



LEFT: All but one of Alice Donlan's great grandchildren gathered near their Detroit home for a group portrait in the mid-twentieth century.

Alice Donlan lived through tough times. She withstood her Irish family's objection to her marriage to John Johnson, an African American born of ex-slaves, and she accepted their subsequent shunning. She braced against the fierce 1904 riots in the black neighborhood of Springfield, where she and John lodged, and then insisted on building a house on the city's "Irish Hill." She pulled back her long drape of chestnut hair to nurse a son in a room full of white eucalyptus steam, but, in the end, was helpless to stop the whooping cough and croup from killing her three-year-old Levi. She worried about her beloved husband, as he faded from the hail-fellow-well-met she married in 1899. After just thirteen years of marriage, she dreaded his imminent death. Nothing, however, was as devastating as the decision she faced in May 1913. Would her oldest child, eleven-year-old Polly, continue into sixth grade or stay home and tend a baby sister while Alice, now-widowed, went out to work? Risking the rebuke of her Johnson in-laws, her only remaining family, she returned to her old Irish family values to decide what she felt was right.

Born April 25, 1875, Alice Donlan grew up about twenty miles down river from Cincinnati in German-Catholic Lawrenceburg, Indiana. Raised in the Roman Catholic faith, she was educated by the Sisters of St. Lawrence who taught her the US Pledge of Allegiance in both English and German. As a second-generation Irish American, her upbringing couldn't claim to be as pure Irish as that of her grandfather from Ireland or even of her father, who had been raised in Dover, an Irish-Catholic enclave in the woods behind Lawrenceburg. In her German-Catholic surroundings, however, Alice came to appreciate similarities and to tolerate and accept differences among people. Leaving Lawrenceburg around 1898, she took a job living and working as a maid in one of Cincinnati's upper-class households.

John Henry Louis Preston Johnson was a first-generation freeborn who descended from enslaved brick masons in Maryland. His father, Isaac Johnson, enlisted in the Union army while still a teenager and fought alongside his own father during the Civil War. Isaac and his father parted ways after the war when Isaac refused to join the African colonization movement. The young Isaac chose instead to marry in Ohio and then settled in Kentucky, where he could apply his masonry skills repairing war dam-

ROOM, BOARD, AND BOOKS

A Mother's Dilemma

by Dedria A. Humphries

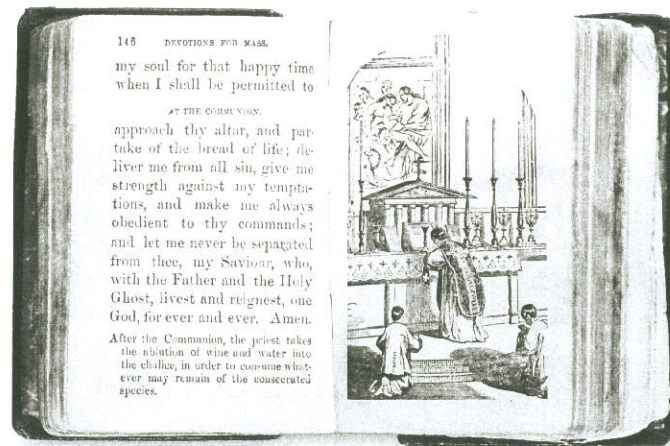
In mid-twentieth-century Detroit, the Humphries family had thirteen children who graduated from high school, at that time the accepted educational standard for an African-American family. All thirteen children, however, would matriculate to college and all — save two — would graduate, several obtaining a second degree along the way. One can speculate as to how this came to be. Certainly hard-working parents, civil rights advancements, and athletic and academic scholarships can be cited as part of the reason for this family's educational success. Another factor, though, was their Irish-American great-grandmother in Springfield, Ohio.



age and raise a family of his own. Born on Christmas Day 1876, John Johnson would be Isaac's only son to survive infancy. While learning masonry from his father, John's compact build made him perfect for the saddle, and he learned to handle horses too. Sometime around 1898, the Johnson family moved to Cincinnati, and John took a stable job at the same mansion where Alice Donlan worked as a maid.

In the late nineteenth century, the drinking song "Little Brown Jug" tinkled through Cincinnati's collection of taverns, saloons, dance halls, casinos, horse-betting parlors, and other good-time establishments. Infected by the city's rollicking character, the young John and Alice met and — defying the cultural mores of the region and time — married in 1899. While interracial marriage was legal in Ohio, it was frowned on in Cincinnati and was all together banned in neighboring Kentucky and Indiana.

After marrying an African American, family and societal pressures forced the Irish-American Alice Donlan Johnson to live in two very different worlds.



After Alice Johnson married, she became estranged from her family, and a Roman Catholic missal became one of the few physical links to her upbringing.

More importantly, Alice's family in Lawrenceburg objected. She ignored them, and for her impudence, Alice was sent away and told to stay away. All she had to remind her of the Donlan family was her mother's portrait and a Roman Catholic prayer book. John's family — his father and seven surviving sisters — became her new family. With them, Alice celebrated and mourned and put her Irish self in the background.

John and Alice Johnson's first child was a girl born February 7, 1902. They named the infant after John's two younger sisters, Pauline and Lucy, but the Irish endearment "Polly" was soon applied by Alice. Shortly after, the young family moved eighty miles north to Springfield to join Isaac Johnson and two of John's sisters and a niece. There, the Johnson family-at-large refused to call the child Polly, preferring "Little Pauline." Thus, the little girl grew up answering to two names and accepting her dual cultural and racial identity.

The Johnsons immersed themselves in their new hometown, choosing to live with John's father in a black neighborhood known as the Levee. But they were shocked when, in 1904, a white mob, angry over the killing of a railroad brakeman, invaded the Levee and another nearby black neighborhood and torched houses. Pregnant with their second child, the violence frightened Alice into reclaiming some of her Irish heritage. When a son was born shortly afterwards, she named him Elmer for her younger brother, quickly nicknaming him Bud. She "encouraged" her husband to buy a lot on Harrison Street in the neighborhood known as Irish Hill. He built a sound house with "wooden lace" atop the porch

Unless otherwise noted, all images are from the author's collection.

posts, while his father built a cistern. By 1906, the new home was habitable and a third child, this time a son named Levi, was born. The house helped Johnson launch his own construction business, and, using accounting skills learned from the nuns in Lawrenceburg, Alice partnered with him by keeping the books while overseeing their home and children.

At the time of her marriage and family estrangement, Alice Johnson turned her back on her Catholic upbringing. Refusing to have her babies christened, she likewise bypassed the neighborhood St. Joseph's Catholic Church School and, when her eldest was ready to enter school in September 1907, enrolled Polly in the Springfield public schools. The Springfield schools proved a good place for an Irish mother with a biracial child. Two late-nineteenth-century lawsuits had challenged school segregation in the city. An 1872 suit was settled by building a new school for "colored students." That established the "separate but equal" doctrine, but, following a second desegregation lawsuit, Springfield's legal segregation ended in 1887. While African-American children were now able to attend any Springfield school, most enrolled in the Pleasant Street School

Pauline "Polly" Johnson (left) was born in Cincinnati in 1902. Her brother Elmer "Bud" was born two years later. At least one of the Staffordshire bull terriers raised by their father for fighting became a family pet.



Pleasant Street School was built in 1887 following a desegregation lawsuit in Springfield, Ohio. African-American children made up a large portion of the school's enrollment, although Polly Johnson later attended a newer city school. *Clark County Historical Society*

built to settle the first lawsuit. Polly Johnson, however, attended a new school, Clifton (later renamed the Emerson School).

Five-year-old Polly didn't want to go to school, wishing to stay home with her parents and baby brothers. Her mother was unmoved by the girl's sobs walking to school and later sitting at her desk in the first-grade classroom. Alice's persistence was evidence that, for this Irish-American mother, nothing would be more important than sending her children to school. Her determination had deep roots in her Irish-Catholic heritage. Beginning with the twelfth-century invasion of Ireland, carried through Henry VIII's break with the church, and brought to the United States, the Roman Catholic church continued to educate immigrants and champion their Irish culture. Polly attended five classes — including two of arithmetic — before mid-morning recess each day. Alice Donlan Johnson, even if her family didn't know, was proving to be a good Irish mama.

When the extended family gathered for Christmas 1907, Alice obligingly sent her six-year-old daughter over early so the visiting Johnson aunts could fuss over Little Pauline. While they caressed her fair-

complexed cheeks and stroked her soft hair, the fact that she was a student was of little importance. As a family that came out of slavery, the Johnsons valued work above all and were anxious about supporting and holding family together.

The labor unions in Springfield kept John Johnson out of the city's factories, but he kept busy working as a barkeep and supported his family largely through work on his "own account" — as the census termed entrepreneurial income — in construction. A sporting man, he also owned American Staffordshire terriers that he legally put in the pit to fight. His final job was as a groom for the show horses of John L. Bushnell, the son of the late millionaire industrialist and governor Asa S. Bushnell. Johnson's heart was failing, and he needed less emotionally and physically taxing work. When he died on May 29, 1912 — sadly, the only treatment consisted of hot water bags on his chest — his death certificate cited exhaustion and heart disease.

The first summer of her widowhood, Alice kept her three children — Polly, Bud, and Elizabeth, born in 1910 — nearby. While much seemed out of control, her house on Irish Hill was free and clear, and she had savings "planted" in the yard. John's sisters, Pauline and Nellie, helped out as best they could, and another sister from Detroit, Lucy Johnson, regularly visited Springfield. When September 1912 school bells rang with Polly entering fifth grade and

When the stable behind John Bushnell's East High Street Springfield home burned and destroyed several of his horses in January 1909, he rebuilt the structure in fireproof concrete. John Johnson worked here until his untimely death in May 1912. *Ohio Historical Society*



David R. Barker, Photographer

Bud third, money for everyday expenses was running low. Alice needed to find a job.

In the early twentieth century, Springfield's population was nearly fifty thousand, and more homes were rented than owned. Childcare was a favor a woman did for a needy friend, and those who needed to earn money and stay home to care for their children took in washing — back-breaking work. Those women not tied to their homes, especially black women, became domestic servants. The wealthy homes of Springfield provided plenty of opportunities, and all the other Johnson women worked as domestics. But Alice went looking downtown for a job to support her young family. Times had changed since signs in business windows warned “Irish need not apply,” and many hotels — the Shawnee, Bancroft, Heaume, Rogers, Book-walter, and Arcade — accommodated traveling salesmen arriving at the Pennsylvania and the Big Four train depots. She found a housekeeper job at the Arcade, “the leading hotel of the town.” Still, a problem remained. Who would watch baby Elizabeth while Alice went to work or slept?

The Johnson family history offered one solution, similar to many families of color at the time. When John Johnson's eldest sister had died soon after giving birth in 1897, John's twelve-year-old sister, Pauline, cared for the infant. Sadly, the Johnson family, like many other families, valued women's wages over the formal education of their young girls. Education, they believed, might be a necessity for

the acculturated leaders and other people of worth but was surely secondary for “girls, negroes, and the poor.” Daughter Polly Johnson became all three upon her father's death, and by Johnson family standards, she was old enough to babysit to allow her mother to work.

Alice Johnson, however, was determined to raise her children according to her Irish-Catholic mores. Instead of becoming a “Little Mama” as her Johnson relatives presumed, Polly would be educated. In many ways the decision facing Alice when the trees turned green in 1913 brought her full circle. She had defied her family and married her black suitor and now feared that her decision to send her daughter to school might push her in-laws away. While Alice found an ally in John's sister Lucy, who offered to let eleven-year-old Polly live with her in Detroit, that suggestion did not solve the problem of caring for baby Elizabeth. Alice considered where to turn for help, but, having severed her ties with the Roman Catholic church, sponsor of orphanages for Irish immigrant children, she was forced to look elsewhere. She desperately needed another place to turn. She was not alone in her dilemma.

A national debate concurrently raged in America over the care of orphans. In 1909, the same year that Alice lost her baby to the croup, a national conference convened to consider how best to help children whose parents struggled to raise them. In January, President Theodore Roosevelt called together two hundred social workers and others

passionate about child welfare for the White House Conference on Dependent Children. Thirteen delegates came from Ohio, and, reflecting the conference's emphasis on big cities, the majority represented Cincinnati, Cleveland, and Columbus. Homer C. Folks, a New York City sociologist and child activist, was named conference chairman. Folks advocated family home care over “hopeless, dreary and cheerless” orphanages, denigrating such institutions as under “constant pressure to decrease the per capita cost.” As caretakers, Folks criticized, such orphanages had “too many charges to be loving of each one.”

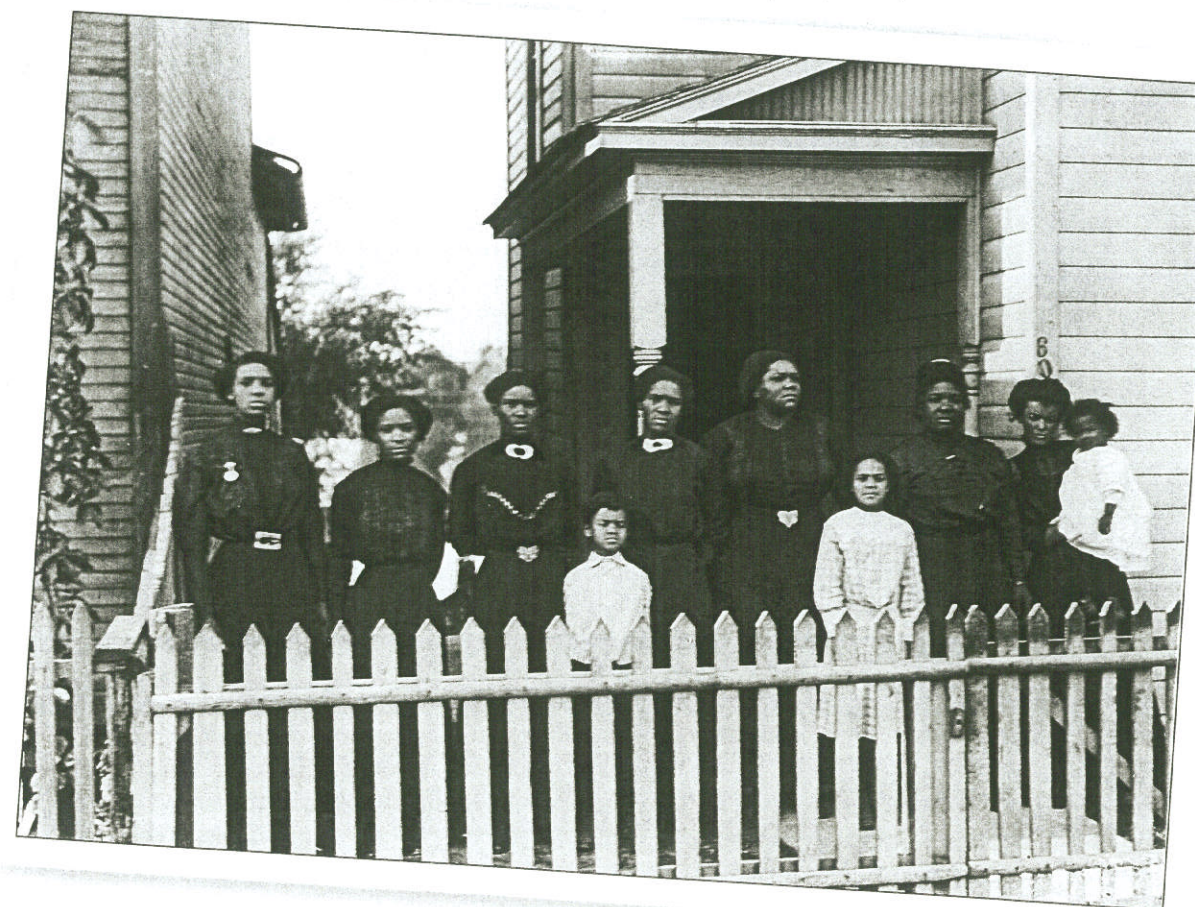
A generation earlier, however, such orphanages had been seen as the ideal solution. Abraham Lincoln's second inaugural address in 1864 urged care for the “half-orphans” whose fathers had been killed in the war. A few years later, in 1869, the Civil War veterans' organization known as the Grand Army of the Republic responded to that call by establishing the Ohio Soldiers' and Sailors' Orphans' Home in Xenia, eighteen miles from Springfield. By the turn of the century, the celebrated orphanage

sheltered more than one thousand children and was the largest in the world. The Ohio General Assembly, likewise, had responded by authorizing her counties to build public orphanages. These orphanages, or “children's homes,” were slow to take shape, and by 1910, only fifty orphanages existed throughout the state.

Delegates to Roosevelt's White House conference varied in their alternatives to orphanages. Some insisted that family homes in the country, with environments of fresh air and sunshine, best respected a child's “inalienable right to protection and education.” Others objected that too often, family homes in remote rural areas placed little value on education. In addition, some cited the absence of compulsory-education laws in states like Ohio, where school attendance between ages six and eighteen did not become mandatory until 1921.

Attendees from the Roman Catholic Church defended orphanages. Michael Doyle, a leader of the Philadelphia chapters of the St. Vincent de Paul

John Johnson's sisters gathered at his Springfield home to offer support for the newly widowed Alice (right holding baby Elizabeth). They had strong opinions on how Polly (fourth from right) could help with Alice's babysitting needs for Elizabeth and Bud (front, center).





Alice Johnson found a job at the Arcade, the city's premier hotel located on Fountain Square directly opposite city hall.
Ohio Historical Society

charity, pointed out that many children were institutionalized both “to provide a home” and to take advantage of the education that could not be found elsewhere. Addressing the conference as supervisor of Catholic Charities in the Archdiocese of New York, The Reverend D. J. McMahon insisted, “Too much weight may be given to the idea of keeping up family ties. Many parents of their own volition send their children to boarding schools . . . because they feel that the influence of companions, social class, and good teachers will be more beneficial for the child than even their own family circle.”

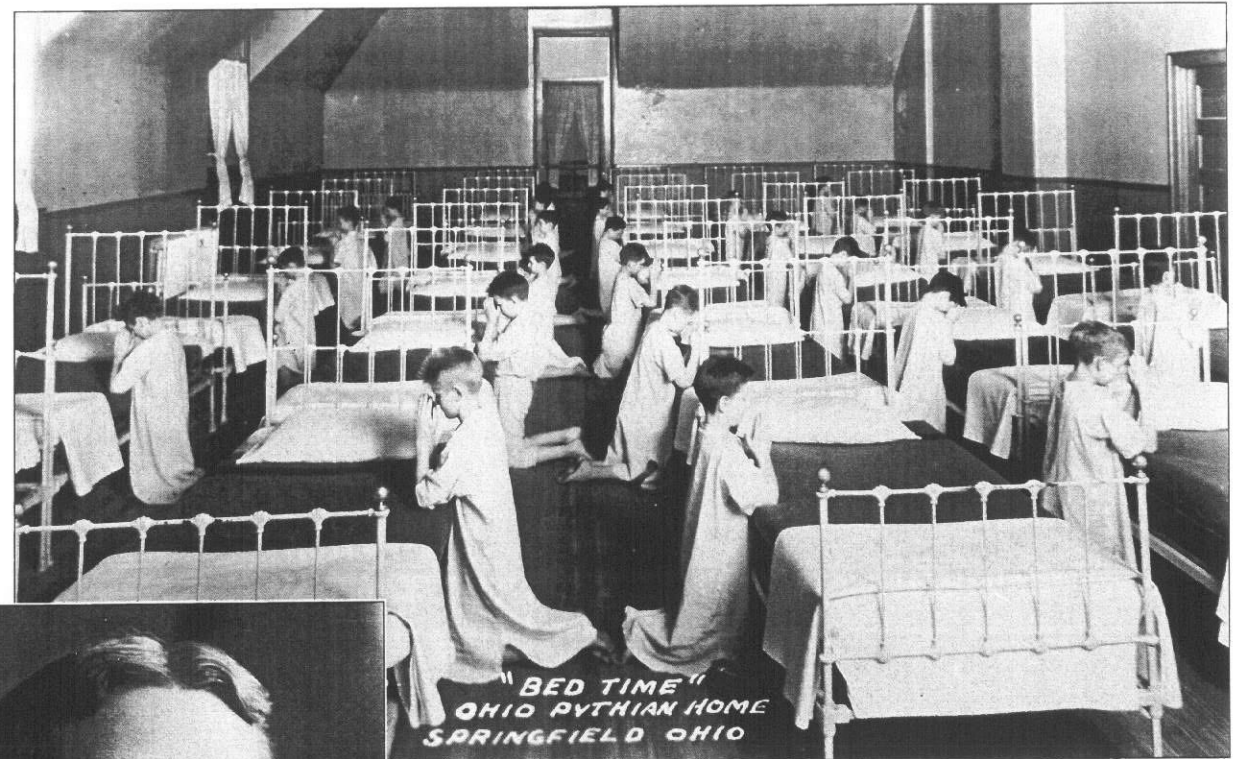
Aware that the debate, as well as the conference participants themselves, focused on males, Martha Falconer, superintendent of the girls’ division of Philadelphia’s House of Refuge, interjected, “Let us say a *girl*, just for a change. We place a girl 13 or 14 years of age with good people in the country — earnest, Christian people — and then we feel that we have done our whole duty by that child.” But, she went on, without visiting the child, orphanage administrators did not know if she regularly attended school. Such families claimed to treat a girl like their own. “That sounds on the surface very beautiful,” she insisted. “What does it really mean? It usually means they want cheap labor.” This was Alice Johnson’s very fear for her daughter.

The 1909 conference, not surprisingly, resolved in favor of family home care despite dissent from Ohio officials and other attendees. With more than a

hundred public and private orphanages, Ohio ranked third behind New York and Pennsylvania. In 1909, the state placed approximately sixteen hundred children in foster care and housed and educated an additional twelve thousand in orphanages.

The Clark County Children’s Home at the northern edge of Springfield opened in March 1878 and boasted a forty-acre site, complete with a red-brick orphanage, hen house, and garden where the children picked their own breakfast berries. In addition, a pigpen provided pork to feed the orphans and have enough left over to pay the butcher for his services. Early residents attended Springfield’s Northern Heights School. But as the home’s trustees lowered the per capita cost by admitting more and more children, the home withdrew its students from the public schools and, shortly after 1900, built a school and a house for a teacher on the grounds. Miss Grace Stickford was hired for \$35 a month. Her low salary was both an attempt to balance the home’s budget and a societal assumption that an unmarried woman only worked while awaiting marriage. Stickford continued at the school for six years without a raise in either pay or benefits, foregoing even a fresh coat of paint on her house.

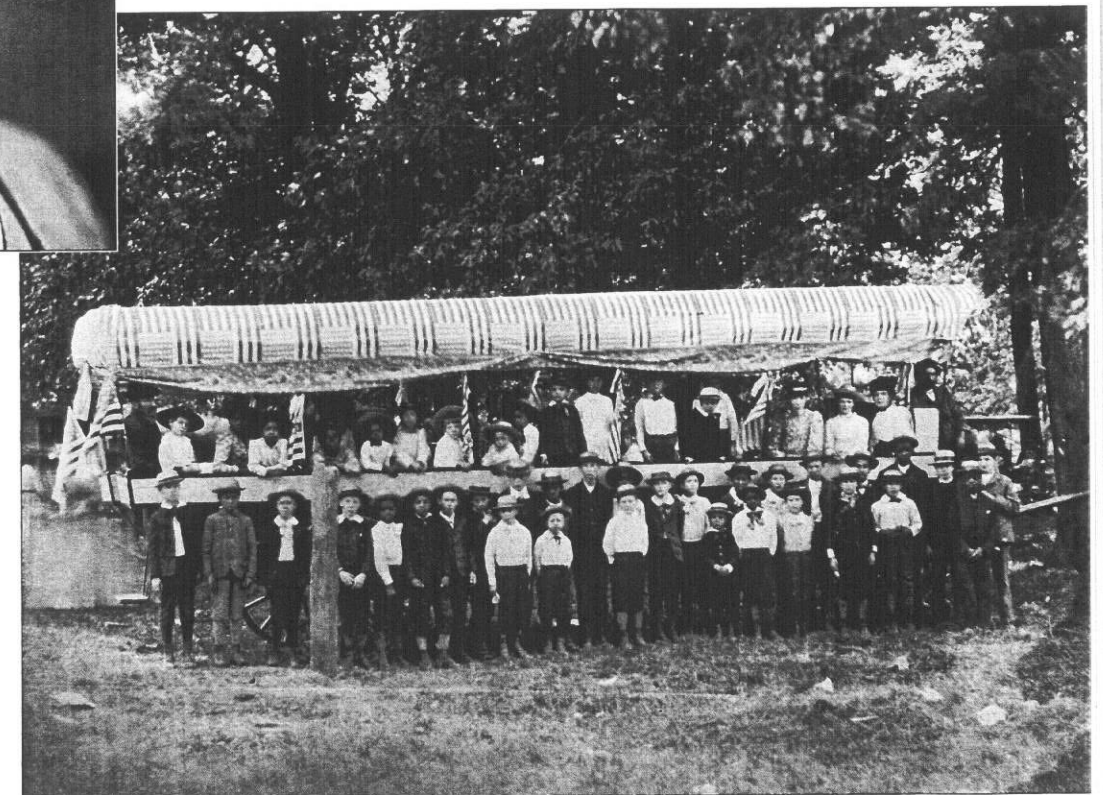
Johnson took her children to the Clark County Children’s Home, the only county home at the time that accepted colored children, on May 16, 1913, two weeks before the school year ended. Once there, she was presented with the “Application and Surrender of Children.” It stated that putting her three children in the home meant turning over her parental rights to the state, and that they could be placed in other



By the early twentieth century, multiple church and Masonic order orphanages had been established in Springfield. Nearly all of them, like the Knights of Pythias Home shown here, excluded African-American children.
Clark County Historical Society



New York sociologist Homer C. Folks was a strong critic of orphanages and headed the 1909 White House Conference on Dependent Children. If Alice Johnson was going to see to the proper education of her children, she felt it important to ignore the advice of such experts. *Library of Congress*



The Clark County Children’s Home was built on a generous property at the north edge of Springfield and, as this view of an outing in the 1890s demonstrates, welcomed African Americans. *Clark County Historical Society*

family homes. We don't know what Alice said to Belinda Barnum, a health inspector who was, for the moment, officiating at the home. The desperate mother had brought her children to the orphanage only because she was a working widow who wanted more than anything for them to attend school. Could she risk losing their love to another family better situated? Or would she sacrifice her oldest girl to keep the family intact? Would her children be separated? Only after the front of the surrender document carried the words "Not to Be Put Out" did Alice sign in a thin, tortured scratch. Legalities aside, it was tough leaving the children, and Alice returned two weeks later for Elizabeth, taking her baby home to Irish Hill. But working and keeping the baby proved impossible, and Alice was forced to surrender Elizabeth a second time.

Polly, safely ensconced in the county home in September 1913, started sixth grade with Grace Stickford. When Miss Stickford left her job to marry the butcher the next year, Harriet Graham assumed the post at the same pay but with the perk of a newly painted house. Polly took eleven courses that year, arithmetic, history, geography, spelling, reading, drawing, physiology, botany, English, and American and German government, and — for good reason — remembered it as "hard." Her mother's frequent visits and Edgar S. Thomas, the new superintendent at the home, kept Polly in class. The Thomas family valued education and Mrs. Emma Thomas became the new matron, while their daughter, Susan, taught in the nearby public schools.

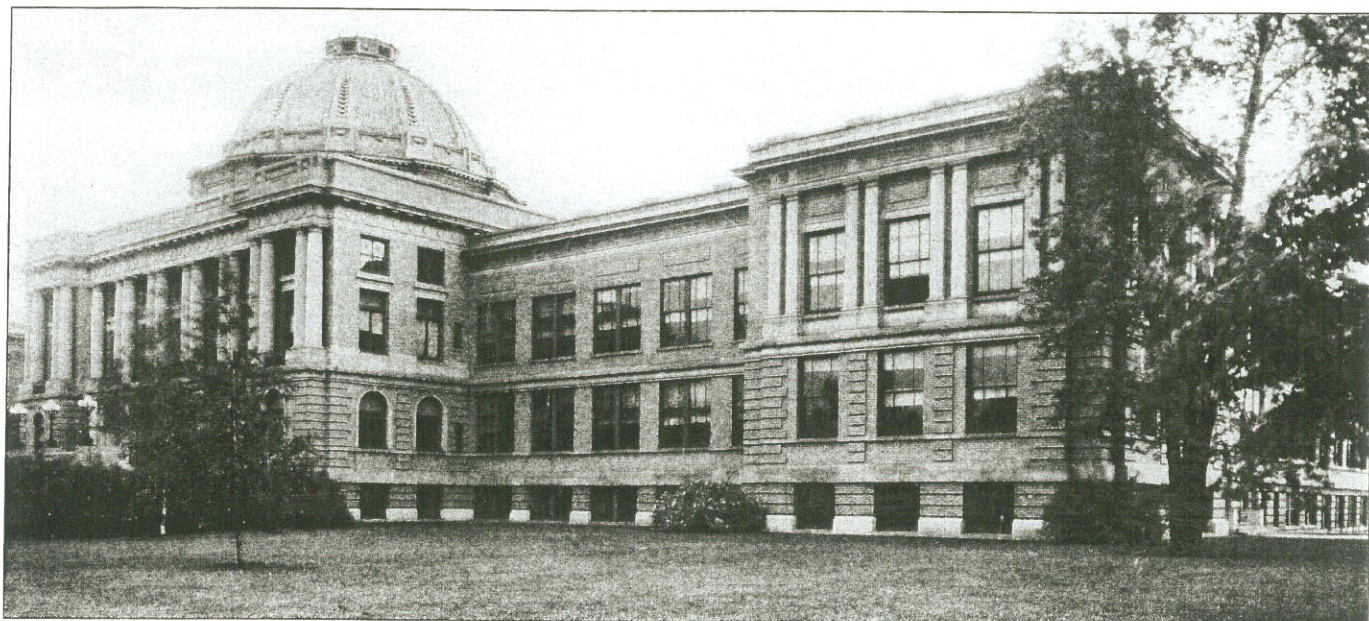
In September 1915, Polly entered eighth grade at a school kept by Louise Davis in her country home. The curriculum was an ambitious academic program and Polly, with two other children's home

residents, spent mornings reciting at the Davis home, after which they sat for exams. In the afternoons, she studied, then spent her evenings helping the younger children at the county home. Tutorial duties were as compulsory as kitchen jobs, though attending high school was not. Only the privileged few attended high school.

The new Springfield high school, an Italian Renaissance-style replica of the Library of Congress — but without the fountains or the dome covered in golden gilt — had opened in 1910. At that time, admission to high school in Ohio was regulated through the Boxwell-Patterson proficiency examination (see TIMELINE, September 1993), although students who excelled in eighth grade could waive the test. In June 1916, two graduating members of Louise Davis's tiny eighth-grade class — Pauline Lucy Johnson and Charles Duncan — earned exam exemptions and an automatic place in the new high school.

A governess escorted the young Johnson to high school on the first day of the 1916 fall semester. The first Clark County Children's Home resident to attend high school, she had a tough year. Ignored by two previous Clifton School classmates, the lonely girl was also sick throughout the winter. Despite her trials, she passed all her freshman courses. A larger threat, however, loomed at the end of the school year. Everyone at the county home who was fifteen, like Polly, had been put out with foster families. Polly's turn was coming when a prosperous couple, Robert

A commercial club publication from 1916 characterized the Springfield High School on South Limestone Street as "the last word in school architecture." It also asserted that the school's commercial department was turning out girls "fully equipped for the hard struggle in the business world." *Ohio Historical Society*



David R. Barker, Photographer

Robert and Edith Rodgers arranged for Polly Johnson to join them in their palatial home — now the Littleton & Rue Funeral Home & Crematory — on North Limestone. Involved in multiple Springfield corporations, ranging from furnaces to flowers to farm implements, the Rodgers family was among the city's elite and influential. *Ohio Historical Society*



Ohio Historical Society, David R. Barker, Photographer

The Rodgers property included a miniature playhouse where Polly befriended the Rodgers's own daughter, Alice. After marrying a banker named J. H. Winters, Alice had a son, Jonathan, who became a famed comedian.

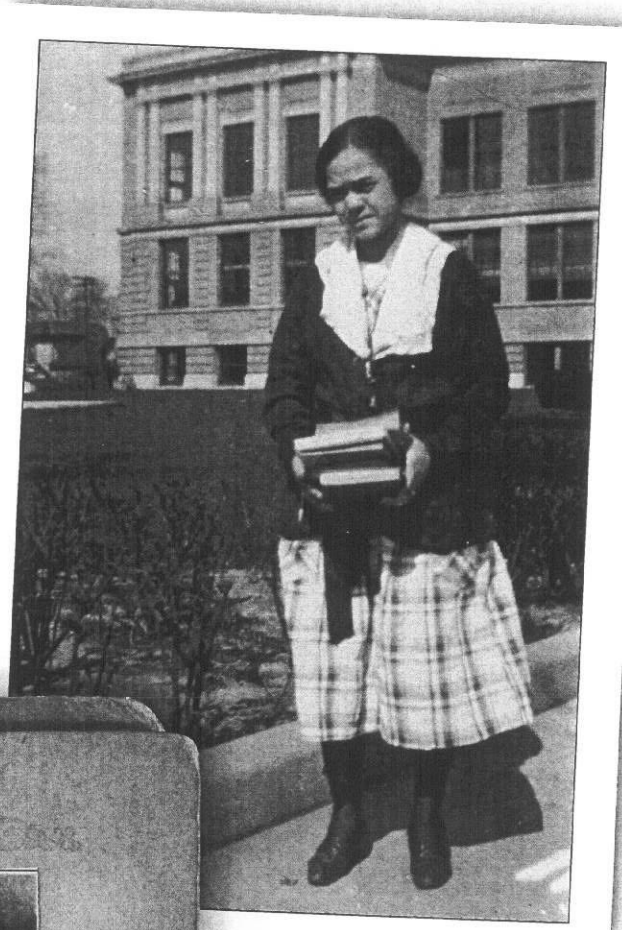
S. and Edith W. Rodgers, visited the home in the spring of 1917.

Rodgers, a graduate of Princeton University, came from Springfield's "old money." His grandfather had been a surgeon who established the county infirmary, the county medical society, and a nearby cemetery. Robert Rodgers was an executive officer in several agricultural implement companies, a wholesale florist, a furnace company, and a dairy, and was a director with two local banks. At the beginning of the twentieth century a sense of noblesse oblige — the rich doing for others — was afoot in Ohio, and it was not uncommon for prominent families to foster an orphanage child. The Rodgers family took a liking to young Polly, and she was "put out" to them "for wages" in June 1917. Understanding that Polly would be sent to high school, Alice Johnson concurred with the arrangement. When school started in the fall of 1917, Polly's main "house duty" was her sophomore year homework.

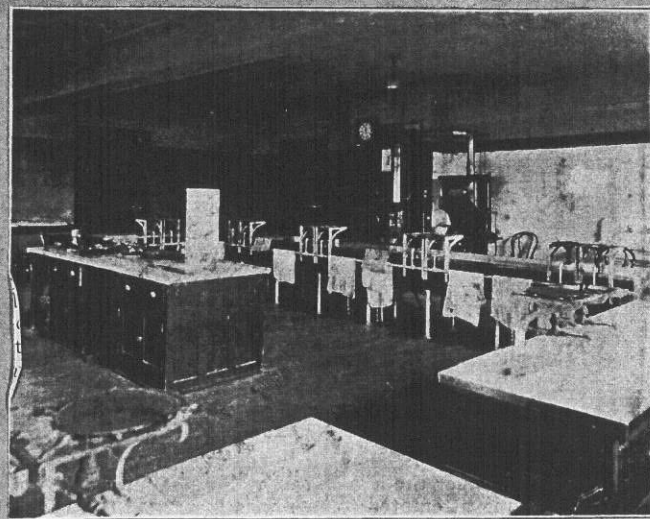
Now living with the Rodgers family, Polly's high school experience continued like any other girl's — any other colored girl's, that is. She learned to endure and overlook slights, being elected secretary for the chapter of the Friendship Club where the colored families lived instead of the all-white chapter operating in her Limestone Street neighborhood where she now lived. In February 1920, Polly turned eighteen and was on track for a June 1920 graduation from the business curriculum. For her birthday gift, the Rodgers presented Polly with her class ring. And when the senior class was announced in the

newspaper in the spring, they gave Polly a perfect-bound, leather-covered, gold-embossed scrapbook. The Rodgers family valued education and loved the girl who persisted in her goal to graduate from high school.

While such support fulfilled a mother's dreams for her daughter, Alice Johnson now feared losing her child's love to a foster mother acting on her behalf. Johnson fought hard for her daughter, first giving Polly a necklace. When the Rodgers gift-wrapped a blue silk dress for commencement two months before the event, Alice countered three days

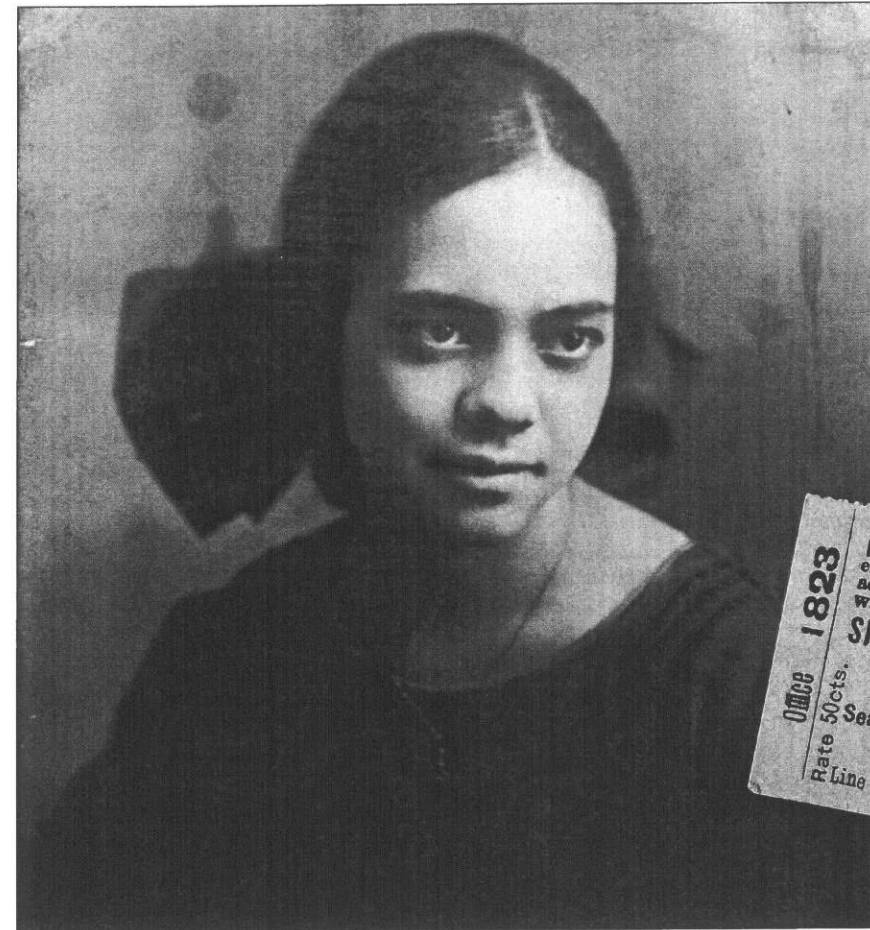


Polly carefully documented her years in high school, keeping a scrapbook with images of her classrooms pasted on its pages.



DOMESTIC SCIENCE LABORATORY

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Polly Johnson's senior year of high school enmeshed her in a battle of affections between her real and adopted mothers.

Ultimately, Polly decided to break with her own mother and move from Springfield to Detroit so her younger sister could also leave the Clark County Children's Home and return to the care of her extended family.




later with a green dress for class night. And when Edith Rodgers gave Polly a green, hand-tooled pocketbook, Alice — refusing to surrender — gave her child a fan and beads and a pair of black silk hose. The unsuspecting Polly appreciated every present, including the final volley from Rodgers: white silk hose. Each gift was carefully recorded in her scrapbook.

The courage Johnson showed by upholding education as of premier importance certainly taught her daughter, Polly, determination and perseverance. But after Polly's graduation, Alice Johnson realized just how much that education had helped her daughter develop her own set of values. Even though the Rodgers invited Polly to continue in their home, her top priority was now her sister, Elizabeth.

In 1920, the Johnson baby, ten-year-old Elizabeth, was the sole sibling remaining at the county home. Bud had been put out — with his mother's approval — to live on a farm after being truant from school. Polly wasn't happy with her sister's treatment and wanted to help make a home for her on Irish Hill. Concerned about the orphanage's persistent overcrowding, which forced many children to sleep in the hallways, Polly begged her mother to bring Elizabeth home. Alice refused, and as an unmar-

ried woman, Polly did not have the legal standing to sign her sister out. Proving as resourceful as her Irish mother before her, Polly sought out the aid of other family members. Without telling her mother, Polly wrote to her aunt and uncle in Detroit asking that they sign the release papers for Elizabeth. Her ploy worked, and on a windy July day in 1920, the two sisters boarded a train bound for Michigan. Elizabeth would complete her education in the Detroit city schools.

It is now more than a century since the Irish-American Alice Donlan separated from her family to follow her heart and marry John Johnson. Facing the consequences of that decision and the subsequent loss of her husband, she used all her inner resources and a single-minded determination to ensure that her female biracial children received an education beyond what family and society deemed necessary. As a result, her eldest daughter, Polly, had the confidence to defy her and put "family" back into the equation. Subsequent generations, Polly's and Elizabeth's children and grandchildren, would grow up in Detroit with the sure foundation that family and school go together. The offspring of ex-slaves and Irish immigrants combined to reach out, through education, for the American dream. 

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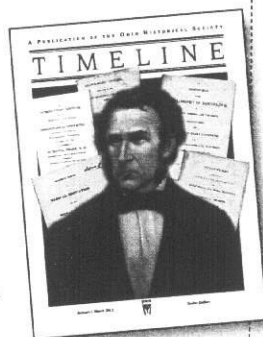
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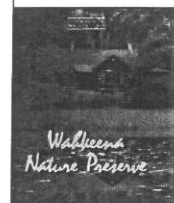
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As a building contractor, John Johnson was able to provide a comfortable home for his African-American and Irish family in Springfield, Ohio. There Polly (left) joined her brother Bud when a photographer came by with a pony and some cowboy duds.

Author's Collection

See: "Room, Board, and Books"