

Napoleon Calimese (1890-1972) and Louise Davis Calimese (1895-1985)

Napoleon J. Calimese (pronounced Calimeez) was born February 18, 1890 in Irvine, Kentucky. He was one of six children born to Jerome and Mildred Calimese.¹ It is not clear exactly when the Calimeses moved to McLean County, Illinois; but according to the 1900 United States Federal Census, Napoleon and his family were living at 505 E. Locust in Normal. Also living at the same residence at that time were his grandmother, two uncles, several siblings or cousins, and a boarder.² In 1911, Napoleon's father (who worked as a barber at B.V. Meaderds) lived at 115 W. Locust Street in Normal with Napoleon's older brother, Burnice. It is unclear where Napoleon was living at that time.³

Louise J. Davis was born February 12, 1895 in Louisiana, Missouri to Charles and Clarissa (Brown) Davis. Unfortunately, there is little information available about Louise prior to her marriage to Napoleon. However, it appears that she was a resident of Chicago before she married Napoleon. The couple was married on August 4, 1920 in Normal by Peter Fields, a minister at Mt. Pisgah Baptist Church.⁴ They had two children: one son (John) and one daughter (Betty).⁵

Like many other able-bodied men at the time, Napoleon was drafted to serve in the United States Army during World War I. His service began on August 1, 1918. He served in Company A of the all-African American 809th Pioneer Infantry as a private, eventually being promoted to the rank of sergeant.⁶ By September 1918, Napoleon and the rest of the 809th were stationed at Camp Upton, New York and at the Port of Embarkation at Hoboken, New Jersey. On September 23, Napoleon and the rest of Company A of the 809th boarded the *U.S.S. Mongolia* in Hoboken, with the final destination of France.⁷

The 809th mostly functioned as a construction crew. All units designated as Pioneer Infantry were trained in semi-technical work, building "temporary roads, railroads, bridges, trenches, and all kinds of shelter both in active operations and rest areas."⁸ They also organized demolitions and destroyed enemy obstacles to prepare the ground for the advance of attacking troops. "They were the arm of the service that smoothed and paved the way so that troops and supplies could reach the front-line trenches."⁹

The 809th was stationed at St. Nazaire, a French port that the United States military frequently used. While there, they built hospitals for wounded American troops using pre-numbered pieces of lumber taken right off the ship.¹⁰ They constructed new structures on the port, in addition to making extensive repairs on others.¹¹ Twenty out of the thirty-seven Pioneer Infantry units were entirely made up of African American soldiers.¹² Like the vast majority of African American units in World War I, the

¹ "Napoleon Calimese." *Pantagraph*, March 27, 1972.

² Napoleon Calimese, 1900 United States Federal Census, Ancestry.com, <https://search.ancestrylibrary.com/cgi-bin/sse.dll?db=1900usfedcen&indiv=try&h=37019881>, Date Accessed April 5, 2019.

³ *Bloomington-Normal City Directory, 1911*.

⁴ Marriage License for Napoleon Calimese and Louise Davis, August 6, 1920, McLean County Clerk.

⁵ Napoleon Calimese, 1930 United States Federal Census, Ancestry.com, <https://search.ancestrylibrary.com/cgi-bin/sse.dll?db=1930usfedcen&indiv=try&h=47614706>, Date Accessed April 5, 2019.

⁶ Napoleon Calimese in the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs BIRLS Death File, 1850-2010, www.ancestry.com, Date Accessed January 14, 2019.; "Sergeant Calimese on This Side," *Pantagraph*, July 19, 1919; Margaret M. McMahon. *A Guide to the U.S. Pioneer Infantry Regiments in WWI*. (Margaret M. McMahon Teaching & Training Co., LLC, 2018), 7-9

⁷ U.S., Army Transport Service, Passenger Lists, 1910-1939 for Napoleon Calimese, Ancestry.com, <https://search.ancestrylibrary.com/cgi-bin/sse.dll?indiv=1&db=NARAWWITroops&h=4087877>, Date Accessed April 5, 2019; McMahon, 98-99.

⁸ McMahon, 7-9

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Eric and Jane Lawson, "Black Yankee: An Interview with Thomas Davis, First World War Veteran," *Trenches on the Web*, <http://www.worldwar1.com/sftdavis.htm>, accessed January 14, 2019.

¹¹ Gerald D. Curry, *Striving for Perfection: Developing Professional Black Officers* (iUniverse Com: 2013), p. 219.

¹² McMahon, 7-9.

members of the 809th were mostly relegated to support positions—though they did receive enough combat training to protect their working parties.¹³

World War I ended on November 11, 1918, a little less than two months after Napoleon’s arrival in France. His company, however, did not return to the United States until late July 1919, departing from St. Nazaire, France on July 6 via the *U.S.S. Scranton*.¹⁴ Upon their arrival in New York, Napoleon was sent to Camp Mills to await discharge.¹⁵ Before he could return home, however, his family in Normal received word that he was seriously ill with pneumonia and was receiving treatment at the Army hospital at the camp.¹⁶ A few weeks later, he was released from military service on August 19, 1919.¹⁷

Prior to the war, around 1915, Napoleon followed in the footsteps of his father Jerome and older brother Burnice, and became a barber. After returning home, Napoleon resumed that work. The Calimese men began their careers working for Boone Van (B.V.) Meaderds, who owned a barbershop at 104 E. Beaufort Street in Normal.¹⁸ By 1920, Napoleon, his brother, and their father all worked in their own eponymous barbershop, the Calimese Bros. (located at 101 E. Beaufort in Normal).¹⁹ The barbershop remained in this location until it moved across the street to 102 E. Beaufort by 1928.²⁰ According to Robert Gaston, (former apprentice of Napoleon and later owner of a barbershop called the Upper Cut) “[the town of Normal] told [Calimese] he could open up a shop [...], but he could not cut any Black folks’ hair. [...] He couldn’t even cut his own brother’s hair. He couldn’t cut nobody’s hair in there.”²¹ This was a policy that these men “had to follow in order to maintain their business in the face of twentieth century racism.”²²

Discrimination and segregation during this time period were rampant in Bloomington-Normal. According to Claude Hursey, a resident of Bloomington beginning in 1918, Bloomington was “pretty bad about that prejudice and ‘Jim Crow’ stuff.”²³ This led to the founding of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) on February 12, 1909. The NAACP advocates for the rights of African Americans, and was especially instrumental during the Civil Rights Era, during the 1950s and 1960s.²⁴ Napoleon was involved in the Bloomington-Normal chapter. He was elected to the executive committee in 1946, and in 1954 he supported the NAACP in their fight against emerging patterns of segregation in new housing developments that the Bloomington Housing Authority was accused of perpetuating.²⁵

Napoleon’s civic engagement did not end with the NAACP. He was also very active in the McLean County Colored Republican Club, leading the group as the president (also called the chairman) in 1938,

¹³ “Enlargement of Camp Dodge Begun,” *The Denison Review*, September 18, 1918, 1; McMahon, 5.

¹⁴ The US Army in WWI: Orders of Battle; “U.S. Army Transport Service, Passenger Lists, 1910-1939, for Napoleon Calimese, www.ancestry.com, Date Accessed January 14, 2019

¹⁵ “Sergeant Calimese on This Side.”

¹⁶ “Normal Notes.” *Pantagraph*, July 28, 1919.

¹⁷ Napoleon Calimese in the U.S., Department of Veterans Affairs BIRLS Death File, 1850-2010

¹⁸ *Bloomington-Normal City Directory*, 1911; *Bloomington-Normal City Directory*, 1915, 432.

¹⁹ *Bloomington-Normal Directory*, 1920.

²⁰ *Bloomington-Normal Directory*, 1928.

²¹ Robert Gaston, oral history interview by Mildred Pratt, February 28, 1986, *Bloomington-Normal Black History Project*, <https://mchistory.org/research/black-history-project/oral-histories/robert-gaston>, Date Accessed September 1, 2019.

²² John W. Muirhead. *A History of African-Americans in McLean County, Illinois 1835-1975*. (Bloomington: The Bloomington-Normal Black History Project and McLean County Historical Society, 1998) 39.

²³ Claude Hursey, oral history interview by Mildred Pratt, March 30, 1988. *Bloomington-Normal Black History Project*, McLean County Museum of History Library and Archives.

²⁴ “Nation’s Premier Civil Rights Organization,” NAACP, <https://www.naACP.org/nations-premier-civil-rights-organization/>, date accessed April 5, 2019.

²⁵ “Eli Pierce Named NAACP President,” *Pantagraph*, December 8, 1946; “Ask BHA Not to Set Segregation Pattern,” *Pantagraph*, February 16, 1954.

1940, 1946, and 1950.²⁶ The club participated chiefly in local elections, advocating for specific candidates. Though no African Americans reached public office as a result of the club, the club served to give voice to these potential candidates.²⁷ Napoleon was either a delegate or alternate for many state Republican conventions, including in 1938, 1942, 1948, and 1954.²⁸

Leadership in local organizations was not unfamiliar to Napoleon. He was active in Masonic Lodge Union No. 23, Prince Hall affiliation, where he served on the executive committee in 1935, and by 1947 was the district deputy grand master of the fourth district. The following year, he was made the grand deputy for the same district.²⁹ Prince Hall Masonic lodges were specifically for African Americans, as Masonic lodges were segregated until the late twentieth century.³⁰

Napoleon was also a member of the Redd-Williams Post, No. 163 of the American Legion. African American veterans were barred from joining “white” veterans organizations, such as the local Louis E. Davis Post 56 of the American Legion in Bloomington, founded in June 1919.³¹ Thirty-five servicemen joined to form the Redd-Williams post for veterans of color in 1923. The post was named for John Redd and Gus Williams, fellow veterans who perished during the First World War.³² The post did not have a permanent home for most of its existence. Members regularly held meetings in the basement of the McBarnes Memorial Building on Grove Street in Bloomington. Ironically, this was the same building where the Louis E. Davis Post 56 also met.³³ Napoleon held several positions throughout his time as a member of the post including treasurer, service officer, and child welfare officer.³⁴

Napoleon was also a member of Mt. Pisgah Baptist Church in Bloomington, IL. Founded in October 1865 as South Hill Baptist Church, Mt. Pisgah has played an important role in local African American

²⁶ “G.O.P. Club to Meet,” *Pantagraph*, October 21, 1938; “Colored Club to Meet,” *Pantagraph*, October 1, 1940; “Calimese Heads County Colored Republican Club,” *Pantagraph*, April 28, 1946; “Negro GOP Club Elects Calimese,” *Pantagraph*, March 11, 1950.

²⁷ Claude Hursey Oral History.

²⁸ “Schantz Heads G.O.P. Central Committee,” *Pantagraph*, April 26, 1938.; “Republicans, Democrats Name Delegates to Judicial Meets,” *Pantagraph*, March 29, 1942.; “County Parties Name Delegates,” *Pantagraph*, April 27, 1948.; “Carnahan Named County GOP Committee Head,” *Pantagraph*, April 27, 1954.

²⁹ “Program pamphlet for the 69th Grand Session of Most Worshipful Hall Grand Lodge October 7-10, 1935,” *Bloomington-Normal Black History Project*, McLean County Museum of History Library and Archives; “Lodge Elects Covington As Master,” *Pantagraph*, January 8, 1947; “Price Hall Lodge Plans School of Instruction,” *Pantagraph*, July 9, 1948.

³⁰ Abigail Swanson, “Prince Hall Masons (1784-),” last modified January 2, 2012, https://www.blackpast.org/aaw/vignette_aahw/prince-hall-masons-1784/. In 1765 at the age of seventeen, Prince Hall, a freeborn native of Bridgetown, Barbados, eventually worked enough to earn passage to Boston, Massachusetts. By 1775, Hall, along with fourteen other free black men, became involved with the Masons at British Army Lodge, No. 58. However, they were not afforded the same rights as white Masons, such as conferring degrees or any other Masonic work. In 1784, Hall petitioned the Grand Lodge of England, the head of all Freemasonry, for a warrant for a charter of their own, that was initially denied by the Masons of Massachusetts. It was granted, and the first African American lodge in North America was established. In 1787, the Grand Lodge of England gave Hall a charter to establish it as a “full” Masonic lodge, making them independent of the Grand Lodge of England. The Prince Hall Grand Lodge was founded in 1791 to preside over three other black Masonic lodges, with Prince Hall as the grand master until he passed away in 1807.

³¹ Lisa Dretske, “Private Gus Williams,” 2009. <http://mchistory.org/research/resources/gus-williams.php>, Date Accessed April 8, 2019. The Louis E. Davis Post 56 was the first post of the American Legion to be founded in McLean County; ; Edward E. Pierson and J.L. Hasbrouck, *McLean County in the World War, 1917-1918* (Bloomington, IL: McLean County War Publishing Company, 1921), 274.

³² “Local Colored Men Form Legion Post,” *Pantagraph*, February 7, 1923; Johnson, 7.

³³ Johnson 7.

³⁴ “Memorial Program, November 11, 1928, Redd-Williams Post No. 163 American Legion,” *Bloomington-Normal Black History Project*, Box 4, Folder 17, McLean County Museum of History Library and Archives; “Stewart Will Head Redd-Williams Post,” *Pantagraph*, August 5, 1942.; “Redd-Williams Post Elects Taylor Cisco,” *Pantagraph*, August 4, 1945.

history. Between 1915-1916, the church built a new sanctuary at 701 S. Lee Street, which was the location where Napoleon attended services. In 1922, Napoleon was a deacon.³⁵ By 1938, Napoleon was superintendent of the Sunday school.³⁶

It is unclear if Louise Calimese joined her husband at Mt. Pisgah or not, but she was particularly involved with the Christian Women's Fellowship of Third Christian Church, located at 301 S. Western Avenue.³⁷ A leader in her church, she was elected the worship director of the Christian Women's Fellowship in 1961, and participated in and organized several of the group's annual Woman's Day Sundays.³⁸ She also performed during special events with other gospel singers as well.³⁹

In her spare time, Louise enjoyed reading. She declared that she was "not a club woman" (possibly because her duties at the Home did not allow her time to participate or she was not interested in the social nature of most clubs of the time), although she did participate in the League of Women Voters.⁴⁰ The League was founded nationally in 1920, six months before the ratification of the 19th Amendment, which gave women the right to vote. The first league was established in Chicago and has always been a nonpartisan organization with an emphasis on grassroots activism.⁴¹ The League of Women Voters of McLean County was organized in 1933.⁴²

Louise and Napoleon had a happy marriage. According to an interview with Louise (who referred to Napoleon as "mister"), the key to any happy marriage is the ability to "take what you have and make the most of it: one must be home loving and able [sic] to do without. Marriage takes love, religion, care, and understanding. [...] You must have a lot to give."⁴³ Their marriage was perhaps strengthened when they embarked on a new endeavor together in 1927—becoming the superintendent and matron of the McLean County Home for Colored Children.⁴⁴

The idea for an institution to provide aid to children of color in Central Illinois originated with the Harriet Beecher Stowe Institute in Danville, Illinois. Founded in 1897 by Reverend George A. Brown, then pastor of the African Methodist Episcopal Church (now Wayman A.M.E. Church) in Bloomington, the Institute was established "to better the condition of the negroes of this state intellectually and industriously."⁴⁵ The institution appeared to thrive until 1907, when Brown and his wife were criticized for their treatment of the eleven children (four of whom were their own) living at the eight-roomed home located in the southeastern outskirts of Bloomington on South Davis Street. Brown and his wife allegedly neglected the children by being away from home for two months while the reverend was sick in Chicago and leaving their thirteen-year-old daughter in charge. When a reporter for the *Pantagraph* visited the home on November 25 to check on conditions, they inquired as to why Rev. Brown was gone for such long periods of time. The eldest daughter stated that, "it was necessary for him to travel about raising funds with which to support the place."⁴⁶ Possibly due to this report by the *Pantagraph*, ongoing criticism by the community, or that Rev. Brown could no longer raise the necessary funds to keep the

³⁵ "Official Staff of Mt. Pisgah Church," *Pantagraph*, March 3, 1922.

³⁶ "Services in Churches Sunday," *Pantagraph*, April 16, 1938.

³⁷ *Bloomington-Normal Directory*, 1960, p. 84.

³⁸ "CWF Sunday Tea With Mrs. Anson," *Pantagraph*, August 26, 1961; "Women's Day Involves Four Local Churches," *Pantagraph*, November 30, 1962; "Women's Day Set at City Church," *Pantagraph*, November 30, 1963.

³⁹ "Mrs. Sorensen Will Recall Africa for Churchwomen," *Pantagraph*, February 14, 1960.

⁴⁰ Verla M. Crawford, "Many Children Depend Upon Mrs. Calimese," *Pantagraph*, October 5, 1947.

⁴¹ "History," LWV, <https://www.lwv.org/about-us/history>, Date Accessed April 5, 2019.

⁴² "About the League of Women Voters," League of Women Voters McLean County, <https://www.lwvmclean.org/about-us>, Date Accessed April 5, 2019

⁴³ Crawford.

⁴⁴ "Board of Home for the Colored Children in Annual Meeting," *Pantagraph*, January 11, 1927.

⁴⁵ *Bloomington-Normal City Directory, 1893*, p. 42; "To Educate the Negro," *Pantagraph*, September 6, 1899; "A Worthy Institution," *Pantagraph*, March 4, 1899.

⁴⁶ "Colored Children's Home Criticized," *Pantagraph*, November 28, 1907.

Institute open, the home was closed in February 1908.⁴⁷ The children of the home were sent to the McLean County Poor Farm, with the intent of eventually transferring them to permanent homes when possible.⁴⁸ Charged with neglect, drunkenness, and general incompetency, legal proceedings soon began to force Brown to surrender his charter for the institute.⁴⁹

Another home specifically for African American children did not appear until ten years later in 1918, when the seeds were sown to establish the McLean County Home for Colored Children. Alexander and Cedonia Barker began the Home in a house they rented at 510 W. Jackson Street by taking in the seven children (ages three months to fifteen years) of Charles and Nellie Luster. Cedonia was friends with Nellie, who died of influenza during the Flu Pandemic of 1918-1919. The father, Charles, had followed soon after.⁵⁰ Having no children of their own, the Barkers continued to take in dependent or semi-dependent children until their home was too full and they moved to a larger house located at 1203 W. Moulton Street (now West MacArthur Avenue).

Before the McLean County Home for Colored Children was established, the only place in Bloomington-Normal that accepted children of color was the Soldiers' Orphans' Home (renamed the Illinois Soldiers' and Sailors' Children's School in 1931).⁵¹ To be eligible for entry into the Soldiers' Orphans' Home, it was necessary to be a child of a veteran, or as of 1907 (through 1924), under the age of eight and have lived in the state of Illinois for at least four years.⁵² There were two homes for orphaned, indigent, or neglected children in Bloomington-Normal: the Girl's Industrial Home (later renamed the Lucy Orme Morgan Home for Girls) and Victory Hall (for boys), but neither institution allowed African American children to live there.

The McLean County Home for Colored Children was officially established as an organization in September 1920.⁵³ In December of that year, the State of Illinois granted the Home a charter.⁵⁴ For many years, this was the only home for African American children outside of Chicago to be licensed by the State of Illinois.⁵⁵ The Home served both McLean and Peoria counties. There was no home for African American children in Peoria County, so the county provided the Home with a monthly allowance for its children that were sent there.⁵⁶ The children who lived at the Home came from a variety of situations. Some of them were orphans, while others came from otherwise broken homes. Some of the children may have had single or widowed parents still alive, but who had no resources to feed or watch their children as they struggled to find work. And still others had both parents living who were fortunately able to partially support them financially.⁵⁷ Before official recognition, the Home was funded by the support of four Christian churches in Bloomington (called the Missionary Union), some aid from the county, and whatever money the Barkers—who served as superintendent and matron of the Home—could solicit from

⁴⁷ "100 years ago," *Pantagraph*, February 2, 2008.

⁴⁸ "Brown Children as Wards of State?" *Pantagraph*, November 23, 1908.

⁴⁹ "To Force Surrender of the Charter," *Pantagraph*, December 31, 1908.

⁵⁰ *Bloomington-Normal City Directory, 1919*, 98; "County Home for Colored Children Worthy of Praise," *The Pantagraph*, October 30, 1926; "A look back at McLean County's Women of Distinction," *Pantagraph*, May 17, 1990.

⁵¹ Grace Arlington Owen, "McLean County Home for Colored Children and Some Present Needs," *Pantagraph*, December 7, 1920.

⁵² "Brown Children as Wards of State?"; Ruth Cobb. *A Place We Called Home: A History of Illinois Soldiers' Orphans' Home 1864-1931, Illinois Soldiers' and Sailors' Children's School 1931-1979* (Normal, IL: Illinois Soldiers' and Sailors' Children's School Historical Preservation Society, 2007), 2

⁵³ "Plan for Colored Children's Home," *Pantagraph*, September 17, 1920.

⁵⁴ Record book 1921-1951, *Booker T. Washington Home Collection*, Folder 7, McLean County Museum of History Library and Archives.

⁵⁵ "Helping Hands Cut Expenses At Colored Children's Home," *Pantagraph*, October 14, 1941.; "Children's Home Unique Downstate," *Pantagraph*, October 2, 1949.; "Know Your Community Chest – The Booker T. Washington Home," *Pantagraph* July 28, 1950.

⁵⁶ Charlotte Fitzhenry, "Cares for Colored Children," *Pantagraph*, October 7, 1940.

⁵⁷ "Colored Children's Home Helps Build Happy and Useful Lives," *Pantagraph*, October 26, 1939.

friends and other organizations.⁵⁸ After its official organization, the Home was included in city-wide fundraising campaigns such as the United Welfare Campaign and Community Chest.⁵⁹ Additionally other local organizations contributed to the support of the Home. One example was that the Domestic Art, Jennie McLean, Woman's Club, and West Side Woman's Club collaborated to provide an electric washer to the Home. The Benefit Club donated \$300 to build a boys' toilet and lavatory.⁶⁰

Children ages six to sixteen could live at the Home. Before that age, the children went to the Baby Fold in Normal. After the age of sixteen, the children were allowed to stay at the Home until they found work or were placed in a private residence. The county no longer provided support once they turned sixteen.⁶¹ A fifteen-member board (consisting entirely of white women) was formed to manage operations.⁶² Alexander and Cedonia Barker were also officially hired to be the superintendent and matron, respectively, of the Home.

In 1942, the name of the Home was changed to the Booker T. Washington Home.⁶³ It was named for Booker T. Washington, a prominent African American leader from the turn of the twentieth century. Washington was known for being an adviser on racial issues to presidents Theodore Roosevelt and William Howard Taft, as well as for founding the Tuskegee Normal and Industrial Institute in Alabama. The institute was a vocational school, which was one of the aspects of education that Washington emphasized for African Americans.⁶⁴ Similarly, the Booker T. Washington Home in Bloomington strove to teach the children living there to "look into the future with the idea of self-support."⁶⁵

The Home was successful because of how the children were treated—with love. Instead of a formal-looking institution, the Home was practically indistinguishable from other houses in the neighborhood. This created a warm, welcoming environment rather than a cold, sterile one. The children were taught "obedience, loyalty, and honor through love, not fear, and the discipline is ideal, while the response is successful."⁶⁶ This approach to care was especially significant considering that, according to the 1920 census, fifteen of the eighteen orphaned or unwanted children were identified as "mulatto"—a term that is no longer used to mean that the children were of mixed-race. At this time period, mixed-race children were often seen as outsiders, and it is possible that these children were intentionally abandoned by their families or communities.⁶⁷ In an attempt to combat these feelings of rejection and abandonment, the Barkers treated the children as if they were their own. The Barkers also had their late son, who died in

⁵⁸ "For Community House," *Pantagraph*, December 22, 1919; "McLean County Home for Colored Children and Some Present Needs," *Pantagraph*, December 7, 1920; "Mrs. George Monroe Has Service Record: Heads Board for Children's Home 21 Years," *Pantagraph*, January 13, 1942.; "Plan for Colored Children's Home;" Bill Kemp, "Booker T. Washington Home offered safe haven for black children," *Pantagraph*, December 13, 2009.

⁵⁹ "Plan Outlined for Welfare Campaign," *Pantagraph*, November 18, 1922.; "Consumer Price Index (CPI) Conversion Factors for Dollars of 1774 to estimated 2028 to Convert to Estimated Dollars of 2018," (Oregon State University, 2018), <https://liberalarts.oregonstate.edu/sites/liberalarts.oregonstate.edu/files/polisci/faculty-research/sahr/inflation-conversion/pdf/cv2018.pdf>, Date Accessed March 25, 2019; "How Community Chest Serves: Colored Children's Home Helps Build Happy and Useful Lives," *Pantagraph*, October 26, 1939.; "Consumer Price Index (CPI) Conversion Factors for Dollars of 1774 to estimated 2028 to Convert to Estimated Dollars of 2018."

⁶⁰ "Negro Children in Good Home," *Pantagraph*, December 6, 1921.

⁶¹ "Colored Children's Home Helps Build Happy and Useful Lives;" "Colored Children's Home Adds Vegetable Cellar," *Pantagraph*, December 31, 1929.

⁶² Owen; "Annual Report by Mrs. Monroe," *Pantagraph*, February 13, 1923; A *Pantagraph* article explicitly states that "the colored children's home has the backing of a small group of white women numbering among them some of the city's civic leaders" as being the foundation of the board of this institution, "Day Nursery Needs \$3,211," *Pantagraph*, October 26, 1932.

⁶³ Children's Home Unique Downstate," *Pantagraph*, October 2, 1949.

⁶⁴ Biography.com Editors, "Booker T. Washington Biography," A&E Television Networks, last updated April 3, 2019, <https://www.biography.com/people/booker-t-washington-9524663>, accessed April 8, 2019

⁶⁵ "Colored Home Useful," *Pantagraph*, October 23, 1927.

⁶⁶ "Deserves Credit for the Success of Colored Home," *Pantagraph*, June 5, 1925.

⁶⁷ Kemp; Muirhead. 43.

infancy, in mind when they created the Home. In caring for the children, Cedonia Barker said she “put these children in [my son’s] place and...[tried] to give each of them a little of the love which would have gone to him.”⁶⁸ This is the level of care that the board sought when they searched for replacements for the Barkers, and that they found in Napoleon and Louise Calimese, who took over as superintendent and matron, respectively, in 1927.

Napoleon and Louise were “thoroly [sic] recommended by business and professional men of Normal who” had known them for years.⁶⁹ While Napoleon was still working as a barber, his doctor instructed him to “get more fresh air and sunshine.” Because there was an opening at the Home, the Calimeses applied, intending to only stay for a year.⁷⁰ As superintendent and matron, they were responsible for the “spiritual, moral, and physical welfare of the girls and boys who are placed in the Home.”⁷¹ The couple approached their “duties with a keen desire to fulfill the wishes of the board of directors and are showing an interest in the children of the Home.”⁷² When the Calimeses began working at the Home, they earned a combined salary of \$100 per month, plus room and board (which would be about \$1,428 in 2018).⁷³

When the Home was chartered by the State of Illinois, it was a rather primitive structure that housed nineteen children and two adults in a six-room house without running water or plumbing. By December 1920, an adjoining lot was purchased with a small cottage on it. This alleviated some of the crowding in the main house by separating the boys and girls. Louise stayed with the girls in the main house, and Napoleon stayed with the boys in the small cottage until a new, larger structure was built in 1935.⁷⁴ Even with this expansion, they frequently had to turn children away because there was simply no room and not enough resources to support more children. Additional improvements were also made to the first house, with a furnace, plumbing, and electricity all being added.⁷⁵ However, by 1923, it was necessary to expand the Home even more if it was going to continue operating.

In order to address the need for a larger home and improved facilities, the board decided to look for a new location and relocate the Home to the Town of Normal. However, this was met with a great deal of hostility. The *Pantagraph* reported on March 7, 1923 that several property owners near the proposed location of the Home did not wish it to be “near their property.” Other citizens of the town argued that “Normal has enough charitable institutions” and were not in favor of making Normal a “dumping ground for such institutions” that looked to the citizens of Normal for support when their property was non-taxable. A three-person committee was appointed to notify the trustees of the Home that “not only the Commercial club but practically the whole town is opposed to their removal to Normal and that they would be unwelcome.”⁷⁶ The following week, it was reported that the plan to relocate the Home to Normal was abandoned.⁷⁷

With the plans for relocating the Home now scrapped, members of the board began to expand the resources for the existing Home until the time came when they had the necessary funds to build a new structure on the existing lots. Sometime after 1923, additional lots (1203 and 1205 W. Moulton Street)

⁶⁸ “County Home for Colored Children Worthy of Praise.”

⁶⁹ “Board of Home for the Colored Children in Annual Meeting,” *Pantagraph*, January 11, 1927.

⁷⁰ Bob Lyhne, “Operate Home, Not Institution,” *Pantagraph*, August 28, 1952.

⁷¹ “Rules and Regulations of the Home,” *Booker T. Washington Home Collection*, Folder 2, McLean County Museum of History Library and Archives.

⁷² “Board of Home for the Colored Children in Annual Meeting.”

⁷³ Mrs. Harold E. Walsh, “Booker T. Washington Home.” *Home Town in the Corn Belt: A Source History of Bloomington, Illinois 1900-1950, Volume V*, compiled by Clara Louise Kessler. (Bloomington: 1950) 197; “Consumer Price Index (CPI) Conversion Factors for Dollars of 1774 to estimated 2028 to Convert to Estimated Dollars of 2018.”

⁷⁴ “Two Lots Added,” *Pantagraph*, December 31, 1930; “Kids Get a Break at Washington Home,” *Pantagraph*, September 30, 1956.

⁷⁵ Walsh, 196.

⁷⁶ “Opposed Colored Home Enterprise,” *Pantagraph*, March 7, 1923.

⁷⁷ “Abandon Plan,” *Pantagraph*, March 14, 1923.

were added to the property, expanding it to four total. Additionally, one of the new lots was turned into a playground for the children.⁷⁸ In 1930, two more lots were added (one of which was equipped with playground apparatus), and 300 feet of concrete sidewalk was laid in front of the premises.⁷⁹ The next year, nursery service was added to care for younger children whose mothers worked.⁸⁰

Finally, in 1935, enough funds had been accumulated to begin constructing a new building to accommodate the ever-increasing number of children at the Home. The building was 54 by 32 feet, two stories tall, fireproof (because it was made of red-brick and tile with steel beams and sashes), and included a full basement for heating, laundry, and storage. It had a double entrance (one for girls and one for boys), with a common dining room and study. Two dormitories occupied the second floor (the girls' on the east side and the boys' in the separated west wing). Napoleon, Louise, and their charges moved into the new, modern home in late August 1936. The Home could only accommodate twenty children, but this was considered an amenity that offered the children who lived there "a family atmosphere instead of an institutionalized life."⁸¹ This new structure was built right next to the old buildings, which were torn down after construction was completed.⁸²

In the hope of creating a true home environment, children at the Home were expected to contribute to the upkeep of the house by doing chores. In October 1940, the *Pantagraph* published an interview with Louise as part of an ongoing series of articles about agencies affiliated with the Community Chest. In the interview, Louise explained that the children would "rotate the household jobs so that each child gets a chance to do everything."⁸³ She also stated that Napoleon bought clothing for the boys, and the girls made their own.⁸⁴ Louise, who liked to sew herself, started teaching the girls to sew when they reached the age of ten. The girls even belonged to a 4-H group called the Quick Chicks, and received some recognition for their sewing skills by participating in 4-H competitions.⁸⁵ Napoleon and the older boys worked the vegetable gardens located on the grounds of the Home. The abundance of fruits and vegetables that the garden produced sustained the Home throughout the summer months, and any excess was canned by Louise and the older girls in the Home's kitchen for use during the winter.⁸⁶

But it was not all work and no play at the Home. Programs, such as concerts by the Amateur Musical Club, were frequent sources of entertainment for the children.⁸⁷ The Calimeses also facilitated hobby-building programs for the children, including birdhouse building for the boys and piano lessons for all the children. The children attended Bloomington Public Schools and participated in many community activities. Children from the neighborhood were welcome to play at the Home's playground, as long as they behaved.⁸⁸

The Home also never forgot a child's birthday. Each child received a birthday gift, and during the "monthly birthday table," a birthday cake with candles was supplied by various community groups. Christmas was also an especially exciting time for the children at the Home. Each child would receive a gift; and Louise and Napoleon planned the decorations and helped the children trim a large Christmas tree, with planned programs and the singing of Christmas carols. The Young Men's Club would throw the

⁷⁸ "The McLean County Home for Colored Children," *Pantagraph*, October 13, 1929.

⁷⁹ "Two Lots Added."

⁸⁰ "Colored Home Adds Service," *Pantagraph*, January 13, 1932.

⁸¹ "A Credit to their Community," Undated Brochure from the Booker T. Washington Home, *Booker T. Washington Home Collection*, Folder 6, McLean County Museum of History Library and Archives.

⁸² "Building Home for Children," *Pantagraph*, November 17, 1935; Colored Children's Home Helps Build Happy and Useful Lives;" "Kids Get a Break at Washington Home."

⁸³ "Cares for Colored Children," *Pantagraph*, October 7, 1940.

⁸⁴ Fitzhenry.

⁸⁵ "Girls at Home Make Clothing For School," *Pantagraph*, August 17, 1947.

⁸⁶ "Colored Children's Home Adds Vegetable Cellar;" Walsh, 193

⁸⁷ "Will Give a Program for Colored Children," *Pantagraph*, March 19, 1927.

⁸⁸ "Cares for Colored Children."

children at the Home a party on Christmas Eve, and the local Rotary Club always furnished a lavish Christmas dinner complete with a turkey and all the holiday trimmings.⁸⁹

Additionally, short trips were planned for the children. Louise stated in the aforementioned 1940 interview that “these children never go away anywhere for a summer vacation, so we try to plan an outing for them each year.” Those outings included New Salem, Brookfield Zoo, Navy Pier, the Art Institute, swimming, games, and a visit to the Mackinaw River.⁹⁰ Local organizations also contributed to the children’s outings. In 1946, businessmen of the area bought tickets to the Mills Brothers Circus from the John H. Kraus Post of the Veterans of Foreign Wars, who sponsored the circus.⁹¹

An account of the outing to the Brookfield Zoo provides an excellent example of how daily life was conducted while living at the Home. All the children had to wash and dress for the day. The older children helped the younger children. Beds had to be made and the dormitories left in order. Breakfast was to be served, eaten, and cleared before they could leave the home for their trip. In addition to the Calimeses, five board members volunteered to be “mothers” for the daytrip. The children were reportedly very well behaved, and the only concern that the caretakers had was for their safety (as would be the concern for any parent). The children were given spending money at the zoo, which they generally handled responsibly.⁹² The group had a sense of family camaraderie, as older children looked out for the younger children. One of the board members offered a six-year-old child named John more and more food. Charles, a twelve-year-old, stopped her stating that “he’s already eaten four and he’s kinda small. Sometimes, he makes himself sick if you don’t stop him.”⁹³ Overall, the primary goal during trips like this one was to give the children who lived at the Home experiences other children may have had, and they clearly found much joy in these outings.⁹⁴

Living with the children and ensuring that they were raised properly was not only a full-time job for the Calimeses, it was their whole life. Even though they worked together every day, Napoleon and Louise could never go anywhere alone together. In an interview with the *Pantagraph* in 1947, Louise stated that, “when one leaves the home, the other must say, and if one takes a vacation, the other must wait to take his.” Raising an average of twenty children at a time was undoubtedly a large responsibility at which the couple ultimately excelled. Louise knew the importance of their role, and provided the children a shoulder to cry on and support through any problems that came through adolescence.⁹⁵ She was always there for her charges to offer “motherly advice for character and personality development.” Napoleon was known as a “stern taskmaster,” but even the children knew that he was a “just man.”⁹⁶ Both Napoleon and Louise clearly cared for the children, and they became like parents to each of them.

Louise strived to help the children discern the difference between actual racial prejudice and deserved discipline. In instances that the children would come home from school saying that the teacher did not like them because of their skin color, Louise stated that “nine times out of ten [...] the child has done something it shouldn’t and deserved any reprimand that it received.” However, this does not suggest that the children did not experience prejudice in their lives. Louise would try “to instill in the child a desire and willingness to turn the other cheek and thus rise above the insult by sheer superiority in understanding and tolerance.” As an African American woman herself, she would have known the struggles that came with the racism that was so prevalent at this time. She aimed to prevent any resentment from forming within the children.⁹⁷

⁸⁹ Walsh, 192-193

⁹⁰ Fitzhenry; “50 Years Ago,” *Pantagraph*, July 3, 1982; “30 Children to Take Tour of Chicago,” *Pantagraph*, August 15, 1948

⁹¹ “320 Children Will Get Free Tickets,” *Pantagraph*, June 11, 1946.

⁹² Walsh, 192.

⁹³ *Ibid*, 193.

⁹⁴ *Ibid*, 192.

⁹⁵ Crawford.

⁹⁶ A. Blanche Walsh, “Napoleon Calimese credit to area,” *Pantagraph*, March 30, 1972.

⁹⁷ Crawford.

The religious background that Napoleon and Louise personally possessed facilitated the spiritual training that they were expected to provide to the children. The Calimeses, however, did not force them to attend their own church. Children were free to attend the church of their choosing, without any discrimination from anyone at the Home.⁹⁸ This liberty and encouragement towards attending the church of their choice was likely very formative in the lives of the children at the Home. It particularly affected one of the most well known “graduates” of the Home, Sister Mary Antona Ebo, who was known as Betty Ebo as a child. She was one of the first three African American women in the United States to be admitted as a novice of the Sisters of St. Mary of the Third Order of Saint Francis, a Catholic nursing order in St. Louis.⁹⁹ She converted to Catholicism when she was still living at the Home. She lived there with her older brother and sister after their father was no longer able to care for them. She was a sickly child, and during one particular visit to St. Joseph’s Hospital in Bloomington, she learned about Catholicism and converted. Ebo believed that had this event not happened, she would have continued to be “a good Baptist.”¹⁰⁰ In addition to nursing, Ebo was also actively involved in the Civil Rights Movement, in particular the protests in Selma, Alabama in 1965. She continued to advocate for African Americans throughout her life. She was a founder of the National Black Sisters’ Conference in 1968, later becoming president, and became the first black woman of a religious title to run a hospital.¹⁰¹

In addition to raising the children at the Home, Napoleon and Louise were raising their biological children as well. The Calimeses had two children: a son named John (born in 1922) and a daughter named Betty (born in 1923).¹⁰² On July 4, 1933, tragedy struck when John passed away at the age of ten years old. He died of complications related to a ruptured appendix.¹⁰³ Their daughter, Betty, attended Illinois State Normal University, and later married Raymond Isaac in New York on June 25, 1946.¹⁰⁴ She moved back to Illinois, and by 1957 she was a teacher in Champaign.¹⁰⁵ Later in life, she moved to Las Vegas, Nevada.¹⁰⁶

The Calimeses remained at the Home for almost thirty years, retiring on July 15, 1957. The day before the couple’s last day, members of the board of the Home held a reception for Louise and Napoleon in honor of their many years of tireless devotion and efforts towards the success of the Home.¹⁰⁷ It was stated that “their cooperation with the board and their outstanding ability in handling children have endeared them to all with whom they work.” To their credit, many of the children “who left the home and gone out into the world never fail to express their appreciation for the splendid training” Louise and Napoleon gave them to “meet the problems of the world.”¹⁰⁸ After a thorough screening of applicants, Thomas and Fannie Brown of Danville were hired to succeed them.¹⁰⁹

⁹⁸ “A Credit to their Community!” *Bloomington-Normal Black History Project* Box 6, Folder 1, McLean County Museum of History Library and Archives.

⁹⁹ “Colored Girl One of Three Accepted by Nursing Order,” *Pantagraph*, October 2, 1946.

¹⁰⁰ Elaine Graybill, “From Orphanage to History Books: Bloomington’s Betty Ebo has made her place,” *Pantagraph*, February 15, 1990.

¹⁰¹ John Feister, “Brave Sister of Selma,” *St. Anthony Messenger*, March 2007, 23-24.

¹⁰² 1930 Federal Census, Ancestry.com, <https://search.ancestrylibrary.com/cgi-bin/sse.dll?db=1930usfedcen&indiv=try&h=47614711>, Date Accessed April 5, 2019

¹⁰³ “Boy, Age 10, Dies of Ruptured Appendix,” *Pantagraph*, July 5, 1933.

¹⁰⁴ Betty Calimese in the New York, New York, Marriage License Indexes, 1907-2018, Ancestry.com, <https://search.ancestrylibrary.com/cgi-bin/sse.dll?viewrecord=1&r=5542&db=NYCMarriageIndex&indiv=try&h=1124481>, Date Accessed April 5, 2019

¹⁰⁵ “Calimeses Retiring At Children’s Home,” *Pantagraph*, July 9, 1957.

¹⁰⁶ “Louise J. Calimese,” *Pantagraph*, September 28, 1985.

¹⁰⁷ “Calimeses Retiring At Children’s Home.”

¹⁰⁸ “Know Your Community Chest: The Booker T. Washington Home,” *McLean County Courier*, July 28, 1950.

¹⁰⁹ “Children’s Home Has New Superintendent, Matron,” *Pantagraph*, September 27, 1957; *Bloomington-Normal Directory*, 1922, p. 215.

Starting in 1969, after a series of mergers, the no longer segregated Booker T. Washington Home became the Children's Foundation (later renamed to Children's Home & Aid).¹¹⁰ This organization still exists today as BrightPoint, and offers early childhood care and education, adoption support and preservation, counseling and support programs, and mental health and wellness programs, and coaching and mentoring services.¹¹¹ The organization is located at 403 S. State Street (the former location of the Lucy Orme Morgan Home).¹¹²

The brick building that had served as the location for the Booker T. Washington Home from 1936 until 1969 was sold several times after it closed. After being purchased by the Bloomington Urban Development Department in August 1983, the house was demolished to make way for an approach to the planned West Oakland Avenue bridge.¹¹³ A marker was erected near the site of the home in August 2023 to memorialize the history of the Home and the children who called it home for so many years.

After the Calimeses retired from working at the McLean County Home for Colored Children, they moved back to Normal and settled in a house at 1002 S. University Street.¹¹⁴ Napoleon worked as a serviceman at the House of Hoover (which sold and serviced vacuum cleaners, sewing machines, and other small Hoover brand appliances), located at 801 W. Washington Street, for at least three years.¹¹⁵

In 1965, Napoleon returned to barbering, working at Gaston's Barbershop at 201 S. Center Street in Bloomington.¹¹⁶ However, according to Robert Gaston, Napoleon only said he had returned to barbering. Gaston was his apprentice. Gaston recalled that in order to become a barber, you had to have an apprenticeship and had to have "someone sponsor you before you get your license. He [Napoleon] was retired at the time, but what he did is he hung his license in my shop, and I could work under his license. And he said he worked there part time, which he didn't. He was retired."¹¹⁷ In 1968, Napoleon retired for the final time.¹¹⁸

Napoleon J. Calimese passed away on Friday, March 24, 1972 at the age of 82. He had been ill for some time and was under a physician's care at the time of his death. His funeral was held at Stamper Memorial Home with Elder Aubrey Hursey officiating.¹¹⁹ Six days after his passing, A. Blanche Walsh, who had worked closely with the Calimeses at the Home, wrote a letter to the editor of the *Pantagraph* to praise Napoleon in a public forum. She asserted that the welfare of the children at the Booker T. Washington Home was always his main objective. She recalled that after leaving the Home, "many boys

¹¹⁰ In 1969 the Lucy Orme Morgan Home for Girls and Booker T. Washington Home merged to form the Morgan-Washington Home (which served both Black and white children) and they continued to use the Lucy Orme Morgan Home building on State Street. In 1981 Victory Hall (which served only white boys) closed and merged with the Morgan-Washington Home, renaming itself the Scott Center after the courts settled the estate of Judge John M. Scott, who left funds to the Home. A new building was constructed for the girls and a boys facility was created by purchasing private residences on East Lincoln Street. By 1983, a new administration/school building replaced the original one that had served as the Lucy Orme Morgan Home starting in 1917. By 1988, after adding many other programs, diversifying programs, and serving a larger variety of clientele, the name was changed again to the Children's Foundation. In 2002 the home became the Children's Home & Aid (after merging with the Children's Home and Aid Society of Illinois).

¹¹¹ BrightPoint, About Us, <https://www.brightpoint.org/about-us/who-we-are/about-brightpoint/>, Date Accessed July 25, 2023.

¹¹² "Children's Homes Merged," *Pantagraph*, January 15, 1969; "Children's Foundation," *Pantagraph*, October 12, 2008; Kemp.

¹¹³ "McLean County real estate transfers," *The Pantagraph*, December 17, 1972; "McLean County real estate transfers," *The Pantagraph*, May 6, 1973; "Pre-empted home," *The Pantagraph*, October 12, 1983. The planned bridge over the Southern Pacific railroad tracks was delayed for many years, finally being completed in 1991.

¹¹⁴ *Bloomington-Normal City Directory*, 1957, 201.

¹¹⁵ *Bloomington-Normal City Directory*, 1959, 227; "House of Hoover" advertisement, *Pantagraph*, April 11, 1959.

¹¹⁶ *Bloomington-Normal City Directory Volume 1*, 1965, 100.

¹¹⁷ Robert Gaston oral history.

¹¹⁸ *Bloomington-Normal City Directory*, 1968, 117.

¹¹⁹ "Napoleon J. Calimese."

and girls came back to see their ‘home parents’ or wrote back letters thanking this good man for the training they had learned to recognize was all-important.” He was “an honest, hardworking and just man [...] a good citizen, a humble man, [and] a credit to his race and community.”¹²⁰

Thirteen years after Napoleon’s death, Louise J. Calimese passed away on Tuesday, September 24, 1985 in Las Vegas, Nevada. She had been living there with their daughter Betty.¹²¹ It is not known how long Louise had been living with her daughter before she passed away. Louise’s body was brought back to Bloomington, and she was buried next to Napoleon at Evergreen Memorial Cemetery.¹²²

“I imagine in years hence when some interested person looks back to the history of the Booker T. Washington home, they will find it closely entwined with the personal story of Mr. and Mrs. Calimese.”¹²³ This statement, written by journalist Verla M. Crawford twenty years into the Calimeses’ tenure of working at the McLean County Home for Colored Children, becomes more and more evident as one studies either the history of the Home or the lives of the Calimeses. The two histories merge in an inseparable way, as both deeply impacted the other.

By: Erin Jessup, 2019

Edited By: Candace Summers, 2019

Researched by: Anthony Bowman, Candace Summers, and Erin Jessup

¹²⁰ Walsh.

¹²¹ “Louise J. Calimese.”

¹²² “Napoleon J. Calimese,” Find A Grave, Findagrave.com, Date Accessed November 29, 2018.

¹²³ Crawford.