Secret Societies and Dusty Records: Researching a Found Box

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On the streets of Richmond, Virginia, an unassuming cardboard box sat on the sidewalk. Unlike most of the abandoned items one could find on sidewalks in cities, this box was full of important historical documents. The process of archiving and documenting physical evidence like these documents is one of the most important aspects of being a historian. When one is confronted with physical evidence, it is important that one properly examines and organizes this evidence in order to use and understand it in a beneficial way. This paper is specifically focused on the physical evidence that was found in this unassuming box on the side of the street. This box contained records of the now-defunct African-American secret organization, the Independent Order of St. Luke, which served as a fraternal organization and insurance company for African-Americans living in Richmond and along the entire East Coast of the United States. Many envelopes and other documents were inside the box, and each one of these envelopes contained records on juvenile life insurance policies that had been paid by the order. These records provide names, ages, sex, and causes of death, all valuable pieces of historic information. The box also contained notecards detailing insurance policies on adults, which also contain valuable information, although these records are not as detailed as the juvenile ones. For a long time, this organization was led by the great Richmond historical figure Maggie L. Walker, the first woman to become president of a bank in the United States. Therefore, this box of records was quite a find as it could provide valuable data for genealogical studies, details on life in African-American Richmond in the early 20th century, and it can also provide information on death in the African-American community in Richmond and other cities and towns along the East coast. Who these people were and how, when and where they died are all questions that could potentially be answered with the information contained in this box of records.

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This paper will have three main aims. Firstly, to detail the history of the Independent Order of St. Luke and other African American organizations of the time, so that the significance of and the information within the box of records can be better understood. Secondly, to detail the process of organizing and going through the box of records, and the efforts made to examine and preserve the documents within it. Lastly, to summarize the information that is collected from examining the records in the box and drawing and developing any conclusions that may be gathered from the information found in the records. This information will be summarized in the attempt to answer questions about death in the African-American community of the south in the early 20th century.

Section 1: The History of the Independent Order of St. Luke

In order to understand the contents of the box, it is important to have a historical grasp of the Independent Order of St. Luke. In the years following the Civil War and Reconstruction, African-Americans living in the South found themselves free, but living in a hostile environment. In order to improve their standard of living, many African-Americans started banding together. These organizations originally formed in and around churches, and eventually secret and fraternal organizations along the line of the Masons would begin to form in the African American community. In 1944, in an article on "Negro Secret Societies," Edward Nelson Palmer would write that "Ceremonial secret societies abound among Negroes in this country. They are with few exceptions fraternal benefit organizations which 'care for the sick and bury the dead.'"[1]

[1] Edward Nelson Palmer, "Negro Secret Societies," *Social Forces* vol. 23, No. 2 (Dec. 1944): 208.

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The Independent Order of St. Luke was one of these organizations. It had been established soon after the end of the Civil War in 1867, and provided insurance to members to pay for burials. In addition to this duty, the Order promoted other humanitarian causes and pushed for greater community ties amongst its members. Maggie L. Walker joined the order at a young age, and eventually would become the leader of the order in 1899, and she would continue to head the order until her death in 1934. Under her guidance the Independent Order of St. Luke would flourish; however, the order would steadily decline after her death, until it officially dissolved in the 1980s. While the order expanded out of its original focus of providing money in order to pay for the burials of the deceased, this mission remained at the core of the organization.

African-American secret and fraternal organizations were extremely common in the years following the Civil War. W.E.B. Dubois did a study of what he called "Some Efforts of American Negroes for their own Social Betterment" for the University of Atlanta in 1898, and this study is a fantastic source of information for the subject of African-American secret organizations. In the study, Dubois chose nine Southern cities of various size and asked secret and benevolent organizations to submit information on their organization and the work that their group did in order to accurately analyze them. Dubois first states that "It is natural that to-day the bulk of organized efforts of Negroes in any direction should centre in the Church."[2] Dubois assigns most of the charitable work amongst African-Americans in the South to churches and other benevolent organizations that were under the guidance of churches. However, the Independent Order of St. Luke was not one of these organizations, and Dubois assigns it to the role of a secret organization. Dubois explains the reasons behind the development of secret

[2] Dubois, W.E.B. "*Some Efforts of American Negroes for Their Own Social Betterment: Report of an Investigation under the Direction of Atlanta University; Together with the Proceedings of the Third Conference for the Study of the Negro Problems, Held at Atlanta University, May 25-26, 1898: Electronic Edition.*" (Atlanta, Atlanta University Press, 1898): 4.

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benevolent organizations amongst the African-American population when he states that secret organization such as the Independent Order of St. Luke "rose especially among the Free Negroes as a substitute for the primitive love of mystery. Practical insurance and benevolence, always a feature of such societies, were then cultivated […] some, branches or imitations of great white societies, some original Negro inventions."[3]

After spending some time writing on what he believes the reasons for the formation of secret African-American societies were, Dubois then goes into detail with charts and lists of the information that was gathered from the organizations in the nine cities that answered his questions. In his summary of the table of information, Dubois writes that of the 92 branches of various secret organizations that responded, seven of them were councils of the Independent Order of St. Luke.[4] This may not seem like a very high number, but this was only a list of the organization branches that deigned to respond to his inquiries, and he only asked the organization branches based in nine cities across the southern United States. While Dubois's work is very useful in understanding the general characteristics of African-American benevolent societies, it does not go into very specific detail about the Independent Order of St. Luke. In order to fully understand the Order, it is important to look at primary sources from the order itself.

The Independent Order of St. Luke was organized along the lines of many secret societies, with every meeting being conducted along ritualistic lines. Every member of what they called the Grand Council had certain special titles and certain special words and phrases that were to be said at every meeting. The Order was organized into small groups in each city called

[3] Dubois, *Some Efforts of the American Negro for Their Own Social Betterment*, 5.
[4] Ibid, 12.

councils, with larger cities usually having multiple councils, while a smaller town might only have one or two. At the top of the Order was the Grand Council, which was based in Richmond, Virginia. Luckily for historians, the Independent Order of St. Luke's opening, closing, and installation ceremonies of the Grand Council were preserved in the form of a book that lists these ceremonies and is now property of the Library of Congress. The book was written in 1893, and provides information on the structure of the Grand Council of the Order, the rituals that would take place at meetings, and what members of the Grand Council were responsible for what. It also provides information on general character of the organization. Most of the officials of the order would sit at their own desks in the meeting room, while various representatives would sit around an altar. All of the people in the meeting would be clothed in special regalia, and would have to know a secret password in order to gain entrance to the meeting. All of the officers, despite their various titles, were always addressed with the title "Right Worthy Grand" in order to distinguish them from the officers of the smaller councils. The Right Worthy Grand Chief was the officer in charge of the meeting and of the order in general. Besides the Chief, the two other very important officers of the Order were the R.W.G. secretary and the R.W.G treasurer, who together were responsible for the finances of the Grand Council and of the order in general.[5] In fact, while the meeting was supposedly run by the chief, it seems that most of the power resided in the position of R.W.G. Secretary, and this is the position that Maggie L. Walker filled, although at the time of the writing of this book, she had not obtained this position yet.

Although Dubois divided secret societies from churches in his work that was mentioned previously on African-American benevolent organizations, it is important to note that this does not mean that these secret organizations were without religious elements. In fact, looking at the

[5] Independent Order of St. Luke, *Opening, closing and installation ceremonies of the Right Worthy Grand Council of the Independent Order of Saint Luke of the State of Virginia*, (Richmond, 1893): 4.

book of ceremonies clearly shows how central their Christian beliefs were to the Order. Prayers marked the beginning and end of every meeting, and it was also customary to sing a hymn at the beginning and end of every meeting of the Grand Council. These aspects of the Grand Council meetings help to show how important their religion was to the members of the Independent Order of St. Luke.

The book of the ceremonies of the Grand Council also contains a passage that illustrates how central their charitable actions were to the organization. As part of the closing ceremonies of the Grand Council meeting, the chief was to state that "May the gentle influence of love, with the desire to be pure in heart and a feeling of charity for all mankind, be demonstrated in our lives."[6] This shows how even though the organization expanded into banking and other financial areas, the main focus of the Order primarily remained to be a charitable organization within the African-American community.

The person who was responsible for the growth of the order was Maggie L. Walker, a woman who remains a large figure in the history of Richmond. Maggie Walker joined the Independent Order of St. Luke at the mere age of 14, and by 1895 was in charge of its juvenile branch. In 1899 she became the Right Worthy Grand Secretary of the Grand Council and effectively controlled the entire Order. Walker also helped to found or run numerous other benevolent organizations in Richmond and in Virginia as a whole.[7] Maggie Walker is often remembered as the first woman bank president, but many do not realize that the bank that she founded was, as the writer Elsa Barkley Brown states "the outgrowth of the Independent Order

[6] Independent Order of St. Luke, *Opening, Closing, and Installation Ceremonies*, 8.
[7] Elsa Barkley Brown, "Womanist Consciousness: Maggie Lena Walker and the Independent Order of St. Luke," *Signs* vol. 14, No. 3 (Spring, 1989): 615.

of St. Luke, of which she was Right Worthy Grand Secretary for thirty-five years."[8] Brown also goes into the history of the Order in some more detail than found in other sources.

Brown writes that the Independent Order of St. Luke was founded in Maryland in 1867, and eventually expanded along the East coast to Virginia and other states. In 1899, however, the grand secretary resigned, stating that the Order was in a serious decline. This is when Maggie Walker took over the position, and quickly began to turn the Order around. Under her leadership, the Order would eventually grow to "over 100,000 members in 2,010 circles and councils in twenty-eight states."[9] During this time, the base of power for the Order shifted to Richmond. Maggie Walker was a very prominent figure in Richmond, and she was a great speaker, often using religious ideas and scripture in order to help her prove her points. She used her position in the community to argue passionately for rights for women and for rights for African-Americans in general.[10] Through the Order she established a newspaper, created jobs for hundreds of people, and consolidated the power of the African-American community in Richmond. Knowing the facts about the history of the Independent Order of St. Luke and of Maggie L. Walker is vitally important for understanding the contents of the box of records that was found.

Section 2: Preserving and Analyzing the Box

This box contains records of a historical organization, and therefore had to be preserved. One important part of any historical work is working with physical evidence like the records in this box. The preservation and organization of historical records is vital to historical work. To that end, part of the work that I have done with the box was an effort to both understand more

[8] Brown, "Womanist Consciousness," 616.
[9] Brown, "Womanist Consciousness," 617.
[10] Elsa Barkley Brown, "Constructing a Life and a Community: A Partial Story of Maggie Lena Walker." *OAH Magazine of History* vol. 7, No. 4 (Summer, 1993): 29.

about the records in the box, and to preserve the physical documents. As an undergraduate, I had never had the opportunity to work with unanalyzed historical documents like the ones found in the box. Thus, I was presented with a unique chance to see some preservationist techniques in action.

One of the first things I noticed about the box of records was the bad state that many of the documents were in. Time had not been kind to the majority of the records. There was evidence of mold and some water damage. Many of the documents were also sealed with metal pins that had begun to rust in the 70 years since they were sealed and filed away. Some of the documents had damage that had obviously been caused by people; one document (shown below) even had a shoe print on it. However, for being 70 years old, and having spent some of that time on the sidewalk of a city street, the documents were in passable condition.

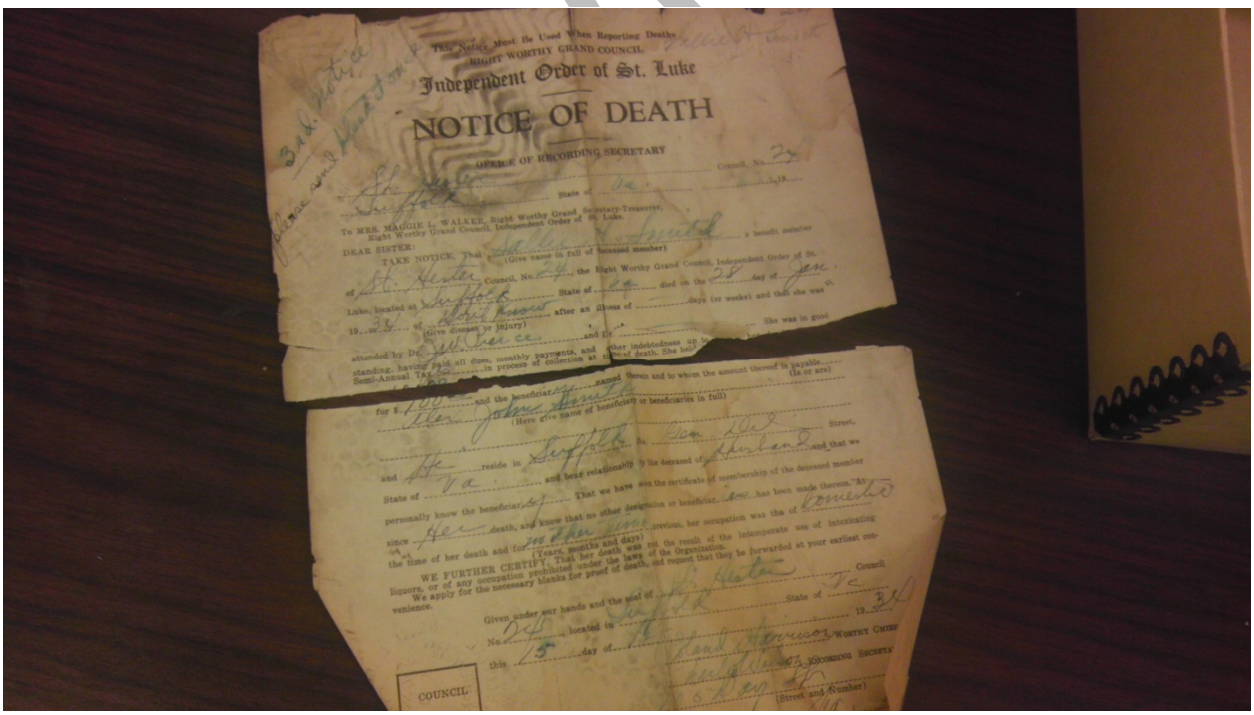


Figure 1, Damaged Death Notice, Photograph by Ian Cashwell, November 16, 2012.

After having assessed the condition of the documents, the next step was to go about organizing them, while taking care not to further damage them. After examining the contents of the box, I determined that there were two main types of documents in the box. First, there were large, sealed envelopes. Each of these envelopes had information written on the outside of the envelope, and each one contained further documents. The second type of document was a large amount of notecards; these had much less information on them, having only side written on. Unlike the envelopes however, the notecards looked like they had previously been filed in some sort of order, as there were index cards with numbers that appeared to be some sort of organization system that I was unfamiliar with.

The first step of business was to begin to organize and document the envelopes, as they seemed less organized and they would be more time-consuming to examine. Each envelope had large amounts of information written on the outside of the envelope. I began by examining this information. On each envelope was written information about an individual who had died and had their burial insurance paid by the Independent Order of St. Luke. The information written on each envelope was a treasure trove; it provided the name of the individual, how old they were, when they died, how they died, and it even gave the name of the city where they had signed up for the insurance policy. I began to examine and write down this information so I could analyze it later, and in the meantime I began to organize and sort the envelopes.

After talking with some of the staff in the special collections area of VCU's Cabell Library, we decided that the best course of action was to open up each envelope for examination, and then sort the opened envelopes using a system of folders. After examining several of the envelopes, I noticed that the envelopes all had a number that was listed as the number of their life insurance policy, but this number was not how the envelopes had been organized. After

examining the envelopes further I realized that the envelopes had originally been sorted in the order in which the policies were paid. So when a policy was paid and sealed, it was added to the ever-increasing number of paid policies. This meant that the lower the listed number, the earlier that policy had been paid and sealed.

With this in mind, I tried to remain faithful to the original order of organization, since this would not only preserve how the original organizers had done it, but it would also put it in a simple system where all that one needs to look for to find one of the envelopes is the number. After starting to use this system, I began to unseal and examine the documents inside each envelope. What I found inside were fantastic sources of information.

Within each envelope was a variety of different documents. Almost every envelope contained the deceased individual's original death benefit certificate, the actual document that had been given to the individual or their beneficiary when they first signed up for the insurance policy. These benefit certificates provide the name of the individual, where they were living, and who their beneficiary was. It also showed how much money the policy was for. After going through many of the envelopes, it became apparent that all of these envelopes had several things in common. Firstly, they were all for juvenile insurance policies. The benefit certificates stated this clearly, and only one of the individuals in the envelopes was listed as having lived past the age of 18. Secondly, all of the envelopes were for policies that were paid and sealed away in the 1940s. These envelopes specifically ranged in time from August 1940 until December 1945. With this new information in mind, I began to look at and write down the causes of death and where the policy was from in an effort to see if any diseases or causes of death were particularly prevalent in African-American juveniles during the 1940s.

Not every envelope contained the same documents, however. Many had items missing, and it is unclear whether these items were lost or if they had never been in the box in the first place. Some envelopes also had extra documents that others did not have. The documents that the majority of the envelopes seemed to have were the original death benefit certificate, the death record of the Independent Order of St. Luke, a receipt stating that the beneficiary had received the payment of the insurance policy, and a letter sent to the council of the deceased individual from the office of the Grand Council of the Order. These four items were found in almost every envelope. The death record of the Order was filled out by the beneficiary and the doctor who had attended the individual who had died. The doctor was required to fill out the information to the best of their knowledge and to provide a cause of a death and a verification that the individual had died under circumstances that did not break the terms of the insurance agreement. This means that the death records were an extremely valuable source of information, as they listed the cause of death, where the deceased had died, and in some cases where the individual had been buried. The receipts were useful in that they provided the name of the beneficiary, giving a possible genealogical link to families that are still around today.

Of particular note were the letters that were sent to the councils from the Grand Council. Most of them read roughly the same, stating that here was the money for this policy, but many of the letters also included a plea for recruitment in them. Several letters said that they hoped the payment of this insurance policy would go towards helping to recruit new members to the Order. Does this mean that in the 1940s the Order was seeing their membership number decrease? Or did they simply want more members involved in order to generate a larger cash flow? It is unclear what the reasons were for this, but it was interesting to note.

After opening and examining the documents inside an envelope, it was time to make sure that the envelopes would be maintained better than they had been by whoever left them on the side of the street. First, the pins had to be removed. They were rusting and only causing further damage to the envelopes. Once the pins had been removed and the envelopes opened, the next step was to carefully unfold the documents within. Some of the documents tended to be in better shape than others. The paper that was used for the letters sent to the councils was of very bad quality and did not survive the years very well at all. Most of those letters were already falling apart at the folds if not completely separated already. The other documents fared better, as they seemed to be made of a thicker, tougher paper.

One type of document that was not in every envelope, but was in a fair amount was an official death certificate. Every envelope that contained the documentation of an individual who had died in New York State had an official copy of a New York death certificate. The occasional other envelope contained one from another state but New York was the only state that consistently had a copy of an official death certificate in every envelope of someone who had died in that state.

After having gone through every envelope and unfolded the contents of them, I then carefully placed them into individual folders and sorted them. After having done that, I placed a heavy book on top of the folders in order to flatten them and remove the creases that had been formed by their folded state over the years. Analyzing and organizing the envelopes of the juvenile records took several work sessions with the box.

After I had completed this section of the box, I moved on to the notecards. Unlike the envelopes, these appeared to be in some kind of order already. Many of them were bound to

other notecards with old paper clips, while others were bound together with several other notecards with string (shown below on next page). After going through many of the notecards, the original organization method of the cards became clear. The notecards had originally been organized by the number of the council that the individual had belonged to. Once again, I decided to organize the notecards along the lines that they had originally been organized in the 1940s.

Another aspect of the notecards that quickly became apparent was the fact that they, unlike the envelopes, were for adults. All of the notecards were for men and women over the age of 18. This meant there was far less information on the adults. Could this be because they were more worried about fraud with the children? Or were there originally documents that went along with these notecards that simply were not within the box? We can't be sure.



Figure 2, Bound notecards, photograph by Ian Cashwell, November 16, 2012.

After going through the notecards, it became apparent that while they did not have the amount of documentation to help show information about the individual, the notecards did contain almost as much information as the envelopes. Aside from figuring out how the notecards needed to be organized, the process of preserving them was not nearly as complicated or as time-consuming as the envelopes. Like the envelopes, all of the rusting paper clips had to be removed, as they were simply further damaging the records. All the strings had to go, and then the notecards were placed in order in a filing box. Once all of the documents inside the box had been organized and briefly analyzed, the next step was to summarize the information that had been gathered.

Section 3: Summary of Information Gathered

Facts such as cause of death, where the individual was living when they died, and where they were buried were of primary interest for this paper. With this in mind I began to examine the information that I had collected from the analysis of the various documents in the box. Recording all of the information inside the box was a daunting task, but one I eventually completed. After gathering all of the data that was pertinent to my interests in the box, I made two summary tables in order to make it easier to compare and examine the gathered data.

I began with inputting the information from the juvenile records, as they had much more data and were generally more explicit in their details. With the juvenile records, I recorded eight things from each envelope, these being the number of the envelope, the name of the deceased individual, the date they signed up for the insurance policy, the city in which they signed up for the insurance policy, the date of their death, the age at which they died, their cause of death, and

where they were buried. I then made a summary table for the juvenile records, which is labeled "Table 1.1 Juvenile Death Records" and is included along with the paper.

For the most part, this information contained in the table was clear and easy to find inside the records. Some of the information was much more difficult, such as where the individuals were buried. This piece of the information was never written on the actual envelope, instead only being found in the doctor's statement on the death of the individual. Oftentimes, the doctor would neglect to fill this part of the form out, or write it in such a way that I was unable to determine what had been written. Other than some difficulty with the burial places, the rest of the information was relatively easy, albeit slow, to gather. Right away, some patterns began to emerge when examining the summary table of the juvenile records with regards to location.

Firstly, all but two of the juvenile records had been issued in states along the East coast, one certificate being issued in Wisconsin, and one being issued in West Virginia. Secondly, the greatest concentrations of individuals were found in major urban centers; specifically the most common were New York City, Richmond, Philadelphia, and Baltimore. This could be attributed to a variety of factors. It may be that the Order had much more influence and power in urban centers than in rural areas, or alternatively there may be more certifications found from urban areas in the box simply because there are more people living in urban areas, thereby having a larger number of deceased individuals that are members of the Order. Thirdly, 52% of the juvenile records had been issued in Virginia. This shows how concentrated the power of the Order was across the entire state of Virginia.

Moving on to causes of death, it became apparent quickly that amongst the juveniles of the Order, Tuberculosis and Pneumonia were the leading causes of death, each disease being

responsible for 15% of the deaths in the records. Tuberculosis is a disease that is not nearly as common amongst American juveniles today as it was in the early 1940s, so it is interesting to see how widespread it was amongst African-American youth at the time. Antibiotics that were effective at combating Tuberculosis would not be developed until 1946, leading to the much lower rate of the disease in America in the present day. Pneumonia, while still a serious illness nowadays, was much more serious in the 1940s, as medical treatments were not as advanced. This lead me to examine and compare the rates of disease amongst the individuals whose records were in the box with that of today's youth.

According to CDC, in a survey done in 2010, the leading cause of death amongst Americans from ages 1-24 was "Unintentional Injury."[11] In my examination of the individuals in the box, I found that only seven individuals died from accidents, ranging from drowning to accidental gunshots to an automobile accident. This puts the percentage of unintentional deaths amongst the juveniles of the box at 13%, well below the combined 30% of Tuberculosis and Pneumonia, and not even taking into consideration the several cases of Meningitis and Rheumatic fever, which together account for another 13% of the deaths. This simply illustrates how medical technology was not nearly as advanced at the time that these children lived, making it much more likely that in the case of an American juvenile dying, they would die from a disease and not an unintentional injury. This could also be interpreted as a side-effect of the automobile being less common in America in the 1940s. As the number of people driving cars rose, the number of people being killed in automobile accidents would also rise, leading to a greater amount of unintentional injuries resulting from automobile accidents in the present day.

[11] U.S. Center for Disease Control and Prevention, "Leading Causes of Death by Age Group – 2010," http://www.cdc.gov/injury/wisqars/pdf/10LCID_All_Deaths_By_Age_Group_2010-a.pdf, (Accessed Nov 2012.)

Moving on from the causes of death, I focused on attempting to discover where these juvenile individuals had been buried, perhaps to see if there was a trend amongst home burials versus burial in public cemeteries, or burial in public cemeteries versus church burials. This was the most difficult information to gather, as stated earlier in the paper. Several entries were unreadable, or simply stated what town the individual had been buried in, without actually mentioning what graveyard. In terms of home burials, only one individual is explicitly written as having been buried at home. Others may have been as well, but it is impossible to say for sure. As part of my focus in this research was into the history specific to Richmond, I also examined the individuals who had been issued certificates in Richmond. Of these five individuals, only three have recorded burial cemeteries. Two were buried at Woodland Cemetery, and one, William Smith, was buried at Evergreen Cemetery. Both of these cemeteries are historically African-American cemeteries, and Maggie L. Walker is actually buried at Evergreen cemetery as well. Unfortunately the horrifically overgrown state and large size of Evergreen Cemetery made it impossible to try and actually find the grave of William Smith. While I did not have the opportunity to visit Woodland cemetery, I am sure that the graves there would be much easier to locate. Only three individuals are explicitly mentioned as having been buried at a church. This leads to the conclusion that judging from the sample of individuals found in the box, amongst African-American individuals in the 1940s, it was much more common to be buried in a public cemetery, although it is unclear how many of these were specifically designated as African-American cemeteries like Evergreen or Woodland Cemeteries in Richmond.

After having compiled the information of the juvenile records together, I then moved on to the adult records. There were about twice as many notecards as there were envelopes, so I was dealing with a much larger sample group of adults than juveniles, but at the same time there was

significantly less information about the adult individuals to be had. Because of this, there is less information in the adult record summary table. The notecards only listed what state the individual lived in, not the city or town, and none of the notecards made any mention of where the individual was buried. For these reasons I only included the number of the Order's council in which they were a member, the name of the individual, the state in which they lived, their date of death, the age at which they died, and their cause of death. I then compiled this information into a summary table which is labeled "Table 1.2 Adult Death Records" and is included along with this paper.

After having compiled the table, I began to examine the council numbers of the deceased individuals. As mentioned earlier in the history section of this paper, at the height of its power, the Independent Order of St. Luke had "over 100,000 members in 2,010 circles and councils in twenty-eight states."[12] The councils that the deceased adult individuals belonged to varied wildly, with the individuals belonging anywhere from Council 3 to Council 1753. This means that there is a very wide sample across most of the councils that existed within the Order, making this box of records an excellent source of information. Unlike the juvenile records, the adult records seem to start somewhat earlier, with the earliest death recorded being recorded in August 1937, and end somewhat earlier as well, with the latest death being recorded in December 1943. This may be due to the fact that there were so many more adult records than juvenile, and therefore the notecards had been split up into different boxes, leaving this box with a slightly different time period than the juvenile records also found in the box.

Also of note is the fact that there is a much larger percentage of Virginians in the adult records than the juvenile records. As stated earlier, 52% of the individuals in the juvenile records

[12] Brown, "Womanist Consciousness," 617.

had been issued their certifications in the state of Virginia. In the adult records however, 68% of the recorded adults were living in Virginia. This could mean a variety of things, maybe that the adult life insurance branch of the Order could have been more established in Virginia than in other states, or that the juvenile branch was simply more spread out along the East coast than the adult branch of the Order. It could also simply be because the records from Virginia are the ones that survived and made it into the box. There is no way to be certain what the answer is. Unfortunately, the adult records don't state what cities the individuals were living in, only the state.

Moving on to the causes of death, I was quickly struck by how many adults were simply recorded with the cause of death simply stating "Heart." At first I took this to mean that they had died of a heart disease, but there were a few adults listed with specifically that as their cause of death, so I knew "Heart" had to mean something else. I then theorized that this signified heart failure, but then I found an individual who had that listed as his specific cause of death as well. I also noted that 51 of the adult individuals or 44% of the adults in the records had "heart" listed as their cause of death, while only one individual had "old age" listed as his official cause of death. This has led me to believe that the doctors simply wrote heart when they were unsure of the true cause of death and it appeared that the person had simply died of what we would nowadays call natural causes or old age.

Of particular interest in the adult records is the fact that only two adults were listed as having died of cancer. This is interesting because in the present day cancer, or malignant neoplasms, is listed by the Center for Disease Control in their 2010 study as one of the top five causes of death for all Americans ages 15-65+, and as the second leading cause of death

overall.[13] To have a mere 1.7% of the adult individuals recorded in the box die of cancer is remarkable when compared to the present day. The reasons for this are unclear, has cancer simply become more common? Were the people of the 1940s exposed less to sources that cause cancer? Was cancer simply harder to diagnose in the 1940s? It is unclear, and warrants an investigation in its own right.

The two summary tables of this data allow for several conclusions to be drawn. Firstly, the Independent Order of St. Luke had considerably more power in urban centers, and was especially strong in Virginia. This is probably due to the fact that the Order was based out of Richmond, Virginia. Secondly, diseases like Tuberculosis, Pneumonia, Meningitis, and Rheumatic fever were much more common and more likely to be fatal amongst the African-American juvenile population in the 1940s as opposed to the present day, illustrating the advances made in medical science over the past 70 years. Thirdly, African-American juvenile burials seem to have been more likely to have taken place at public cemeteries than home or church burials, although this theory is based off of incomplete information. Fourthly, heart issues leading to death seemed to be especially common amongst African-American adults in the 1940s, while cancer was much more uncommon.

These conclusions are only some of the important information that can be drawn from the box. This information is important because of the historical value that this box contains. What conclusions I have drawn from the records of this box is only the barest minimum of what information could be obtained. Data on disease rates, funerary practices, medical procedures, and African-American life in the 1930s and 1940s can be gathered from the records contained in the box. For example, the records of this box would prove invaluable to any genealogical studies.

[13] U.S. Center for Disease Control, "Leading Causes of Death by Age Group – 2010"

The individuals recorded in this box are the parents, grandparents, uncles, aunts, etc. of people that are alive today, and finding out more about them and their lives could be amazing to their descendants and also useful to historians. Each of the people in the box has their own unique history. Some, such as Jack Watson of Council 1034, who died at the age of 98 in 1943, would have witnessed some of the most incredible moments of American history from the time of his birth in 1845. Jack Watson, like some of the men and women recorded in this box, could have been born a slave, but lived on to witness the end of slavery in America, as well as the fights of African-Americans for rights and of women for the right to vote. Looking into the lives of the individuals recorded in this box could provide even more information on the time period for historians.

To conclude, what seemed to whomever left it on the sidewalk to be an unassuming box filled with dusty records has proven to be a gold mine of historical information. The data drawn from this box can and will be useful for any historical research into the Independent Order of St. Luke, Richmond, or historical African-American life in the south. With my research into the box having ended, the box will be donated to the Library of Virginia, where it will hopefully be put to good use and provide valuable information on life and death amongst the African-American community in the early 20th century.

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