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Providence Shelter for Colored Children

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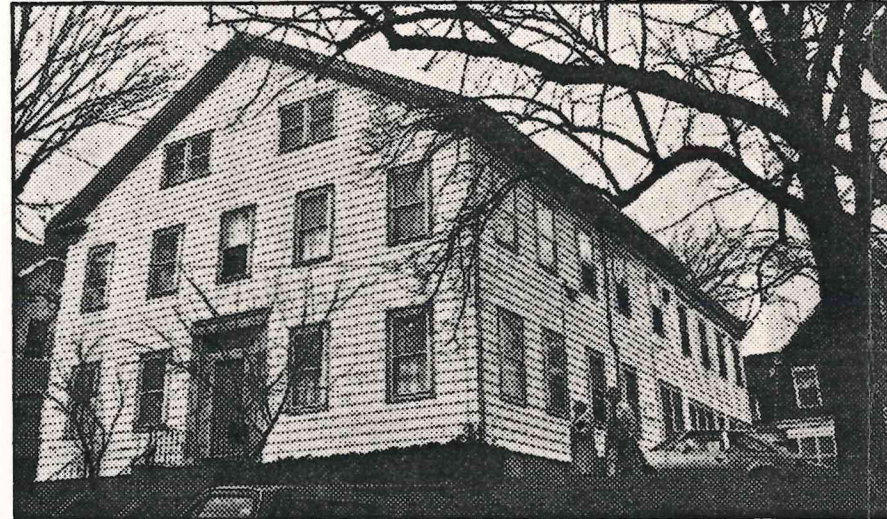
THE PROVIDENCE  
SUNDAY JOURNAL

FEBRUARY 19, 1989

# Accent

Social side	2
Martha Smith	5
Families	15
WEDDINGS	7

Through changing times,  
the Providence Shelter  
for Colored Children  
has served youngsters  
for 150 years

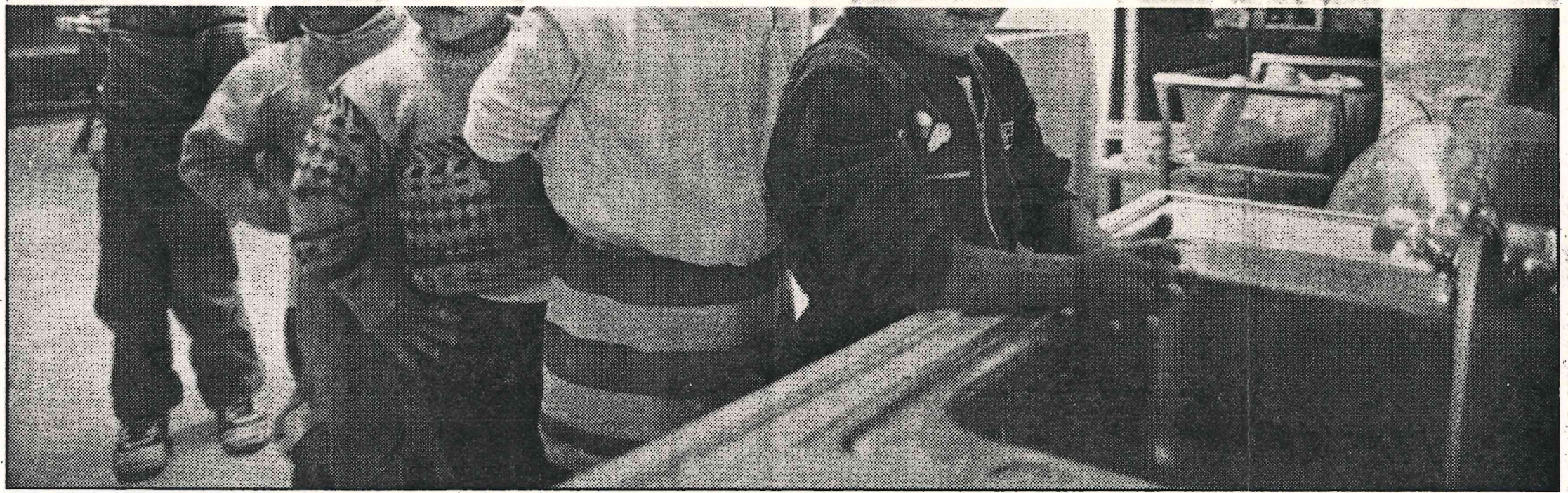


**A  
LONG  
HISTORY:**  
*The shelter's  
former home at  
20 Olive Street in  
Providence.*

— Journal-Bulletin Photo  
by TIMOTHY C.  
BARMANN







# KEEPING THE PROMISE



**JAMES N. WILLIAMS:**  
Prodded the shelter to change.

By **BERT WADE**  
Journal-Bulletin Staff Writer

The Great Depression was 10 years old when James N. Williams came to Rhode Island in 1939, determined to use his new position as head of the Providence Urban League to improve the conditions of black people.

1939 also was the year the 12 white ladies who ran the 100-year-old Providence Shelter for Colored Children decided to buy a radio and let the children listen to it as a reward for good behavior.

Times were changing. For most of the shelter's history, it had provided for 30 to 50 orphaned, abused or neglected children. But that year, only 12 lived in the 25-room house at 20 Olive St. on Providence's East Side. The state home for children had been integrated, and social workers now favored putting children in foster homes rather than institutions.

More changes were on the horizon.

Guiding children toward the kinds of jobs they had a real chance of getting had been shelter policy since 19th-century girls were trained for domestic work and boys for menial jobs

in the trades. But in 1939, blacks were pushing for equal opportunities in all kinds of work. It no longer seemed appropriate to encourage children to be housekeepers and janitors just because those were still the jobs most readily available to them.

On the other hand, the ladies agonized that "Negroes have a craving to be more than they are capable of being, so that we are in danger of . . . giving them positions beyond their capabilities. We have a tendency to do what we think is nice rather than what is good for them."

Guidance came from Williams, a black man who knew about limited opportunities. After graduating with honors from Des Moines University in his Iowa hometown, working with street gangs for the Harlem YMCA was the best job he could find.

Now he was in Providence, where more than half the blacks were on some kind of relief, but were not represented on the boards of public or private agencies providing services. Williams set about to change that.

As part of his push for interracial planning, he wrote Mil-

Turn to GOOD, Page E-3

**IN  
GOOD  
HANDS:**  
Kids wash up  
before lunch at  
the Mount Hope  
Day Care Center  
in Providence,  
which receives  
financial support  
from the  
Providence  
Shelter for  
Colored Children.

— Journal-Bulletin Photo  
by WILLIAM K. DABY



# Good deeds: 150 years of helping children

Continued from Page E-1

dred MacKillop, president of the shelter's board of managers, inviting her board to a meeting of the Urban League. The ladies attended, then reciprocated the invitation. On his way to developing a reputation as a quiet-spoken, diplomatic, "slow-moving bulldozer," Williams became a regular guest at meetings of the shelter's board and spoke at its next annual meeting.

He emphasized the need for employment opportunities and training for black youths. Whites and blacks have a mutual interest in health, education, recreation and delinquency, he said, and promised the Urban League would work with the shelter to obtain the best of these.

A partnership was forged that continues to this day.

The white ladies listened to Williams' suggestions. Black women were added to the shelter's board and a black social worker was hired. And the board began a 10-year transition from running a shelter to disbursing income from invested funds for the benefit of black children.

Today, only its name ties the shelter to a history that began in 1839, when several Quaker ladies dedicated to abolition set about doing good for the sake of poor, unfortunate colored children.

## In the beginning

The ladies proposed to teach the children "habits of industry, improve their morals and instruct them in such branches of knowledge as would enable them to procure respectable maintenance" — that is, a job.

Anna A. Jenkins, the only grandchild of Moses Brown and a leader in the Religious Society of Friends, offered the

resembling a Quaker meeting house of the period, was built next to a Quaker burial ground on a lot Mrs. Jenkins owned at Olive and Brown Streets.

In July of 1850, 10 days after the shelter was dedicated, Mrs. Jenkins and one of her four children died when her own home was destroyed by fire. But the shelter's work continued.

Girls were trained as domestics and placed in homes at age 12. Boys were taught trade skills and sent out to work at age 10, but by 1852, the ladies were having difficulty finding suitable employment for boys. Secretary Sophia Metcalf

in 1874 because there was no room.

"It's hard to refuse mothers who bring their children because they must struggle in the world of work," writes the recorder for 1879. "Wages are low and mothers cannot afford but a small pittance toward the board."

But by 1940, the problem was not overcrowding, but a lack of children to live in the shelter. The board decided to phase out the shelter and turn its attention to looking out for the welfare of black children in foster homes.

It rented its building to Children's Friend Society, a private

cussed.

In November, 1943, they were impressed with an article in The Providence Chronicle, a black newspaper, that said "the day of philanthropy was past and the Negro must have an equal chance with the white race and stand on his own feet." Board members who attended the 1943 Urban League dinner marveled that "white and colored worked together setting the tables."

By 1944, the shelter board was ready for "another historic step." They asked Olive Wiley and Marjorie Bell, the first black women appointed to the case management committee, to join the board. The two have served in one capacity or another ever since.

Still, there were questions about the board's mission. After consulting with the Urban League and the Rhode Island Foundation, the board rewrote its bylaws, ended its role in overseeing foster care. In May, 1952, it sold its building Dr. William Leets for \$12,000. (The building, across Olive Street from Brown University's Hillel House, is now seven apartments.)

Since then, its works have been varied, but they all have aimed at helping black children in metropolitan Providence.

## Just for the kids

For some 25 years, committees bought and wrapped individual Christmas presents for black children who were wards of the state. The board also gave scholarships and paid summer camp fees for black children.

Its main job, though, is giving about \$25,000 a year to non-profit organizations with programs that mostly serve black children under 14, preferably providing for their basic needs.

Williams and the Urban League became consultants for allocating



'Never in my wildest dreams did I imagine I would serve on the board of the home where I was once cared for. What a way to go down in history!'

**ELIZABETH WALKER**  
Shelter president

wrote that "the crushing hand of prejudice and poverty now rests upon the whole race," but she predicted "greatness for the African peoples in the world."

"Shelter boys" fought for the Union in the Civil War. New residents were received from camps in Washington, D.C., where captured slaves were interned.

Occasionally during the early

adoption and foster placement agency. In 1942, as part of an agreement with the society, it hired a black social worker and appointed a biracial case management committee to plan and check the placement of black children in foster homes.

The white ladies also continued to struggle between the cultural conditioning that led them to ques-



— Journal-Bulletin Photo

**A FIRST:** Olive Wiley with two of her grandchildren. In 1944, Mrs. Wiley was one of the two first black women to join the board of the Providence Shelter for Colored Children.

(Williams was the Urban League's executive director for 30 years, and was named to the Rhode Island Heritage Hall of Fame before he died two years ago.)

## Plenty of worthy projects

The shelter's grants have made all the difference in the world for children at the Mount Hope Day Care Center on Hope Street, says Betsy Adams, executive director. Not only did the shelter provide \$10,000 to keep the fledgling center alive in 1969, but since 1981 it has paid the fee for children who fall through cracks in state social service programs. The majority of children at the center are black and come from the same neighborhoods as those who lived in the

dence schools. Recently, the agency merged with Mount Pleasant Tutorial to become Volunteers in Providence Schools, a city-wide program.

Shelter grants helped establish an after-school kindergarten at the Doyle Avenue School on the East Side. They helped build a gymnasium at the John Hope Settlement House in South Providence, a day nursery run by the Salvation Army in South Providence, a building for the South Side Boys Club. During the '50s, the shelter co-sponsored the Urban League's Project for Negro Family and Child Life (later called Project ENABLE), a forerunner of Head Start.

More recently, the shelter's annual grants to the Urban League



403 N. Main St. It was to be supported by membership subscriptions; during the early years, a donation of more than one dollar was gratefully acknowledged in minutes of the shelter's annual meetings.

A matron, teacher and cook were hired and the ladies began taking in orphaned, abandoned, abused and neglected black children between the ages of 3 and 11. Some were brought to the shelter by a mother close to death. Others had come North via the Underground Railroad.

Still others were rescued after they were orphaned. One 9-year-old girl bound to a man who treated her like a slave was taken from him with the help of a sheriff. In a handwritten record book stored at the Rhode Island Historical Society Library, her suffering is described as "beyond description."

News of the shelter spread by word of mouth. Within the first year, the ladies received 32 children. Eight were returned to their parents, six were placed with families and three died from disease.

### Room to grow

But 15 remained in the shelter at year's end. When the little house became overcrowded, the ladies took children to their own homes. Mrs. Jenkins began a campaign to raise money to build a bigger house.

Donations were small and few at first. The ladies rented larger space and moved the shelter to 367 N. Main St. and then to 11 Wickenden St., where it was in 1847 when the ladies incorporated.

Three years later, Mrs. Jenkins's dream was realized. Individual donations of \$500 and \$400 had brought the building fund to more than \$5,000. A new shelter,

would pay for a child's care. Boarding was more common by 1870, a noteworthy year because no children died. Parents working as live-in domestics left their children in the shelter. A dozen children were turned away

because James Williams promoted. They considered a compromise: having black board members who could attend three or four meetings a year, but not those at which property and finances were dis-

requests was for half the \$3,000 salary for a new vocational training counselor on his staff. Mae Belle Williamson, a graduate of Harvard with a master's in education, had once lived at the shelter.

The shelter also provided seed in 1965 for establishing the East Side's Doyle-Jenkins Schools Tutorial, later renamed Lippitt Hill Tutorial and expanded to provide tutorial services in nine Provi-

families to adopt black children.

Like the name of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, the board's name sometimes causes consternation. When Patricia Mathews, chief of public information for the state Department for Children and their Families, was president of the shelter board in the early '70s, she suggested a name change to Providence Foundation for Black Children.

The rejection was almost unanimous. The members of the board said the foundation's name has historic value and provokes curiosity.

### A big surprise

When Elizabeth Walker first heard the name as an adult, it also provoked some resentment in her, she says. "I didn't like the image of white ladies taking care of poor, orphaned and sick Negro children, many from slave states."

Mrs. Walker was invited to join the board after she had served several years as president of the Urban League Guild, a service auxiliary of the organization. She delved further into shelter history and discovered it was the place where she had lived as a child.

She found things to appreciate. Now she is the shelter's president.

"We do know from whence we have come and our progress has been steady," she says. "I decided that, doggone it, this was a challenge."

"Other board members did not know what accepting their invitation meant to me. Never in my wildest dreams did I imagine I would serve on the board of the home where I was once cared for."

"What a way to go down in history!"

## Shelter life: Plenty to eat, plenty of discipline

Memories of the Providence Shelter for Colored Children mix good times and a sense that things were not quite right.

"I think it bothered my mother that she had to put me there after my father died," says one 30-year member of the shelter's board of managers who lived there from 1912 to 1917. "She had to work and it was the best and only thing she could do, but she felt she had lost her child."

"I was four at the time, so it was all the home I knew," continued the woman, who asked that her name not be used. "We were treated well. We were kept clean. We had plenty to eat. We were brought up very, very strict. We had to be very obedient. We were under such strict discipline I was half scared all the time I was there."

She remembers the soap storage room on the third floor, where punishment was inflicted with a hair brush, most often to the palm of a hand. The matron was a nurse who taught children to turn corners of sheets when they made beds.

"I think I liked her," the board member recalled. "I remember being fussed over quite a bit when I pushed a shoe button up my nose and it caused an infec-

tion."

It was dark in winter when the children got up to wash and dress for school. Breakfast at the oilcloth-covered tables in the dining room was oatmeal or cream of wheat with cocoa. They came home at noon for their main meal. The woman remembers best what she liked least: creamed codfish. Tapioca pudding was a frequent dessert. "Because they used the big pearl tapioca," she said, "we called it cat's eye."

The yard had swings, slides and sandboxes, and the children played after school. Before supper, they gathered around the piano in the large living room to learn fun songs as well as hymns. Supervised Saturday baths were dreaded. The ritual began in early afternoon and continued until everyone was clean. The water was never quite warm.

After she outgrew a crib, the woman remembers sharing a room with one other child. Most bedrooms had two small cots and a small chest. The front bedrooms were bigger. They had three or four cots.

Annual meetings of the board of managers were favorite events. "They were special, like a banquet. We had to learn reci-

tations and songs for the program.

"Often through the year we were treated to Laura Carr's ice cream, and I remember Mrs. Charles Sisson used to have her husband take us on hayrides in his truck. We ended up at her home for a feast. She always gave us a pad and pencil when we left, and at that time those were treasured gifts."

Bedtime at the shelter was earlier than for rich East Side children who gathered at Froebel Hall, across the street from the shelter, for dance lessons. Shelter children sneaked out of bed to gather at the front windows and watch the little dandies.

"We envied them," the board member said. "It is too bad there couldn't have been some other solution to our needs, because institutional living does a bit of warping."

William D. Wiley, former president of the Urban League and former editor of The Providence Chronicle, a newspaper for the black community, grew up in the shelter's neighborhood and attended an all-black elementary school at the corner of Meeting and Thayer Streets where shelter children were enrolled.

"There was a stigma to living at the shelter," he recalled during a telephone interview from his retirement home in Florida. "They didn't wear uniforms, but they had an institutional look that identified them. For example, the girls' hair was always cut short. Those of us who did not have to go to the shelter thought we were a little better."

Elizabeth Walker, a clinical social worker at Rhode Island Hospital who is president of the shelter's board this year, was one of the last children to live there in the early 1940s.

She was six or seven when her father took her and a younger brother and sister to the shelter. Their mother was pregnant and sick and their father, a cross-country truck driver, had to be away from home for weeks at a time.

"I remember the three of us hovering together and this very pure, loving, kind, chubby woman made us feel comfortable and secure. She gave us jelly and biscuits and they seemed so good."

"I remember the bath that was so refreshing. Even my hair, fingernails and toenails were washed."

— BERT WADE