Bill Kemp, MCMH Librarian

This rare image of the Booker T. Washington Home comes from a 1940s brochure. The home is no longer standing. (Courtesy of the Mclean County Museum of History)

For much of the 20th century, Bloomington-Normal residents thought it necessary to maintain segregated group homes for underprivileged children. One would be hard pressed to find a better illustration of the embarrassing state of race relations over the decades than the fact that impoverished, neglected and unwanted children were separated by race until the 1960s.

From World War I until JFK and Camelot, African-American children lived at the McLean County Home for Colored Children (later renamed for Booker T. Washington) on Bloomington’s far west side.

This institution dates to 1918 when Alexander Barker and his wife Cedonia, with assistance from Margaret Wyche, took it upon themselves to care for six orphaned black children. Not long after, the Missionary Union, a group of four local churches, stepped in to lend much-needed assistance. Though chartered by the State of Illinois in December 1920, the home was a rather primitive operation, with 25 children and 2 adults living in a 6-room house with no plumbing or running water.

Improvements in the home, both in its physical plant and operation, soon followed. Located on the 1200 block of West Moulton Street (now MacArthur Avenue), the home’s mission was to “foster self respect, independence and good character” among its young charges.

Overseen by a 15-member board of progressive-minded women, the home expanded to an adjacent residence. Also acquired in the early years were five nearby lots that were converted to truck gardens so the home could grow much of its own food. The boys generally worked the garden plots and the girls handled the laundry and canning, along with other duties (as late as the 1960s, girls made their own clothing).

The 1920 U.S. Census identified 15 of the 18 children at the home as mulatto, a since-discarded term for someone of mixed race heritage. Back then, children with one black
parent and one white were often outcasts, and into the 1940s (if not later) the home served as a safe haven for mixed race children abandoned by their parents and local communities.

Money was always tight and the needs of the new arrivals great. “A special effort has been made to give each child his full quota of milk and butter fat, as many of the children were underweight,” read one report from 1921.

“There is absolutely no place of good repute open to such children in Illinois, except this one,” noted The Pantagraph two years later. “The question arises, shall a child be permitted to subsist on the contents of garbage cans … simply because of their race? Paraphrasing the Biblical interrogatory, ‘Who is thy brother’s keeper?’”

Beginning in 1927, husband and wife Louise and Napoleon Calimese served as the home’s matron and superintendent, and there they remained until the mid-1950s.

Bloomington organizations helped out from time to time. For instance, the Young Men’s Club organized the home’s annual Thanksgiving dinner and Christmas Eve party, and the Bloomington Rotary sometimes followed with a Christmas dinner. Annual summer outings included Lincoln’s New Salem and Brookfield Zoo.

In late 1935 construction began on a two-story, tile block and brick building. The two existing wood-frame buildings were torn down and the space converted into a playground. Then in 1942 the home was renamed for Booker T. Washington, an African American leader who advocated a social philosophy of “self-reliance born of hard work.”

A brochure from the 1940s boasts of the home’s successful “alumni,” including “athletic coaches, nurses, beauty operators, business men and women, and fine homemakers.” Others went on to serve in the military or attend college and become teachers.

The home’s most famous “graduate” is Sister Antona Ebo, a nun in the Franciscan Sister of Mary order who is now in her mid-80s. Ebo’s mother died when she was four, and her illiterate father was of little help, so she and her siblings were sent to the Colored Home in Bloomington. A chance visit to St. Mary’s Church led to a passionate interest in Catholicism, and she eventually entered a convent in St. Louis.

In March 1965, the then-41-year-old Sister Ebo and five other nuns from their St. Louis order traveled to Selma, Ala., to support the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s historic march to Montgomery. “I am here because I am a Negro, a nun, a Catholic, and because I want to bear witness,” she told the world.

In the late 1960s, the Booker T. Washington Home merged with the Lucy Orme Morgan Home, a group home for white girls. In the early 1980s the Morgan-Washington Home combined with Victory Hall, a home for boys located in Normal that had welcomed its first African American child in 1962.