of a training camp for African


\textsuperscript{23} Public education for black children in Washington, D.C., did not begin until 1862.

\textsuperscript{24} Gatewood, \textit{Aristocrats of Color}, 40-1.
American soldiers on Roosevelt Island in the Potomac River. By the end of the war in 1865, there were over 40,000 former slaves in the nation's capital.

For both whites and free blacks, the rapid growth of contraband camps was alarming. To many whites, contrabands were manifestations of trouble, laziness, and congestion. And to already freed blacks, the large presence of former slaves into the city strained their already fledging struggle for respect and equality. This sudden increase in numbers also threatened the tenuous sense of organization that some established black Washingtonians felt.\(^\text{25}\) At the same time, many contrabands had little interest in the hierarchical ladder that some blacks believed would lead to social stability and respectability. Instead, they concentrated on securing and maintaining steady employment, procuring adequate housing, and remaining safe from racist vigilantes. These differing priorities led to little cooperation and cohesion between the thousands of black residents in the city. In 1863, a group of well-established black Washingtonians established the Lotus Club on the premise of providing social and humanitarian leadership to other black Washingtonians, but the Club limited its membership to a small circle of like-minded people and circulated letters about proper etiquette and achievement for black Washingtonians.\(^\text{26}\) Some newspapers accused them of creating more racial divisions that white people.\(^\text{27}\) These dissidents eventually

\(^{25}\) Green, *Secret City*, 66.
\(^{27}\) *Washington Bee*, May 10, 1884.
would challenge the so-called "elite's" reliance on family heritage, social connections, and skin tone to determine worth.

Indeed, by the time the war ended in 1865, the District was in chaos and race relations were contentious. The city was overcrowded, smallpox and other illnesses had left nearly a third of the city’s contrabands dead, and roads and public buildings were in disrepair. To reduce the large number of blacks in the city, the Freedmen’s Bureau, founded in 1865 to address the needs of the larger number of newly emancipated African Americans, encouraged many blacks to move to Barry Farm in Anacostia in southeast Washington, promising them their own land and the protection of the government. For many blacks it was not enough. Rumors of dissension between blacks and newly arrived Irish immigrants, as well as the belief that life was relatively safer for African Americans west of the river, kept many from moving.

On top of that, by 1871, the District's municipal government fell into disarray, and by 1873, Washington, along with the rest of the nation, was in financial panic. Many whites felt that, had the city remained under congressional rule, rather than the local rule that allowed many blacks the chance to vote, they would not be in such a raw state. Whites quickly turned to city planning and real estate as one way to stop the spread of African Americans throughout the city. As noted earlier, neighborhoods instituted covenants to keep residents out

28 Ibid., 81.
29 In 1886, blacks were granted the right to vote in the District of Columbia. Green, Secret City, 75-81.
and prices were lowered in areas whites deemed unsuitable for living. As a result, Foggy Bottom in northwest Washington and portions of the District’s southwest regions, areas many whites considered unsuitable for residential planning because of their flood plains, became home to many blacks. In turn, whites began moving to the fringes of the city and relied on a growing public transportation system to take them downtown.30

At the same time class relations among African Americans became further strained in the post-war period as the black elite attempted to separate itself from former contrabands. By the 1880s, upper class blacks even refused to participate in the annual Emancipation Day parades, contending that they were low-class affairs that brought unnecessary attention African Americans. They felt that a quiet, sometimes acquiescing nature was the best way to garner political and civil rights. In doing so, the black aristocracy divided the struggle for civil rights within the black community, foreshadowing the debates on racial uplift that would surface in the black community over the next thirty years.31

Calvin Chase, the founder and editor or the Bee decried the behavior of wealthier, long established residents as pretentious, short-sited, and divisive. Chase would go on to become an outspoken critic of inter-racial divisions within the community and lead the call for the development of black-owned businesses

31 Willard B. Gatewood contends that this nineteenth century division ultimately led to the apathy and withdrawal of upper class blacks as leaders of the collective struggle for civil rights in the 1910s and 1920s. Gatewood, Aristocrats of Color, 51-2.
and the recognition of people based on their educational or vocational merits, rather than their family of origin or length of residence in the city.\textsuperscript{32}

Into these fragile conditions, James William Butcher, Jr., was born in 1875 to his southwest Washington parents as the oldest of five children. His father continued to work at the Treasury Department, but there is no indication in the census records that his mother continued to work. This is not surprising considering that many black male employees of the federal government liked to brag that their steady employment provided enough income for their family, such that their wives no longer had to work.\textsuperscript{33} Not all “stay-at-home wives” really did stay home, however. In interviews conducted more than fifty years after their employment as domestics, many women asked that a pseudonym be used to identify them out of fear of embarrassing or shaming their husbands who wanted to be the sole breadwinners of their families despite the need for two incomes.\textsuperscript{34}

Thus Mrs. Butcher’s decision to stay home or her refusal to acknowledge that she worked reflects a growing trend among African American men in Washington during this time to find a sense of success and purpose in being able to provide for their families as their wives tended to the duties of hearth and home.

While under the watchful eye of his mother and father James discovered that he harbored both a great love for and adroitness in drawing and design. He

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{32} Gatewood, \textit{Aristocrats of Color}, 58; Bee, January 19, 1884, January 2, 1886.
  \item \textsuperscript{33} Interview with Eric Yellin, Assistant Professor History, University of Richmond, Richmond, Virginia, June 18, 2007.
\end{itemize}
maintained a close relationship with his father who nurtured an appreciation and passion for detail. As Butcher recalled, “Some of this [skill] came down to me. My father was of a very artistic person. He had no direct tact [sic] for drawing but he made beautiful articles for decoration. He had patience.” Although he claimed he did not have the patience like his father did, James would later acknowledge that he was a diligent and determined worker who wasn’t afraid to ask for help when he needed it. Of course, the artistic youngster conceded that he didn’t always practice that diligence with his other subjects.

By the time he arrived at M Street High School (later Dunbar High School) Butcher was an antsy artist, using every free moment he had to draw. Under the informal apprenticeship of the school’s art teacher, Mr. Thomas Hunster, a skilled artist who would go on to design Dunbar High School, Butcher fine-tuned his love of drawing, taking courses from Mr. Hunster throughout his tenure at M Street and spending free weekends in his classroom.

First established in 1870 by Congress as the Preparatory High School for Negro Youth, M Street devoted most of its resources to basic grammar school training. By 1891, a new building elevated the prominence and resources of the school, graduating people such as Walter H. Loving, a lieutenant who served in the Army in the Philippines and Japan during World War II, Charles Hamilton Houston, an attorney who fought segregation before the Supreme Court, and Benjamin Oliver Davis, Sr., a commander during World War II and the first black

35 Green, *Secret City*, 70.
36 “Drafting, Drafting, Etc.” January 16, 1942, JWB, Folder 1; Green, *Secret City*, 137.
general in the US Army. The educators that trained many of these leaders include inventor Carter G. Woodson, historian Rayford Logan, and educator Anna J. Cooper, as well as other African American luminaries of the early twentieth century. In black Washington and across the country, attendance at M Street was seen as the key to success and opportunity despite its overcrowded conditions. The school was known across the city and country for achieving the same, if not, higher academic success of white schools in the city.\textsuperscript{37} M Street’s rigorous curriculum included “two years of Greek, three years of French, [and] four years of Latin.”\textsuperscript{38} And to Butcher’s advantage, courses in industrial training and drawing were also required all four years. On the latter course, Butcher unabashedly wrote that it was the “only subject that I could count on for a fine mark.”\textsuperscript{39}

Drawing, however, was not the only activity that instilled the young Butcher with a sense of confidence and joy and M Street’s impact extended beyond its students. The school’s Cadet Corps was known for instilling discipline and routine and creating pride and self-respect. The M Street’s Corps competed in local competitions against local schools and won them in many cases. Their yearly performance at Howard University’s Griffith Stadium was marked as one of the must-see events among African Americans in Washington. In 1949, a

\textsuperscript{38} 75\textsuperscript{th} Anniversary of the Birthday of Professor Rayford W. Logan, Department of History, Howard University, January 7, 1972, Vertical File, Rayford W. Logan, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.
Pittsburgh newspaper featured the anniversary of the company's annual drills, noting the reputation and excellence of the group.40

Butcher joined the corps when he was thirteen years old and marched in the parade for President Grover Cleveland's second inauguration, the self-declared highlight of his high school career. This experience best expresses Butcher's dogged perseverance and the kid-like awe and wonder that permeated his life and later his business. As Butcher reflected on the wintry conditions that the M Street Cadet had to endure during Cleveland's inauguration, he noted

This company of boys under command of Captain Louis A. Cornish marched ahead out into that blizzard weather undaunted. They showed the spirit of the real soldier...After forming, the authorities in charge of the white cadets decided it was too bad to march in as the boys had no overcoats. The white cadets were therefore ordered to fall out. They did so. Naturally, it was to be supposed that the colored cadets would do likewise. What was the surprise for everybody to hear the order 'forward' given and the colored cadets marched into the position, which had been held by white boys. Be it said to the everlasting credit of the white cadets that as they lined the curb and saw the colored cadets march forward into the place they had vacated that they gave one resounding cheer for their bravery...So bravery [is] rewarded always. 41

Despite M Street's reputation, Butcher remained aware of the fragile relationship between whites and blacks and the exceptional opportunities afforded to him at M Street. Yet he illustrates how something as seemingly
recreational as the Cadet Corps could be a way to respond to racism through the pride and social cohesion it fostered. Indeed, it was a paradox of sorts.

In 1893 James graduated from M Street and set his sights on obtaining a medical degree and practicing surgery. For Butcher and his family, art was merely a hobby and not a means of financial stability. Indeed, M Street had a reputation as place that trained future scholars, physicians, and lawyers, not starving artists. The economic and intellectual growth of African Americans as a means to subvert racism was a growing argument in the African American community and best articulated by W. E. B. Du Bois who contended education would bring advancement and produce suitable leadership to fight for civil equality.

Butcher’s family, however, did not have enough money to send James to college, so Butcher began working full time as a messenger at the Government Printing Office (GPO) in 1893. Two years earlier, President Chester Arthur had signed the Civil Service Act that established the Civil Service Commission, which gradually led to the increase in the number of African Americans in the federal government. The Civil Service Commission reconstituted appointments to federal government positions by instituting a color-blind qualification test. As a result,

---

the numbers of African Americans employed by the federal government increased from 620 to 12,000 in less than thirty years. The federal government was not only a steady source of income for its employees, but also an opportunity for blacks to integrate themselves as citizens and servants of what they firmly believed was their nation, too. As Butcher asserted in one of many letters written to the Public Printer: "I assure you it shall be my purpose to give to you my full support in all things which lead to the uplift and betterment of the service and which bind us all together as co-workers in a common cause."

As a proud member of this growing cadre of employees, James Butcher began saving for college with his 18¾ cents per hour salary. Three years later, he enrolled at Howard University, taking courses at night and continuing full-time federal employment. However, his simultaneous work as a student and civil employee took a toll on Butcher's health and his eyesight began to waver. "Like a shot out of the clear sky I found my sight going back on me." Although he received a promotion to office helper and a seven cents per hour pay increase in 1899, Butcher spent ten to twelve dollars a week on doctors' visits in hopes of diagnosing his debilitating eye condition. In 1898—less than one year away from graduation—James's failing eyesight forced him to resign his job and withdraw from his university studies. For the next year, Butcher continued to seek

45 Patler, Jim Crown and the Wilson Administration, 2-6, 10-12.
46 James W. Butcher, Jr., to George H. Carter, 3 November 1922, Civilian Personnel Records of James W. Butcher, Jr., National Archives and Records Administration (NARA). St. Louis, Missouri.
47 Appointment Jacket; Butcher to John Greene, July 30, 1926, NARA.
treatment for his unknown condition and a year later his eyesight returned.

Certain that he could no longer practice medicine, Butcher decided that he “just
couldn’t loaf around doing nothing with a good brain.” So, just as father had once
done, Butcher enrolled in a shorthand and typing program at Spencerian
Business College, a vocational school for African Americans. 48

Butcher returned to work as a helper and less than a year later—when he
was twenty-five years old—applied to take the civil service examination for a
clerk’s position he would not obtain for another six years. 49 (There is no known
cause for the time lapse.) But work was not the only thing on the young Butcher’s
mind. In 1902, soon after he completed his studies in typing and stenography at
Spencerian, Butcher married his girlfriend of nine years, Jennie Rosa Lawrence
Jones, a fellow M Street graduate and self-employed piano teacher.

Soon after they married James and Jennie began expanding their family.
They had five children (Edith, who would later die as a teenager, Nellie; Jennie L;
James; and Charles), each of whom would go on to attend Dunbar. 50 After their
first child was born, Jennie Butcher quit her job as a piano teacher and never
reported working again. Whether Jennie worked or not, Butcher, like his father,
stands as an example of the growing number of African Americans in
Washington who carved out a niche of respectability based on, if not

48 James W. Butcher, “Thing This One Over and then Quit the Sulks,” JWB, Folder 1.
49 Butcher to the Honorable F.W. Palmer, 27 December 1900, Civilian Records-NARA.
50 After 1920, Edith no longer appears in the census or civil personnel records. There is
no known cause or date of death.
remunerative work, college education for one’s children, self-sufficiency, and engaging in the city’s cultural life.

Indeed, even while Butcher continued to work full time for the GPO, he continued to keep at his love of drawing. Thus when the United State government issued Patent 573, 334 in 1912 to him it was the first public and official recognition of two arduous years of design, drawing, legal meetings, and for Butcher’s family, patience and prayer. Patent 573, 334 was not the patent of one of Butcher’s intricate and carefully built dollhouses. It was a patent for a truck handle. Reflecting on his life thirty years later, Butcher recalled that the process of building it was equal parts utility and determination. Butcher believed that his evening hours spent tinkering in his basement workshop after a full day at the GPO was a process of creativity, utility and diligence. Moreover, it was a chance to share his talent with others and prove that one’s hobbies and gifts were not to be kept to one’s self, but to be shared with the world.51 This first product for the wider public would continue to follow and ultimately serve as the greatest indicator of Butcher’s perseverance and his desire, and the desire of fellow African Americans in Washington, D.C., in the first half of the twentieth century to fully integrate themselves into mainstream America through less political, but no less aggressive means.52

51 “Drawing, Drafting, Etc.” and “Think this one over and then quit the sulks.” JWB, Folder 1.
Part of Butcher's personality however, was influenced by his religious beliefs. Raised in the Baptist church and eventually becoming a deacon in Northeast Washington's Berean Baptist Church, James Butcher, found church to be more than just an experience of faith. It was also a social gathering. As a deacon Butcher often urged members to take responsibility for their membership through consistent service and giving to the church. In one poem he urged his worshipping community to focus on taking care of its internal needs before trying to focus on external matters: "I dreamed that the debt on the church was paid/ By some very generous members/ The pastor's salary was settled/ Right through 'till next September/ No more worry with fule and gas/ Now electric heat and light—/ Provided by the Deacon board,/ And bills paid right on sight." For Butcher, church was not only a place for political organization—arguably one of its most recognized roles—but also a place of spiritual and social fulfillment.

Without the community he found in his church, Butcher's prospect for sound fulfillment may well have been blocked by the election of Woodrow Wilson. Soon after he took the oath of office President Wilson authorized sweeping changes to the federal bureaucracy. In 1914 civil service applicants were required to submit a picture along with their application, a tacit scheme to screen out potential black employees. A year later segregation was established throughout the Treasury Department and the Postal Service, the largest employer of African Americans. Many blacks in mid-level management positions were then

---

53 "The Idle Dream of the Church Trustee," JWB, Folder 1.
downgraded under the guise of becoming leaders in the newly formed all black sections. Butcher was able to retain his employment with the GPO but was assigned to a different desk, where he often complained of being separated from the people he had worked side-by-side with for many years. Many of these same co-workers had rallied to Butcher's side when he became ill. Their letter to their supervisor on the matter is quite telling: "The employees of the Pamphlet Bindery, would like to take up a collection, to help Mr. James W. Butcher, in his dire need...Has no leave coming, and his family are now stricken with the flue [sic]." President Wilson, however, took little if any notice of the evidence of interracial cooperation and the sense of pride and community federal government provided some of its workers.

To address the increased segregation in the federal government, the NAACP requested meetings with White House officials, wrote numerous editorials and letters to local white leaders, and published their progress in their magazine, The Crisis. Although NAACP board member and chairman Oswald Garrison Villard wrote numerous letters to and finally met with President Wilson in 1913, the Virginian Democrat would not budge on his view toward segregation. In 1914, Joel Spingarn, the "most militant white member of the NAACP," led a national tour of NAACP board members across the country to raise support and

55 Ibid., 16-20.
56 Deputy Public Printer to Mr. Carter, February 23, 1924.
57 Susan L. Ga—to the Honorable Cornelius Ford, January 25, 1920, Civilian Personnel Records, NARA.
awareness of the organization’s fight against segregation and racial violence. And William Monroe Trotter led the local organization and protest to Wilson’s policies. Reflecting on the widespread effects of increased segregation under President Wilson, W.E.B. Du Bois reflected, “Quite suddenly the program for the NAACP, which up to this time had been more or less indefinite, was made clear and intensive.”

As the NAACP concentrated their efforts on fighting segregation in the federal government, other African American Washingtonians turned their efforts to other civil rights struggles, including housing discrimination. Georgetown, once a home to many antebellum African Americans slowly became the enclave of well-to-do white Washingtonians who were attracted to the design and character of the older homes. As a result, blacks were forced out the area because of high prices in a competitive market. And with the number of voluntary covenants established by white neighborhoods, middle class African Americans who had secured jobs with the government or were teaching at nearby Howard University, were forced to establish themselves elsewhere. Left with few options beside the heavily populated Anacostia, many blacks turned their sights to the yet-developed forests in northwest Washington. Close to Howard, Freedmen’s Hospital (which served African Americans), and the Wisewall Barracks, many

middle class blacks thought they had found the perfect spot in the LeDroit Park and Columbia Heights neighborhoods. These new residents however, didn't just want a place to live; they wanted a community to call home. Even in the midst of segregation, African Americans refused to deny themselves the dreams of prosperity and joy. So into these northwest Washington neighborhoods one of the nation’s largest district of black-owned businesses developed.

---

62 Green, Secret City, 148.
Developing a thoroughfare for black entrepreneurship was both a necessity to combat the few choices mitigated by the refusal of many whites to serve blacks, as well as an alternative to the traditional methods of agitation. At the close of the Nineteenth Century, a growing cadre of successful blacks began challenging the decades-old theory of uplift through political agitation and higher education alone held by many of Washington's black elites. As noted earlier, there remained a desire within Washington's black upper class to carefully, but consciously integrate themselves into white society. This included passing as whites or refusing to patronize black-owned businesses for fear of appearing too accommodating to the racist status quo. Many of these similarly thinking elites found support in the theory of W. E. B. Du Bois who stressed active political agitation and the need for the stable and firm leadership of an educated "tenth." However, with the legal sanctioning of segregation in the 1896 *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision, a rising ideology of separation stressed cooperation within

---


the race and the importance of self-sufficiency within the community gained momentum in Washington’s black community, especially among newer residents and those with fewer ties to the traditional black aristocracy. For people without a college education who wanted to ascend the economic and political ladder, Booker T. Washington offered the logic and reasoning for supporting self-sufficiency in an era of Jim Crow.

At the same time, not everyone subscribed in entirety to Washington’s conciliatory and accommodationist politics. In a scathing rebuke of what they saw as Washington’s hypocrisy the Bee editors said that Washington used his accommodationist rhetoric to get more money while also relying on the education and intellect of other African Americans to advance his aims. Thus as the NAACP focused on political agitation and many remained divided on the best way to adopt Washington’s theories, black Washingtonians began to seek out an alternative through the development of black-owned businesses.

In a Bee editorial, editor Calvin Chase commentated on the diverse philosophies of this rising middle class noting, “Washington is not an agitator, he is a constructive worker. Du Bois is not a constructive worker; he is a theorist. Trotter…is an agitator pure and simple…The condition the race finds itself in today…argues the need of the constructive, the theorist, and the agitator…there ought to be some common ground upon which all three might stand.” This “common ground” slowly manifested into the formation of a black business district

---

65 Bee, August 15, 1903.
in northwest Washington. Located in what became known as Shaw, near Howard University and along U Street, this enclave of black-owned businesses also became the social epicenter of black Washington culture by the 1920s.  

Self-motivated economic development in predominantly black neighborhoods was a chance to address multiple concerns and philosophies within Washington’s black community. The first was the refusal of many white businesses to serve African Americans or the higher prices charged blacks for comparable goods and services offered to whites. Second, was the desire for the greater distribution of wealth among black Washingtonians. Third, there was a need to spur cooperation within the African American community between the have and have-nots. But with little capital to establish their businesses and the reluctance of many financial institutions to offer them loans while simultaneously charging them higher interest rates than their white counterparts, the establishment of black-owned businesses remained an up-hill battle until 1900.  

In 1890 there were fifteen black-owned small general stores, candy-makers, shoemakers, and barbers, and blacks still relied heavily on businesses owned by whites, who were increasingly refusing blacks as customers. The Hecht’s Department store, which allowed African Americans to shop in their store,

---

68 Michael Andrew Fitzpatrick notes blacks paid two percent more for regular loans, fourteen percent more for first mortgages, and twenty-five percent more for second mortgages. Fitzpatrick, “Shaw, Washington’s Premier Black Neighborhood,” 30.
refused, however, to allow them to eat at their lunch counter. Nevertheless, black patronage of Hecht's still remained proportionally low, out of what Chase decried as laziness, pride, and contempt for people of other classes. In response, Chase, along with Washington businessman Andrew Hilyer and former Mississippi Senator Blanche Bruce's son, Roscoe, led the fight for this black business district. Unlike their predecessors, this newer generation of leadership wanted to achieve racial uplift on a more short-term basis by solidifying the economic base and the cooperation of black Washingtonians.

Hilyer did his part by forming the Union League (not the same as the Reconstruction Era Union League) an organization aimed at aiding the establishment of black-owned businesses in Washington. At the same time they continued to actively seek political gains for their community. For example, community leaders encouraged whites to hire blacks and blacks to support their fellow residents. Meeting monthly, the Union League became the center of black businesses development.

Nevertheless, many residents complained that black-owned business offered little variety and high prices. In an editorial, Chase opined that black business owners had to offer competitive prices, friendly and professional service, and help to one’s “brother in a similar business.” As leaders began

---

72 *Bee*, July 17, 1915.
vocalizing support for African American-owned businesses earlier strategies of resistance changed. In 1906, four years after the Union League dissolved because of differences among the leadership, Washingtonians chartered a chapter of Booker T. Washington’s National Negro Business League to take its place. Ironically, Washington’s Negro Business League was dominated by the likes of Robert Terrell and other wealthy, university trained black Washingtonians, who had earlier scorned Booker T. Washington’s accommodationist philosophy. Their leadership contributed to the increased diversity of black businesses and those who advocated for them. Between 1900-1910 pharmacies, jewelers, insurance companies, banks, and undertakers began appearing throughout northwest Washington, drawing the attention and patronage of middle and upper class blacks who had previously expressed contempt for Washington’s so-called black businesses district. At the same time, skilled workers and poorer resident—people who were quickly refused from service at white-owned businesses—now found a place to patronize.

Thus although the formation of Washington’s Shaw business district originally developed under the pretense as political resistance, it became a means of economic advancement and social cooperation among different classes concerned more about daily survival and comfort than national politics. In one editorial Chase declared, “while the Bee is against and has opposed segregation, it has certainly forced the colored brother and sister to come

---

Chase went on to say that "business development for African Americans was, by necessity, a process of observation and experiment." That "observation and experiment" now included the privilege of choice. Indeed, the seemingly mundane, yet necessary choices of everyday life became both a chance to fight Jim Crow and an opportunity to make a choice in everyday matters of consumption as leaders continued the fight against Jim Crow culture.

The Bee reflected the diverse array of choices available to the community and the evolution of a consumer center along U Street in Northwest Washington. On any given day, there were three ads for funeral homes; two for department stores, one of which was white-owned; two for pharmacists, one offering a variety of homemade remedies and herbal treatments; three for dental services, one for the clinic at the Howard University School of Dentistry, the other two for private dentists. These advertisements also suggest an expanding social and recreational life for African Americans. A March 1915 edition offered three different ads for vacation homes and hotels along the New England seaboard. The Hotel Dale, in Cape May, New Jersey, promised the "greatest" service to colored people. Moreover, in the 1910s increasing numbers of

---

74 Bee, December 4, 1915.
76 A third of the paper was dedicated to ads.
77 Bee, December 4, 1915.
78 Bee, May 5, 1915.
African Americans were patronizing the few remaining integrated institutions, the city's public libraries and parks, albeit at unstated times of "black only" use.\textsuperscript{79}

Yet amidst the growing diversification of African Americans in public recreation, blacks remained acutely aware of the racial struggles they faced. In 1919, following an attack by white soldiers on predominately black neighborhoods in southwest Washington, many of the city's African American males gathered weapons and coalesced around 7\textsuperscript{th} and T Streets NW, which along with U Street, had become the epicenter of Washington's new middle class black community. They were prepared to defend their community from rumors of encroaching white veterans returning from World War I to "take back" their city. Shots were fired between the two groups and a riot ensued that lasted for four more days. Many African Americans were determined to protect their community at any costs.\textsuperscript{80}

Originally projected as a means of responding to the economic limitations of segregation, the enclave of black-owned businesses became a place of choice, recreation, and the crafting of a distinct black social life. A \textit{Bee} editorial noted that people along this corridor were "proud of their establishments...and show their approval by keeping them busy from 9 a.m. until 10 p.m."\textsuperscript{81} Indeed, by the 1920s U Street, running through the Shaw neighborhood expanded its


\textsuperscript{80} \textit{Bee}, April 26, July 26, 1919; Constance Green notes that many people attributed the riot to false and inflammatory reports in the white owned \textit{Washington Post}. Green, \textit{Secret City}, 190-4.

\textsuperscript{81} Ibid.
offerings and now included more than theatres, arcades, and James Butcher's own Butcher-Built dollhouses, out of Butcher's basement. Butcher, and many other black Washingtonians of the rising middle class found ways to live in the midst of Jim Crow Washington by relying on the support and patronage of blacks from all walks of life.
CHAPTER III

A WORLD IN MINATURE: BUTCHER-BUILT DOLLHOUSES

Although Butcher discovered a comfortable niche in the federal government, by 1926, he was forced to find a new way to navigate through life. In July, Butcher found himself plagued with exhaustion and an unnamed "nervous attack." On the advice of his family physician Butcher permanently left his post with the GPO. For the thirty-two year federal employee, disability retirement undercut his emotional and financial stability. Six months after he left the GPO, Butcher wrote to the Public Printer of the United States confessing that disability retirement "was a heavy blow to me to realize that at my age I could no longer be an active worker. I accepted the situation with much regret, but with a thankfulness also since so many who had worked with me had never been given the warning signs to quit before they were overtaken and stricken down." Butcher's work was not only a source of income, but also a source of pride, alluding to the assertion that as employees of the federal government many African Americans found a sense of stability that allowed them to attain a status

82 James W. Butcher, Jr., to John Greene, July 30, 1926, Civilian Personnel Records, NARA.
83 Butcher to George Carter, January 18, 1927, Civilian Personnel Records, NARA.
of stability and sense of community, albeit a rather tenuous one, with their fellow employees in the dual citizen and employee of the United States. In a letter to the Public Printer, George Carter, upon finally receiving his pension check of $999.96 per year, Butcher offered his thanks and belief in Carter’s leadership to the dedicated employees of the United States: “I trust that your administration will be a source of great pride to yourself as well as to the FOUR THOUSAND.”84 Without this source of pride and income Butcher became despondent.

James’s wife Jennie quickly became frustrated with her husband’s aimlessness and began to imagine that her husband’s love of dollhouses could become more than a way to fill his idle time. At her urging, James began work on a Sears Roebuck dollhouse model.85 After it was completed his wife took it three blocks from their northwest Fifth Street home to the black-owned Frances Mae Mart. Completed just in time for Christmas, this simple “brick paper [and a] shingle roof” sold for $8.50.

With a little bit more change in his pocket, James William Butcher, Jr., began believing that there was in fact a market for dollhouses. He also realized that he needed more than paper materials if he wanted to make the best home so he turned to the local black-owned businesses in Shaw to secure the supplies he would need for the elaborate and detailed homes he planned to build. He quickly came to rely upon black-owned Kelly’s Lumbar Company and Galliher

85 “A World in Miniature,” 1, JWB, Folder 1.
and Hughuely for his supplies, but not without comparing prices amongst the growing number of stores available. In his records he noted the stores’ prices, whether they delivered, and how much he purchased from them and other stores at various times. In turning to the local stores of his LeDroit park community, Butcher illustrates the expansion that Shaw’s black business district had on his assertion of choice.

Yet why spend so much money on dollhouses, a luxury item of recreation in many instances, when times were bleak for African Americans? For Butcher it wasn’t mere luxury, it was life at its best. Indeed, Butcher’s passion for craft and design was not new. For Butcher, the dollhouses were “dreams come true.” Building the dollhouses was a chance to instill his work with precision, “ingenuity and care.” The dollhouses were “diminutive replicas rather than mere toys,” he wrote. As Butcher recalled in his journal

The models are more to me than almost anyone can imagine. They represent real life and action to me. In the houses babies are born, children grow up, marriages are contracted, illnesses are suffered, and deaths are visited...This might not be so real were it not for the fact that the work is my own. Not the originality. That is the architects'. But the execution is mine and it brings some crumb of comfort to know that each step in the construction was carried out with a good thought and each model was finished with a blessing.

---

86 JWB, Folder 16.
88 "What the Models Mean to Me," February 16, 1942, JWB, Folder 1.
Butcher’s oldest son Philip recalled in their family papers that his father was often moved by the notion that through his homes, a sense of community, heritage, and family could be fostered and passed down through generations.\textsuperscript{89} Indeed, for the Butcher family the business was an enterprise that involved everyone, even if the children did not build the homes themselves. As an adult, Philip recalled, “[We] always speak of ‘houses,’ never of ‘doll houses’... Most of the important family decisions have been reached after basement consultations; and marriage and births, disappointments and new prospects, catastrophies [sic] and triumphs, all are announced there first.”\textsuperscript{90}

Philip also shared that although financial profits were important to the expansion of the business, its real impetus for the business lay in the ability of the dollhouses to provide Butcher and his family with a sense of purpose and “optimism” during an otherwise dismal time of unemployment. As he said, “In those days neither of them dreamed how thoroughly their confidence and industry would be rewarded. It was enough to have the possibility of a productive future again.”\textsuperscript{91} Butcher’s family’s experience invites us to consider the ways in which he and possibly other black Washingtonians created a sense of purpose through social integration outside of the seemingly traditional and well-known models of protest.

\textsuperscript{89} A World in Miniature,” 6, JWB, Folder 1.
\textsuperscript{90} Ibid., 5, JWB, Folder 1.
\textsuperscript{91} “A World in Miniature,” 1-2, JWB, Folder 1.
And with this sense of personal duty and the desire to make dreams come true, Butcher-Built dollhouses set its sights on introducing itself to the community by placing ads in the *Bee* and *Washington Post*. The ads garnered little response, so Jennie began going to the local department stores asking them if they would be willing to display and sell the miniature houses. Woodward and Lothrop, an established white-owned store was the first to agree and Butcher sold his fourth home for $50.00 in 1927. Soon after, Butcher also began displaying his home inside of Hecht’s and Kann’s department stores, most of the homes selling for between $25.00-50.00.92 Having garnered the support of department stores Butcher’s customer base expanded to include residents of the tony and predominately white Chevy Chase, Georgetown, and suburban McLean, Virginia communities, including Washington socialite and one-time Hope Diamond owner Evelyn Walsh McLean, who purchased a home for her granddaughter, Mamie Spears Reynolds.93 Butcher also sold a few of his homes in his local northwest Washington neighborhood.94

Once he had a reliable source of distribution, Butcher began expanding the variety of homes he built and the types of materials he used. He also created grades of models, based on their size and prices. Homes fetched for upwards of $200 for Butcher-Built “factory” models and $500.00-$1,000 for custom designed

---

92 Ibid., 1-4, JWB; “The Beginning,” 1, JWB, Folder 16.  
94 JWB, Folders 17-18.
homes. Within the first year of business Butcher was able to rely less on the department stores for support and more on word-of-mouth referrals to garner business. In the first year alone he made nearly $1,200.00 from the thirteen dollhouses sold. Yet James remained rather demur about his business’s success and focused more on their design and perfection.

Each home, which took on average four weeks to complete, was designed with precision and to the specifications of the customer and Butcher’s imagination. The homes were built with panel board, pine strips to reinforce the base, and panels, stucco, or brick wallpaper. After cutting out spaces for the window and doors and making the different levels, Butcher placed the floor covering in each home and drilled holes for the electrical sockets. Placing the electrical wiring next he then partitioned the walls and doors so that the wiring was hidden. Finally the exterior of the home was painted.

Figure 2: “The Arcadia”, which sold for $75.00.

95 “untitled,” Dollhouse Models, JWB, Folder 19.
96 “A Butcher-Built Doll House,” JWB, Folder 1; “He Harnessed a Hobby,” Pulse January 1946, 12-13
Wanting each home to appear as “real” as possible, each home had a fireplace with a simulated fire in the living room. For the rest of the interior decoration, James turned to the sharp eye of his wife Jennie. She selected the pieces of furniture to go in each home the room color, and the type of wallpaper used. Jennie, however, had some help in her selection. In 1930, Butcher wrote a series of letters to international dollhouse builders for their advice. To one builder in Cornwall, England he requested wisdom on securing fine furniture to fit his one foot to one inch scaled homes. And from a builder in Australia, Butcher received advice on interior color schemes and backyard “gardens.” But it wasn’t all business for Butcher. Many of his overseas exchanges included comments on the state of the economy and family matters. Butcher also sought his children’s opinions when working on the design of children’s rooms as he asserted that each home had a “personality.” In both his personal reflections and in the notes he kept, such as the various types of windows he created, Butcher asserted not only his creativity and entrepreneurial ingenuity, but also the individual resolve for social harmony in an otherwise tumultuous time. He did not use his business to realize racial integration. Rather, Butcher navigated segregation on a daily business through his life and work, at times subverting it through business and personal ingenuity. For example, as he sought to expand his business he wrote a series of letters to various manufacturing and carpentry companies offering to

97 Butcher to Bill Guy, 15 October 1930; Keith Reid to Butcher, December 10, 1930, JWB, Folder 6.
98 “Old Colonial House,” JWB, Folder 17; “What the Models Mean to Me,” 3-5, JWB, Folder 1.
give them a home using their supplies in exchange for a chance to place a free ad in their publication knowing that many white-owned stores wouldn’t accept his patronage in person. By including a picture of his work, Butcher grabbed the company’s attention. As Brown shared, “As a matter of fact, a person would almost believe that they are pictures taken of actual homes instead of small doll houses.”99 In the October 1939 issue of Delta’s publication, Deltagram, Butcher was featured in article headlined “Life Begins After 50.”100 In fact, historians of the dollhouse craft have noted that Butcher was among the select few independent manufacturers and sellers.101

When the Depression began to affect the sale of his dollhouses in 1936, Butcher expanded his business to include the production and sell of the Butcher-Built Folding Desk. Recalling to one manufacturing company that the Depression was affecting his business as it had many others, Butcher declared that by offering something more “practical” he might be able to stay in business and still meet “people’s needs.” Always hesitant to give himself too much credit, Butcher claimed that the desk was nothing more than attempt at make something practical and beautiful for people. Of course, he was not reticent in sharing that he sold over 200 desks during the thirteen years that he made them. Built with numerous drawers for storing supplies, each desk was sized according to customer specifications and sold for thirty-five dollars apiece. And though it would

99 Sam Brown to Butcher, 2 May 1939, JWB, Folder 7.
100 “Life Begins After 50,” Deltagram 9, no.4 (January 1940), 63, JWB, Folder 8.
never gain the popularity that his dollhouses did, Butcher’s desk was also a product of Butcher’s yearning for perfection and usefulness in the home. “The various color schemes, the artistic panel designs, coupled with the fact that it can be carried about from room to room give this desk its place in the scheme of better things for the better home.”

Although Butcher continued to concentrate on his dollhouse business, building desks allowed Butcher to expand his craft and develop a newer contingent of customers, including a Greenwich, Connecticut shop owner who contracted with Butcher to make several folding-desks in the late 1930s. His desk was even featured in the *Deltagram* carpentry trade publication, as his homes had. By expanding his market to include more practical products Butcher reflected both his business ingenuity and his ability to adjust to the economic conditions of his time. And though he lived with segregation it did not dominate his sense of self.

---

102 “Butcher-Built Folding Desk: A Short History,” JWB, Folder 1.
103 Dan Rogers to Miss Catherine Callies, 17 October and 5 November, 1938, JWB, Folder 16.
In fact Butcher continued to increase his business contacts and wrote to Walker-Turner Company, a “Manufacturer of Tools and Hardware Specialties,” offering to build a home for them using their supplies in exchange for a small amount of publicity. The company was unable to meet Butcher’s demands, but their reason why is more of a tribute to Butcher-Built dollhouses than a dismissal of his work. They insisted that anything Butcher built “would undoubtedly be too high class and too expensive for this trade, as they figure the whole doll house should not cost over $4.00 or $5.00 to complete. It would be a cheap production and certainly not in the class with the type which you make so carefully.”

104 N.B. Barrett to Butcher, January 21, 1931, JWB, Folder 5.
Indeed, the Arcadia, Concordia and other detailed models that Butcher built had garnered a reputation for sophistication and elegance, suggesting that despite his rather self-deprecation James Butcher’s business was not a “post-retirement hobby” to kill time, but a growing and respected business of ingenuity growing amongst a wider group of black Washingtonians.

Indeed, despite the unwillingness of these manufacturing companies to buy Butcher’s drill press, Butcher was able to introduce his company’s products beyond the market of dollhouse purveyors. In 1939, made a visit to Armstrong Linoleum Company in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, now one of the major producers of flooring. They requested 48 homes from Butcher, 12 scale models at $100.00 piece and 36 one-floor homes at $40.00 a piece. They supplied Butcher all of the interior materials to use and in exchange Butcher made $2,440.00 on the project, more than twice what he made a year on his pension.105

By 1938, Butcher was selling across the country, with most of his long-distance customers coming from New York, New Jersey, and California.106 Noted Los Angeles architect Paul Williams heard about Butcher and sought him to build scale models for his Hollywood customers. These models often went for $600-$1000 dollars, though Butcher made little mention of the financial aspect of the relationship. Instead, he commented on the high $65,000 price tag of the Hollywood mansions and his awe that his “basement tinkering” could have

105 “Tuesday, June 20, 1939,” JWB, Folder 12.
106 Records of Butcher-Built construction, 1926-1939. JWB, Folders 16-17.
48
yielded such a response. Butcher also began building models for churches, including one for First Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia on behalf of Wenner and Fenk architects. Taking a month a half to complete, the church model was one of the most memorable experiences for Butcher. To the dollhouse builder,

The greatest reality [was] in the churches. All the stories of churches seem so vivid when one can sit and see the church...In the churches babies are christened or blessed...weddings are solemnized; festivals are held; and funerals are preached. In the church life begins and in the church the earthly career ends.

Indeed, Butcher was less concerned with wealth, concentrating instead on providing stability and a sense of continuity for his family. Butcher-Built dollhouses was a way for this savvy craftsman to use his hobby and spirituality to spawn a business that mirrored the spread of black Washingtonians into business and recreation during Jim Crow.

This is best exemplified in Butcher's encounter with a Washington celebrity during the height of his business. Without notice, a middle age white man stopped by Butcher's house and asked if Mr. Butcher would accompany him to his downtown Washington apartment to look at a model that his wife had built of their home. The well-connected, but still unknown couple wanted Butcher to build a more finished and detailed model of their home. As Mr. Butcher and his

107 Better Homes and Gardens to Butcher, April 12, 1938; Butcher to Bruce C. Wenner, 1 February 1, 1947, JWB, Folder 9.
108 “First Presbyterian Church,” JWB, Folder 9.
109 “What the Models Mean to Me,” JWB, Folder 1.
potential customer drove through Washington's streets, the man gradually revealed that he was a former member of Congress. Upon hearing that, Butcher's curiosity was peaked recalling that he knew some “officials at the capitol.” However, as the two men arrived at the Connecticut Avenue apartment building and proceeded to the elevator, Butcher began discerning his company was more established and politically connected than Butcher realized. As he said, “All this time I noticed people taking off their hats to him and that made me more interested to know who he was.” With equal parts wonder and eagerness, Butcher arrived at the former Congressman's lavish apartment and soon discovered that the politician's wife was an architect herself. Butcher was dumbfounded: “Of course, that puzzled me still more since she was architect to know why they wanted ME to build them a model.” After discussing with the couple their wishes Butcher eventually left with orders in hand and his customer's business card: Clarence C. Dill, Attorney-at-Law. Doing a little research the following day Butcher discovered that the man “driving [him] around town” was a former Senator and current gubernatorial candidate in the state of Washington. Although the couple later put a hold on their order, Butcher reflected, “[The] experience was something to marvel about...Being called on by an architect to inspect her work was a bit of a booster for me. And she really did know what she was taking about. Being a pretty woman probably had something to do with it—as you know how that sets with me. Huh?"110

110 “Clarence C. Dill: An Experience,” JWB, Folder 1.
Butcher Built Dollhouses offered Butcher unique opportunities to interact across the color line on a frequent basis. At the same time, his experience remains a broader reflection of the determination of many African Americans living in Jim Crow Washington who turned to entrepreneurship and community networks to fashion a livelihood out of a hobby.

In late 1949, with his health failing, Butcher decided to close-up shop for the final time. Having built over three hundred homes, he reflected that not only had he provided extra income for his family, but he had also found ways to find purpose and meaning, as well as interaction with whites and blacks in a time of segregation. Of course, Mr. Butcher’s life was far from perfect. There were moments when he struggled to make ends meet and wondered whether he would ever receive his pension. He struggled with mental illness and the fear of waiting for his sons to return home from serving in World War II. And that is what we know. Indeed, there may be more to James William Butcher’s story than pictures and pieces of paper indicate. But that which remains reveals a man who had a yearning and passion for a life well lived, a man who found meaning in his work and relationships with family and friends in a time of racial degradation. One man among many.
CONCLUSION

Today, Butcher’s dollhouses can be found in the Archives of the District of Columbia and Washington’s Children’s Museum. In a period during which active protest and communal organization often fills the pages of history books, James W. Butcher, as both an employee of the federal government and later dollhouse entrepreneur, reflects how some African Americans created a middle class existence amidst the daily struggles of segregation. In 1950, he received a letter from John W. Kauffmann, a reporter for Washington’s Evening-Star, who wanted to interview Butcher for an upcoming article. On the letter Butcher reflected, “This young man will never realize how very, very happy he made the last few hours of my life. A wonderful job he did.”

Throughout his life, James William Butcher, Jr., possessed a child-like admiration of life and its opportunities. Perhaps it’s only fitting them that he became an exacting craftsman of the more than three hundred dollhouses that he built over the course of his lifetime. Amid the confines of segregation, Butcher, was one of many African Americans whose middle class existence found unique and alternative means of enduring Jim Crow segregation through their sense of community in the federal government, and entrepreneurial ingenuity.

---

111 John M. Kauffmann to Butcher, October 8, 1949, JWB, Folder 1.
As an article in the *Deltagram* declared, "Life Begins After Fifty." Indeed, for James W. Butcher, the life that offered the most freedom and creativity began once he could craft it on his own terms in his own community. Reflecting on his life, Butcher harbored no regrets, only the desire that others, too, would see the worth of his favorite pastime. To Butcher, these recreations were not merely dollhouses, but "representations of real life and action."

![Figure 4: James Butcher at work](image)

Indeed, on the eve of Butcher's death in 1950, black Washingtonians became known for its lively theatres, black owned businesses, and intellectual rigor of nearby Howard University. And after three hundred homes and twenty-

---

112 JWB, Folder 8.
113 "What the Models Mean to Me," February 16, 1942, JWB, Folder 1.
three years of living out his childhood dream of transforming his love of art into a
vocation, James William Butcher died peacefully surrounded by his family.

Butcher’s life was not only a story of personal determination and passion, but a reflection of the way that he was able to cross lines of class and race in the first half of the twentieth century to reflect a wider influx of African Americans in public life through their private engagements. Second, he illustrates how the nature of Jim Crow segregation paradoxically spurred on the creation and growth of black businesses. Ultimately, the creation of this middle class culture at the beginning of the twentieth century helped build a community that had been divided by class at the end of the Civil War and turn of the century. Indeed, through his dollhouses, James W. Butcher had imagined a nearly perfect world—a world without Jim Crow.
BIBLIOGRAPHY

PRIMARY SOURCES

Manuscripts


Civilian Personnel Record of James William Butcher, Jr., National Archives and Records Administration, St. Louis, MO.


75th Anniversary of the Birthday of Professor Rayford W. Logan, Department of History, Howard University, January 7, 1972, Vertical File, Rayford W. Logan, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.


Newspapers

Pittsburgh Courier
The Sunday Star
Washington Bee
Washington Star

SECONDARY SOURCES

Books


**Articles**


Fitzpatrick, Michael Andrew. “‘A Great Agitation for Business’: Black Economic Development in Shaw” *Washington History* 2 (Fall/Winter, 1990-1)


**Thesis and Dissertations**


VITA

Maria Alexandria Kane

Maria Alexandria Kane was born December 22, 1980, in Dallas, Texas and grew up in Bedford and Sugar Land, Texas. She is a 2003 *summa cum laude* and Phi Beta Kappa graduate of Howard University with a BA in History and a BA in Classical Civilization. In 2006, Maria earned her MDiv from The Divinity School at Duke University. That fall she enrolled in the College of William and Mary’s MA/PhD program in History. In the spring of 2007 she defended her master’s thesis proposal and completed the project the following winter. She is currently in her second year of studies at the College and preparing for Holy Orders in The Episcopal Church. This thesis completes her requirements for the Master of Arts in History.