

TO "BE OF USE SOMEWHERE IN FRANCE" THE WOMAN'S CLUB OF BALA CYNWYD DURING THE FIRST WORLD WAR

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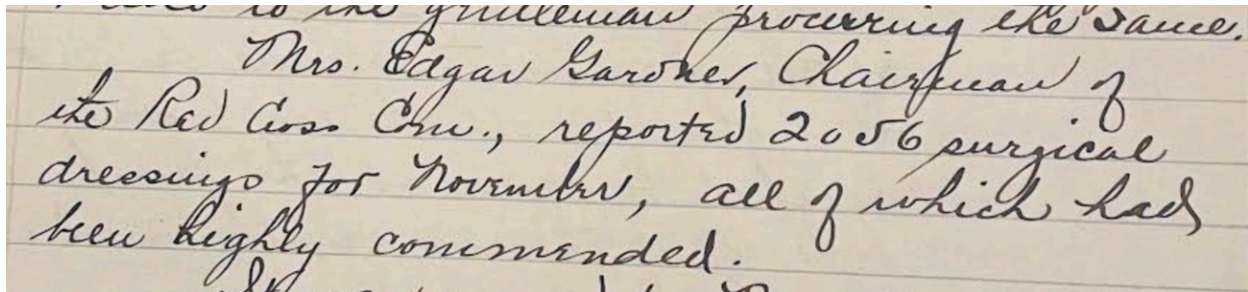
HISTORY IS LOCAL

To “Be Of Use, Somewhere In France”:
The Woman's Club of Bala Cynwyd During the First World War
By: Brea Scarlett
2023

When the first shots of the Great War sounded from across the Atlantic, America looked on with watchful eyes. For a majority of the war, America held fast to its isolationist views, hoping to remain a third party to the conflict. Finally on February 3, 1917, Congress voted to declare war, deciding that military action was the sole remaining option. As American soldiers started shipping overseas in large numbers, those at home were tasked with keeping the country afloat while simultaneously supporting the soldiers from afar. Those who took the helm during this turbulent storm of new age military warfare, social change and uncertainty were the women of the nation. While women of all creeds and backgrounds had significant impact in the war, the most well recorded are the impacts of the affluent women of the time. One can easily observe the national trends and stories of women and their role in the First World War through history books, but what is more telling and striking is learning of local women’s stories through their own words. The women of Lower Merion, like so many other women at the time, contributed to the national war effort. Through looking at the records of one particular women’s club in Lower Merion, one can find details of how their specific community aided in the war. The records of the Woman's Club of Bala Cynwyd provide invaluable insight into the daily roles of affluent women in relation to World War I. Using the club’s records as a guide one can pinpoint personal stories of Lower Merion women to larger scale moments in the overall trajectory of the nation’s war effort.

Throughout the First World War organizations such as the Young Women’s Christian Association (Y.W.C.A.) and the Red Cross were prominent groups which aided soldiers both abroad and at home. Notably, many of the volunteers for both organizations were women. Keeping to the national trends, the Woman's Club of Bala Cynwyd (WCBC) was an active participant in many of the group's activities. The Red Cross founded in 1881 provided medical services to soldiers and the wounded during the war. The Red Cross began its service in the war almost immediately after its outbreak, but after America joined the fray, the organization began expanding their

operations.¹ Following a call of support from President Woodrow Wilson (1913-1921), the club formed a Red Cross committee led by Mrs. Stella Gardner.



“Mrs. [Stella] Edgar Gardner, Chairman of the Red Cross Committee, reported 2056 surgical dressings for November, all of which had been highly commended.”

In 1919, the club supplied the Red Cross with thousands of surgical dressings, donated \$967—in today’s money \$17,915.35—to its local chapter, and contributed to the local drives.² The women of the club spent significant portions of their time sewing for the Red Cross and its war supply drives. One can put the club’s contributions into perspective by referring to a report entitled: “The Work of the American Red Cross during the War” published by the organization in 1919.

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COLLECTED CONTRIBUTIONS, FIRST AND SECOND WAR DRIVES COMBINED,
WITH COMPARISONS BY STATES
February 28, 1919

State	Collections	Per Cent. to Total	Per Capita	Per Cent. to Wealth
Maine	\$1,564,480.08	.6	\$2.00	.15
Massachusetts	14,114,500.99	5.2	3.682	.22
Rhode Island	2,090,235.69	.8	3.279	.22
Vermont	503,222.10	.2	1.374	.10
New Hampshire	875,986.16	.3	1.962	.13
Connecticut	6,968,947.95	2.6	5.418	.30
New Jersey	9,775,739.48	3.6	3.173	.17
New York	69,331,242.69	25.4	6.511	.28
Delaware	3,273,524.41	1.2	15.089	1.06
Pennsylvania	27,283,990.90	10.0	3.101	.18

¹ The American Red Cross. n.d. “World War I and the American Red Cross.” Red Cross. <https://www.redcross.org/content/dam/redcross/National/history-wwi.pdf>.

² Converted amount retrieved from: <https://data.bls.gov/cgi-bin/cpicalc.pl?cost1=967&year1=191901&year2=202307>

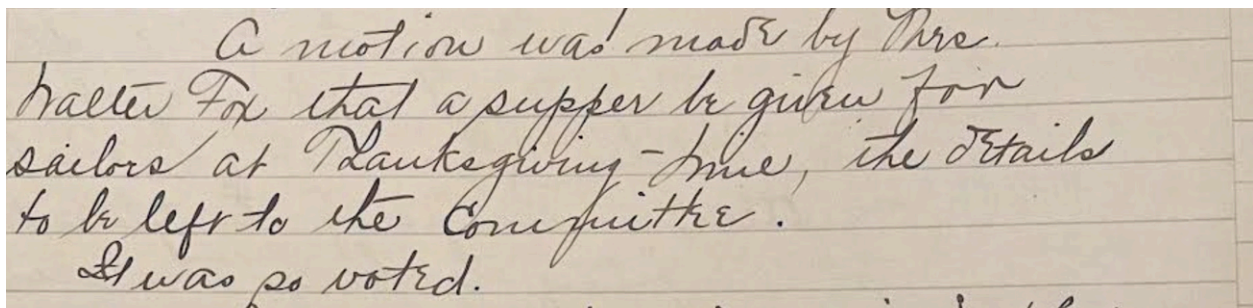
Table 10

CLASSIFICATION OF RELIEF SUPPLIES PRODUCED BY CHAPTER WORKERS
Twenty Months Ending February 28, 1919

	Quantity	Value
Surgical dressings	306,966,759	\$14,637,909.35
Hospital garments	17,462,400	22,969,585.59
Hospital supplies	14,211,439	5,966,854.20
Refugee garments	6,328,982	7,779,055.73
Articles for soldiers and sailors	23,328,831	41,858,274.72
Unclassified articles	3,279,053	766,316.30
Total	371,577,464	\$93,977,995.89

The WCBC also worked heavily with the YWCA (Young Women’s Christian Association). The connection between the club and the YWCA will be explored further in a later section. The club provided funds for the organization through drives. These funds were used for the war work of the organization as opposed to their normal service.

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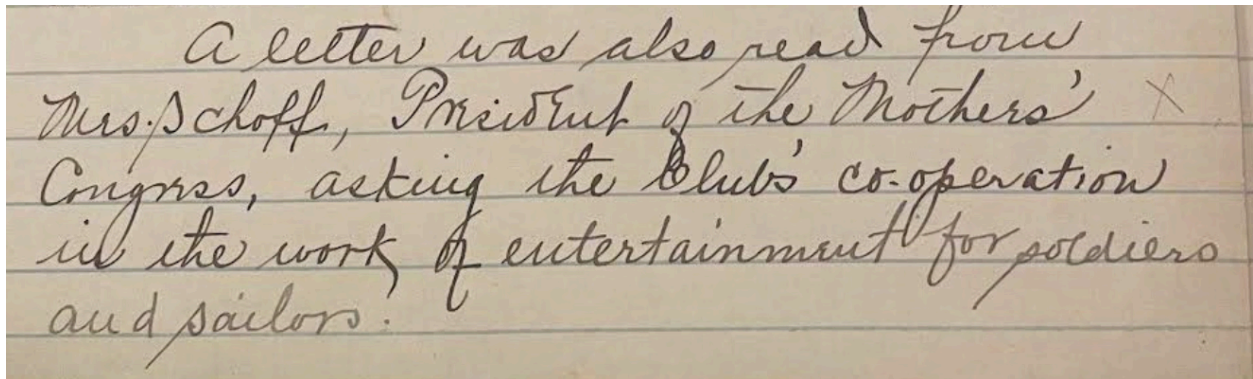


“A motion was moved by Mrs. [Dorothea] Walter Fox that a supper be given for sailors at Thanksgiving-Time, the details to be left to the Committee. It was so voted.”

While the WCBC supported national organizations, the members also contributed to the war effort in unique individual ways. Firstly, in 1917, the club hosted a dinner party for the sailors of the USS *Oklahoma*. The club, personally encouraged by Mrs. Hannah Schoff (1853-1940), one

of the founders of the National Congress of Mothers, decided to host a Thanksgiving dinner for the ship's crew.³

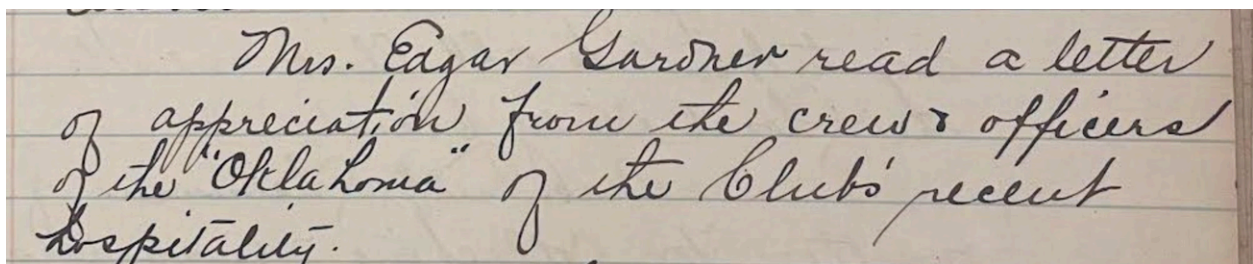
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“A letter was also read from Mrs. Schoff, President of the Mothers’ Congress, asking the club’s co-operation in the work of entertainment for soldiers and sailors.”

Many may know the USS *Oklahoma* as one of the ships hit and sunk during the attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941. The ship’s lesser known story begins during WWI. Commissioned in 1916, the ship was used by the US Navy to carry soldiers to Europe and to convoy Ally ships through German U-boat infested waters.⁴ After the dinner, the club received a letter of gratitude from the crew of the *Oklahoma* expressing their appreciation for the event.

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“Mrs. [Stella] Edgar Gardner read a letter of appreciation from the crew & officers of the “Oklahoma” of the Club's recent hospitality.”

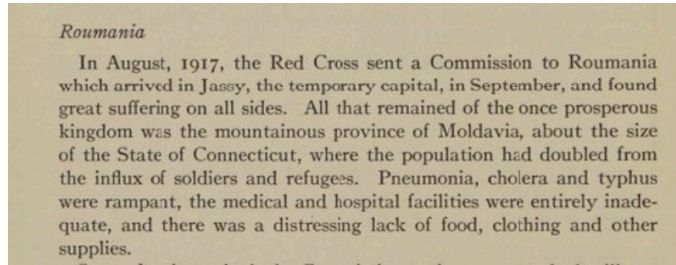
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³ Ewbank, Douglas. n.d. “West Philadelphia Collaborative History - Hannah Kent Schoff.” West Philadelphia Collaborative History. <https://collaborativehistory.gse.upenn.edu/stories/hannah-kent-schoff>.

⁴ US Navy. n.d. “USS *Oklahoma* (BB 37).” Naval History and Heritage Command. <https://www.history.navy.mil/our-collections/photography/us-navy-ships/battleships/oklahoma-bb-37.html>

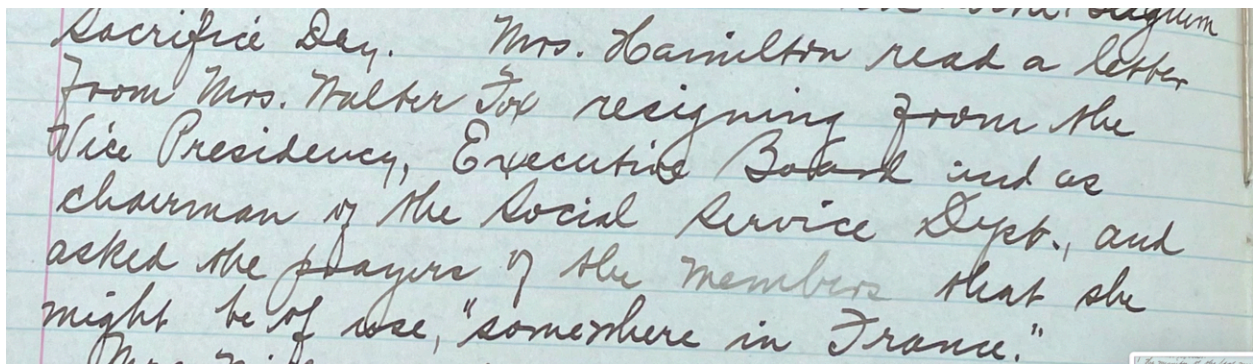
In addition to providing necessities and hospitality to soldiers, the club also paid great attention to the needs of the children affected by the war. During the war, the club provided donations of clothing to “Roumanian” children affected by the war.

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Going a step further, the club, over the course of the war, adopted two French children. The women of the club sponsored one child and the children of the club’s members sponsored a second. After adopting the children, the club committed itself to aiding Belgium children through monetary donations to the “Fund for Destitute Belgian Children”. In a most dedicated manner, Mrs. Dorthea Fox resigned from the club on October 4th 1916 in order to—in the words of recording Secretary Anne Cross—“be of use somewhere in France”. To take with her to France, Mrs. Fox asked her fellow club members to provide her with some gifts to give soldiers. Mrs. Dorthea Fox later returned to the club after finishing her time in France. Upon her return, she continued to advocate for the club’s commitment to aiding those affected by the war in Europe.

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“...Mrs. Hamilton read a letter from Mrs. Walter Fox resigning from the Vice Presidency, Executive Board and as chairman of the social service Dept., and asked the prayers of the members that she might be of use, “somewhere in France ”.

The war did not take place in a vacuum. While the guns were firing in the fields of France, there were battles being fought in the homeland. Often accompanying war is wide-spread social change. While the First World War was novel in almost all aspects, in this regard, the war was like many others. In the midst of the war, Americans faced new-age social questions such as prohibition, women's suffrage, and the morality of child labour. And while most definitely not adequately addressed, the nation began grappling with the racial discrimination present in all facets of American life. The war had profound impacts on the status of many marginalized groups such as women, African-Americans, and children. One of the first factors that contributed to a person's ability to participate in the war effort was their economic status. Most of the women who were able to go abroad to help as nurses or related positions were the wealthy and independent women who had the funds to support themselves while overseas.⁵ In fact, the Red Cross actively sought out educated women between the ages of 28-35 who had some knowledge of either French or Italian. In the words of author Nancy O'Brien Wagner, "these restrictions largely limited the volunteer pool to unmarried, educated, upper-class women—those without spousal obligations or significant financial needs".⁶ This would have been the position of the women of the Bala Cynwyd Club, financially able and independent enough to go overseas to help. While they may have wanted to help, the women without the lower classes would not have been able to, and while some may have gone to Europe, many stayed in the US. While this does not diminish the work that these women accomplished, it does put into perspective the role that economic status has in one's willingness and ability to support a war abroad. The financial position of the women of the club made it possible for them to spend their money and time devoted wholeheartedly to the war effort.

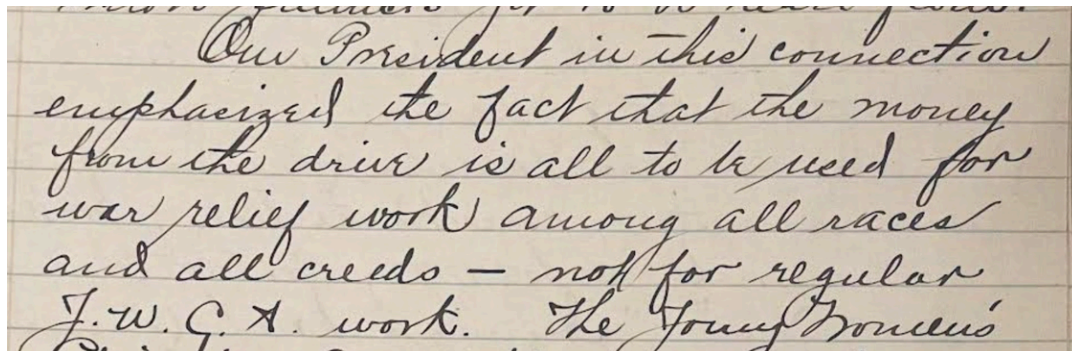
Another factor that contributed greatly to one's ability to contribute to the war effort was race. During the first world war more than 380,000 African-American soldiers went to fight for the Allies. Those soldiers, like the rest, left behind wives, mothers, daughters, and sisters that became responsible for supporting them abroad. The YWCA, while instrumental to the government through the aid they provided the soldiers, failed to adequately supply those same

⁵Hallet, Christine E. "American Young Women at War." In *Nurse Writers of the Great War*, 175–86. Manchester University Press, 2016. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1b3h94f.17>.

⁶Wagner, Nancy O'Brien. "Awfully Busy These Days: Red Cross Women In France During World War I." *Minnesota History* 63, no. 1 (2012): 24–35. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41704981>.

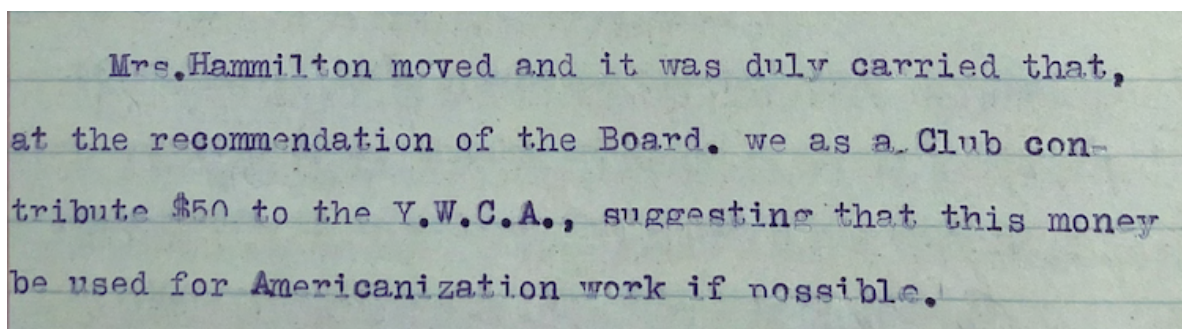
services to African-American soldiers. The YWCA's structure segregated their women volunteers into racially divided programs. During the First World War some YWCA leadership attempted to rectify the YWCA organization by creating well-funded programs for Black women. To do this, they required funds that sometimes came from the larger organization. Eva Bowel, most accurately described as the leader of the Black Women of the YWCA, was instrumental in emphasizing to the White women of the YWCA the necessity for labor and union rights and equality for the black YWCA women. Perhaps this is what the recording secretary refers to when she writes of the discussion that took place regarding the donation of funds to the YWCA.

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Mrs. Hammilton moved and it was duly carried that, at the recommendation of the Board, we as a Club contribute \$50 to the Y.W.C.A., suggesting that this money be used for Americanization work if possible.

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Some of these funds also went into “Americanization work” which entailed assimilating the refugees the Y.W.C.A took into American culture.⁷ On a more practical note, the social position of Black women made it easier for affluent White women to dedicate significant time and effort into their war work. For example, Mrs. Stella Gardner and her family employed a black servant named Susie Evans in their household. Having a person at home to take care of the mundane chores of running a house would have freed much of Mrs. Gardner’s time for leading the Red Cross Committee for the club.

*

Gardner	Edgar S.	Head	1	O	M	M	W	55	M
—	Stella	wife				F	W	46	M
—	Catherine	daughter				F	W	14	S
—	Elizabeth	daughter				F	W	9	S
Evans	Susie	servant				F	B	37	S

Source: U.S. Census 1920

Accessed Through Ancestry.com

A telling example of how race immediately relates to the Woman's Club of Bala Cynwyd and their war work can be seen when discussing a musical fundraiser that the club produced and performed entitled, “A Plantation Medley”. As the title suggests, “A Plantation Medley” was a minstrel show that the club hosted on February 12th, 1919. The show consisted of stereotypical, racist performances accompanied by singing of Black Spirituals. The club netted a profit of \$633.45—which in today’s money would be \$11,953.08.⁸

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⁷ For more information on the YWCA and “Americanization” work. The National WWI Museum and Memorial. n.d. “YWCA for United America.” National WWI Museum.

<https://www.theworldwar.org/learn/about-wwi/ywca-united-america>.

⁸ Numbers retrieved from The Bureau of Labor Statistics Inflation Calculator:

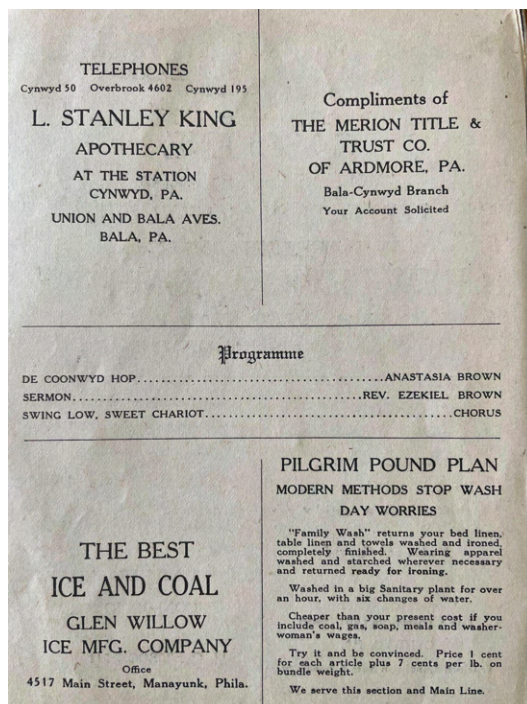
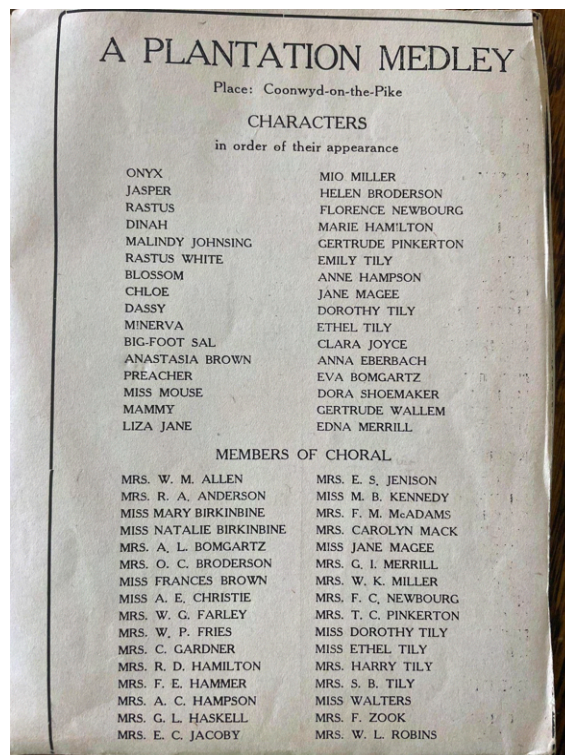
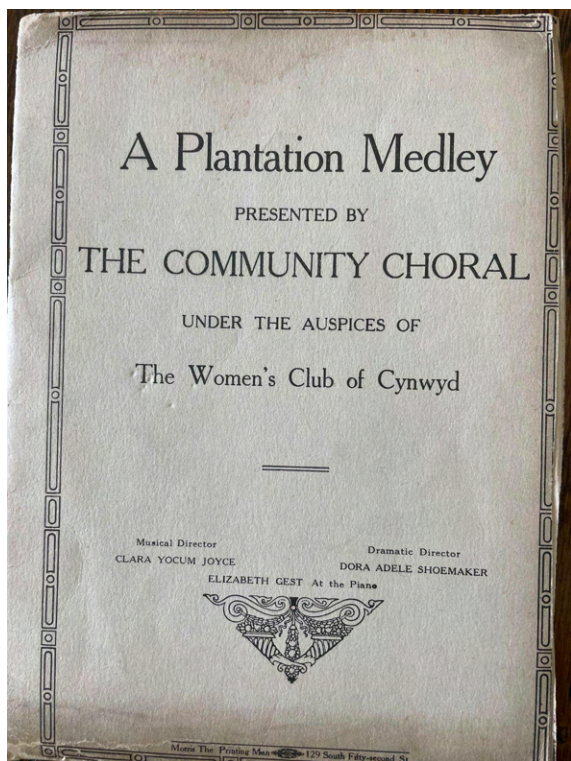
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work of the Young Women's Club
The Club Choral has continued its successful work under the very direction of Mrs. Joyce. Through the willing and untiring efforts of Mrs. Joyce two splendid concerts were given. "The Plantation Medley" on February twelfth netted six hundred dollars which was sent to the hospital for the blinded soldiers in Baltimore. On May twentieth, at St. Mathias Hall

done in the schools.
Mrs. Hampson, Chairman of the Music Department, announced that the proceeds from "The Plantation Medley" given by the Club Choral, amounted to \$633.45.

The WCBC members then used this money as a donation to a hospital in Baltimore for wounded and blinded soldiers of the war. This particular event highlights the relationship between the national war-effort and race at this period in American history. The Woman's Club of Bala Cynwyd profited off of African-American suffering and discrimination. While some may say the club did not directly profit off the event (as the money was donated to a hospital), that argument ignores the fundamental problem with collecting money that had been raised through a minstrel entertainment show at the expense of an entire race of people. From the elite social clubs of the time to charities organizations such as the Y.W.C.A, in almost all aspects of American life racial barriers prohibited racial minorities from fully participating. The "Plantation Medley" highlights how these social groups used Black culture and history specifically to their advantage while simultaneously excluding them from their social spheres.

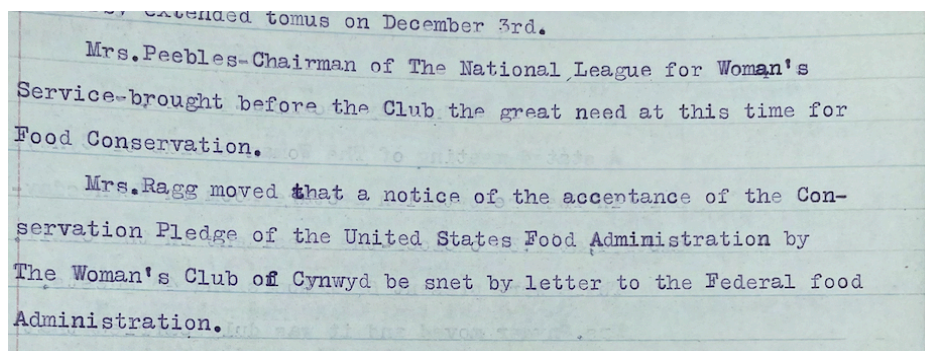
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Pictures of the first three pages of the "Plantation Medley" program

As the membership of the Woman's Club of Bala Cynwyd was, by nature, all female, the club was targeted by local politicians (and by the larger war work effort as a whole) to be champions for projects the government deemed women the most qualified for. Included under this umbrella of “women’s war work” was food rationing and the purchasing of Liberty bonds. The Club promoted to its members the importance of frugal dining habits and the rationing of scarce food products. The Club supported the “Conservation Pledge of the U.S. FDA” which included rationing measures such as reducing meat, butter, and sugar consumption.⁹

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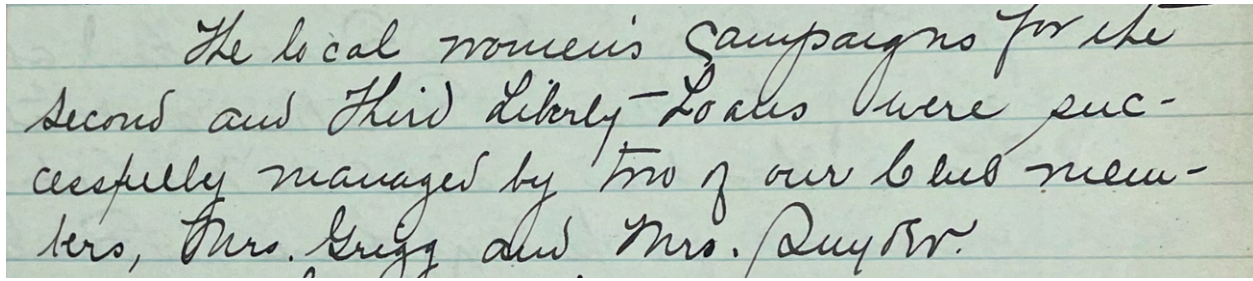


In order to help finance the war, the Federal Reserve created a bond program that became famous for selling “Liberty Bonds”. These were bonds that individuals could buy for \$50 dollars and then could later be cashed with interest. The government targeted affluent women in particular as they were willing and had the ability to purchase bonds to show their support and patriotism.¹⁰ The WCBC purchased \$100 dollars worth of bonds during the fourth drive of the Liberty Bonds and some members helped to facilitate local drives for the previous two drives.

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⁹ To see the full pledge see the Smithsonian Institute Archives:
https://siarchives.si.edu/collections/siris_sic_14232

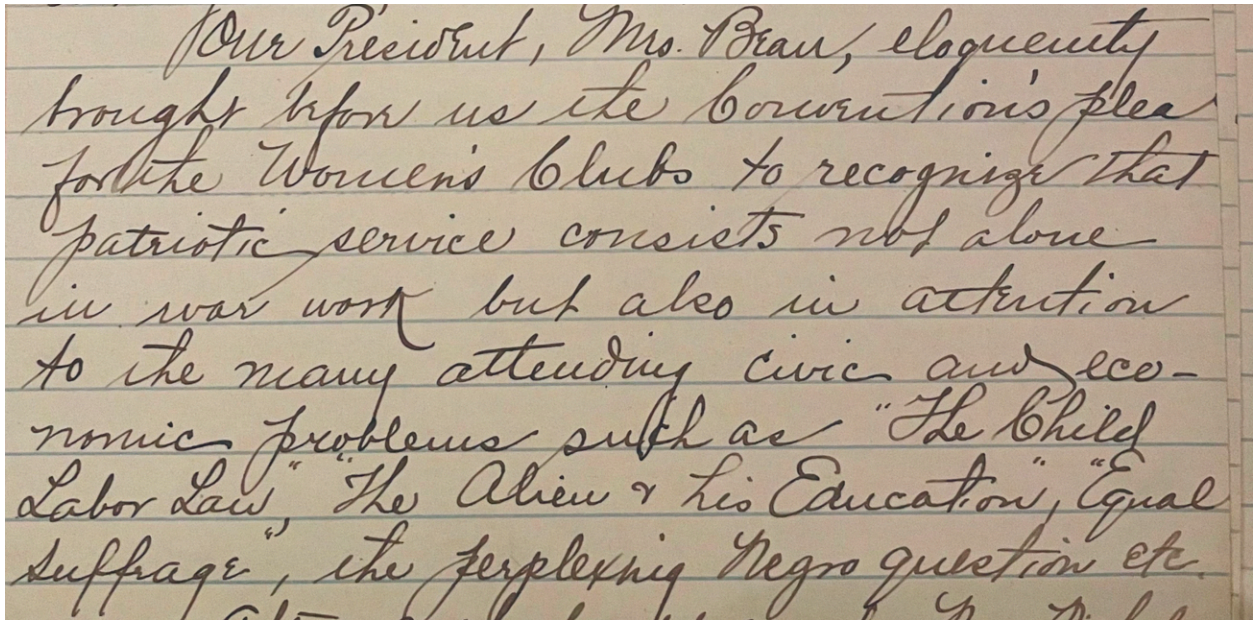
¹⁰ Sutch, Richard. 2015. “Liberty Bonds.” Federal Reserve History.
<https://www.federalreservehistory.org/essays/liberty-bonds>.

A photograph of a handwritten note on lined paper. The text is written in cursive and reads: "The local women's campaigns for the second and third Liberty-Loans were successfully managed by two of our club members, Mrs. Grigg and Mrs. Snyder."

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The Woman's Club of Bala Cynwyd acts as a small local example of the national trends of the time. As a group of affluent women they contributed to the war effort through their monetary contributions to organizations such as the Red Cross, YWCA, and the "Fund for Desisitue Belgian Children". In addition, their social-economic status allowed some of the club's members to contribute even further to the war effort by donating their time to volunteering overseas in Europe. Through the club records and notes from the early 20th century, their dedication to remedying the social, political, and economic problems of the U.S. is clear. The purpose of the WCBC from its inception was not to be a "social knitting club" or a frivolous gossip group of women as some may expect but was to be a politically active organization. Their focus spanned from modernizing child labour laws to addressing the nation's influx of immigrants. Where their social activism ended though was in regards to race with the club perpetuating America's racist culture. Like previously mentioned, the war did not occur in a vacuum and the club members themselves acknowledged that fact. The political and social activism of the club can be summed up in this excerpt:

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A photograph of a handwritten note on lined paper. The text is written in a cursive script and reads: "Our President, Mrs. Bean, eloquently brought before us the Convention's plea for the Women's Clubs to recognize that patriotic service consists not alone in war work but also in attention to the many attending civic and economic problems such as 'The Child Labor Law', 'The Alien & his Education', 'Equal Suffrage', the perplexing Negro question etc."

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One can see the instrumental role that women played in the political and social spheres of America in the early 20th century simply by exploring the local history of one’s own neighborhood.

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