Aristocrats of Color

The Black Elite, 1880–1920

Willard B. Gatewood

Aristocrats of Color

Aristocrats of Color

The Black Elite, 1880–1920

Willard B. Gatewood

University of Arkansas Press
Fayetteville
2000

Original edition first published 1991 by Indiana University Press

Manufactured in the United States of America

21 20 19 18 17 5 4

Designer: John Coghlan

♾ The paper used in this publication meets the minimum requirements of the American National Standard for Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials Z39.48–1984.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Gatewood, Willard B.
Aristocrats of color : the Black elite, 1880–1920 / Willard B. Gatewood.
p. cm.
Originally published: Bloomington : Indiana University Press, c1990.
Includes bibliographical references (p.) and index.
ISBN 1-55728-593-4 (alk. paper)
1. Afro-Americans—Social life and customs. 2. Afro-Americans—History—19th century. 3. Afro-Americans—History—20th century. 4. Upper class—United States—History—19th century. 5. Upper class—United States—History—20th century. 6. Bruce, Josephine. 7. Bruce, Blanche Kelso, 1841–1898. I. Title.

E185.86 .G38 2000
973'.0496073—dc21

00-020351

For Lu, Bill, and Ellis

Contents

Illustrations follow pages 96 and 152.

Preface

To undertake a discussion of class in America is to venture into an area fraught with perils. It may well be, as one authority has suggested, that "class is the toughest, slipperiest opponent in the lexicon," all the more so when applied to Afro-Americans. But failure to consider class division in the black community is likely to contribute to what Bayard Rustin once termed the "sentimental notion of black solidarity" and to the perpetuation of the myth that black society is a homogeneous mass without significant and illuminating distinctions in background, prestige, attitudes, behavior, power, and culture.

Throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries Afro-Americans challenged what they perceived as the Jim Crow way of viewing black society, which held that among blacks there existed no class distinctions. In the generation following Reconstruction blacks engaged in lively and frequent discussions regarding the significance and implications of the evolving social gradations in the black community. They spoke in terms of a larger lower class, a small but expanding middle class, and a minuscule upper class. The attention devoted to the last group indicated that its significance was vastly disproportionate to its numbers.

Students of the black class structure generally agree that the upper class was exceedingly small, yet they often divide it into two strata: the "old families" as the top tier, newcomers as the second. This study focuses on the "old families," who viewed themselves as the products of a process of natural selection and superior to other blacks in culture, sophistication, and achievement. A sufficiently large segment of the black community shared this self-image to legitimize the notion of an elite or what was described at the time as an aristocracy. The black elite was identified, by itself and by others, in various ways: the "colored aristocracy," "black 400," "upper tens," and "best society." Such terms will be used in this work to evoke and describe the self-perceptions of the elite, but without the imputation that the elite was necessarily superior to other blacks in their values and way of life, or that the "old families" were in fact always as ancient as they suggested.

Recent studies in Afro-American history lend credence to contemporary assessments by blacks regarding the contours of the class structure among Afro-Americans in the period between 1880 and 1920. Such works, which have been used extensively in this study, reveal much about the diversity, tensions, and dynamics of black society in the era and leave little doubt, as one student put it, that "there has always been a Negro elite of some kind." The purpose of this work is to identify the black elite that was predominant in the forty years following the end of

Reconstruction, to explore its self-image, behavior, values, strategies, and relationship to the larger society, both white and black, and to indicate changes that occurred in its composition.

The black elite considered in this volume constituted, on its own terms, an "aristocracy," that is, an aristocracy relative to other blacks, and was so described by black contemporaries, but it scarcely conforms to customary usage of the term. In view of the deteriorating status of blacks in general in the era from 1880 to 1920, one does not usually think in terms of black aristocrats or aristocrats of color. What is especially noteworthy about this "aristocracy" was its cross-cutting definition of itself in regard to the black and white worlds, and the tenuous place that it occupied between them. These aristocrats laid claim to elite status within a subgroup, the black Americans, by defining themselves in terms of prestige, tradition, culture, and other considerations reflective of values drawn from the white majority of American society. The aristocrats of color also dramatized the fact that there have been numerous variations of *the* black experience. Because they were upper-class *black* Americans, not simply upper-class Americans, their "we" feeling was defined by both class and race. Their behavior mingled these variables in ways that often perplexed whites and sometimes enraged other blacks.

Each of the four parts of this volume is introduced by an exploration of some aspect or aspects of the life of the family of Blanche K. Bruce, the black United States senator from Mississippi. In many respects members of the Bruce family constituted the ideal or quintessential aristocrats of color. Others rarely achieved such eminence. The Bruces and a few other families obviously bore a closer resemblance to upper-class whites in terms of prestige, education, wealth, political importance, and influential connections than did most other aristocrats of color who nonetheless enjoyed high status in relation to the black population.

Numerous individuals provided valuable assistance in the preparation of this volume. I owe a large debt of gratitude to librarians and archivists at Atlanta University, University of Georgia, Duke University, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, the Library of Congress, and the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library. Among the staff members of Mullins Library at the University of Arkansas who always responded to my numerous inquiries and requests, I am especially indebted to Regina French, Debra Cochran, and Stephen Dew. Gary M. Shepard of the University of Arkansas Media Services displayed great skill and patience in reproducing most of the photographs in this volume. During extensive research at Howard University in Washington many individuals, but especially Esme E. Bhan of the Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, provided extraordinary assistance and called my attention to materials that

I undoubtedly would otherwise have overlooked. No less valuable was the help given by Clifton H. Johnson and the staff of the Amistad Research Center, Tulane University, New Orleans, who were as gracious as they were generous with their time. Roberta Church graciously allowed me to use the papers of the Robert R. Church family, located at Memphis State University. Michele Fagan, Curator of the Mississippi Valley Collection at Memphis State, not only made the Church papers available but called my attention to other relevant materials in the collection. Sara D. Jackson of the National Archives was extraordinarily helpful in directing me to individuals knowledgeable about the black community in the District of Columbia. Jane Knowles of the Radcliffe College Archives and Kathleen A. Markees of the Harvard University Archives furnished valuable data on various members of the Bruce family. Gail Lumet Buckley of New York City shared with me useful information gathered during research on her *The Hornes: An American Family.* David Edwin Harrell, Jr., Robert Finlay, Randall B. Woods, Mary Gussman, and Suzanne Maberry read the entire manuscript and gave me the benefit of their wise counsel and perceptive criticisms. While I have drawn upon and profited by the works of numerous scholars, I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge the influence of August Meier and his pioneer investigations of the class structure in black America. Theresa Garrity and Jeanie Wyant, who typed and retyped the manuscript, displayed extraordinary patience and an uncanny ability to decipher my copy. As always, my wife, Lu Brown Gatewood, was a constant source of support and encouragement throughout the research and writing of this project; she was in large measure responsible for its completion.

The illustrations in this book have been reproduced from the following books, magazines, newspapers, and library collections:

Alexander's Magazine: Nos. 4, 5, 22, 48.
Amistad Research Center, Tulane University: Nos. 25, 30.
Colored American Magazine: Nos. 8, 15, 16, 20, 21, 24, 26, 27, 28, 31–37, 40, 43, 44, 45, 46, 49, 51, 57, 63.
D. W. Culp, *Twentieth Century Negro Literature:* Nos. 9, 10, 13, 17, 18, 19, 24, 41, 58–62.
Caroline Bond Day, *A Study of Negro-White Families in the United States,* courtesy Peabody Museum, Harvard University: No. 23.
Indianapolis *Freeman:* Nos. 47, 53.
Daniel Smith Lamb, *Howard University Medical Department:* Nos. 11, 38.
John Mercer Langston, *From the Virginia Plantation to the National Capitol:* Nos. 6, 50.
Library of Congress: No. 12.
Mississippi Valley Collection, Memphis State University: No. 7.
Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University: Nos. 1–3 (from the Bruce Collection) and No. 39.
Voice of the Negro: Nos. 14, 29, 42, 54, 56, 64.
Washington Bee: No. 55.

Part I

Origins

Prologue

Two weddings that took place in Cleveland, Ohio in 1878, a little more than a month apart, attracted considerable attention in the nation's press. The first was the highly publicized marriage of Don Cameron, a former secretary of war who had succeeded his father as senator from Pennsylvania in 1877, to Elizabeth Bancroft Sherman, the niece of General William T. Sherman and Secretary of the Treasury John Sherman. The political and social prominence of the two families, combined with the fact that the nineteen-year-old Lizzie Sherman was two years younger than Cameron's daughter by a previous marriage, aroused extraordinary public interest in the union. According to press reports, their lavish wedding on May 9, 1878, in Saint Paul's Episcopal Church, was "one of the most elaborate and costly affairs which the people have ever witnessed." The excitement created by the Cameron-Sherman marriage had scarcely subsided when rumors began to circulate about "another senatorial wedding" in Cleveland.[1]

Close observers of the city's social life had been aware that for over a year Blanche K. Bruce, the black senator from Mississippi, was a frequent guest at Forest City House, a well-known hotel, and that he regularly called at the handsome two-story house at 228 Perry Street, the home of Dr. Joseph Willson, a highly respected black dentist. Several years earlier Bruce had been engaged to marry Miss Namée Yosburgh, whose family had long occupied a place of prominence in Cleveland's black community. In fact, their wedding date had been set when Miss Yosburgh became ill and died within a few weeks. The senator "took her death greatly to heart" and observed a period of mourning for some months. Sometime in 1876 he met Dr. Willson's daughter Josephine Beall Willson, a graduate of Cleveland High School and a teacher in the city's public schools. She was, by all accounts, a striking beauty, with "fine black eyes and an animated countenance" who possessed no visible "trace of her African ancestry." An accomplished linguist, Josephine Willson shared with her mother, Harriet, and her three younger sisters a love of literature and classical music.[2]

Although the Willsons prided themselves on being Philadelphians, Joseph Willson was actually born in Augusta, Georgia in 1817. Educated in Boston, he settled in Philadelphia and for a time was engaged in the printing trade before studying dentistry. A modest and reticent man with impeccable manners, he was well informed on books and current events. When his daughter was scarcely a year old, Willson moved his family to Cleveland. Like others in Cleveland who had

been free for a generation or so before the Civil War, the Willsons occupied a place at the top of the black social structure. They were among the select black families who belonged to the Social Circle, a club organized in 1869 "to promote social intercourse and cultural activities among the better educated people of color" in Cleveland. In terms of life style, education, income, and even color the Willsons more closely resembled whites of the upper and upper-middle class in Cleveland than they did most blacks. In fact, they often associated and identified with such whites. They were members of an elite white church, Saint Paul's Episcopal; the children attended racially mixed schools; and many of Dr. Willson's patients were white. Josephine's older brother, Leonidus, was an attorney affiliated with one of the best-known white law firms in the city. He married the sister of his law partner, was accepted into a white Masonic Lodge, and ultimately "lost his identity with blacks."[3]

Unlike his fiancée, Senator Bruce was born a slave. His was not the background of an ordinary slave, but rather that of a privileged bondsman who enjoyed an extraordinary position in the Virginia family that owned him. He was born in 1841 to a slave woman, and therefore by law he inherited the "condition of the mother." His white master, who may have been his father, took a special interest in his welfare. Bruce shared a tutor with his master's son and experienced few of the hardships associated with slavery. His life as a slave, first in Virginia, then in Mississippi and Missouri, was, as he later recalled, little different from that of the sons of whites. From Missouri he escaped into Kansas and proclaimed his freedom. In 1864 he returned to Missouri and for a time taught school in Hannibal. Following a brief course of study at Oberlin College, he settled in Mississippi in 1868. He acquired considerable property and prospered as a cotton planter in Bolivar County, where he became active in politics. He rose rapidly in Republican Party ranks during Reconstruction and was elected to the United States Senate from Mississippi in 1874.[4]

When Bruce arrived in Washington, he immediately became a favorite of the single ladies among the capital city's black aristocrats. Smitten by his good looks and polished manners, they vied with each other in attracting his attention and interest. But the new senator, while always courteous and solicitous, was not interested in romantic entanglements because he was still grief-stricken over the death of his fiancée in 1874. In order to shield himself from flirtations, he adopted the practice of appearing at social occasions in the company of his friends Congressman John R. Lynch from Mississippi and Miss Emma V. Brown, a well-known Washington schoolteacher. Compared to the socially prominent belles eager to attract Bruce's attention, Emma Brown possessed little style or beauty. She enjoyed having such a charming and handsome escort, and described Bruce as a

"great big good natured lump of fat" always impeccably attired in the finest broadcloth, diamond studs, and kid gloves; he was "gentlemanly and very jolly"—"just the kind of fellow to go around with."[5]

In Washington Bruce quickly acquired a wide circle of influential political friends and commanded the respect of even those who objected to the presence of a black man in the Senate. Most of those who came to know him were impressed by his innate dignity, elegant manners, conservative tastes, and shrewd political judgment. A black acquaintance spoke of him as "an exceptionally cultured and refined man" who had read more widely than most of his Senate colleagues.[6] Not the least among whites who respected and admired Bruce was L. Q. C. Lamar, a Democrat, who joined him as the junior senator from Mississippi. After a private conference with Bruce at the Lamar residence in Washington, he confided to a white friend that his black colleague was a truthful, sensible, and "self-poised man" of principle. "The fact is," Lamar wrote in regard to Bruce, "I believed him to be a noble negro."[7] David S. Barry, a white journalist in Washington for forty years, described Bruce as a man of "high moral, mental and physical standards" whose language was that of a highly educated person and who resembled "a Creole Beau Brummel." According to Barry, the senator was "a handsome man, well-built, with a finely shaped head covered with curly black hair"; his clothes were always of "the best texture and most fashionable cut."[8] Reflecting the perspectives of those whites friendly toward Bruce, the *Boston Herald* succinctly characterized him as "really a whitened African."[9] Though legally born a slave and largely self-educated, by the mid-1870s Bruce had become a man of considerable means with the manners and tastes of a polished Victorian gentleman. His personal attributes, affluence, and prestigious political office combined to make him a worthy suitor of Josephine Willson.

Because the senator and the Willsons disapproved of ostentation, they agreed that the wedding should "make as little display as possible." The ceremony, therefore, was to take place at the Willson residence in the presence of a few intimate friends rather than in a church with hundreds of guests. At the appointed hour on the evening of June 24, 1878, approximately sixty guests in "full dress," a majority of whom were white, arrived at the Perry Street residence. According to one observer, they encountered abundant "evidence of the good taste and enlightened ideas of the occupants," from the Brussels carpets, fine furniture, and oil paintings to the heavy velvet draperies closely drawn at all windows "to keep out the gaze of the inquisitive crowd" that lined the sidewalk in front of the house.[10]

N. S. Rulison, rector of Saint Paul's Episcopal Church, who had officiated at the Cameron-Sherman marriage, performed the ceremony. The bride's sisters—Victoria, Mary, and Emily—served as her attendants. The bride wore a gown of

white silk trimmed in satin that had been created for her by a New York designer. Following the wedding ceremony, Joseph and Harriet Willson hosted a catered supper for the guests at which a local orchestra provided music. Their gift to the Bruces was a set of sterling flatware. At 10:30 P.M. Senator and Mrs. Bruce boarded a special railroad car for New York City, where they occupied the bridal suite at the Hoffman House. On June 27, 1878 they sailed for Europe aboard the *Algeria* for a four-month honeymoon.[11] "If half is true that is told of her beauty and accomplishments," the *Washington Post* noted in regard to the senator's new bride, "her entry here as a Senator's wife is likely to create a sensation."[12]

The Bruces' European tour assumed a semi-official status because Secretary of State William Evarts instructed American diplomatic and consular personnel to extend them every courtesy. In England, Senator and Mrs. Bruce toured various historic sites, visited art galleries, and attended the theatre. Their presence attracted considerable attention from the British press. The London *Times* described Bruce as a man of great ability, as "accomplished as any man in the Senate." On the Continent the Bruces toured Belgium, Holland, Germany, Switzerland, and France, where they were honored by receptions and introduced to government officials. During two weeks in Paris, Josephine Bruce spent much of her time acquiring an extensive wardrobe, including a number of gowns that prompted much comment upon her return to Washington. While she was shopping, Senator Bruce met regularly with former President Ulysses S. Grant, who had stopped in Paris during his tour around the world.[13]

The Bruces returned to Washington in time for the reconvening of Congress late in 1878. The senator had leased a large house at 909 M Street, but because it was undergoing extensive renovation they temporarily took up residence near Howard University in the home of Virginia-born John Mercer Langston, who was in Haiti serving as United States minister. The Langston home, a fourteen-room house known as "Hillside Cottage," had for some years been the center of social life for Washington's black elite. Here Caroline Wall Langston had presided over receptions, teas, musicales, and literary gatherings as the grand lady of black society. The new mistress of Hillside Cottage, who was no less skilled in the art of entertaining, continued that tradition.[14]

1

Background and Antecedents

The idea of a black aristocracy, a black 400, or an "old upper class" was so alien to most whites that it regularly encountered ridicule and scorn. In 1873, in a satire on "Negro society," *Harper's Weekly* printed a cartoon grotesquely caricaturing an upper-class black wedding. The caption read: "Mr. Leon de Sooty, the distinguished Society Man, will to-day lead to the altar Miss Dinah Black, the beautiful heiress. . . ."[1] Since most whites in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries viewed blacks as a homogeneous mass of degraded people, they were rarely inclined to think in terms of a stratified black society. Rather, the tendency was to classify blacks as "good Negroes" and "bad Negroes" or to designate, for one reason or another, certain black individuals and families as exceptional. But even exceptional blacks were considered inferior to whites. Those who attempted to go beyond vague generalities in dealing with social gradations among blacks invariably were surprised to discover the existence of a well-defined social hierarchy. That the mass of blacks belonged at the bottom of a social pyramid was scarcely unexpected; more surprising was the discovery of a small, but growing, upwardly mobile, middle class which in the phrase of the day had struggled "out of the depths" of bondage. This group appeared to whites to be an example of the rewards of hard work, thrift, and "righteous conduct" that awaited even those among a proscribed race. It was the small group of blacks at the top of the pyramid, the "colored aristocracy," that aroused the greatest curiosity and posed the greatest difficulties for white investigators. What they concluded as a result of first-hand observation, rather than by any close objective analysis, was that there existed a black elite, small in number and light in complexion, whose culture and style of living more closely resembled that of the "better class of whites" than that of the masses of their darker brethren. Even though the distance between the colored aristocracy and the white upper class was as great or greater than the gulf that separated the former from most blacks, the discovery of such an elite group prompted some white observers in the late nineteenth century to question the validity of the common notion that all blacks were "upon an equal plane."

One such individual was a correspondent for the Hartford *Courant* who in 1883

wrote an article entitled "Gradations in the Social Scale Among Colored People," focusing almost exclusively on what was termed "the upper reaches" of black society. Even in slavery, he discovered, "there were distinctions among the Negroes," especially between field hands and house servants. The "culture of the mind and manners" among the latter, not to mention that possessed by blacks who had enjoyed the status of free people of color prior to Emancipation, placed them socially far above the "dusky multitude" and cast them in a leadership role in the post–Civil War era. Impressed by the polish, refinement, and family pride evident among this small elite, the *Courant* correspondent noted that the younger members of the black upper class possessed a "degree of culture unknown to the average white youth." Even more surprising to him was the discovery that the black aristocrats resided in comfortable, tasteful homes and often employed one or more servants. "A few days ago when sitting in the handsomely furnished parlor of an accomplished colored lady who had had many advantages of seeing the world denied her 'plain' compatriots," he noted, "my hostess, instead of telling me of her travels and distinguished acquaintances as I hoped she would do, turned the conversation upon the difficulty of obtaining competent domestics." The existence of a cultured, educated black elite, in the view of the writer, was not without serious implications. In fact, he believed that a major problem confronting Americans was how to make accessible to such blacks "avocations hitherto reserved for the favored race."[2]

In 1887, a white resident of Baltimore, amazed to discover the existence of social gradations among blacks, wrote: "Colored society has rules as strict as the laws of the Medes and Persians. It is full of circles and each succeeding circle holds itself proudly above the one just below it. A colored aristocrat is one of the most perfect pictures of conscious exclusiveness that the world has ever known."[3] One such aristocrat who remained prominent in the social and political life of the national black community for four decades after Reconstruction was James Lewis of New Orleans. A native of Mississippi who grew up in Louisiana, Lewis was the son of a white planter and his mulatto slave. During the Civil War he raised the first regiment of black troops to serve in the United States Army. From the end of the war until his death, he was prominent in the Republican Party and held a succession of state and federal offices. In 1864 he married Josephine Joubert, a member of a slaveholding free family of color. For many years the Lewises lived in a large house on Canal Street across from Straight University.[4] When he died in 1914, the *New York Times* observed: "Lewis was an aristocrat of his race and was not disposed to associate on terms of equality with the mass of his people. He held himself, in a measure, aloof from them, even while working zealously for their betterment."[5]

Twenty years earlier, in 1894, Henry McFarland of the *Philadelphia Record* had reached similar conclusions in regard to black leaders such as Frederick

Douglass, Congressmen John R. Lynch and John Mercer Langston, and Senator Blanche K. Bruce. "They have very little to do with the mass of colored citizens . . . ," McFarland declared, "except in a business way or by making speeches or addresses to them. With their families and friends these leaders of their race form a society as exclusive as the most fashionable white society, and socially have almost as little to do with their brethren as if they were white, instead of almost so, as most of them are. The colored people do not feel identified with them, and although they are in a way proud of their prominence, they are not fond of them personally. They do not feel that they are being helped very much by these leaders."[6] In 1898, at the death of Senator Bruce, a black acquaintance noted that he "was a man of education and fine tastes" who, though "alive" to the interests of Negroes, did "not have any close fellowship with members of his race" and especially alienated some because while living in Indianapolis he chose to attend a white church.[7] At one time or another in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries similar assessments were likely to be made of those who constituted the exclusive black social circles in Detroit, St. Louis, Memphis, Philadelphia, Cleveland, and Boston, not to mention the enclaves of mulatto aristocrats in Washington and Charleston, South Carolina.

Whites who showed interest in the black social structure in general and the colored aristocracy in particular usually tried to explain both through the use of class indices such as wealth, income, education, and occupation traditionally applied to whites. Such criteria or indices, employed within the context of the black experience, were useful but scarcely proved adequate to explain the peculiar place occupied by what became known as the "old black upper class"—described by Constance McLaughlin Green as the few Negroes who from the perspective of those lower may not have appeared as angels "but were scarcely more accessible than the heavenly creatures."[8] More subjective factors related to historical experience and traditions and to a color-conscious society figured significantly in determining the contours of the black class structure. Much of what accounted for prestige and status in the black community had no counterpart in white society. For example, the emphasis that colored aristocrats placed on ancestry and family heritage, or what Charles S. Johnson later termed "a significant family history," was in large measure bound up with blacks' experience with slavery—their place in the slave system, their role in opposing it, and the extent to which their families had been free from it.[9]

Often related to their pride in ancestry and lineage was the question of color or complexion. The existence around the turn of the century of a color complex among some blacks that linked a light skin with high status reflected the extent to which "the Negro community's internal prestige hierarchy was the product of the

external pressures exerted by the color caste system" imposed by whites.[10] What made the mulattoes "so aristocratic," explained a character in one of Sutton Griggs's novels, was: "we blacks like them, the white folks like them, and they like themselves; leaving nobody to like us blacks."[11]

Modern sociologists, whose studies of the black social structure have been less impressionistic but often little more enlightening than those of earlier nonprofessional analysts, seem to have reached at least a measure of agreement about the "inapplicability of 'white' social class indices for the Negro community" and about the substantial differences in the class identification process among blacks and whites. While sociologists still disagree about many aspects of this process among blacks, especially about the relationship between color and status, at least they no longer treat the black social structure as a mere facsimile of that in the white community or attempt to analyze it exclusively in terms of objective criteria applied to white society. "It would appear," one student of social class measurement admitted in 1968, "that the Negro stratification structure is a bigger mystery than has been heretofore imagined." Even though some sociologists take exception to the suggestion that blacks are "more class conscious than whites," few disagree with the notion that race constituted such a cleavage in American society that there existed two "essentially different subjective class hierarchies" for whites and blacks.[12]

Although the hardening of anti-black sentiment in the late nineteenth century encouraged white Americans to view blacks as an undifferentiated mass of inferior beings, the notion of a stratified black society capped by a "colored aristocracy," however vaguely or loosely defined, had existed for well over a half century before the appearance of the article in the *Courant* in 1883. Through their association with blacks in the struggle against slavery, some white abolitionists came to appreciate the significance of class among blacks and to despair of the elitism evidenced by some of their black compatriots. "I mourn over the aristocracy that prevails among our colored brethren," Sarah Grimké wrote Theodore Weld in 1837. "I cherished hopes that suffering had humbled them and prepared them to perform a glorious part in the reformation of our country, but the more I mingle with them, the fainter are my hopes. They have as much caste among them as we have, and despise the poor as much, I fear, as their pale brethren. . . ."[13]

Four years after Grimké's observation, in 1841, Joseph Willson, writing under the pseudonym "A Southerner," explored in considerable detail the question of a black aristocracy in a little volume entitled *Sketches of the Higher Classes of Colored Society in Philadelphia.* Aware that such a title was likely to prompt derision, Willson nonetheless hoped to disabuse whites of their inclination "to regard

people of color as one consolidated mass, all huddled together, without any particular or general distinctions, social or otherwise" and to hold the "errors and crimes of one . . . as the criterion of the character of the whole body." Such a view, he argued, imposed upon black society a degree of unity quite contrary to reality. Focusing on the "men of fortune and gentlemen of leisure found among black Philadelphians," Willson maintained that the principal grounds of social distinction were "founded upon wealth, education, station, and occupation." While birth and family connection were important, they alone did not insure a place at the top of the black social structure. Education, in particular, received a high priority, and among no people, according to Willson, was "the pursuit of knowledge more honored" than among Philadelphia's black upper class. While those in this class fully enjoyed the good things of life, they avoided extravagance and vulgar display. They practiced abstinence and sobriety, evidenced a concern for moral conduct that made them "as chaste and temperate as any other body of the population," and adhered so strictly to "the nicer etiquettes, proprieties and observances . . . of the well-bred" as "to render their society agreeable and interesting to the most fastidious in such matters." Always careful to remain "aloof from the vicious and worthless" of their race, upper-class black Philadelphians led such "virtuous and exemplary" lives that they provided the black masses with a model worthy of emulation.[14]

Wishing to present a balanced view of the upper class, Willson was careful to note what he interpreted as its basic weakness. For him the most unbecoming attribute of this group resulted from its division into "numerous distinct social circles," or cliques, each made up of individuals "equally respectable and of equal merit and pretensions," which were locked in competition. Marked by displays of envy, hypocrisy, and deceit, these rivalries had on occasion lasted through several generations. The implication was that upper-class blacks expended so much energy on social feuding that they had little left to devote to more worthwhile causes, such as uplift activities in behalf of the "submerged" masses.[15]

In many respects the black upper class that evolved in communities, large and small, throughout the North resembled that in Philadelphia described by Willson. Differences in environments, settlement patterns, and other factors accounted for variations in the size and character of this class. In New York City, the Dutch influence was evident in the names and traditions of some prominent aristocrats of color as late as the opening of the twentieth century. Fannie Barrier Williams, a native of Brockport, New York, who became a conspicuous figure in Chicago's black society, described herself as a "mulatto in complexion" whose parents and grandparents were free people. In Brockport her only association was with whites. "We suffered from no discrimination on account of color or 'previous condition,'"

she later recalled, "and lived in blissful ignorance of the fact that we were practicing the unpardonable sin of 'social equality.'" Her sister, Ella Barrier, was for many years a teacher in Washington's public schools, and her brother George Barrier settled in Detroit and married into the prestigious Pelham family there.[16] In Boston the black Brahmins displayed, in their values and life styles, what was termed the influences of "New England ideals of home and society." In a reference to the exclusive social set of black Boston, James Weldon Johnson spoke of those "staid, more or less dark New Englanders" who were sometimes awed and puzzled by the expansiveness and penchant for opulent display exhibited by black southerners in their midst.[17] Regardless of the differences that existed among the black upper class in various northern communities, its members displayed pride in a free ancestry and the role that their forebears had played in the struggle against slavery, lived "virtuous and exemplary" lives, and placed a premium on education.

Because of Cincinnati's proximity to slave states, emigrés from the South made up a sizable element in the city's black community. In the relatively free atmosphere of Cincinnati, a host of caterers, barbers, and other entrepreneurs achieved a degree of prosperity that allowed them "ample opportunity for imitation of the aristocratic white people with whom they came in contact." By the 1850s there had emerged an upper class known as "the big families," who enjoyed and dispensed "the amenities of high social life" and spearheaded campaigns that secured educational opportunities for black children. According to one authority, those of the black upper class, including the Harlans, Fossetts, and Schooleys, pursued a life style resembling that of "the aristocratic white people with whom they came in contact." Despite economic reverses suffered by some of the "big families" and the emergence of other blacks claiming elite status, the "small group" descended from the old upper class was "still true to ancient conditions" and manifested pride in being "to the manor born."[18]

The black social structure that emerged in post–Civil War America had its roots not only in the experience of the higher classes of free blacks in the North, described by Willson and others, but also in the experience of those blacks, both slave and free, in the antebellum South. That group known as the "old upper class" or "old families," as distinct from those that later made up an economic elite, was drawn largely from the ranks of free blacks (some of whom owned slaves), house slaves and other privileged bondsmen, and certain immigrants from the West Indies. Class distinctions developed among antebellum free blacks in the South, ranging from those whose poverty, illiteracy, and color placed them closer to the slave masses than to those free people of color whose wealth, education, values, and complexion more closely resembled upper-class whites, with whom they were sometimes related by blood. A free black elite flourished especially in the southern port cities of Charleston, Mobile, Savannah, Pensacola, and New Orleans.[19]

Daniel Murray, an early twentieth century Afro-American bibliographer and a member of a prominent black family from Maryland, extolled the traditions and contributions of free blacks, especially those in his native state and in North Carolina. He cited in particular the Chavises, Evanses, Greens, and Chesnutts, all antebellum free families of color located in the area around Fayetteville and New Bern, North Carolina. Descendants of these families who lived in Ohio and other states outside the South in the twentieth century continued their families' traditions of achievement and occupied places of prominence in diverse fields. "It is this power of blood inheritance, fully illustrated in the career of colored men from Maryland and North Carolina," Murray declared, "that we find the fullest justification that 'blood will tell.'"[20]

The stratification of free blacks, as Ira Berlin has indicated, was infinitely complex. Substantial differences existed between the class structures of those in the North, upper South, and lower South. Each region "had its own distinctive demographic, economic, social and even somatic characteristics," which resulted in "different relations with whites and slaves, as well as distinctive systems of values and modes of social action." In the lower South, for example, free blacks tended to think of themselves as a caste apart from slaves and attached greater significance to gradations of color.[21]

The concept of the three-caste society was perhaps more fully developed in Louisiana and Gulf port cities such as New Orleans than anywhere else in antebellum America. Extramarital unions between European males and black females, in addition to liberal manumission policies under the French and Spanish, resulted in a large population of *gens de couleur libre.* It was not unusual for the offspring of such unions to be recognized officially as the children of white fathers, who on occasion provided them with educational advantages and bequeathed to them substantial wealth. In New Orleans the so-called Creoles of color, who were usually fair complexioned and often identified with French culture, thought of themselves as a caste apart from other blacks. They assumed positions of leadership during Reconstruction, and despite pleas from some of their spokesmen for the Creoles of color to abandon their tradition of separatism and make common cause with the masses of freed slaves, old distinctions proved to be extraordinarily difficult to eradicate. Few colored Creoles were willing to accept the notion that their future was "indissolubly bound up with that of the negro." Some attempted to acquire separate and distinct legal rights for themselves, prompting other blacks to fear that the Creoles would "institutionalize themselves into a kind of oligarchy."[22]

The light-skinned black elite whose forebears had been free for one or more generations not only responded differently to Emancipation than did slaves but were also quick to draw distinctions between themselves as free men and the former slaves as freedmen. As one slave recalled, the "freeborns" used "contra-

band" as a pejorative term to designate newly freed slaves. In 1868 a young, fair-complexioned woman of free ancestry who was a schoolteacher in Frederick, Maryland exhibited a condescending view toward black freedmen and poor whites that was probably typical of her class. Frederick, she wrote, was populated largely by "poor, mean, sneaking looking whites" and by blacks who were "ignorant and unfit for the society of any who have been blessed with any advantages of cultivation and refinement." As one so blessed, she avoided all contact with both groups and confined her social relationships to a small circle of black friends of comparable refinement that she met at the local Episcopal church.[23]

An institution frequently cited as a symbol of the exclusiveness of the free-born mulatto elite was the Brown Fellowship Society of Charleston. Organized in 1790 and limited to fifty free men of color of good character, the Society continued well into the twentieth century. The founders of the Society were members of the white St. Philip's Episcopal Church, "where they worshipped, were baptized and married but could not be interred in its burial ground." Therefore one of the organization's most important functions was the maintenance of a cemetery. The membership included men of substantial wealth who owned slaves. In 1859 Richard and Joseph Dereef, whose family was long a part of the slave-owning free black elite of Charleston, together owned real estate valued at more than $40,000 and a total of eighteen slaves.[24]

Also representative of the society's membership was the Holloway family. In 1904, on the 117th anniversary of the founding of the Society, J. H. Holloway, whose father, grandfather, and great-grandfather had all been free men, delivered a moving address in which he discussed its ideals and traditions, noting in particular its commitment to charity, benevolence, and "social purity." Because "our fathers" allied themselves with upper-class whites, Holloway explained, "they had their influence and protection," and "our fathers" had "to be in accord with them and stand for what they stood for." Even if the members of the Brown Fellowship Society had publicly supported the system of slavery, they had "sympathized with the oppressed" for they themselves, though free, had to endure oppression. What Holloway did not emphasize was that members of his society, like the white aristocrats with whom they identified, also exploited the labor of slaves and discriminated against all Negroes of darker complexion, free as well as slave. Through all the tumultuous changes of war and Reconstruction, Holloway declared with obvious pride, he and others in the Fellowship "still kept the compact close" and revered "the heritage of the fathers." A saddle and harness maker by trade, Holloway clearly viewed himself, as did others, as "an aristocrat," unobtrusive, of gentle nature, and "very virtuous." He manifested great pride in the accomplishments of his family both before and after the Civil War.[25]

The tradition of civic responsibility demonstrated by Holloway's antebellum ancestors continued after the war with his father, who served as city alderman in Charleston, and a brother who was a presidential elector in 1896. Holloway himself was active in Republican politics and received an appointment as postmaster of Marion, South Carolina. Upon retirement from that position, in 1902, he wrote a friend that he had returned to Charleston to reside in the ancestral home built by his grandfather almost a century earlier on land purchased by his great-grandfather in the eighteenth century. Throughout his life he was "true to his convictions" and steadfast in his loyalty to the ideals and "close compact" of the Brown Fellowship Society. It may well be, as a writer suggested in 1925, that Holloway resembled "a priest of a dying cult," but the legacies of that cult continued to exert influence among the "old families."[26]

The "close compact" among upper-class free blacks described by Holloway was also evident among a similar group in St. Louis. In 1858 Cyprian Clamorgan, a free black man of French and Afro-American ancestry who resided in the city, published a slender volume entitled *The Colored Aristocracy of St. Louis* "to show the origins and position of a portion of those whom circumstances have placed in the path of comparative respectability and to whom fortune has been kind in the bestowal of the good gifts of life." By the term "colored aristocracy," Clamorgan meant those blacks in antebellum St. Louis who "moved in a certain circle; who, by means of wealth, education or natural ability, form a peculiar class—the *elite* of the colored race." According to Clamorgan, a "high wall" separated this elite, those of the "first class," from those whom he placed in "the second class"; and the distance between the "first class" and the black masses at the bottom was insuperable. While his account includes numerous references to the elite's emphasis on learning, manners, and style of living, its most distinctive traits were its color and wealth. Except in rare instances Clamorgan's colored aristocrats were fair-skinned mulattoes, a group "separated from the white race by a line of division so faint that it can be traced only by the keen eye of prejudice." Many were blood relatives of "the first families" in the white community. In addition to their fair complexions, the colored aristocrats possessed wealth, some being worth more than $100,000, according to Clamorgan's estimates. While a few had inherited substantial property, in some cases from white relatives, most were self-made men whose own business acumen accounted for their worldly goods. Since barbering was considered a high-status occupation by blacks and was one of the few professions open to them, "tonsorial artists" were well represented among the colored aristocracy of St. Louis. What was also obvious from Clamorgan's account was the extent to which family background—"connection"—was important in establishing one's place among the elite. Clearly too, neither wealth nor color alone or together was

ufficient to guarantee acceptance among those of "the first class." Rather, admission to the upper reaches of society required a combination of respectability, moral rectitude, social grace, education, and proper ancestry, as well as wealth and color.[27]

Among those whom Clamorgan described in some detail was Samuel Mordecai, "one of the wealthiest of our colored aristocrats." A Kentuckian by birth and of Jewish-Afro-American ancestry, he had served for many years as a steward on a riverboat and had amassed a sizable fortune through his skill with cards. By 1860 he had acquired real estate valued at $14,000. A man of elegant manners and unimpeachable integrity, Mordecai was "quite aristocratic in his feelings" and, according to Clamorgan, possessed "the ability and address" to "be received in the first circles" of any society. He sent his fifteen-year-old daughter to England to be educated and considered moving his family to Paris upon completion of her schooling because "in France a colored man is more respected than in any other part of the world." For some reason Mordecai abandoned the idea of leaving St. Louis, and he and his descendants remained among the city's most socially prominent blacks. One of these in the 1890s was Edith V. Mordecai, "the society queen" of St. Louis, who expressed pride in being a "lineal descendant of the proud blood of the 'Blue Grass' country." A teacher in the city's public schools, an accomplished pianist, and a linguist who spoke German "with the fluency of a Berliner," Miss Mordecai obviously was as gracious and "aristocratic in feeling" as her ancestor.[28]

That an aristocracy of color on a smaller scale than that described by Clamorgan existed in Natchez, Mississippi is evident from the extensive diary of William Johnson, a free man of color, and a barber who acquired considerable wealth from his real estate speculation and money-lending activities. The Johnsons, along with several other free fair-complexioned black families such as the Barlands, McCarys, Fitzgeralds, and Winns, constituted an elite circle whose cultural and social pretensions approximated those of upper-class whites. Some of these families had not only inherited valuable property from white ancestors, but, like Johnson, also owned slaves. Johnson undoubtedly reflected the attitude of "the top bracket of the free Negro group" in Natchez with his disdain for any kind of ungentlemanly behavior, especially that evident in what he called "darky parties," where slaves and lower-class free blacks intermingled. He was a man of elegant tastes, great dignity, and lively intelligence who subscribed to several journals and enjoyed music and the theatre. His home was filled with expensive furniture, carpets, cut glass, and paintings. In fact, Johnson and his close friend Robert McCary, also a barber, maintained life styles that distinguished them from most blacks—and poor whites—whom they referred to as "low minded wretches." Their tastes, values, and outlook more closely resembled that of the white planters with whom they were in regular contact. Despite the proscribed world in which they existed,

the Johnsons, McCarys, and the few other families that made up Natchez's free colored upper class not only kept aloof from most whites as well as other blacks, both slave and free, but also identified with the white aristocracy.[29]

Another component of the old upper class among blacks in the post–Civil War era came not from those who had been legally free but from slaves who had occupied a privileged, or at least an unusual, position in the slave system. Among these were the house slaves who in time became the subject of numerous legends. Often ridiculed for aping the ways of their white owners, they were accused on occasion of disloyalty to the race because of their practice of using the influence that they had acquired with their masters "against the interest of the field hands." The idea of a well-developed class system among slaves, in which house servants identified with white aristocrats and drew a sharp distinction between themselves and field hands, appears to be largely mythical, but like most myths, it contains an element of truth. Class consciousness was more likely to be found on plantations large enough to possess clearly defined categories of work among slaves. On most plantations no sharp distinction existed between housework and field duties; hence many slaves moved from one to the other as circumstances required. Although the evidence suggests that "group loyalty overrode tendencies toward class division among slaves," the idea persisted, among blacks as well as whites, that the "aristocracy ethos" absorbed by pampered house slaves prompted them to identify with their white masters and to place distance between themselves and field hands.[30]

In his autobiography, published in 1895, H. C. Bruce, the brother of Senator Bruce and a slave for twenty-nine years, attempted an elaborate, if somewhat convoluted, defense of "favored slaves," whom he considered superior to the "free fellows" even though the latter "felt themselves better" than their brethren in bondage. Convinced that "blood will tell," Bruce explained that blacks, no less than whites, fell into two categories, superior and inferior, as a result of the quality of the "blood in their veins." He did not mean that white blood was superior to black, but rather that some blacks, just as some whites, possessed "inferior blood," which accounted for their backwardness and degraded status. Those blacks who made no progress and remained in menial positions generation after generation obviously did so as a result of their "inferior blood." In contrast, slaves "having superior blood in their veins" never gave up in "abject servility" but held their heads high and "proceeded to do the next best thing under the circumstances, which was to so live and act as to win the confidence of the masters, which could only be done by faithful service and upright life." These were "the reliables," faithful and trustworthy, whose loyalty slave owners rewarded by placing confidence in them. Bruce calculated that there were thousands of such "high toned and high spirited slaves who had as much

self-respect as their masters, who were industrious, reliable, and truthful, and could be depended upon by their masters in all cases." From the ranks of these "high-toned" slaves, he argued, came the natural leaders of the race after Emancipation. Their self-confidence, sense of duty, and other admirable traits exhibited in their own lives and instilled in their children meant that the freedmen of "superior blood" were "largely instrumental in making the record of which we feel so proud today."

Bruce's argument could be used to support the view of the favored slave as one who, no matter how "high-toned," was always deferential to whites and all too willing to embrace their attitudes toward the mass of slaves. Clearly that was not Bruce's intention. Rather his aim was to explain the slave hierarchy in terms of character traits in a way that justified the claims of "superior" slaves to positions of high status in the postwar black community. Despite his disparagement of free blacks and their hauteur toward slaves, the attitude of his "superior" slaves toward the "inferior" masses resembled that of the "free fellows" toward slaves in general.[31]

Among the observers of life in the antebellum South who noted that the light-skinned house slaves enjoyed a lofty status in the slave hierarchy was Samuel Mordecai. His *Richmond In By Gone Days,* published in 1860, included a chapter on "the Colored Aristocracy," which described the self-conscious elitism of such slaves and their tendency to imitate upper-class whites in their "high life below the stairs." Sy Gilliant, a fiddler for parties and balls held by the white gentry, was "the most prominent member of the black aristocracy" in early nineteenth century Richmond. Like others of the city's slave elite, Mordecai explained, Gilliant "acquired something of the polite and respectful demeanor which prevailed among the gentility." Highly selective in his choice of associates among blacks, he limited his circle of friends to a few of the "leading stewards, coachmen and head cooks of the best families."[32]

Daniel R. Hundley, whose *Social Relations in Our Southern States* also appeared in 1860, lent support to Mordecai's observations. "The slaves of a gentleman of good family . . . ," Hundley argued, "are not only more intelligent than the mass of blacks, but are both polite and well-bred, and in a measure refined and aristocratic. They scorn to associate with common darkeys." Even Frederick Douglass believed that "these house people constituted a sort of aristocracy."[33] Although the distance between such slaves and those in the fields was scarcely as great as sometimes implied, house servants in some southern cities and on certain large plantations, especially if they were light skinned, probably did approximate an elite class "that lived up to the legends." Certainly the notion of sharp distinctions between house servants and field hands persisted within the black community.[34] In 1906 a black editor, in a scathing denunciation of "big Negroes," likened them to the slaves "up in the big house" who spent so much time currying favor with whites

and trying to imitate them that they manifested little interest in the welfare of ordinary Negroes.[35]

Not all house slaves, any more than all free persons of color, entered the ranks of the postwar black upper class. Much depended on one's answer to the question: "Who are your people?" An answer likely to gain one admission into the colored aristocracy would almost certainly convey information about respectability, manners and deportment, education, ancestry and color, family achievement, and perhaps wealth. In explaining what made a family distinguished, historian Carter G. Woodson noted that a black family must early produce "a member who accomplished something unusual and others of his descendants lived up to that record by likewise achieving distinction."[36] That "something unusual" might involve purchasing or otherwise securing freedom from slavery, acquiring an education, or participating in activities associated with the crusade against slavery, as in the case of Frederick Douglass and William and Ellen Craft. Certainly, Douglass and his descendants as well as the Crafts were accorded places in the upper strata of black society.

Another route by which favored slaves gained admission to the social elite was by way of a particular form of the miscegenated family tree. It was what John Mercer Langston later called one of "the many curious things . . . connected with the old institutions of American slavery." Conspicuous among the members of the black upper class in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were the fair-compexioned offspring of white masters and mulatto slaves and the descendants of such offspring. Unlike the mulatto children that resulted from casual liaisons between white men and slave women, who were ignored or abandoned by their white fathers and who, in Roi Ottley's words, constituted the sizable population of "mulatto nobodies,"[37] these individuals were the children of more stable liaisons, sometimes of long duration. They benefited directly from their white parentage by gaining access to education, wealth, or opportunities unavailable to other slaves or even to free blacks.

A number of men prominently identified with Blanche K. Bruce's social circle, including P. B. S. Pinchback, Josiah Settle, Robert Harlan, Norris Wright Cuney, Robert Church, and Henry P. Cheatham, were also slave sons of well-to-do white planters who showed a special interest in their welfare. For example, Harlan, a slave and relative of the Harlan family of Kentucky, who allowed him "unusual freedom," traveled widely in the United States and abroad. A politician of influence and a prosperous businessman with a fondness for thoroughbred racehorses, he and his family were fixtures in the highest social circles of black Cincinnati for a half century beginning in the 1850s. Scarcely less remarkable was Norris Wright Cuney, one of eight children born to Colonel Philip N. Cuney and

his slave Adeline Stuart, whom he eventually set free. Colonel Cuney was an indulgent father who provided generously for the education of his mulatto offspring. In 1859 Norris Wright Cuney entered the Wylie Street School in Pittsburgh under the famous educator George B. Vashon. When the outbreak of the Civil War interrupted plans for him to continue his education at Oberlin, Cuney secured a job on a steamboat on the Ohio and Mississippi between Cincinnati and New Orleans. Here he first met and formed lifelong friendships with P. B. S. Pinchback and James Lewis, who, like him, became prominent politically during Reconstruction. A man of considerable wealth who served as collector of the Port of Galveston, Cuney remained the most influential black Republican in Texas until his death in 1898.[38]

Robert R. Church, the wealthy Memphis businessman, banker, and father of Mary Church Terrell, was a close friend of Harlan and Cuney as well as Pinchback and Bruce. Like Cuney, he first encountered James Lewis before the Civil War when both were working on riverboats. Church's father was Captain Charles B. Church, owner of two palatial Mississippi River steamboats, who reared his son to be a gentleman and taught him to fight anyone who showed disrespect. Robert Church's mother, Emmaline, was described as "a born aristocrat" with "exquisite manners." Though a slave, Emmaline claimed she was the daughter of Lucy, a beautiful Malay princess who had been enslaved following her family's fall from power. Robert Church never considered himself a slave because of his close relationship with his natural father, whom he adored and respected, and because of the freedom he enjoyed. He amassed great wealth in Memphis, and when a southern journal referred to him as a "former slave," James Lewis, his boyhood friend, hastened to complain: "I never heard of you being classified as a slave." Whether technically a slave or not, Church was, according to his daughter, a man of "innate culture" who, "reserved in his manner, was rarely familiar with anybody."[39]

As was often the case of slave sons who enjoyed special treatment, they displayed obvious pride in their background as well as considerable affection for their white ancestors. Aristocrats of color were almost always expert genealogists possessing a detailed knowledge of their miscegenated family trees. Knowledge of one's family history, W. E. B. Du Bois remarked of upper-class black families in New England, "was counted as highly important." In 1907, for example, B. F. Wheeler, a descendant of the Varick family of New York, published a history of the family that covered several generations. Among the family's most notable characteristics were its "lightness of complexion," strength of character, continuous record of achievement, and prominence in the civic and social life of communities from New York to Mobile. Most disappointing in Wheeler's view was the lack of religious fervor in a family whose most famous ancestor, James Varick, was the founder of the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church. In explaining the strengths of the Varick family, Wheeler placed much emphasis on its "mixture of blood," noting

that in its veins flowed "the blood of the firm and tenacious Dutchman, the blood of the alert and unconquerable Indian, and the blood of the religious Negro."[40]

Unlike Booker T. Washington, who never knew the identity of his white father, mixed-blood aristocrats of color could furnish detailed genealogical knowledge about the African kings, Indian chiefs, Malaysian princesses, and distinguished white Americans from whom they were descended. That they acknowledged and sometimes exhibited affection for their white forebears did not mean that they either ignored or were unimpressed by their African ancestors. "One of the marvels of our once divine institution of slavery," John Mercer Langston observed in 1887, "is the product of sons and daughters—slaves, too, by law—who, because of the affection and devotion of their white master-fathers, have been recognized, named, cared for and endowed as offspring, in fact and in law, by fathers who were their owners. How many colored children, sons and daughters in this country bear the name of white, slave-holding families . . . ? How many of them, too, have been educated and located in life and business upon efforts and outlays made by men, their fathers, whose names they bear! How many of such class have won fame and standing in general society and distinction in colored society . . . and have wielded commanding influence throughout the community." The "best representatives" of such miscegenated families, according to Langston, not only identified with blacks but also "exercised a loyalty and devotion to the whole Negro race, to whose welfare they have given their wisest and bravest efforts."[41]

Among those who fit Langston's description of such offspring was Adella Hunt, one of seven children born to Georgia judge Nathan Sayre and Maria Hunt, whose ancestry was white, Indian, and African. A petite, strikingly beautiful woman, Adella Hunt graduated from Atlanta University and joined the faculty at Tuskegee Institute, where she married Warren Logan, the school treasurer, in 1888. Asked on one occasion to provide a biographical sketch, she responded: "There is little to tell, as my busy life has been without romantic event. I was not born a slave, nor in a log cabin. To tell the truth I got my education by no greater hardship than hard work, which I regard as exceedingly healthful." The marriage of Warren Logan, Jr., to the daughter of Hutchins Bishop, rector of St. Philip's Episcopal Church in New York, linked the Logans to one of the most respected old upper-class families of Maryland and New York.[42]

Similar in many respects were the background and experience of Josiah T. Settle of Memphis. He was named after his father, a white planter who lived for a time in Tennessee before settling on a plantation in Mississippi. His father "had a deep and sincere affection for his children and their mother," who was his slave. After several years in Mississippi, Settle manumitted her and his children by her, but still fearing that their freedom was not secure, he settled his mulatto family in Hamilton, Ohio and lawfully married his former slave. He spent part of the year

in Ohio and part in Mississippi. Josiah T. Settle, the eldest son of this union, recalled that his father "was a father to him in the broadest sense of the word" and enrolled him in Oberlin College in 1868. Following graduation from Howard University Law School in 1875, Settle married the beautiful and cultured Therese T. Vogelsang of Annapolis, a niece of James C. Bishop. The couple moved to Mississippi, where Settle practiced law and played a prominent role in politics. In the early 1880s they established themselves in Memphis and became a part of the city's black elite.[43] Although it is impossible to ascertain how many free blacks in the South had advantages comparable to those of Adella Logan and Josiah Settle, their background and experience were not unique.

Few mulatto aristocrats benefited more directly from the generosity of their white fathers or evidenced more clearly an aristocratic ethos than the urbane John Mercer Langston. At one time or another he was an attorney, educator, diplomat, congressman, and racial spokesman. His father was a wealthy Virginia planter, Ralph Quarles, who had freed his mother and his "favored slave" before Langston was born. Quarles not only provided for the education of his three mulatto sons but also left them a substantial portion of his estate. Langston graduated from Oberlin College and became a lawyer. He married Caroline Wall, also a student at Oberlin and the daughter of "a very wealthy and influential [white] citizen" of North Carolina. "Reared in a white family, educated in a white school," P. B. S. Pinchback later said of Langston, "he had been in close contact with the best element of refined and Christian white people, and naturally acquired their habits of thought and action and imbibed their self respect and innate feeling of perfect equality with all mankind."[44]

No one can read Langston's autobiography without becoming aware of his class consciousness and the pride that he had in his own family background. He described the ancestry of his father as "distinguished" and claimed that his mother was descended from a "tribe of Indians of close relationship in blood to the famous Pocahontas." Keenly aware of family name and prestige, he largely confined his associations to persons of "high social position." While attending a private school in Cincinnati in 1840, he moved in a social circle that included only "the very best and most highly educated and cultured young colored persons," whose families represented the top stratum of black society. Such families possessed "a reasonable amount of means" and lived in relative ease and comfort. "If there has ever existed in any colored community of the United States anything like an aristocratic class of such persons," Langston later wrote, "it was in Cincinnati. . . ." More than a half century later he still spoke in terms that revealed his class consciousness.[45]

Those who made up the "colored aristocracy" in post–Civil War America inherited from their antebellum forebears ideals, traditions, and patterns of behavior

which they perpetuated and which set them apart from other blacks. Central to this legacy was an emphasis on education and the acquisition of what was termed culture, an emphasis articulated by a member of Charleston's free mulatto elite who claimed that education not only sharpened the distinction between free people of color and slaves but also promised to eliminate white prejudice against people like him. Similar sentiments were common among aristocrats of color a half century later. Existing alongside the emphasis on education and often associated with it was a persistent concern with manners, "good breeding," and decorum evident in the writings of Clamorgan, Willson, John F. Cook and numerous others of the antebellum "colored aristocracy." Their children and grandchildren in the postwar era, according to one authority, were not satisfied to exhibit just proper conduct; rather theirs were "exemplary conduct, superior manners," and "superrespectability." Aristocrats of color in the forty years after Reconstruction were no more inclined than their antebellum ancestors to associate with blacks outside their own class, especially those whom William Johnson of Natchez had referred to as "low-minded wretches" or those whom Clamorgan described as persons unmindful of "the proprieties of life."[46] Notwithstanding their aloofness from those blacks whom they considered not of "good society," the antebellum aristocracy of color displayed a deep commitment to "the elevation of the race." In all sections of the country they displayed a deep commitment to education; those outside the South also figured prominently in abolitionist and antislavery movements and in moral reform crusades. Their descendants, who made up a sizable portion of the post–Civil War black aristocracy, inherited a sense of "service to the race" and to the realization of equal rights for black citizens.[47]

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, black Americans evidenced a keen interest in the question of social "gradations" or classes within the black community. Those who publicly addressed the issue generally agreed that a class hierarchy among blacks did in fact exist, shaped in large part by the slave system with its house servants and field hands, artisans and unskilled laborers, and bondsmen and free people of color.[48] The issue was not whether a class structure existed but what form its development and refinement should take in order to promote "the progress of the race." Of especial concern were the appropriate criteria for delineating between the upper, middle, and lower classes.

In the years immediately following Reconstruction much of the public discussion focused on the need for a simple division between those who were "respectable" and those who were not. There were few references to factors such as ancestry, education, wealth, or decorous behavior. The primary argument was that the "respectables" of the race, those who possessed moral character and virtue, should draw a dividing line between themselves and those blacks lacking such

attributes. It was high time, a black editor declared in 1878, to ostracize prostitutes, thieves, loafers, and other "vicious" elements of the race. The failure of respectable blacks to draw such a line themselves would allow whites to continue their practice of considering all blacks as an undifferentiated mass and of judging the entire race by its worst elements. A quarter of a century later, W. E. B. Du Bois counselled blacks on the necessity of observing social distinctions: "A rising race must be aristocratic; the good cannot consort with the bad—nor even the best with the less good."[49]

By the 1890s, when the public discussion of social classes in the black community became more widespread and more heated, the class structure within the black community had undergone substantial evolution. In cities with large black populations, such as New York, Chicago, Philadelphia, and especially Washington, social divisions were clearly defined. Old upper-class families that made up what was known as "the colored aristocracy" had already begun to confront the challenges posed by an upwardly mobile middle class. While a number of factors undoubtedly contributed to the heightened interest in the class issue in the 1890s, including the increasing urbanization of blacks, one of the most significant related to the hardening of racial lines and the proliferation of Jim Crow contrivances. For aristocrats of color who still clung to the idea of "amalgamation" or integration into the larger society, these developments posed special difficulties. Convinced that blacks *en masse* were unlikely to be incorporated into the larger society within the foreseeable future, they tended to place greater social distance between themselves and the masses in the hope of achieving amalgamation on an individual basis. They appeared to believe that to the extent that they succeeded in convincing whites that they were in fact different from other blacks in education, refinement, manners, morals, wealth, and even complexion, they would be accorded the rights and privileges of first-class citizens.[50] Although their efforts to establish class lines prompted black critics to accuse them of being cheap imitations of the white "codfish aristocracy" or, even worse, of racial treason, few upper-class blacks abandoned concern for the "submerged masses." Theirs was an attitude of *noblesse oblige,* an obligation to lift the entire race as its privileged few won acceptance by the "larger society."

Much of the discussion of social classes by blacks took place within the context of the struggle over Jim Crow measures and public debates over the issue of social equality. The "social equality scare" among southern whites, according to an aristocrat of color in Savannah in 1889, was ridiculous, because "the Negro as a people do not have it among themselves."[51] Two years later J. C. Price, a highly respected black educator and churchman, elaborated upon this theme in an article in *The Forum.* "There is no social equality among Negroes," he wrote, "notwithstanding the disposition of some whites to put all Negroes in one class.

Culture, moral refinement and material possessions make a difference among colored people as they do among whites."[52]

W. E. B. Du Bois, while a student at Harvard in 1891, exhibited an attitude toward the Federal Elections Bill that probably was not unusual among others of the black upper class. Critical of the idea that "law can accomplish everything," he maintained that many blacks in the South were "not fit for the responsibility of republican government," and when the region had "the right sort of black voter" there would be no need for election laws. The same class attitude found expression in the arguments made by some black legislators in the South against measures to segregate the races on public conveyances. According to one Louisiana legislator, such laws would constitute an "unmerited rebuke" to colored men and women of culture, refinement, and wealth by forcing them to associate with lower-class blacks.[53]

The black upper class justified its claims to a privileged status on various grounds, including its record of achievement; status as antebellum free people of color, culture, and education; and, to a lesser degree, wealth. They viewed themselves as the products of a natural selection from which they had emerged as the strongest and fittest of the race. They stood in sharp contrast to those who belonged to the "submerged masses." The emergence of such a class, though small in size, prompted both pride and resentment in the black community.[54]

One of the most extensive discussions of the black class structure occurred in 1896, when the editor of the Indianapolis *Freeman,* W. M. Lewis, invited Richard W. Thompson, a well-known black journalist, to respond to the question: "Do you think the interest of [black] society would be promoted by drawing lines, not based upon color, but in the same manner as instinct draws them in the race around us?"[55] Basing his observation primarily on his knowledge of Indianapolis and Washington, which he considered prime examples of the "eddying currents of Afro-American society," Thompson began by asserting that class lines already existed among blacks and that these lines had been established as a result of the working out of the "natural order." He emphatically denied that social stratification of blacks should be based on criteria different from those prevailing in the white community because "the Negro lives under the same civilization as his Caucasian brother." Thompson also distinguished between authentic class criteria, such as "character, worth, morals [and] conduct," and transient, superficial considerations, ranging from "the accidental possession of money or position" to the "color of skin and texture of hair." "Mere money, mere complexion, mere pretense, unaccompanied by sterling virtues," he argued, "will not maintain an individual's standing forever, nor garner him enduring fame. Individuals will find their destiny determined not so much by one particular quality or acquirement as by a

delicate system of sifting and averaging." Thompson urged upper-class blacks whose aim it was "to assist nature in enforcing the law of natural selection" to "grant labor its dignity," and to avoid the temptation "to leave the race behind" and "withhold the sympathetic aid of a hand grown strong from race support." To commit such an error or to embrace a "false system of education which breeds a contempt for the race" and its masses would ensure the establishment of "a false aristocracy." Although Thompson avoided rendering any judgment on the degree to which the black upper class in 1896 succeeded or failed in measuring up to his standards, he clearly believed that an aristocracy of color did in fact exist.[56]

Dr. J. M. Henderson, well-known black physician and clergyman in New York, who joined in the discussion launched by Lewis and Thompson, agreed that a black aristocracy, "though rudimentary and indistinct," was a reality. Henderson, however, was not reticent about standing in judgment of the aristocracy: he believed that it was more harmful than helpful in promoting racial progress because of its pretentiousness, conspicuous consumption, and disdain of manual labor, not to mention its "whims, vanities and tomfoolery." "The highest expression of the social tastes of the aristocracy," he observed, "is the exclusive dance and the exclusive party." The fate of the Afro-American, according to Henderson, rested with the emerging middle class, which was vigorous, enterprising, aggressive, and intimately identified with the race and its collective welfare. Nor did this antipathy for the aristocrats of color abate with the passage of time.[57] As late as 1907, he was still referring to them as "a tiny class of effulgents" and as "a few puny accidental colored exquisites" who were parasites subsisting on "hand-outs in the way of preferments" from whites. Such people, always preoccupied with promoting themselves as "an exclusive social set," would in the judgment of history go largely unnoticed while the robust middle class would force its way to the front.[58] Others echoed Henderson's criticisms of the aristocracy and praise of the middle class throughout the period from the 1890s to the First World War.[59]

Most black Americans appeared to agree that a "graded social scale" existed in black communities throughout the United States. It was more pronounced in the cities with large black populations but also existed among blacks in small towns and even rural areas. Like sociologists later, black observers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries indicated that the black class structure resembled a pyramid with the overwhelming majority belonging to the lower class at the bottom and a tiny minority constituting the "aristocracy" at the top. Between the two was an emerging middle class, relatively small in size, but steadily growing.[60]

While black writers marshalled evidence to demonstrate the existence of a well-defined class structure among Negro Americans in order to combat the notion that "all Negroes are alike" and hence to strike a blow against segregation efforts, they disagreed over the appropriate criteria to determine the class identification of

an individual or a family. Class distinctions, a black Clevelander noted in 1893, "should be made on a positive basis" but "what this basis should be is not universally agreed upon."[61] In identifying the upper class, blacks often placed "intelligence and character" or "character and attainments" as the prime requisites. Only a little less often did they specifically include attributes such as refinement, culture, manners, and education. Ancestry and family background, while obviously considerations of importance, rarely appeared in general discussions of the black class structure, but they invariably received extensive treatment in biographies of and references to those who belonged to the aristocracy. Wealth and color or fairness of complexion as stratifiers, whatever their actual role, were almost universally condemned as "artificial" and "malignant" considerations. Upper-class blacks, J. Simon Flipper, a well-known clergyman in Atlanta, observed in 1902, were those who had "outstripped their fellows in the race of life and attained a standard of civilization commensurate with the opportunities and had proved to the civilized world that under favorable circumstances the Negro is as capable of a high development in civilization as any other race."[62] Like others who analyzed the black upper class, Flipper spoke in Darwinian terms of the "race of life" while simultaneously implying that those who stood at the apex of the black class structure had enjoyed "favorable circumstances," a phrase that could be related to everything from culture and color to education and wealth.

In 1891 an article on "Colored Aristocracy" by Ralph Tyler, a member of a well-known black family of Columbus, Ohio, appeared in many black newspapers throughout the country. The existence of an aristocracy, he argued, was not only indisputable but also evidence of the "rapid progress of Afro-Americans." "The line between the '400' and the masses of the colored population," he declared, "is as clearly drawn as if an ebony Ward McAllister had spent a life time preaching his theories of social distinction." Tyler did not attempt to explain the origins of the black upper class, but focused on its most visible attributes, noting in particular the significance of personal appearance, character, refinement, and education. A black aristocrat always lived in a fashionable neighborhood, and it was virtually impossible for those who lived elsewhere to rise socially. If one were not born into the aristocracy or had not managed somehow to get into it, the prospects for gaining admission "to its clubs and societies" were practically nonexistent. The black upper class spoke flawless English, while those blacks who sprinkled their conversation with "dialect" expressions clearly belonged to "the lower class of colored people." According to Tyler, money had very little weight in determining whether one gained admission to the "upper tendom." The chief requisite for being included among "the chosen few" was education.[63]

Although the wealth of aristocrats of color was small compared to the great fortunes acquired by some whites in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries,

they did enjoy a degree of financial security unknown to most blacks. Virtually all were working aristocrats whose standard of living and leisure, as well as the educational opportunities provided their children, dramatized the economic gulf between them and other blacks. In addition to those in the professions and in government positions, the black upper class included families identified with such service trades as catering, barbering, and tailoring, which brought them into regular contact with upper-class whites. Some aristocrats of color inherited wealth; others accumulated substantial property, especially in real estate; a few were wealthy by any standard. But Tyler was essentially correct when he later observed that wealth alone did not ensure one a place in the top rung of the black social structure.[64]

The class and color divisions and caste distinctions that developed within the black population before the Civil War did not suddenly disappear with Emancipation: rather they gave rise to a complex class structure topped by those who prided themselves on being "colored aristocrats." Those from the ranks of the elite free black society and privileged bondsmen viewed themselves as natural leaders, superior in culture, sophistication, and wealth to the "parvenu free." According to Langston, the presence in the South of "colored people who had been free for a long time, born so or emancipated," was of "incalculable advantage to those just leaving slavery." The free people of color, born and reared among the very class which had once held them slaves, contributed "much toward influencing and directing those just made free." No other influence, in Langston's view, was "so potent as that of the free colored class" in elevating and directing the thoughts and purposes of the mass of slaves freed by the Civil War.[65]

Although those whom Clamorgan would have designated as belonging to "the first class"—the well-entrenched mulatto elite—often moved in disproportionate numbers into positions of leadership during Reconstruction and afterward, they continually encountered challenges from ambitious, upwardly mobile, darker-complexioned individuals emerging from and closely identified with the black masses. Despite all the rhetoric about unity and racial solidarity, "the advent of freedom exacerbated old differences and introduced new ones" in the black community.[66]

In the decades after the Civil War, the mulatto elite composed of the "old families" and tied by blood as well as culture to the white world, in Joel Williamson's phrase, functioned as the "carriers of whiteness into the Negro community."[67] In 1892 Andrew F. Hilyer, a native of Georgia and a graduate of the University of Minnesota, who was long a fixture in Washington's most exclusive black social circles, spoke directly to this point when he explained the role of the mulatto aristocrats: "The people of mixed blood is the natural bridge between the two races." Although the mixed blood might prefer, as Hilyer indicated, to be iden-

tified with "the dominant race" and thereby escape all the disadvantages of being classified as black, whites had "decreed that one drop of African blood" was sufficient to preclude entry into the white world. "No matter how intelligent, learned, cultured, or wealthy any Afro-American may become, or how white he may be, or how straight his hair," he concluded, "he is always classified as colored and as such liable to all the disadvantages under which the mass [of blacks] labors."[68]

Despite repeated charges that mulatto aristocrats embraced the attitudes and ways of whites, they generally took seriously what they considered their mission of service to blacks, utilizing their "superior advantage and opportunities" in behalf of the masses. Although the light-complexioned aristocrats engaged in a wide variety of racial uplift causes and allied themselves, especially in pursuit of political and economic objectives, with the darker "parvenu free," their day-to-day lives continued to be marked by social distance and exclusiveness. In brief, it appears that economic and political distances between the aristocrats and ordinary black folk narrowed at a substantially faster rate than did social distance. In a sense, the aristocracy embraced a modified version of Booker T. Washington's famous hand and fingers analogy: in all things purely social the aristocrats tended to be as separate from other blacks as the fingers, yet one as the hand in all things for racial uplift. Naturally, the social distance maintained by the "old families" was the source of tensions that sometimes disrupted the unity of uplift activities and invited scorn from other blacks. As early as 1872 the *Christian Recorder,* a publication of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, warned the "upper class of Society" about the dangers of ignoring and attempting to separate itself from the "unfortunate creatures of the lower class." The *Recorder* reminded the aristocrats that their fate was bound inextricably with that of other blacks and that the upper class could not succeed "without taking the lower class with it." A quarter of a century later, Francis J. Grimké, a black Presbyterian clergyman, pursued a similar theme in an essay in which he argued that blacks, regardless of social status or complexion, simply could not "get away from each other."[69]

By the late nineteenth century there existed a nationwide network of aristocrats of color who were personally acquainted and often related either by blood or by marriage. The existence of the network owed much to the migrations of blacks, especially free people of color, both before and after the Civil War. Antebellum free blacks left the South in sizable numbers and achieved prominence in various cities beyond Mason and Dixon's line. By the outbreak of the Civil War, free families of color had members in both the North and the South. For example, various members of free families of color in Fayetteville, North Carolina, including those by the name of Leary, Revels, and Chesnutt, lived in Ohio and Indiana; while free black families in Virginia, South Carolina, and elsewhere in the South had relatives in cities all along the Atlantic seaboard. Then,

with the beginning of Reconstruction, a host of talented blacks in the North, often native southerners or relatives of families still in the ex-Confederate States, migrated into the lower South along with some of the mulatto elite of the upper South. Contact and marriage between the elites of different sections provided the underpinning for what became a nationwide network of aristocrats of color, drawn from social circles in all regions that were as "discriminating as actual conditions allow." "These social circles," James Weldon Johnson explained, "are connected throughout the country, and a person in good standing in one city is readily accepted in another." Entry into the charmed circle for those not in good standing, even if they possessed wealth, was difficult if not impossible.[70]

In the late nineteenth century the light-skinned colored aristocrats exhibited a self-conscious elitism: on some occasions it led to condescension and even arrogance toward other blacks, especially the poor, uneducated masses at the bottom of the class structure, who were sometimes referred to as "vicious" and "degraded"; on others this same elitism produced a sense of awesome responsibility that translated itself into a commitment to improve the lot of the race in general.

Part II

People and Places

Prologue

Blanche and Josephine Bruce had scarcely returned from their wedding trip when the press began to speculate on how official white society in Washington would react to the senator's wife. It was by no means certain that Josephine Bruce would receive the treatment accorded the wives of other senators. Her presence posed what was referred to as "the capital social problem." But like several other white newspapers, the *Baltimore American* maintained that her attractive personal traits were sufficient to preclude "any embarrassments." Few journalists failed to comment on her intelligence, refinement, and courtesy. She possessed, one commentator noted, "a quiet dignity . . . that bespeaks the perfect lady" and more education "than most of the women who intend to snub her." Mrs. Bruce's complexion received more detailed treatment in the press than any other of her notable attributes. The *Boston Journal* referred to her as "a great beauty of the Andalusian type," while another white daily asserted that she resembled "what we all imagine a beautiful Spanish lady to be."[1] The *People's Advocate,* a well-known black weekly published in Washington, described Josephine Bruce's complexion as being so fair that even the use of "a microscope" would not detect any evidences of her African ancestry. A white journalist argued that the fair appearance of the wife of the Mississippi senator was proof that all theories about the telltale "signs of African blood" were absolutely false.[2]

That the press devoted so much attention to her color and character suggested that Josephine Bruce was not considered merely as another senatorial spouse. No matter how fair her complexion or how completely she conformed to the image of an ideal Victorian lady, she was still a Negro, the wife of a black senator whose skin color was only a shade darker than hers. But fears that she would be treated as a social outcast in official circles proved to be largely unfounded, at least for a time, in part because of the timing of her arrival in Washington. The "tolerant friendliness" that characterized relations between whites and blacks in Washington early in the decade of the 1870s, while diminished by 1878, still had not disappeared altogether.[3]

As was the custom, Josephine Bruce designated Thursdays as her "reception days"; her visitors from official Republican circles were numerous, including the wives of cabinet members and congressmen. No Democratic wives paid their respects, and when rumors circulated that the wife of Senator Allen G. Thurman of Ohio had called at the Bruce residence, the senator issued an emphatic denial. Although the Bruces encountered obvious slights from white Democrats, they

received invitations to all official Republican social functions, including White House gatherings.[4] A young, upper-class black woman who as a student at Oberlin was a guest in the Bruce home during Bruce's tenure in the Senate later recalled: "With Mrs. Bruce I attended dances and receptions galore, large and small."[5]

The Bruces' own social affairs both at Hillside Cottage and later in their renovated brownstone on M Street invariably prompted flattering comments from both white and black guests about Josephine Bruce's skill and graciousness as a hostess. Those who attended her receptions and teas agreed that "few ladies in Washington can entertain more gracefully." Even fewer were as beautiful or as fashionably dressed. Ten years later, Mrs. Bruce was still "one of the handsomest and best dressed ladies on the avenue." Despite the apparent ease with which she and the senator moved in white social circles for a time, they were scarcely oblivious to the fact that they were included only in social affairs of a more or less official nature.[6]

Nor were the Bruces unaware of the criticism directed at them by certain blacks who claimed that they appeared more interested in associating with whites than with members of their own race. In August 1879 an unsigned letter to the editor of a black newspaper in Washington suggested that Josephine Bruce was the cause of the family's snobbery. When the senator was a bachelor, according to the letter, he had moved easily and often among diverse social circles, but since his return from his European honeymoon and his acquisition of an elegant mansion in "the aristocratic part of the city," no colored person had received an invitation to any of the Bruces' teas or soirées. The anonymous correspondent claimed quite falsely that even the most prestigious black families, including the Douglasses and Cooks, had been excluded from their social life.[7]

By no means were all of Josephine Bruce's efforts focused on social activities. She was knowledgeable about financial matters and managed the household with efficiency and economy. She was in charge of the servants and appears to have encountered the same difficulties as other women of her social status in finding and keeping satisfactory maids and cooks. "Poor old Mrs. Jackson," she complained at one point, "got so good for nothing that I turned her off and now at least have a good, strong, willing girl." A "constant source of worry" for her was Meekins, the coachman long in the employ of the Bruces, who attended to their elegant carriage. Although she objected to what she perceived as Meekins's inefficiency and casualness, she apparently could not bring herself to fire such an old and faithful servant.[8]

The Bruces' only child, a son, was born on April 21, 1879. When the baby was a month old, his parents held a party of their most intimate friends in order to select a name for him. The senator's wishes prevailed, and the child was named Roscoe Conkling Bruce after the Republican senator from New York who had accompanied Bruce to the desk of Vice President Henry Wilson in 1875 to be

sworn in, when James Lusk Alcorn, the senior senator from Mississippi, refused to do so. The christening was delayed until Josephine Bruce could take the baby to Cleveland, where the ceremony was performed, according to her wish, by the same Episcopal rector who had officiated at the Bruces' wedding.[9]

The end of Reconstruction and the return to power of white Democrats in Mississippi meant that Senator Blanche K. Bruce's career as an elected official was over. Following his defeat for reelection to the Senate in 1880, he secured a succession of appointments from Republican presidents, first as Register of the Treasury in 1881, as Recorder of Deeds for the District of Columbia eight years later, and finally as Register of the Treasury again in 1897. By the 1890s he had become the senior black official in Washington and enjoyed a degree of political prestige unmatched by any other man of color, except perhaps his close friend Frederick Douglass. During the Democratic interludes under Grover Cleveland, Bruce served the Republican National Committee in a variety of capacities, especially as a campaign speaker among black voters in northern and border states. On at least two occasions he was seriously considered for a cabinet post. Always a harmonizer who eschewed violent rhetoric and who was generally seen as an honorable and reasonable man, Bruce believed that whites would continue to dominate American society and that the best hope of black Americans lay in patience, compromise, and education.[10]

For almost two decades following his departure from the Senate, Bruce remained a highly visible figure in the black community. Although the Republican organization in Mississippi remained his political base, he functioned as a national leader of his race who usually found cause for optimism in regard to the "progress of the Negro." A fixture on the lecture circuit, he traveled extensively throughout the United States, often accompanied by his wife, whose presence was considered an ornament at any social occasion. Everywhere, whether in Boston, Memphis, Indianapolis, or Philadelphia, his association with the black masses was largely limited to making addresses at public gatherings or "mass meetings."[11] Whites viewed him as a spokesman for blacks, but in fact his contact with blacks was confined to a select few who shared his tastes, interests, and life style, such as John R. Lynch, a friend and political ally in Mississippi, Robert R. Church of Memphis, and James Lewis of New Orleans.

His salary as a federal official, combined with his lecture fees and the rents from his Mississippi plantations, provided Bruce sufficient income to maintain a large house in Washington with several servants and to enjoy travel and other luxuries similar to those of upper middle- and upper-class white families in late nineteenth century America. For a time Bruce operated a successful insurance, loan, and real estate agency and made substantial investments in stocks, bonds, and rental property in the District. He also acquired a large plantation adjoining the one he already owned in Bolivar County, Mississippi. His landholdings in the Delta

ultimately amounted to several thousand acres. He always had a keen interest in the development of his plantations and often sought the advice of his Memphis friend, Robert Church, who sometimes acted as his agent. Bruce apparently viewed his plantations as performing a dual function: contributing to the welfare of poor blacks in Mississippi and providing him with a source of income. But he saw the plight of the black masses from afar, and his attitude toward those trapped in the sharecropping system resembled that of paternalistic white planters. Although it is not clear if blacks derived any special benefits from being Bruce's tenants, the evidence suggests that the plantations, which included numerous tenant dwellings, a cotton gin, and a church, were profitable enterprises. Through Bruce's influence a post office was established in Bolivar County, largely to serve his plantations, and was named Josephine, Mississippi, in honor of his wife.[12]

Although the Bruces continued to receive invitations to official receptions and parties, their presence at predominantly white social functions declined sharply after Blanche's departure from the Senate. That Bruce thereafter occupied a relatively minor federal office was probably not the only reason he and his wife appeared less frequently at official social gatherings. The deterioration in race relations in the nation's capital during the 1880s, which differed only in degree from what was happening elsewhere, marked the beginning of what Constance M. Green referred to as "the withering hope" for blacks. The 1883 Supreme Court decision declaring unconstitutional the Civil Rights Act of 1875 served as tangible evidence of the movement to thwart their ambition and aspirations. Those of the upper class, such as the Bruces, were acutely sensitive to the change in the racial atmosphere.[13] Josephine Bruce found polite, social intercourse with the wives of white officials increasingly difficult, and rebuffs became more frequent. At a White House reception in 1884, white women studiously avoided her until Mrs. John A. Logan, the wife of the Republican senator from Illinois, made a point of introducing her to those who had shown little inclination to be hospitable. Mrs. Logan later recalled that when President Chester A. Arthur invited the wife of Senator Bruce to assist at one of his New Year's receptions, no one in the "receiving line acquitted herself more graciously, was more elegantly gowned or more accomplished in her manners than Mrs. Bruce." She was "a handsome, modest, capable and womanly woman" who was in every respect worthy of receiving "all the civilities due the wife of a United States Senator." All the while, according to a white Washington newspaper in 1883, Blanche K. Bruce continued to be "received in courtesy and as a political equal" in official circles, "but there the line is drawn." Anything smacking of social equality was no longer tolerated.[14]

Too proud either to go where they were not wanted or to risk moving backward, black aristocrats withdrew into a world of their own, often as separate from that of other blacks as from that of whites. The Bruces and others like them in Washington created what Jean Toomer later recalled as "an aristocracy such as never

existed before and perhaps will never exist again in America—midway between the white and Negro worlds."[15] That peculiar "aristocracy" consisted of members of the old, well-established District families such as the Wormleys, Syphaxes, and Cooks, as well as distinguished newcomers, who constituted what Mary Church Terrell described as "society, spelled with a capital S."[16]

Following the death of her husband in 1898, Josephine Bruce moved to Indianapolis and lived for a time with her sisters Victoria and Mary Wilson, both of whom were principals of public schools in the city. The Wilson sisters, who attended a white Episcopal church and rarely moved outside a small circle of black friends, had "very little association with members of the race." Their exclusiveness prompted resentment among certain blacks who in 1892 tried in vain to have them removed from their principalships.[17] After a little more than a year in Indianapolis, Josephine Bruce accepted an offer from Booker T. Washington, an old friend of her husband, who was emerging as the best-known spokesman for black Americans, to become Lady Principal of Tuskegee Institute in Alabama. The position at Tuskegee allowed Mrs. Bruce an opportunity to return to educational work in a way that satisfied her growing interest in rendering service to the less-fortunate members of her race. Washington could scarcely have found anyone who would function more superbly as a role model for the women students at Tuskegee: Josephine Bruce epitomized the moral rectitude, polished manners, and social grace associated with the genteel lady at the turn of the century.[18]

The news of her appointment to the Tuskegee staff prompted much speculation in the black press. For some it came as a shock to learn that the northern-born wife of a former United States senator, accustomed to moving in the best black circles and even in the white ones, would abandon the life of a society matron to labor among the "uncouth girls of the rural South." The implication of much of the speculation was that the Bruce family was in dire financial straits and had thrown in its lot with Booker T. Washington as a means of survival. On the other hand, a black weekly in Seattle, edited by the daughter of Hiram Revels, the black senator from Mississippi who preceded Bruce, interpreted Josephine Bruce's move to Tuskegee as evidence of her bravery, magnanimity, and desire "to be useful to the race with which she is identified," especially since she "had no financial reason to do so." Not all blacks, especially those in the South, took such a generous view of Mrs. Bruce's appointment. One black southerner viewed it as an example of a well-to-do society woman "cutting some poor deserving young woman out of a job." "What does Mrs. Bruce know of us in the South?" he asked. Despite such occasional criticisms, Josephine Bruce went to Tuskegee in the fall of 1899 as Lady Principal and remained there until 1902. She devoted most of her time and energy to "direct teaching in morals and manners."[19] She returned to Washington by 1906 and resumed her place in the social life of the city's aristocracy of color.