

(Re)Imagined Black Informational Past: Chicago's New Negro Intercollegiate Club and the Wonder Books, 1927 & 1929 (Paper)

Abstract or Résumé:

In 1927, the collective of Black students known as the *Washington Intercollegiate Club of Chicago* went out into their community to collect data about the various components of the Black experience. This research turned into the two editions of the *Intercollegian Wonder Book*. The *Wonder Books* present a Black past that notes a time of youth envisioning their community through the lens of the New Negro Movement, galvanizing to uplift and promote a new Black present in Chicago. Our project tracks the impact of the *Wonder Books* by examining how they have been referenced in research and journalism since their publication.

1. Introduction: Treasured Text

The 2021 estate sale of Claude Albert and Etta Moten Barnett, known as Chicago's Black Renaissance power couple, promised to bring a treasure trove of materials reflecting the 20th century Black experience. Claude A. Barnett was a Pan-Africanist, civic leader, and in 1919 founded the Associated Negro Press. Etta Moten was an actress and singer best known for her role as *Bess* in *Porgy and Bess* and was the first African American to perform at the White House in the 20th century (Ihejirika, 2021; HistoryMakers, 2022). The couple traveled extensively to the African continent and amassed a collection of art, books, photographs, and memorabilia. As a librarian attending the sale, (Gray, 2022) expected to discover first editions of books and other rare informational materials. Bookcases were scattered throughout the home filled with texts that reflected the history and culture of Blacks in America and abroad. Lying separate from other texts on the bottom shelf of a China cabinet, lay the treasured 1927 *Intercollegian Wonder Book* or *The Negro in Chicago, 1779-1927*. (Gray, 2022) searched many years for a copy and knew instantly that it deserved a place of prominence in the household among other treasures kept separate on display in the cabinet.

The text is used as a reference tool for historical, genealogical, sociological, race, and information research. It is often referred to in studies of Chicago's Black Renaissance and New Negro movements. Our presentation will present the masterpiece from the information grounds that it emerged. The research presented will signify progress towards two objectives. The first is to uncover the Intercollegiate Club as an organization by documenting the process of the collective data gathering and research performed by the students through Black institutional networks linkages in 1920's Chicago. The second objective is to trace and gather the impact of the text in its own time and how it is utilized as a historical tool.

2. Intercollegiate Club

In October of 1927 the collective of Black college and professional students set out to compile "exact information about the Negro in the city" (Robb, 1927, 3). The group incorporated as the *Washington Intercollegiate Club*, under the auspices of the Chicago Urban League and the Wabash Avenue YMCA, was established in 1909 by social workers who felt it necessary to have Black students attending various institutions come together in the summers for social activities, later becoming a literary society. In the early years the number of members grew to one hundred and nine. As time passed, the club became dormant and re-established itself in 1922 to serve the students year-round, as both a social and intellectual organization. documented Black life and history in the city of Chicago. Under the vision and leadership of Frederic Robb, a Northwestern

University law student and graduate of Howard University, the club number grew from twelve regular members to over two hundred. The work of the book commenced in March 1927. The club felt that they were “presenting to Chicago and the nation at large, the most complete survey of the constructive progress of the Negro in Chicago that has been affected” (Robb, 1927, 11). The students used facilities at the Southside Wabash YMCA, and with the help of the Urban League, conducted various surveys of the Black population.

The student members that researched and compiled data attended and were recent graduates of schools including Northwestern University, University of Chicago, Crane College, and Chicago Normal College. They studied law, medicine, business, history, music, and education. In the text they represented themselves by their professional and social connections (See Figure 1). The students went out into the community armed with ‘pad and pen’ collecting data and evidence about civic, business, educational, religious, architectural, labor, and leisure elements of the Black experience (Reed, 2011; Robb, 1927).



Figure 1: Sample Page of Club Members, (Robb, 1927, 25)

The full description on the title page of the comprehensive work, 1927 *Intercollegian Wonder Book or The Negro in Chicago, 1779-1927. Volume I.: Survey of the Negro's Educational, Athletic, Civic and Commercial Life from 1779 to 1927. History, Who's Who in Chicago, Directory, Facts and Figures about the Negro for 8000 Years* (See Figure 2), provided a well-researched and informational representation of the achievements and work of Blacks in the city (Robb, 1927). It reflected and was a tribute to the New Negro ethos of Black consciousness articulated by philosopher and Rhodes's scholar, Alain Locke (Stewart, 2018). Dewey R. Jones, the *Bookshelf* editor for the *Chicago Defender* newspaper called the book a "masterpiece." In his review he stated that "*The Negro in Chicago* is far too valuable a book to be harshly dealt with and it represents far too much diligent, conscious effort to be passed over lightly" (Jones, 1927, A1). There was so much accumulated data and evidence that at the publication of the first volume in 1927, the second volume published in 1929 was announced in its pages.

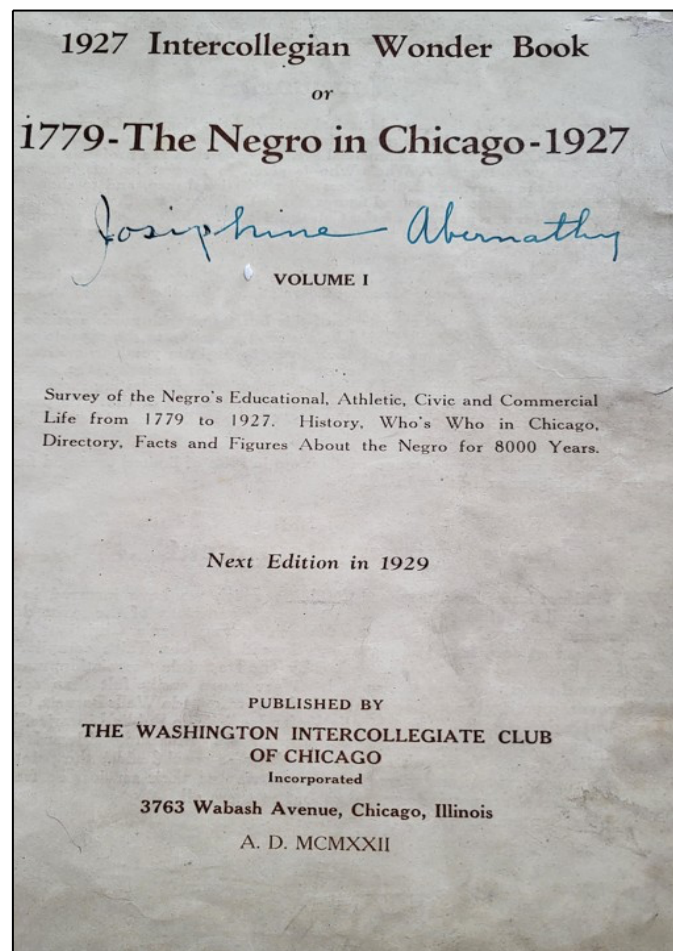


Figure 2: Title Page of the 1927 Edition of the Wonder Book, (Robb, 1927, 3)

The 1927 *Wonder Book* is mentioned in research on the philosophy, education, class studies of the Black population of Chicago (Guzman, 2006, 2018; Green, 2013). The creation of the text was a grassroots effort and is sandwiched between classic works on Blacks in the city written by scholars at the University of Chicago and governmental agencies. The first similarly

titled *The Negro in Chicago: A study of race relations and a race riot* (Commission on Race, 1923), detailed the state of the Black community post WWI and was conducted to examine race relation after the July, 1919 racial uprising. The second work, *The Black Metropolis* (Cayton & Drake, 2015, originally published in 1925) an ethnography on the Black community in greater detail, in pre-WWII Chicago. The *Wonder Book* demonstrates the authentic voice of Black inhabitants from the ground up. It is an expansive youth project that provides data and information on the celebrated Black Chicago landscape using the intellectual vigor of students armed with a self-reliant consciousness (Locke, 2021, originally published in 1923).

3. Locating the Wonder Books

To locate the impetus and impact of the *Wonder Books* involves looking at what the text says about itself, how it is represented in communication venues at the time, where in historical research it is used, and who are the major players in the club that produced the work. We chose to track how the books have been referenced throughout the past century and how other scholars and journalists have seen the works as a jumping off point for their own research. To do this we performed a forward citation search to find items that reference the text. We identified the key terms most likely to help us find any references to the works. These included various titles that the books have been given including “Intercollegian Wonder Book: Or, the Negro in Chicago, 1779-1927”, “The Book of Achievement: Featuring the Negro in Chicago, 1779-1929”, “The Negro in Chicago, 1779-1927”, and “The Negro in Chicago, 1779-1929” and various names which seemed most likely to be credited as the author of the text such as “Frederic H. Robb”, “Frederic H. H. Robb”, “Hamurabi Robb” and “Washington Intercollegiate club of Chicago”. We entered these terms into various databases (open source & proprietary) and search engines. In tracing the books this way we discovered 283 hits of various sources that referenced the text. (See Table 1)

Table 1: Forward Citation Searching Results

Database/Source (N=13)	Relevant Items
Archive Grid	1
Black Life in America	12
Black Studies Center Database	17
BMRC	2
Chicago Defender Archive	4
Chicago Public Library Digital Collection	5
Google (Google, Google Scholar, Google Books)	82
HathiTrust	5
Internet Archive	47
JSTOR	14
Newspapers.com	10
Proquest History	35
World Cat*	49
Total	283

*Number of libraries with holdings

One notable insight from this research was the continued usage of the works. Despite them being relatively rare items, they are cited as background research and references in books, articles, dissertations, newspapers, and other sources (See Table 2). The fields range widely from political history, sports history, art history, biography, environmentalism, and more. This piece of those data illustrate how the *Wonder Books* have continued to capture the imagination of scholars, especially those looking to center Black history, beyond the typical figureheads. Additionally, Robb’s prevalence in the Black community, as seen by how he is referred to in the news articles in which he is mentioned and how he was often chosen to represent both Black Chicago and Black America more broadly, both nationally and internationally. This illustrates that the work was not a small side project by a group of students, but one that was in the middle of the community imagining the future of the New Negro movement. The project was fueled by up-and-coming young Black leaders and helped bring some of them to prominence.

Table 2: Source Types

Source Types	1927 Book	1929 Book	Both/Unclear	Number of Resources
Book	47	41	11/7	106
Dissertation & Theses	8	12	6/2	28
Journal Article	8	8	4/1	21
Newspaper Articles	14	9	5/1	29
Landmark Designation	2	1	1/0	4
Paper Collections	2	0	2/0	4
Miscellaneous	2	7	2/0	11
TOTALS	83	78	31/11	203

1. (Re) Imagined Black Past

The *Wonder Books* communicate the structure of an ancestral community and its representation of itself. It serves up a Black past that notes a time of youth galvanizing to uplift and promote a new Black present in the 1920’s Chicago. Through investigating the texts, we found that the influence is in various areas in the study of history (Black biography, Sports, Politics, Business, Education, and Philosophy) and illustrates a collective pursuit in documentation or defining themselves in an illustrious light. The presentation will tell the story of the production of the books and the significance to the New Negro movement established in the 1920’s. Specifically, we ground the story of a Black past that informs contemporary movements in Black existence in the United States and how reaching back to bring forward a community consciousness is emblematic of the struggle for equality. Most importantly, the development of the *Wonder Books* show how a Black community imagines and represents themselves to a Black audience.

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