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Merging Identities: A Glimpse into the World of Albert Wicker, An African American Leader in New Orleans, 1893-1928

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Merging Identities:
A Glimpse into the World of Albert Wicker,
An African American Leader in
New Orleans, 1893-1928

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts
In
History

by

Melissa Lee Smith

B.A. Loyola University, 1994

December 2007

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*In Loving Memory of
David Henry Smith
1937-2007*

For James Patrick Henry Ellis

Acknowledgments

For a period of five years, I worked in the non-profit field as a way to learn more about benevolent societies, their positive aspects, and their pitfalls. That experience served me well in researching the subject of this thesis, Albert Wicker. Later, as I began work in the archival field in New Orleans, I found myself in the perfect place to complete this project and thus end this leg of my journey.

The assistance and support that I received from faculty, colleagues, and family have proven immeasurable and I will always be grateful for this assistance. Dr. Connie Atkinson, my advisor, helped me flesh out ideas regarding Albert Wicker and the world in which he lived. Dr. Raphael Cassimere, a committee member, offered numerous suggestions on dealing with problematic issues in the black community during the early years of the twentieth century. Committee member Mary Niall Mitchell walked me through my return to the program and suggested a comprehensive reading list that helped me gain a better understanding of Wicker's world. Michael Mizell-Nelson, another committee member, encouraged my return to UNO's history program, despite my being a non-traditional student. Dr. Mizell-Nelson also led me to freelance research and writing projects that, in turn, helped me uncover additional information on Wicker. Since the early 1990s from my days as an undergraduate in his classes, Dr. Mark Fernandez from Loyola University has been a constant presence in my life. For this project, he acted as a sounding board for my ideas regarding Wicker and offered numerous suggestions on how to look at Wicker's world. The faculty and staff of Special Collections at Tulane University, specifically Dr. Bill Meneray, Lee Miller, and Ken Owen, offered ideas on

how to pursue research into different aspects of Albert Wicker's life, and allowed me to take time off so that I could complete this thesis.

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Abstract

The life and career of Albert Wicker, Jr. (1869-1928), reflects the growth of the new urban African-American middle class in New Orleans, Louisiana, in the early years of the twentieth century. He spent his career working for advances in education while using memberships in churches, Masonic groups, insurance companies, benevolent societies, and educational leagues to achieve his personal and professional goals. The networks created by him and others along the way illustrate not only complexity of black life in New Orleans but also the growing tendency of differing ethnic groups to work together to achieve common economic, political, social objectives.

Keywords

Albert Wicker, Jr., 1869-1928

African-American Education (New Orleans, LA)

Straight University (New Orleans, LA)

Robertson Street Elementary (New Orleans, LA)

Bienville Street Elementary (New Orleans, LA)

Wicker Elementary (New Orleans, LA)

Grand Lodge of Louisiana, Eureka

St. James AME Church (New Orleans, LA)

Central Congregational Church (New Orleans, LA)

Dryades Street YMCA (New Orleans, LA)

People's Benevolent, Industrial Life Insurance Company of Louisiana

Société des Jeunes Amis (New Orleans, LA)

Foreword

Before Hurricane Katrina changed the landscape of New Orleans and my life, I would drive past Albert Wicker Elementary School on Bienville Street on a daily basis, and often wondered who was Albert Wicker and why did the Orleans Parish School Board name a school for him. I was working at this time for Special Collections at Tulane University in the Manuscripts Department. One day in early 2006, as I rehoused older collections, I came across Collection 436, the Albert Wicker Papers, that contained the following few items: a photograph of Wicker as a middle-aged man, a love letter from Wicker to Nellie Brisco Wicker before their marriage, the by-laws and constitution for an African-American benevolent society, a program for a Negro educational conference in 1910, a few receipts, and a slip of paper commemorating the re-naming of Bienville Street Elementary to Wicker Elementary only a couple of months after his death.¹ It was not much, but these items intrigued me, and I determined to pursue Wicker's life more thoroughly.

There is no cohesive set of Albert Wicker papers or records due to Hurricane Katrina's significant damage to Wicker Elementary in 2005. Nevertheless, his life and progress can be seen through a variety of sources: newspaper accounts, city directories, membership roles, and the few items that have been found in New Orleans repositories. Scouring the *Woods' Directory*, city directories, and census counts, a picture emerged of a man who strove for a middle class future for himself and his family. And, the further I delved into the records at various repositories, another image of Wicker appeared: a

¹ These papers were originally processed as the Albert Wicker Papers, Manuscripts Collection 436, Manuscripts Department, Special Collections, Tulane University. The collection is now catalogued as the Albert Wicker Papers, Manuscripts Collection M1138, Manuscripts Department, Special Collections, Tulane University. From this point when referencing these papers, I will use the new collection designation of M1138.

graduate of Straight University; an educator and an activist involved in the pursuit for equality in the aftermath of *Plessy v. Ferguson*; and a civic-minded man who was instrumental in the founding of the Dryades Street Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA), the first Y for black New Orleanians. Through networks that he developed in his life, Wicker straddled two black ethnic worlds in New Orleans that had been previously divided. With social and political issues at the forefront of black life in New Orleans in the early years of the twentieth century, leaders realized that they would have to shed the old ethnic divide of black New Orleans and forego previous alliances to forge a new identity. Wicker's life exemplified the beginnings of this merger and how African-Americans in New Orleans were active, not passive, participants in the discourse regarding black education.² His life reflected the network of civic leaders in New Orleans who knew that their economic futures depended upon the uplift of their entire community. He and the wider black community in New Orleans were shaping a new identity for New Orleans blacks that more closely resembled the identity of blacks in America.

They argued for better schools and school buildings, and after many years of doggedly pursuing the Orleans Parish School Board, they won some concessions. These were small but necessary steps in the fight for advancing their cause. Black educators assumed the role to represent the voice and the hopes of their race.³ And, these men did not do this in isolation. African -Americans in a response to the rise of class consciousness of late nineteenth and early twentieth century America regarding self-

² Glenda Gilmore, "But She Can't Find Her [V.O.] Key," *Feminist Studies* 25, No. 1 (Spring 1999): 133-153.

³ Adam Fairclough, "Being in the Field of Education and also Being a Negro...Seems...Tragic: Black Teachers in the Jim Crow South," *Journal of American History*, Vol. 87, No. 1, (June 2000): 65-91.

improvement and education, found themselves pursuing these same goals and setting the stage for future generations.

This local effort tied into regional and national politics. This is the age of W.E.B. DuBois and Booker T. Washington and their fissure over education of African-Americans played heavily in black politics on the state and local level, as it did in other states. This educational debate centered on DuBois' stress of academic training versus Washington's advocacy of vocational training. In turn, this debate became a focus for local African American leaders as they made the necessary steps to claiming and fighting for equal rights. Albert Wicker, along with Walter Cohen, George Longe, Henderson Dunn, and a whole host of others, formed a tightly cohesive networking and political coalition through their memberships in various churches, Masonic groups, insurance companies, benevolent societies, and educational leagues, despite their backgrounds based in either black Catholic society or black Protestant culture.

This is a focus on one man who played a small but significant part in this quest for advancement and equality. Wicker's actions are a part of a larger legacy of a commitment to social justice and to advancing the rights of African-Americans. At times, in order to understand a larger movement, it is necessary to focus on the life of one person, as Albert Wicker is an example of one New Orleans African-American leader who used memberships in multiple organizations to achieve political and economic objectives. His life illustrates how biography can show not only the importance of the individual in the larger movement, but also the subtle shift in a society from an old identity to a new one.

This thesis is not a traditional biography, as I did not have access to Albert Wicker's thoughts, emotions, and concerns through the traditional method of searching through his papers in an archives. This lack of sources is both a hindrance and a luxury. Obviously, having access to the inner Wicker could have provided concrete reasoning for certain decisions he made; yet, I was able to avoid a pitfall for the biographer, namely having his letters sway me one way or the other. With the reliance on primary sources of his colleagues as well as the aforementioned secondary sources, a depiction of Wicker emerges through his actions that I could evaluate in a more dispassionate way.⁴ Even without access to the inner Wicker, his life portrays the concerns and actions of African-American leaders and their multi-faceted networking. Albert Wicker represents another thread in the tapestry of black New Orleans during the first two decades of the twentieth century.

⁴ Shirley A. Leckie, "Biography Matters: Why Historians Need Well-Crafted Biographies More Than Ever," *Writing Biography: Historians & Their Craft*, Lloyd Ambrosius, ed. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2004): 1-26.

Introduction

This thesis examines the life and world of Albert Wicker, Jr. (1869-1928), whose life represented the new middle class African-American man in New Orleans, Louisiana, at the turn of the twentieth century. He spent his adult life as an educator and activist in the Fourth Ward of New Orleans. Wicker received his early education from the New Orleans public school system and his advanced degree from Straight University, also in New Orleans. During his career, he urged for reforms in the educational system and played an instrumental role in the founding of the Dryades Street Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA), the first Y for black New Orleanians. Yet he did not do this in isolation. Wicker, along with a coalition of African-American men who held similar beliefs regarding education and civil rights, created intricate networks that included churches, Masonic lodges, mutual aid societies, insurance companies, and professional organizations. The opening of memberships of these organizations to black men, of both French-Catholic and Anglo-Protestant backgrounds, mirrored the Americanization of black New Orleans. Wicker, and this new coalition of African-Americans, pressured the political leadership of New Orleans for better education for African-Americans in the city.

A Turbulent Era

The merging of black New Orleans' social political and economic networks happened in the perilous yet optimistic period of the end of the 19th Century. This merging took time to develop since there had long existed a political tension between black Franco-Catholics, who had lived in the city for generations, and black newcomers, mostly Protestant Anglo-African-Americans. Albert Wicker's parents, Albert Wicker Sr. and Frances Austine Wicker, represented the latter group.

The Wicker and the Austine families had originally come into the city as free Protestant African-Americans before the Civil War, arriving in Louisiana from South Carolina and Alabama respectively some time in the 1830s and 1840s.⁵ Wicker's parents were born in New Orleans (his father's family later moved to Feliciana parish, north of

⁵ U.S. Bureau of the Census, *1850 United States Federal Census*, Washington, D.C. 1850. U.S. Bureau of the Census, *1880 U.S. Federal Census*, Washington, D.C. 1880. Ancestry.com, *Freedman's Bank Records, 1865-1874*, [Database On-line], (Provo, UT, 2005). *Soards' New Orleans City Directory* (New Orleans: Soards' Directory Company, 1831-1849). Frances Wicker's maiden name is listed as *Austin*, but she spelled it *Austine* when she applied for an account with the Freedmen's Bank in 1874. In the application, she named her parents as William and Mary Ann Austine. A few years later, Frances Wicker, listed as a mulatto in the 1880 census, stated the birthplace of her parents as Alabama. The city directories of 1866 and 1867 do not mention a William Austine or Mary Ann Austine. Yet, a white lawyer, William Austin, is listed as living at 66 Royal Street, only a couple of blocks away from Christ Church where Rev. Leacock served his parishioners. From these sources, I concluded that Frances Wicker's birth took place some time around 1843 in New Orleans. None of the aforementioned Austins are listed in the city directories until the 1860s.

Albert Wicker, Sr. was born 12 January 1831 to Daniel Wicker and Maria Baptist in New Orleans. The *New Orleans Times* and the marriage certificate listed Albert Wicker, Sr. as from the Bayou Sara area of Feliciana Parish. A search of the census for 1850 and 1860 in Bayou Sara lists one Daniel Wicker with no race designation living there with his family. Daniel Wicker was born in 1795 in South Carolina and Maria Baptist's place of birth was New Orleans. While there are some discrepancies between the two census counts, there tends to be more similarities than differences regarding Daniel Wicker and his kin. Additionally, Maria Baptist, at times listed as Maria Wicker, was listed as black and her children were listed in both census counts as mulatto. They were the only people on this census sheet who had any sort of race designation next to their names. Also, no Daniel Wicker is listed in any of the New Orleans city directories from the 1830s and the 1840s, the time around the birth of Albert Wicker, Sr. See: Orleans Parish Birth Records, 1850 and U.S. Federal Census 1860.

Baton Rouge at some point in the 1840s). His mother's family lived continually in New Orleans, seldom appearing in various records.⁶

Prior to the Civil War, free people of color in New Orleans possessed more rights than their counterparts in other parts of the country, representing a large portion of the population and generally living in the black Creole municipal districts where law enforcement toward blacks tended to be more lax.⁷ Free people of color could sue and be sued, own property, settle disputes, and many worked as skilled artisans. The period from 1810 until the 1840s had seen an influx of free people of color come into the city from other areas in the United States to escape increased restrictions in their own states.⁸ The Austine and Wicker families represented this group.

Although Louisiana and New Orleans in particular, became more restrictive, it was not as harsh as the rest of the South. In the years leading up the war, however, the free black population declined as New Orleans white society began to mirror that of the South with its intimidation and actions to exclude the free black community.⁹ The war further brought transitions to New Orleans' political and social culture. Most apparent to all residents, the change from New Orleans as a Confederate city to one under Union occupation brought an amount of uncertainty. Nevertheless, African-Americans felt

⁶ John Hope Franklin and Alfred A. Moss, Jr. *From Slavery to Freedom: A History of African-Americans*, 7th ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, Inc., 1994): 151-158.

⁷ Joseph Logsdon and Caryn Cossé Bell, "The Americanization of Black New Orleans," *Creole New Orleans: Race and Americanization*, Arnold Hirsch and Joseph Logsdon, ed. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana University Press, 1992): 204-207.

⁸ Joseph A. Walkes, *Jno G. Lewis, Jr.—End of an Era: The History of the Prince Hall Grand Lodge of Louisiana, 1842-1979* (Leavenworth, KS, 1986).

⁹ Caryn Cossé Bell, *Revolution, Romanticism, and the Afro-Creole Protest Tradition in Louisiana 1718-1868* (Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1997): 87.

optimistic as they saw their fate and progress tied to federal initiatives, such as the Freedmen's Bureau. Whites, on the other hand, wanted to maintain their hegemony and reduce any sort of power that African-Americans might try to exercise. African-Americans achieved some improvements in the post-war period with increased access to education and voting privileges. Toward the end of the century, however, they would see these gains wither away. Within the black community a more profound change was to take place—a shift in its power structure from a Franco-African-American stronghold to one with more of an Anglo-African-American influence.

The Wicker Family

On February 8, 1866, Reverend W.T. Leacock, rector of the Episcopal Christ Church on Canal Street, filled out a marriage certificate confirming the union of Albert Wicker, Sr., of Bayou Sara, Louisiana, and Frances L. Austine of New Orleans, taking place at the home of the bride.¹⁰ The first time the young couple shows up in any of the city directories with a listed residence is in 1870 with A. Wicker, a steward, residing at 459 Bienville Street, located between North Rocheblave and North Tonti streets, in the Fourth Ward (Tremé).¹¹ By 1871, however, the Wickers had set up their household at 490 Customhouse Street (later renamed Iberville Street) where the family would live for two generations. In 1867 and 1869, respectively, Albert and Frances Wicker welcomed the births of their two children, Mary Maria and Albert, Jr.

¹⁰ Episcopal Diocese of Louisiana Records, Manuscripts Collection 558, Tulane University Library. *New Orleans Times*, February 10, 1866.

¹¹ *Gardner's New Orleans Directory for 1866* (New Orleans: Charles Gardner, 1866). Prior to that time, only an Albert B. Wickes who worked as a clerk at 62 Poydras and a B. Wicker, a gardener on Frenchmen near Gentilly Road show up in the directories. At times, the Wicker's last name is listed as Wickes and from research in various census counts; it is safe to assume that Albert Wicker's middle name was Batisse/Baptist, which was his mother's maiden name.

During Reconstruction, the black population in New Orleans numbered 50,456. By 1900, this same population totaled over 77,000. With this rise in population and the resulting housing shortage, black newcomers to New Orleans had little choice but to live in the Third Ward that extended from Rampart Street to Lake Pontchartrain (portions of present day Mid-City).¹² During Reconstruction, recently freed slaves left the plantation to secure educational and financial opportunities in New Orleans. Ethnically, many were Anglo-African-American, Protestants. On the other hand, Tremé, located in the Fourth Ward, was generally the home of Catholic Franco-African-Americans, many descended from free people of color. The Wickers, existing somewhere between the two worlds with their free, Anglo-African-Protestant background, and their Fourth Ward residence, literally straddled these two ethnic worlds.

The employment career of Wicker's father also reflected this divide. Although not a black Creole from Tremé, the group that usually held skilled occupations, Albert, Sr., primarily worked as a waiter and as a steward, first as a waiter in 1878 at the Oviatt House on Dauphine Street. The following year, he switched over to the Nicholls Lunch House on Camp Street as a steward.¹³

During Reconstruction, financial opportunities for African-Americans depended mainly on background and experience, extending anywhere from menial to skilled artisan labor. Another factor in opportunities depended upon ethnicity. Anglo-African-American-Protestants usually worked menial jobs while skilled artisan positions were reserved for Franco-Catholics. In 1870, although African-Americans constituted only 25

¹² Richard Campanella, *Geographies of New Orleans: Urban Fabrics before the Storm* (Lafayette: Center for Louisiana Studies, 2006): 300.

¹³ *New Orleans, Louisiana Birth Records Index, 1790-1899*, State of Louisiana, Secretary of State, Division of Archives, Records Management, and History. *Soards' New Orleans City Directory*, 1878 and 1879.

percent of the total labor force, they held from 30 to 65 percent of all skilled positions such as steamboatmen, draymen, masons, bakers, carpenters, cigarmakers, plasterers, barbers, and gardeners.¹⁴ Other professions, such as waiters, stewards, and printers, would also fall into this category of skilled labor. Black men working as waiters jumped from six in 1860 to 84 in 1870 and then 199 in 1880.¹⁵ Another popular profession for African-Americans during this period related to the grocery business, normally based in the proprietor's home. Occupational success for African-Americans between Reconstruction and 1910 remained quite high for skilled laborers who could handle better than newcomers the high cost of living in the city and the high unemployment rates during downswings.¹⁶

Although young Albert and his family enjoyed a certain amount of comfort during these post-Civil War years, things changed for the Wicker family in a drastic way during the summer of 1880. In June, Albert Wicker, Sr., died from an "inflammation of the brain."¹⁷ Shortly afterwards, Frances Wicker opened a grocery store out of her home to make ends meet. Albert Jr., then eleven years old, entered the workforce as a laborer according to the city directories, but he was also listed as attending school in the 1880 census. During this time, it was not unusual for children such as young Albert to work, especially given the Wickers' circumstances. In addition, he probably attended school at

¹⁴ John Blassingame, *Black New Orleans 1860-1880*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973): 63.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 74, 223-227.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 59-63.

¹⁷ New Orleans, Orleans Parish, Louisiana, Roll T655_25, 494. *United States Federal Census Mortality Schedules, 1850-1880*.

Rampart Street No. 2, since that was the only African-American school for boys in the Second District.¹⁸

Education in Black New Orleans

The 1870s and 1880s ushered in a time of dramatic decline in the quality of education for both black and white students in New Orleans. African-Americans had received the opportunity to attend public schools in New Orleans through General Order No. 38 of March 22, 1864, issued after the federal government took control of Louisiana.¹⁹ Until that time, many black Creole families educated their children at home with tutors, sent their children to private or parochial schools, or sent their children to schools abroad. Article 135 of the Louisiana State Constitution of 1868 established integrated schools with compulsory attendance.²⁰ Yet, only 6,654 African-American students made up the city's school population of 24,324.²¹ During the period when Wicker attended the Orleans Parish Public school system (presumably in the 1870s), ideas regarding African-American education and public school integration started to change. Generally, black Creoles argued that maintaining separate public schools was too expensive and that segregating people based on race was inherently unjust. They held that all African-Americans in New Orleans would suffer either way. While Anglo-African-Americans also looked at education as an avenue for racial and social advancement and

¹⁸ A.E. Perkins, ed., *Who's Who in Colored Louisiana* (Baton Rouge: Douglas Loan Company, Inc., 1930): 96. Perkins states that Wicker received an Orleans Parish public school education but did not name the school. *Report of the Chief Superintendent of the Public Schools of New Orleans to the State Board of Education* (New Orleans: Seymour and Stevens, 1880): 38.

¹⁹ Betty Porter, "The History of Negro Education in Louisiana," (master's thesis, Louisiana State University, 1938): 738.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 753.

²¹ *Report of the Chief Superintendent of the Public Schools of New Orleans to the State Board of Education* (New Orleans: Seymour and Stevens, 1880): 32.

many were determined to see that their children received an education, primarily in the public schools, unlike black Creoles, many Anglo-African-Americans acquiesced to the idea of segregated schools because they thought of this as an avenue to protect their civil liberties and possibly advance black education.²² Most whites felt that public schools belonged exclusively to them and would never acknowledge the equality of African-Americans in the classroom (or on the street). Once Reconstruction ended in Louisiana and the Democrats regained control of Louisiana politics, they began a systematic pursuit to disfranchise black voters and to repeal some of the initiatives regarding public education begun under Reconstruction. The eventual decline for public education for African-Americans did not occur immediately. Rather, it was a slow and steady regression over the course of twenty-five years, starting at the end of Reconstruction, and culminating with African-Americans losing the right to vote in Louisiana at the turn of the century.²³

The debate on integration of schools that divided New Orleans reflected the national struggle, most notably framed by W.E.B. DuBois and Booker T. Washington. W.E.B. DuBois wanted total integration and believed that economic success of African-Americans the influential factor in black education. He devised education models that radically reshaped African American education. DuBois argued for higher education for African-Americans to be rooted in classical education so that the “talented tenth” could raise the black masses out of poverty. While he agreed that African-Americans should have access to vocational and industrial training, he did not want that to be the sole focus

²² Donald E. Devore and Joseph Logsdon *Crescent City Schools, Public Education in New Orleans, 1841-1991* (Lafayette: Center for Louisiana Studies, 1911): 83.

²³ *Ibid.*, 82.

of higher education. In his earlier years, he also urged that African-Americans attend integrated schools, as that would lessen racism in the United States.²⁴ In contrast, Booker T. Washington also argued that African-Americans should have access to a liberal education, but he emphasized the importance of vocational and industrial training for those who could not attain a classical education. He believed students could receive adequate educational opportunities in a segregated system and the elimination of white involvement could help advance black civil rights. DuBois' stance stressed more of the opinion of the old black elite, in terms of New Orleans African-American history, and Washington represented new thoughts and practices among the new black middle class of the twentieth century with their pursuit of a racial identity based on self-help, piety, and the accumulation of wealth.²⁵ Writing "Of Mr. Booker Washington and Others," DuBois looked at Washington as representing the old guard with the latter's attitude of submission, and recognized the importance of economics in Washington's decisions. "This is an age of unusual economic development," DuBois writes, "and Mr. Washington's programme naturally takes an economic cast, becoming a gospel of Work and Money to such an extent as apparently almost completely to overshadow the higher aims of life."²⁶ At his address to the Atlanta Exposition, Washington takes a pragmatic view toward education and economic opportunity. "The opportunity to earn a dollar in a factory just now is worth infinitely more than the opportunity to spend a dollar in an

²⁴ Derrick P. Alridge, "Guiding Philosophical Principles for a DuBoisian-Based African-American Educational Model," in *Journal of Negro Education*, Vol. 68, No. 2 (Spring 1999): 182-199.

²⁵ Kevin Gaines, *Uplifting the Race: Black Leadership, Politics, and Culture in the Twentieth Century* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996): 2.

²⁶ W.E.B. Du Bois, "Of Mr. Booker T. Washington and Others" *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1994): 30.

opera-house.”²⁷ These two men’s contradictory views reflected in New Orleans in the attitudes of black Creoles who mainly would have approved DuBois’ arguments regarding integration of education and the right to vote while Anglo-African-Americans would have generally supported Washington’s stance, reflecting the economic concerns of New Orleans’ black middle class.

Straight University

It seems that despite the difficulties of his early days, Wicker pursued an upwardly mobile lifestyle and his education and work experience reflected that climb. Throughout the 1880s, Wicker appears rarely in city directories with the exception that he worked as a clerk for the Federal Land Office with a brief stint as a copyist for the attorney, Charles H. Lavillebeuvre on Common Street in 1887.²⁸ During the early 1890s, Wicker enrolled as a student at the Normal School at Straight University in New Orleans, graduating in 1893.

In 1869, the American Missionary Association (AMA) had established Straight University in New Orleans, which became an important site for the merger of the two black ethnic groups. Originally located on Esplanade at Burgundy and later on Canal Street, Straight University was the first school for African Americans in New Orleans that furnished elementary through postgraduate education. Departments originally included Normal, College, Law, Theological, and Medical schools, in addition to the

²⁷ Booker T. Washington, *Up From Slavery* in *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*, Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Nellie Y. McKay, eds. (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1997): 516.

²⁸ Soards’ City Directory, 1887. Perkins, 96.

lower schools.²⁹ The Law School operated for ten years, educating both white and black students; the Normal School focused solely on the training of black teachers for African-American schools. A two-year education program, the Normal School's first year of study offered the following courses: arithmetic, geography, grammar, United States history, physiology, teaching practices, the study of textbooks, and teaching methods. The second year emphasized the practice of teaching with courses in psychology, science of education, administrative management and planning, pedagogies, methods for teaching elementary students, observation of younger students at the Hand Preparatory School, and composing lessons for students in that practicum. The university prided itself on being "the pioneer school in this section of the South, in offering the recently emancipated race, the opportunity for an education leavened with the spirit of the Gospel."³⁰ Straight University also reflected the American middle class ethos of the day regarding its domestic science program: "We must have a model home in which to teach our girls the dignity of labor, the charm of the house beautiful when graced by useful and noble womanhood."³¹ George Henderson, writing in 1900, stated, "Straight never loses sight of the home as the center of social life, as the sanctuary of purity and virtue."³² Straight's stress of morality sent the message to aspire to a life based solidly in American, middle class values. During his time as a student, Wicker encountered men who would be

²⁹ Joe M. Richardson, "The American Missionary Association and Black Education in Louisiana, 1862-1878," in *The Louisiana Purchase Bicentennial Series in Louisiana History, Vol. XVIII* (Lafayette: Center for Louisiana Studies, 1999), 210.

³⁰ *Straight University Catalogue*, (New Orleans: Paragon Printing, 1893-1894).

³¹ Oliver B. Loud "Straight University of New Orleans Its Influence in Louisiana," 1900 in George Longe Records, Manuscripts Collection 252, Amistad Research Center, New Orleans, Louisiana.

³² George W. Henderson "Straight University," 1900 in George Longe Records, Manuscripts Collection 252, Amistad Research Center, New Orleans, Louisiana.

lifelong fellow activists and colleagues. A close friend and fellow student, Henderson Dunn (1872-1955), from Thibodaux, Louisiana, the son of ex-slaves, entered Straight's College Department in 1893 and graduated with a bachelor of arts in 1900 and a bachelor of divinity in 1904.³³ He would later serve as the pastor of Central Congregational Church from 1906 to 1921 and also taught at a couple of schools, including the Milne Boys Home. Dunn served as the head of the Louisiana Colored Teacher's Association in 1916-1917. Wicker graduated on May 25, 1893, with four other students. The class motto was *Vita Vocat*, or "Life Calls Us." During the exercises, Wicker gave an oration on self-government.³⁴

Both Anglo and French blacks supported Straight and the university, following the policy of the AMA, refused to acknowledge caste systems in its population. The university encouraged support and involvement on all levels as it offered night courses for its students as well as encouraged black administrative participation, including serving on the Board of Trustees and as faculty. Straight's student population included people of modest means and the children of wealthy black families. Prominent black New Orleanians involved with the university included Louisiana Lieutenant Governor Oscar J.

³³ Dunn-Landry Family Papers, Manuscripts Collection 138, Amistad Research Center, New Orleans, Louisiana. Another student who should be mentioned at this point although he did not attend Straight with Dunn and Wicker was George Longe. Longe, although a bit younger, would eventually come into contact with these men. Longe, from Creole stock, was born in 1898 and received his Bachelor's from Straight in 1921. He became the Vice Principal of Albert Wicker Junior High. An active Mason, activist, and educator, Longe once he entered the profession fought alongside of Wicker and Dunn in the advancement of equal rights for African-Americans in New Orleans. He also served as the head of the Louisiana Colored Teacher's Association in 1939-1941. George Longe Records, Manuscripts Collection 252, Amistad Research Center, New Orleans, Louisiana.

³⁴ Straight University Graduation Exercises Program, May 25, 1893 in George Longe Records, Manuscripts Collection 252, Amistad Research Center, New Orleans, Louisiana.

Dunn, who served on the Board of Trustees, and Louisiana Governor P.B.S. Pinchback, who lectured there in 1871-1872.³⁵

Oscar J. Dunn (1826-1871), born as a free person in New Orleans, learned painting and plastering as a child when his mother and stepfather apprenticed him to the firm of Wilson and Patterson. Unsatisfied with this work, Dunn left his apprenticeship and eventually worked as a barber and music teacher. Following the Civil War, he opened an employment agency, placing newly freed people in positions in New Orleans and outlying parishes. During this time, he became more active in political life, identifying with the black working class and eventually elected Louisiana Lieutenant Governor in 1868.³⁶

P.B.S. Pinchback (1837-1921), a Georgia native, served as the Lieutenant Governor of Louisiana upon the death of Dunn in 1872 and also served as governor of Louisiana for thirty-five days after the Louisiana legislature impeached Henry C. Warmoth in 1871. Pinchback served on the Orleans Parish School Board from 1872 until 1877 and also graduated from Straight University Law School in 1885. Pinchback organized the Fourth Ward Republican Club in New Orleans. With his political influence, Pinchback convinced Democratic governor Francis T. Nicholls to appoint four black men to the New Orleans school board and in exchange, agreed to accept Democratic control of Louisiana. Local black leaders criticized Pinchback for working with Democratic

³⁵ Richardson, 157-160.

³⁶ Marcus B. Christian, "The Theory of the Poisoning of Oscar J. Dunn," in *Phylon*, Vol. 6, No. 3 (3rd Qtr. 1945): 254-266.

leaders.³⁷ Dunn and Pinchback were only two of influential men who had connections to Straight University.

Robertson Street Elementary

In 1898, Albert Wicker received his first position as a teacher at Robertson Street Elementary, after working in the publishing field and in the family grocery.³⁸ He was aware of the issues plaguing education in New Orleans: sordid buildings, overcrowded schools, problematic student attendance, and a dearth of qualified teachers. Although these conditions existed in both black and white schools, it was much more aggravated in African-American schools. The 1901 report of Warren Easton, Orleans Parish School Superintendent, lamented the drop of attendance for African-American students and thought that this did not bode well for the future: “Perhaps 2,000 to 3,000 more of the colored youth may be accounted for by their attendance at the colored universities and private schools, leaving an appalling number who are at range on the streets, growing up in dense ignorance without receiving any instruction whatever.”³⁹ He further reported that the enrollment for white students in elementary schools was 24,007 with 614 teachers to instruct them in 61 schools, while 5,072 black students had access to 73 teachers in seven schools. While Robertson Street Elementary dealt with issues of overcrowding, it contained the second largest library for African-American schools in New Orleans, second only to Thomy Lafon School. At Robertson, 452 parents listed their professions as miscellaneous or as laborers and six parents listed their professions as physicians,

³⁷ Devore and Logsdon, 82-85. Nicholas Lemann, *Redemption: The Last Battle of the Civil War* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2006): 96-198.

³⁸ *Soards' City Directory*, 1898.

³⁹ *New Orleans Public School Annual Report of the Board of Education and the Superintendent of Schools, Session 1901-1902* (New Orleans: Mawberret's Printing House, 1903): 10-11.

more than any other African-American school. Other parents who sent their children to Robertson listed the following professions: minister, teacher, clerk, bookkeeper, salesman, merchant, carpenter, mechanic, bricklayer, screwmen, baker, and draymen.⁴⁰

At Robertson, Wicker met fellow teacher, Ella Brischo, whose family hailed from Ohio. During their courtship, Wicker mailed a letter to Brischo as a response from a letter he received while visiting Pass Christian, Mississippi: "I am so tickled at this delightful letter. I do not know what to do. I am like a dog with two tails. I suppose those who saw me reading my letter along the street last evening must of laughed at me[.] I was so ticeled [sic] that I would have not conceal [sic] my feelings."⁴¹ They married in 1908 and set up their household at 2426 Iberville, the new address for the former 490 Customhouse, the house where Wicker grew up.

Religious Involvement and Masonry

While educational standards in New Orleans was a forefront issue for Wicker, as with many black New Orleanians, he also pursued other activities, mainly joining Masonic orders, churches, and mutual aid societies, as had been the practice for New Orleanians since the city's inception. Membership in these organizations provided not only camaraderie for people of similar interests, but also offered an avenue for networking, financial support, a place to discuss pertinent issues, and join forces to bring about change. One church to which Wicker belonged in 1900 was St. James A.M.E.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 136-137.

⁴¹ Albert Wicker to Ella Brischo, August 21, 1908, Albert Wicker Papers, Manuscripts Collection M1138, Special Collections, Tulane University Library.

Church in New Orleans. As was custom with A.M.E churches nationally, St. James A.M.E. was founded along with a Masonic lodge.

In the 1840s, Charles Doughty, James B. Berry, James Hunter, John Parsons, and Jacob Norager, already Prince Hall Freemasons and members of the St. Paul Methodist Episcopal Church, organized themselves into St. James A.M.E. Church. These men were free people of color of a middle class background. According to their charter in 1848, none of them was originally from Louisiana; all had arrived to the state prior to 1835.⁴² According to the act introduced in the Louisiana Legislature for the establishment of the St. James Church, all members had to be free and were limited to meeting between sunrise and sunset.⁴³ In December 1848, they purchased a lot on North Roman Street between Customhouse and Bienville for the establishment of the church. Reverend Thomas Stringer, a Prince Hall Mason and a traveling elder for the Indiana District of the A.M.E. Church, was sent to New Orleans to serve as the pastor of the church.

In 1849, members of St. James A.M.E. Church petitioned Reverend Stringer to form a Masonic lodge. Stringer complied with the request and issued a dispensation to form the Richmond U.D. Lodge. A few months later, Stringer became the first Grand Master of the Prince Hall Grand Lodge of Ohio, and eventually the Richmond U.D. Lodge would be placed under its jurisdiction. By 1863, New Orleans established an additional two lodges, enabling them to form a Grand Lodge.⁴⁴ The Grand Lodge of

⁴² *Charter of St. James Church, New Orleans, 1848: Act of Incorporation of the African Methodist Episcopal Church*, in Walkes, Joseph A. *Jno G. Lewis, Jr. The History of the Prince Hall Grand Lodge of Louisiana, 1842-1979*, (Leavenworth, Kan., 1986): 18.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 19.

⁴⁴ A Grand Lodge is formed when three or more local lodges petition to form a state (Grand) Lodge.

Louisiana, named Eureka, was established January 5, 1863, at the Hall of Richmond Lodge, No. 4, between Customhouse and Bienville streets. Among the notable civic and business leaders who comprised the ranks of the Eureka Grand Lodge were Oscar Dunn, who served as a Senior Grand Warden and third Grand Master for the Eureka Grand Lodge.⁴⁵ After the Civil War, across the United States, Prince Hall Freemasonry consolidated its ranks, strengthened its position as the supreme Masonic order amongst all black Masons, and started working toward some of its highest priorities, one of them being recognition by white lodges, a goal they were never able to attain.

James Lewis, a Grand Master of the Anglo Eureka Grand Lodge, represented a changing of the guard for Masonic orders in Louisiana. Under Oscar Dunn's term as Senior Grand Warden, Dunn had refused to have fraternal relations with the Supreme Council of Louisiana, the black Creole Masonic order, because they were not integrated.⁴⁶ Yet, when Lewis became Grand Master, he initiated relations with the Supreme Council, which was reciprocated. This marks an important transition for African-American Masons who began to believe that they would have to work together, whether they came from a French or Anglican heritage, to attain common goals.

Another church tied closely to not only St. James A.M.E. Church, but also Straight University was Central Congregation Church in the Fourth Ward, where

⁴⁵ Walkes, Joseph A. *Jno G. Lewis, Jr.--end of an era: the history of the Prince Hall Grand Lodge of Louisiana, 1842-1979*. [Leavenworth, Kan., 1986]: 17-20. *History of Mount Olive Lodge #21 Free and Accepted Mason of the Most Worshipful Prince Hall Grand Lodge Jurisdiction of Louisiana*. Walter Cohen (1860-1930), businessman, civic leader, and Elk would also later preside as Grand Master in 1915-1916.

Perkins, 113. Walter Cohen was born in New Orleans in 1860 and received his education in the parochial schools of New Orleans. A protégé of P.B.S. Pinchback, Cohen also involved himself with the Republican Party.

⁴⁶ Walkes, 47-50.

Wicker's college friend, Henderson Dunn, spent the majority of his career. This church was founded in New Orleans in 1872, shortly after the founding of Straight University, when thirty-two members of St. James A.M.E. established Central Congregation Church. Charles H. Thompson, a professor at Straight, served as the first pastor. Located at the corner of Gasquet and South Liberty streets, the American Missionary Association, owner of Straight University, eventually purchased the church, making it the official church for Straight University.⁴⁷ Central Congregation Church stressed the worth of the individual and the right to freedom of action and thought.

Tied to Wicker's membership with St. James Church, he also joined and later served as Grand Master of the predominantly Anglo Mount Olive #21 Masonic Lodge, under the jurisdiction of the Eureka Grand Lodge for Louisiana. On April 22, 1866, Mount Olive Lodge #21 had been organized and chartered by the Most Worshipful Prince Hall Grand Lodge for the State of Louisiana.⁴⁸ Linked exclusively to St. James A.M.E. Church, the church held services for the announcement, consecration, and solemnization of the lodge.⁴⁹ The leadership of Elks lodges, St. James A.M.E. Church, Central Congregational Church, and other organizations in New Orleans all drew membership from various lodges under the Eureka Grand Lodge. One of Eureka's missions on its platform was to advance education. At Eureka's annual meeting in 1901, in a *Report on the State of Education*, the Masonic leadership asserted that "A stream can

⁴⁷ Dunn-Landry Family Papers, Manuscripts Collection 138, Amistad Research Center, New Orleans, Louisiana.

⁴⁸ *History of Mount Olive Lodge #21 Free and Accepted Mason of the Most Worshipful Prince Hall Grand Lodge Jurisdiction of Louisiana*. On November 10, 1873, thirty-one applicants formed this lodge. See Wilkes, p. 78. He belonged to a Masonic lodge, the Ezra Chapter No. 1 of the Eureka Grand Chapter of the Royal Arch Masons of the State of Louisiana for whom Wicker would also serve as High Priest. *Proceedings of the Most Excellent Eureka Grand Chapter of the Royal Arch Masons of the State of Louisiana*, New Orleans, May 3-4 1921.

⁴⁹ Mount Olive Lodge #21 website, <http://www.mountolive21.com>.

not rise higher than its source, neither can Masonry rise higher than the ideals which are formed in regard to it.” To the Eureka Grand Lodge and their member lodges such as Mount Olive #21, the future of the Masonic craft and race depended upon the education of all black people.⁵⁰ This also reflected the national level as black Masons were linked not only to the foundation of the A.M.E. Church in the United States but to benevolent societies and insurance companies as well.⁵¹

Dryades Street YMCA

In 1905, Albert Wicker opened his home for meetings with other African-Americans to set up a Young Men’s Christian Association. Although only a few lines exist regarding Wicker’s involvement, Robert Meyer writes that Wicker was a “firm advocate of the Y movement” and the meetings that he held took place over a “considerable length of time before other accommodations were available.”⁵² Nellie Wicker continued financial support of the Dryades Street YMCA, even after her husband’s death. For the 1928-1929 fundraising campaign for the Dryades Street Y, Nellie Wicker gave a donation of \$1000, the largest amount given by any woman, one of only four donors who gave \$1000. She requested that the Y dedicate a room in the new building in honor of her husband. According to the *Louisiana Weekly*, the Dryades Street YMCA was “organized in Professor Wicker’s home, and he remained a staunch, life-long

⁵⁰ *Proceedings of the 38th Annual Communication of the Most Worshipful Eureka Grand Lodge F&AM Held at Masonic Hall, February 19, 1901* in George Longe Records, Manuscripts Collection 252, Amistad Research Center, New Orleans, Louisiana.

⁵¹ Walkes, 17.

⁵² Robert Meyer *We Name Our Schools* (Unpublished manuscript, No Date), Louisiana Collection, Tulane University Library.

supporter until his death last year.” Walter Cohen, a colleague of Wicker’s, also gave \$1000 during this drive. In his address to the donors in New Orleans, the National YMCA Campaign Director R.B. DeFrantz stated, “All creeds and denominations joined as one band with enthusiasm to reach the objective...Precedents in inter-racial co-operation have been set that will mean much to the future of our work nationally.”⁵³

The first decade of the new century had marked a time of great transition and debate for black New Orleans, but it also ushered in a time when a variety of individuals and organizations had begun to come together in new ways to fight for equal rights and education for all blacks in New Orleans. Lacking the assistance of the federal government, churches, educational leagues, Masonic orders, and civic leaders began to join forces to urge local leaders to improve black education in New Orleans.

Bienville Street Elementary

In 1907, black educator John Guillaume, in *The Colored Teacher*, the official journal of the Louisiana State Colored Teacher’s Association, wrote, “What the teachers and leaders of the Negro in Louisiana need is a more intimate acquaintance with educational conditions and a broader knowledge of educational achievements that they may be inspired to higher educational endeavors.”⁵⁴ The following year, Wicker faced a new challenge in his career; he received a principal’s position at Bienville Street Elementary, encountering the same poor conditions that had plagued the public school

⁵³ *Louisiana Weekly*, June 1, 1929. The *Weekly* also broke down the amount of donations that the Y received: 59% of the donors gave between \$200 and \$5000, 89 people donated \$100, 187 people gave \$50, 379 offered \$25, and 99 people gave \$5 or less.

⁵⁴ John Guillaume, *The Colored Teacher*, Vol. 1, No. 4 (John Guillaume Publisher, February, March, April 1907).

system when he began teaching. Three years later, in a notebook entry dated November 20, 1911, Henderson Dunn stated that Bienville Elementary had a total of sixteen teachers serving an enrollment of 900 students with seventy children in the morning enrollment. He further wrote that an annex of six rooms could be possible in the near future.⁵⁵ In the Superintendent's report for 1912-1913, Orleans Parish School Superintendent Joseph Gwinn had noted that many black schools such as Bienville, McDonogh 32, McDonogh 6, and Thomy Lafon needed physical expansion. Overcrowded black schools required that school days be reduced anywhere from two-and-a-half to four-hour days to accommodate all the students.⁵⁶ In the next few years, the city would build two new schools for African-Americans.

By 1914, African-American leaders lobbied the Orleans Parish School Board for a high school, in the belief that in order for the African-American community to advance socially, it needed access to a high school education. In 1917, white leaders began to realize that if they were to maintain segregation, African-Americans would have to have access to their own higher education. They finally acquiesced and granted the first black public high school in New Orleans, McDonogh 35.⁵⁷ In an undated letter, Henderson Dunn suggested to Pierre Capdau solutions to the problems in black public schools. He requested that the Orleans Parish School Board make provisions for blacks above the elementary level and he requested an evening school. "These are for the less fortunate race," he wrote. "Their leaders can do little with the masses until the latter be lifted to the

⁵⁵ Dunn-Landry Family Papers, Manuscripts Collection 138, Amistad Research Center, New Orleans, Louisiana.

⁵⁶ Devore and Logsdon: 185.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 192.

point where they appreciate cleanliness, integrity, sobriety, and honesty; but these virtues do not go hand in hand with ignorance.” He also offered ideas for improvement of overcrowded, unsanitary buildings, the importance of a new school at Gentilly Road, and improvements to Bienville, McCarthy, Fisk, McDonogh 32, and Thomy Lafon. He advocated an industrial school as some African-American students would become professionals, but most would be laborers. He stressed that the city depended upon missionary-trained teachers and Northerners, a situation he concluded as potentially disruptive, and how that could cease if the Orleans Parish School Board would establish an individual high school with teacher-training.⁵⁸

The next step for black leadership concerned evening schools for students, especially after the school board had established one for the white population. After persistent efforts from black leaders, an evening school opened in 1918. Writing on the state of African-American education in 1918, State Education Superintendent Leo Favrot commented on the double standard of white and black education in Louisiana and how it hurt both races. At times using a paternal tone, Favrot commented on proper hygiene. “Most of us can cite from our experiences numerous instances of the transfer of communicable diseases wholly preventable and due to a carelessness born of ignorance.”⁵⁹ He also acknowledged a different class of African-Americans when he compared undereducated African-Americans with “the intelligent and better educated Negro.” Then, Favrot revealed a progressive streak when he asserted, “It may be well to

⁵⁸ Dunn-Landry Family Papers, Manuscripts Collection 138, Amistad Research Center, New Orleans, Louisiana.

⁵⁹ Leo Favrot, “Conditions Governing the Attitude of White Men Toward Negro Education in Louisiana,” *Louisiana Bicentennial Series* (Lafayette: Center for Louisiana Studies, 1999): 289.

point out here that in some sections of the state the Negro is not receiving for education of his race the direct school taxes that he contributes. To fail to grant him this, amounts to confiscation.” He chastised white Louisiana, stating that they could not be provincial in their outlook on education for all children. “It is time to put aside old doubts and fears,” he wrote, “and to espouse this thoroughly righteous cause...in the interest of a more prosperous state, better health or public safety; or do it because our sense of justice and fairness prompts us to.”⁶⁰

Unfortunately, Favrot’s words went unheeded and in 1923, issues over education and equality came to a head. Due to the overcrowding of black schools in the city, black leaders started pressuring the school board to build new schools and the school board eventually agreed. Yet, when white parents heard that black children were getting a new school (to be called Joseph Craig) in a white neighborhood in 1922, they became upset and started protesting for the school board to give them the new school and remove the African-American students to other schools. As efforts intensified, the school board was compelled to reverse its decision. James Fortier, president of the school board, capitulated, stating that black schools in white neighborhoods would threaten white supremacy. He then suggested that the extra black students, rather than going to a new school, would be dispersed to other African-American schools, including Bienville Elementary. Outraged at this proposal, black community leaders gathered forces and planned their actions. Emile Labranche, a local leader, submitted his plan to the school board on behalf of the African-American community requesting the opening of Joseph Craig School as originally planned. Through much debate, the school board voted to

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 290.

allow the students to attend Craig until a new black school could be built on Philip Street. James Fortier chided that since the Orleans Parish School Board had allowed concessions to African-Americans over the years, they would have to deal with this persistence from African- American leaders and their advocacy.⁶¹ The persistence of African-Americans had succeeded in gaining concessions and advancing their cause.

People's Benevolent, Industrial Life Insurance Company of Louisiana

In 1912, Wicker is listed on the advisory board for the People's Benevolent, Industrial Life Insurance Company of Louisiana. Organized as a mutual benefit society, it opened its headquarters at 624 Rampart Street on January 3, 1910.⁶² Walter Cohen, affectionately called Captain Cohen, a former cigarmaker and U.S. Customs Inspector, was the driving force behind the establishment of the African-American-controlled insurance company in its early years and through its restructuring into a stock company in 1922. The mutual benefit society set the stage for African-Americans to learn business practices and develop clientele from the black community, as many African-Americans did not want to place their financial dealings in the hands of whites.⁶³ Among some of the early members and employees of the company included Creole activist Homer Plessy, as well as James Lewis, Jr., an Anglo-African-American Mason who received his education in the public school system and at Straight University. Lewis also founded the Fourth Ward Civic League and belonged to St. James A.M.E. Church. Lewis led a successful

⁶¹ Devore and Logsdon, 200-204.

⁶² *The People's Industrial Life Insurance Company Souvenir Twenty-Fifth Anniversary*, (New Orleans, 1947) George Longe Records, Manuscripts Collection 252, Amistad Research Center, New Orleans, Louisiana.

⁶³ C.A. Spencer *Black Benevolent Societies and the Development of Black Insurance Companies in Nineteenth Century Alabama*, *Phylon* Vol. 46, No. 3 (3rd Quarter, 1985): 251-261.

court fight in 1928 against the legalized segregation of home districts. He belonged to the Urban League, the NAACP of New Orleans, and served as the past Grand Master of Stringer Lodge, No. 3 of the Eureka Grand Lodge. Additional original members of this company were the acclaimed personal photographer to Booker T. Washington, Arthur Bedou, and Beverly Baranco, an Odd Fellow and a Mason under Eureka Grand Lodge.

People's Benevolent Insurance Company prided itself that it was organized and managed by successful African-American businessmen. The company's solicitors, physicians, and pharmacists were all African-American. Furthermore, they believed that "the time has come when the colored people should contribute their support to a concern of their own, whose benefits are shared among them."⁶⁴ The connection between black insurance companies and the African Methodist Episcopal Church dates as early as 1778 in Philadelphia with the establishment of The Free African Society.⁶⁵ The charter members of The Free African Society included Richard Allen, the founder of the African Methodist Episcopal Church. It began as a mutual aid society helping its members through illness, death, and burial. Although at first The Free African Society had no affiliation with any religious entity, over time, a connection would develop between this organization and the A.M.E. Church.

Société des Jeunes Amis

Société des Jeunes Amis was the last organization that Albert Wicker joined. He became a member and remained active until his death in 1928. Organized historically as a benevolent society geared toward black Creoles working as cigarmakers, it received its

⁶⁴ *Wood's Directory*, 1913.

⁶⁵ James B. Browning, "The Beginnings of Insurance Enterprise among Negroes," *The Journal of Negro History*, Vol. 22, No. 4 (October 1937): 417-432.

charter in 1874. The society was located at the Salle Thomy Lafon at 1321 Dumaine Street and each year on All Saints Day, members placed a floral offering on the tomb of Thomy Lafon, an honorary member and benefactor of the society. The society provided sick and death benefits to its members and provided an annual gift of \$25 to the Eye, Ear, Nose, and Throat Hospital of New Orleans. Members conducted their meetings and recorded their minutes in French until 1919 when they switched to English.

Albert Wicker's Legacy

Albert Wicker died on August 30, 1928. In reply to the many condolences she received following the death of her husband, Nellie Wicker posted a response in the *Louisiana Weekly* on September 18, 1928. In it, she thanks several organizations: the Orleans Parish School Board, the Teacher's Association, the Masons, the Elks, the Odd Fellows, St. James A.M.E. Church, Central Congregation Church, and Societé des Jeunes Amis. An educator and an activist, Albert Wicker influenced an untold number of African-American New Orleanians through his profession and his activism.

Years after his death, in the program for the Louisiana Colored Teacher's Association's fortieth annual convention, advertisements announced classes at the YMCA on Dryades Street and at Dillard University, the descendant of Straight University; People's Benevolent Life Insurance Company displayed information on membership; and the Parent-Teacher Association at Albert Wicker High congratulated the association for all their years of hard service. Albert Wicker had a strong association with each one of these organizations. Wicker and his associates represented a time of optimism and hope despite the harshness of Jim Crow, and their actions reflected a national trend of African-Americans who entered the middle class in the first years of the

twentieth century. Wicker worked toward making his city a better place through his commitment as an educator, as a founder of the Dryades Street YMCA, and as a patriot during World War I.⁶⁶ He also strove to make his family's life better through his involvement with Société des Jeunes Amis, the People's Benevolent Life Insurance Company, and through his religious commitment to the St. James A.M.E. Church and the Central Congregational Church. In general terms, benevolent societies and social, aid, and pleasure clubs held an important role in New Orleans, dating back to the city's earliest days. Black New Orleanians drew upon these older models to increase their network of support at the turn of the twentieth century. On a personal level, Wicker used his memberships to attain the stability, prestige, knowledge, and skills he desired for his life. On a professional level, he achieved improvements for Bienville Street Elementary through this vibrant community of support. These facets of his personal and professional life and his social interactions did not exist in a vacuum; they intermeshed to such an extent that it can be difficult to separate them. Albert Wicker's life and work reveal the complexity of social organization and life among the African-Americans in New Orleans during this dynamic, optimistic, yet perilous time. The organizations to which he and so many others belonged and the issues for which they fought reveal multi-dimensional, overlapping networks created by African-American Catholic Creoles, Protestant Anglo-African-Americans, alumni, Masons, church leaders, civic leaders, and educators, working in concert.

⁶⁶ Robert E. Meyer, *We Name Our Schools* (Unpublished manuscript, 1936), Louisiana Collection, Special Collections, Tulane University Library. Meyer wrote that Wicker started drives during the war "to aid the cause."

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Vita

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