



the

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The Lincoln Colored Home: The Cooperative Spirit Was Alive

A boarded up, red brick two-story house stands rather forlornly on a street on the near east side of Springfield. The building's current deserted and neglected atmosphere belies its once important place in the community. From 1898 to 1933, this old building served as a safe haven for poor black children needing a home. It was the first orphanage available for black children in Illinois and one of the first in the nation. The Lincoln Colored Home exemplified the collaborative efforts of whites and blacks working together to create a shelter for dependent children.

The Lincoln Colored Home, located at 427 South 12th Street, was founded by Eva Carroll Monroe in 1898. Monroe recognized an unfulfilled need in Springfield for orphanages that cared for destitute black children. Sangamon County had the second largest number of dependent black children, second only to Cook County. There were three other facilities at the time in Springfield, but they would serve white children only. The Lincoln Colored Home is the only orphanage of the four still standing in Springfield and the only orphanage in the state to be listed on the National Register of Historic Places. During its peak, the Lincoln Colored Home housed as many as 60 to 70 elderly and orphans at one time. By 1915, there were still only six orphanages open to African Americans in Illinois, so placement in the Lincoln Colored Home was in great demand.

Eva Monroe, the oldest of seven children, bore much of the responsibility for her six younger siblings

when her mother died in 1880. This early experience most likely prepared her well for the task ahead of caring for large numbers of destitute children. Monroe left Kewanee, Illinois for the capital in 1896 and found employment as an aide at the Prince Tuberculosis Sanitarium. After only two years, 29 year old Eva and her sister Olive Price had scraped together enough money for a \$125 down payment on an old house, known about town as the "Haunted House." Monroe had been caring for two elderly women and three children in her

tiny apartment. Initially, the sisters faced resistance from both the black and white communities in their efforts to garner financial support, primarily because they were outsiders - newcomers to Springfield, and townspeople viewed the purchase of the dilapidated house as foolhardy. Nonetheless, with three children and two elderly women, Monroe opened the doors of the Lincoln Colored Old Folks and Orphans Home in March of 1898. Financial problems were a constant source of concern for Monroe. She traveled around the

state soliciting coal, money, straw, and furniture. The Eielson Lumber Company, a local business, donated a front door, provided Eva would transport it and install it herself; she and her sister "Ollie" carried the heavy door all the way home. Additionally, Monroe grew vegetables, sold pies and other food at Washington Market to help cover expenses.

According to Wanda Hendrick's article "Child Welfare and Black Female Agency in Springfield: Eva



The Lincoln Colored Home opened on March 8, 1898. The home is shown here circa 1910. Photo courtesy of the Sangamon Valley Collection.

Monroe and the Lincoln Colored Home,” “her [Monroe’s] social agency grew out of the organized black female reform movement that peaked in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. . . . By the time that the Lincoln Colored Home opened, Monroe and other African American women on local, state, and national levels had created the largest network of like-minded and dedicated reformers, and soon became the most powerful agents of social welfare and racial uplift.”

Monroe’s efforts to raise money and awareness of the plight of the children soon gained the notice of Mrs. Mary Lawrence, the wealthy widow of former Springfield mayor Rheuna Lawrence, who paid \$1400 to settle unpaid mortgage debts when Monroe had trouble making the payments and the Home was in danger of foreclosure. Mrs. Lawrence, a woman with significant political influence and connections in Springfield, pursued support from both the white and black communities for the Lincoln Colored Home’s cause.

Mary Lawrence persuaded Eva Monroe that a new structure was needed, and in 1904, the current brick building was built on the same location after razing the first house. At that time, Monroe was caring for 29 children and eight elderly women. All lived in tents in the backyard during construction. Water had to be carried from Lincoln School, which was a block away until Mary Lawrence convinced government officials to provide a water system.

In August of 1899, the Springfield Colored Women’s Club, a group of middle-class black women made the Lincoln Colored Home its foremost project and kept it supplied with sheets, food, furniture, medicine, and money. The Club held fund-raisers such as musical afternoons, “tag days,” and silver teas in the home; eventually the Club even raised enough funds to purchase a piano for the large back parlor.

At this time, Mary Lawrence and her daughter Susan Lawrence Dana had commissioned famous architect Frank Lloyd Wright to design a home for them around a core of their original Italianate mansion at Fourth Street and Lawrence Avenue (now known as

the Dana-Thomas House State Historic Site). From the dismantled Lawrence house, Mrs. Mary Lawrence offered doors, windows, stained glass, and chandeliers to be used in the newly constructed Lincoln Colored Home. Additionally, she donated bricks left over from the building of Lawrence School and made from Rheuna Lawrence’s own brickyard. Mary Lawrence had her name placed on the deed of the four-bedroom house to avoid any possible future legal complications. In the event the house no longer functioned as an orphanage or mortgage payments were not paid, the house would revert to Lawrence property. Mrs. Lawrence then proceeded to organize fund-raising groups, enlisting Joseph Bunn of the Marine Bank and the brewer George Reisch to contribute funds. She also persuaded Bunn to take a position on the Board of Directors.

After Mary Lawrence died suddenly on March 11, 1905 while vacationing in Georgia, her daughter

Susan continued her mother’s philanthropic work. She gave additional sums of money to the Home, including an impressive \$7,000 lump sum donation, made according to her mother’s wishes. In another move to protect the Home, Bunn was appointed trustee. Although Susan supported the Home financially, she lacked her mother’s ability to reach out successfully to both black



Eva Monroe is second from the right. Monroe is shown here with three of her sisters. Photo courtesy of the Sangamon Valley Collection.

and white communities to push for their support. With Mary Lawrence’s untimely death, Monroe lost a consistent source of financial and community backing. In that respect, Monroe lost an important ally of the Home.

The new home was dedicated on March 11, 1906, the anniversary of Mary Lawrence’s death. The March 12, 1906, issue of the *Springfield Journal* described the ceremony marking the dedication: “The new Lincoln Colored Old Folks and Children’s Home on Twelfth Street between Capitol and Jackson Streets, was dedicated yesterday afternoon as a memorial to Mrs. R.D. Lawrence, with appropriate exercises. A considerable number were present. . . . An impressive program was given. . . . An address was delivered by Eva Carroll Monroe, the founder of the home. . . . Rev. C.F. Dudley of Minneapolis delivered the sermon in which he re-

ferred to the generosity of the donors who erected the home, and pointed out the good it would accomplish for the helpless children and old people of the colored race of this city....” An annual memorial was held in honor of Mrs. Lawrence, at which time Monroe approached prominent Springfield citizens for financial assistance.

In honor of the Home’s benefactor Mary Lawrence and her role in establishing the Lincoln Colored Home, the Springfield Colored Women’s Club and Monroe formed the Mary A. Lawrence Club in 1915 as a way of promoting literary and educational programs for boarders and patrons at the Home. A great part of Monroe’s success rested with her involvement in civic groups. Monroe was a member of the Springfield Colored Women’s Club and was elected president of the Illinois Federation of Colored Women’s Clubs (IFCWC) in 1909. She also held membership in national clubs as well. In an effort to drum up more support for the Lincoln Colored Home, Monroe offered various African American community groups the opportunity to meet in one of the parlors.

Monroe’s efforts did not go unnoticed, and in fact, gained the attention of state officials. Governor Edward Dunne was the featured speaker in a dedication of Camp Crispus Attucks held at the Lincoln Colored Home on May 9, 1913. The Lincoln Colored Home flourished and was even able to add staff, including an assistant supervisor, a girls’ matron, a boys’ matron, a cook, and laundress. The June 3, 1928 edition of the *Journal* described the Lincoln Colored Home as having “none of the characteristic grimness of an institution. It is a Home and no less...the presence or near presence of happy children is conveyed to one irresistibly...girls skipping ropes and boys and girls playing jacks or hopscotch with the quiet manner of a contented family.”

As a way of gaining a more consistent source of funding, Monroe sought and received membership in the Springfield Council of Social Agencies, a precursor to the United Way that was organized in 1925. The Lincoln Colored Home shifted from private philanthropic donations to accepting public funds through the Council of Social Agencies. By 1923, the Home had been designated for children only after the state of Illinois refused to license the Home for the elderly. While alleviating some problems, membership in the local and state systems of child welfare created some new ones. Monroe and the Home began to receive greater scrutiny as a push was made for state governance involving children. As a member of the Council of Social Agencies, the Home would now be required

to meet specific minimum standards established by the state.

Marking the 30th anniversary in 1928, Monroe received a silver loving cup engraved with the words “Presented to Eva C. Monroe By Members And Friends of Lincoln Colored Home, March 8, 1898 – March 9, 1928.” She also received numerous letters and telegrams of congratulations from her former charges.

The Home continued to care for children until 1933, when the state of Illinois refused to license the home as an orphanage. Foster parenting was gaining popularity as an alternative to institutional care (orphanages). Also, social work was becoming a profession, requiring a college education, which Monroe lacked. Increasingly, Monroe’s lack of professional training became a problem. She attended state conferences and classes on child welfare and possessed a great deal of practical experience but lacked a formal college education. The emphasis throughout the country was shifting to adoption and boarding of children away from institutionalization. The Home For the Friendless, located on the corner of Seventh and South Grand, one of the orphanages caring for white children exclusively since the Civil War, was razed in 1933, continuing a trend away from institutional care.

A negative report regarding the Lincoln Colored Home was filed by the State Welfare Department with the Council of Social Agencies in 1933. Critics charged that Monroe lacked administrative skills and that she was unkind to the children. Because of this action, Monroe lost her main source of financial support when the Council of Social Agencies took away their funding for the Lincoln Colored Home.

A petition was filed in 1935 to regain the Lincoln Colored Home’s charter, but the Home remained closed. Monroe had many supporters who attempted to prevent the Home’s closing, even publishing a pamphlet in 1933 titled “The Lincoln Colored Home ‘In Reality.’” It was an effort to create a public record to all Monroe had accomplished as well as to refute the claims of Monroe’s critics. According to Hendrick’s article, “Monroe did no public posturing or lobbying to retain her position...Monroe’s personal expressions were absent. She may have believed that others could better verbalize her sentiments. She may have deliberately decided that the best political move was to maneuver behind the scenes and continue her duties.”

The Colored Children’s Service Bureau took over when the Lincoln Colored Home closed, and all 32 children at the Home were returned to their own homes or placed in boarding homes. In 1959 this agency

merged with its white counterpart, the Child and Family Service Center of Sangamon County, which became the Family Service Center. Joseph Bunn had died and Susan Lawrence Dana had not demanded the Home back. Monroe took in boarders in order to make mortgage payments, even renting out the back to a barber shop, laundry and wiping clothe company. Eventually, the Lincoln Colored Home was recalled by the conservator of Susan Lawrence Dana's property to pay for her mounting medical bills. It was sold at a public auction for \$4,175 on April 17, 1944, with the proceeds going to the Lawrence estate. The new owner Edward Hall assured Monroe a place to live. Monroe, who was nearing her 70's, continued to live in the house until she was struck by a car in the late 1940s. Monroe was hospitalized for months at St. John's Hospital and died on January 3, 1950, while being transported to a home for the aged in Quincy, Illinois.

The house was sold again on a contract-for-deed basis in 1980, but the owners failed to make their payments. In 1988, firefighter Donald Kren purchased the house for \$15,000 at an auction. Kren, who has had a long term love of fixing up old houses, recognized the historic significance of his purchase when he scraped mortar off a cornerstone reading "Lincoln Colored Home, Established 1898, Rebuilt 1904." Through the efforts of the local NAACP working with the Home's current owner, the Springfield City Council designated the property a historic landmark on December 2, 1997. In August, 1998, the Lincoln Colored Home became listed on the National Register of Historic Places because of its significance to the social history of Springfield. Sixty-eight year old Kren is now looking to sell the property and hopes a new owner will complete needed renovations to bring the Home back to its original appearance.

During its brief history, the Lincoln Colored Home withstood many challenges, including the Springfield Race Riot of 1908. The Lincoln Colored Home is a testament to the spirit of cooperation of one black and one white woman sharing a mission and bringing their communities together to accomplish a common goal – creating a safe environment for black children. That may not seem like such a big deal today, but a hundred years ago, that kind of team effort would have been a rare feat. The Lincoln Colored Home may seem to be a nondescript, ordinary two-story brick house, but

it is steeped in significance to the African American community, and its intricate connection to the Dana-Thomas House should not be overlooked by Springfield citizens.

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