African American Boy Scouts---Organizations

Joshua Farrington

**African American Boy Scouts. played important role in the development of many young African American boys.**

The first African American Boy Scout troop to be officially recognized and promoted by the Boy Scout Council was Louisville, Kentucky’s Negro Troop 75, which was sponsored by the Church of Our Merciful Savior beginning in 1916. Soon after, Louisville quickly became a city with one of the largest African American Boy Scout membership in the nation, having more than 500 black scouts by the late 1920s. Separate from the main office, the Colored Division of Scouting in Louisville was housed by the Pythian Temple on Chestnut Street (today the building is the Chestnut Street YMCA). Numerous African American churches throughout the city sponsored their own troops. These included the Grace Presbyterian mission on Hancock Street, R.E. Jones Methodist Temple, First Virginia Avenue Baptist Church, Plymouth Congregational Church, Quinn Chapel, and Emmanuel Baptist Church.

Through much of the 1920s and early 1930, the Colored Division in Louisville was chaired by black educator and businessman William Baxter Matthews. During the late 1930s, the National Council gave three African American men professional full-time positions in Nashville, Cincinnati, and Louisville. Louisville’s appointee was Steward Pickett, an original member of Troop 75 who remained an influential community and scout leader in the city for decades to come. During the Louisville flood of 1937, for example, Pickett and his older boy scout members helped evacuate the sick and elderly from the West End, volunteered at “Tent City,” and set up a 24-hour food stop on West Madison Street at Troop 44’s building on West Madison Street.

African American Boy Scout troops flourished throughout the state as well. There were active troops in Paducah and Mays Lick. Central Kentucky was a major center of African American scouting in Kentucky. Rev. Horace H. Greene, who led his own troop at Gunn Tabernacle Church in Lexington, notes that scouting among black boys was at its height in the 1940s and early 1950s in the region. As Chairman of the Negro Division of the Bluegrass Area Council of Scouts, Greene recalled that during this period “every church that could afford it” had its own troop. The Negro Division was made up of about 30 troops in the Bluegrass Region, which included Georgetown, Cynthiana, Lancaster, and Danville. Every year hundreds of African American scouts from across the Bluegrass would meet and have an annual dinner.

African American Boy Scout troops were also closely tied to the Kentucky Negro Educational Association. Atwood Wilson, Secretary-Treasurer of the KNEA and editor of its journal, was awarded the Silver Beaver in 1933 for fifteen years of scouting leadership. He was only the third African American to receive the national honor. Boy Scouts also volunteered and participated in the KNEA’s annual meetings.

See:

“Boy Scouts of Kentuckiana.” *Encyclopedia of Louisville*.

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