

## **ROSE FINDS A PERMANENT HOME AT PLYMOUTH**

The final chapter of the Rose Ward Hunt story explains how the painting of Rose and Henry Ward Beecher came to hang in the arcade at Plymouth Church. Three characters round out this story: Brooklyn painter and bon vivant Harry Roseland, African American civic leader George E. Wibecan, and civil rights advocate Mary Ovington. Their stories spotlight Brooklyn's local art scene at the dawn of the twentieth century and the growth of and challenges for the African American community in Brooklyn. As Rose Ward Hunt's childhood story illuminated the horrors of slavery, perhaps the history of this painting is a symbol of community collaboration.

We have learned of the ceremony where Henry Ward Beecher led the congregation to free the enslaved girl Sally Diggs and christen her Rose Ward. Our knowledge of those dramatic events is partly the result of Rose Ward Hunt's famed return to Plymouth Church in 1927 and the flurry of news surrounding the event. Less well-known was the effect on Brooklyn artist Harry Roseland. Struck by the lightning bolt of inspiration, he created the painting of Sally Diggs and Henry Ward Beecher in months. What's been forgotten and we need to understand is how the painting got to Plymouth Church and who donated it. The movement within the African American community to donate the painting was years in the making. Without the commitment of George Wibecan, the painting would not have made it to Plymouth. Enriching the story of Brooklyn, Plymouth, Roseland, and Wibecan is the civil rights advocate Mary Ovington with her connections to the city, the church, and the two very different men.

# I

All three figures were born in Brooklyn in the mid-1860s, one to a newly prominent African American family, another to a prominent Brooklyn Heights family, and the third to recent German immigrants. George Wibecan, Jr., 1865-1946, was a second-generation African American civic leader in Brooklyn. His father's prominence garnered him a school named his honor, PS 309. However, there is some confusion about what the Sr. did and what the Jr. did. George Sr. emigrated from Saint Croix in the West Indies in 1863 and was a successful businessman. One story about George Sr. that deserves repeating: during the New York Draft Riots of 1863, he survived by hiding from a mob in a dingy floating out in Wallabout Bay. George Jr. was a civic leader and political activist. George Jr. traveled to Europe for part of his education, studying in Leipzig, Germany, for three years after High-School. He pursued a law degree at Columbia at night. Rose Ward Hunt's husband, James, also pursued a law degree. However, neither man ever practiced law.



*George Wibecan as a young man*



Like Wibecan, Mary Ovington was also born in 1865. The Ovingtons were a prominent multi-generational family in Brooklyn Heights and had a large homeware store on Fulton Street. Her paternal grandparents were members at Plymouth. Her father Theodore grew up in the church and became a member himself. After marrying Ann Louisa Ketcham, he left to join the Second Unitarian Church, where her family worshiped. The minister Rev. John White Chadwick was a rationalist and opposed to the religious sentimentality of Henry Ward Beecher. At times, Mary Ovington would attend Plymouth Church with her grandparents or aunts and uncles. She even attended Beecher's seventieth birthday party. Notably, her aunt and uncle testified on Henry Ward Beecher's behalf in his adultery trial.



*Mary Ovington c. 1910*

Mary Ovington was a graduate of Packer Collegiate Institute in Brooklyn Heights. Although she was not a product of the public schools, PS/IS 30 on Fourth Avenue was named in her honor. As the ups and downs of her father's business went, they lived on Willow Street and Monroe Place, eventually settling in the St. George Hotel. She had to drop out of Radcliff in 1893 due to financial problems.

A year later, in 1866, Harry Roseland was born to Henry and Mary Roseland, who had immigrated to Brooklyn from Germany. He grew up in what is now considered Vinegar Hill, likely under modest circumstances as his father was a grocer. The 1880 census shows that the Roseland family lived in the same slum on which Mary Ovington would focus her attention 30 years later.

Harry Roseland was, for the most part, self-taught, but at the age of 16, he studied with John Bernard Whittaker at Adelphi Academy, the Brooklyn art school. Under Whittaker, the prep school Adelphi Academy launched an unaccredited college art program before incorporating Adelphi University, which is now located in Garden City, New York. In the 1880s, William Merritt Chase and Thomas Eakins taught at the competing Art Students Guild in Brooklyn. An 1893 profile in the *Brooklyn Eagle* states that Roseland studied with Eakins for a short time, a fact omitted from most profiles until those published very late in Roseland's life and in his obituary. He also studied for a short time with J. Carroll Beckwith. In contrast with the moralism of late nineteenth-century arts, the Art Students Guild was the only art school in the area that used nude models. However, Adelphi used strategically draped models. Eakins was later fired for using nude models in his classes at the Philadelphia Academy of Art. He was replaced by Thomas Hovenden, who would influence Roseland's handling of African American subjects.





Harry Roseland

The *Brooklyn Eagle* did an extensive profile of Harry Roseland in 1899 that included the following:

Mr. Roseland could not go to Paris, so he went down to the lower end of Flatbush, wondering as he went why he had never noticed before what fine old colonial houses there were along the way and that noble trees and splendid reaches of meadow, and what bits of satisfying color in the red barns and yellow sheds and what misty clumps of wood in the distance. Why there were Normandy farms and Holland meadows and English herds and all the rest of it but being just a few rods from our own door stones, we had never seen it.

As Paris was the world's art capital, it was customary for serious American artists to spend time there. In an earlier 1888 *Brooklyn Eagle* review, an unknown art critic wrote, "Roseland is a young fellow of decided promise, and after he has profited by a season of travel and study in Europe, some big things may be expected of him." He failed to raise funds with an auction and never managed to travel. To give a sense of what he was missing, George Seurat's masterpiece *La Grande Jatte* is dated 1884-86. Yet Roseland made

lemonade from the lemons that life handed him by earning fame and wealth from painting scenes of Brooklyn inspired by the people, architecture, and landscape surrounding him, stating that he found just as interesting sights and scenes in this country as anywhere in Europe.

As we consider the early lives of all three characters during that era, it is incredible that the best educated of the trio was the African American. The socialite ended up a dropout, the artist figured out his craft on his own, and the African American man studied law at an Ivy League University.

## II

George Wibecan, like his education, was the only one of the three to have a stable home life. He was happily married to his wife Mabel and had four children, George Jr. (technically III), Kenneth, Elenore, and Mildred. His wife was a musician who often performed at his political events. Kenneth was a renowned athlete and as we will see later, involved with the fight to desegregate Coney Island.

Unlike George Wibecan, Harry Roseland's personal life was a bit messy. He was married three times. One shocking event in his personal life was the 1897 suicide of his wife Eva Helene Roseland, who was only 23, at 405 Bergen Street, where they lived with Harry's parents. His parents were home at the time, but Harry Roseland was at an opening for an exhibition at the Salmagundi Club, where three of his paintings were exhibited. Her death made the front page of *The Brooklyn Eagle*, and Roseland was remarried within a year.

Mary Ovington's personal life was also not traditional. She opted never to marry, though the reason is unclear. There is a story told both in her autobiographies and a subsequent biography that in 1890, Mary saw Frederick Douglass speak at Plymouth Church. Although Frederick Douglass did speak at Plymouth, it was in 1866, not 1890. As the tale goes, she brought an appropriate date, a young man from Baltimore, and he disapproved of Frederick Douglass's marriage to a white woman. Mary claimed this was why she remained single her whole life-- appropriate men disapproved of her interests.

Mary Ovington founded the Cosmopolitan Society, which the press suggested advocated for “amalgamation.” Did she like African American men? If so, she was very discreet. There is no gossip about such a lover. Was she gay? Again, there is no gossip. Did she prefer maintaining her independence? As a wife in the late 1880s, she would have forfeited her property to her husband. Ida B. Wells struggled to balance activism with marriage and motherhood. Maybe Mary Ovington wanted to avoid the conflict.

### III

George Wibecan spent most of his career working for the United States Postal Service, serving forty-six years and retiring in 1933 as Supervisor of General Delivery. After leaving the Postal Service, he worked as Borough President Raymond Ingersoll’s confidential investigator. If the Postal Service was George Wibecan’s vocation, his avocation reached near professional levels. The list of civic organizations he led or supported is extensive. He was described as a national leader of the African American Republicans. In 1936, he was the New York State Negro Republican Chairman and the first African American delegate to the Republican National Convention. Wibecan was one of the original members of the NAACP. He was also the Grand Exalted Ruler of the Negro Elks (aka the national president of the segregated Elks Club), President of the Citizens Club, Chairman of the Frederick Douglass Community Center and Forum, Librarian of the Negro Library Association of America, and chairman of the Federation of Colored Organizations of Brooklyn and Long Island.

Two organizations deserve further explanation. George Wibecan was President of the H.H. Garnet Club, a Republican political club. Now largely forgotten, Rev. Henry Highland Garnet was one of the previous generation’s most prominent African American leaders, on par with Frederick Douglas, with whom he did not get along. Rev. Garnet worked with Lewis Tappan and the American Missionary Association. He was the first African American to speak at the Capitol. His widow Sarah Garnet was a civic leader in her own right as a suffragette and educator. At her 1911 memorial service at the Bridge Street AME Church, George Wibecan shared the dais with other luminaries such as W.E.B. Dubois and Addie Waites Hunton, an African American suffragist active in the YWCA who would also speak at Plymouth in 1913.



George Wibecan also founded the Crispus Attucks Community Council, the organization he used to push Brooklyn businesses to integrate. The community council was named in honor of Crispus Attucks who was the first man killed at the Boston Massacre during the Revolutionary War and was a freedman. As Attucks was an early African American patriot, George Wibecan fought to get the playground in Bedford Stuyvesant named for him. The park still bears Crispus Attucks' name and is around the corner from the old Nazarene Congregational Church. In 1919, George Wibecan spoke of the fact that African Americans arrived before the Pilgrims, as the 1619 Project confirms. He also emphasized the financial growth in the African American community since emancipation when it started with nothing.

Although Mary Ovington's parents could not afford her to finish college, her social connections helped her land on her feet. She worked as the registrar at Pratt Institute from 1893-94. Some references say she worked directly for Charles Pratt, whom her parents must have known socially. The wealthiest man in Brooklyn, Pratt was not only a patron of his father's institute but also a significant donor to the Adelphi Academy and the Carlton YMCA. Mary Ovington learned of the horrible state of housing for the poor when delivering Christmas presents to, of all people, Ida B. Wells' sister's family.

With the patronage of Charles Pratt, Mary Ovington left the Institute to work on housing. In 1895, she cofounded Greenpoint Settlement within the Astral Building, which was yet another civic project of Charles Pratt, albeit more pragmatic. He erected the enormous apartment building as housing for his Astral Oil Refinery workers in 1886. Mary Ovington was the senior social worker at the Greenpoint Settlement, modeled after Jane Adams Hull House of Chicago. She left the settlement after contracting Typhoid.



*The Astral House Today*



As Ovington devoted herself to housing the poor, and George Wibecan began his career at the Postal Service in 1887, in 1884 Harry Roseland first exhibited at the National Academy of Design and had already gotten some positive notice in *The Brooklyn Eagle*. He had yet to finish his studies which concluded in 1886. He exhibited extensively in Brooklyn in the late 1880s. Reviews of group shows only listed his name and never gave any sense of what the work was like. He painted landscapes of the farms of Southern Brooklyn, seascapes of Jamaica Bay, still lifes, and portraits. He was looking for a style that would ignite his career. His work was unabashedly American but also he never deserted Brooklyn even after becoming well known. Others were known to head into Manhattan once discovered. Roseland's studio remained in Brooklyn Heights.

By the 1890s, he got more press attention, and in 1896, *The Brooklyn Eagle* reported, "A notable advance is seen in Harry Roseland's figures, especially in his old negroes, as they have humor and have what is better—character. Mr. Roseland has been slowly working toward his métier, and it looks now as if he had found it." After searching for a subject and style, he now embarked on the theme he would paint for the rest of his life. It appears that he began working on the African American subject matter before ever traveling to the South, relying on a small African American community in the Ocean Hill Section of Bedford Stuyvesant.

Harry Roseland was not the first artist to paint African American genre scenes. Three artists deserve discussion: Eastman Johnson, Thomas Hovenden, and Henry O. Tanner. Johnson and Hovenden were from an earlier generation active in the 1860s. We discussed Johnson's painting *Freedom's Ring but Riding to Liberty*, another famous painting hanging at the Brooklyn Museum. Hovenden was an Irish-born American painter best known for his painting *The Last Moments of John Brown*, hanging at the Metropolitan Museum. However, it may be more interesting to compare Roseland's work to Hovenden's painting *I Know'd It Was Ripe*, painted in 1885, also owned by the Brooklyn Museum. Combining a theme straight from a minstrel show with Beaux-Arts academic rendering was a play of high and low for commercial success. No matter how well painted the boy is, to modern eyes, an African American joyously eating watermelon is a poisonous subject best avoided by white artists.



Thomas Hovenden  
*"I Know'd It Was Ripe", 1885*

Henry O. Tanner might be the most interesting comparison. The same generation as Roseland, albeit six years older, Tanner was the first African American artist to attend the Philadelphia Academy of Art, studying under Thomas Eakins, with whom he was close. He then traveled to Europe to escape the oppressive racism in the States, studying at the Academie Julian. Importantly for us, he returned to the US, and, while here, painted the two genre paintings *The Banjo Lesson*, 1893, and *Thankful Poor*, 1894. It seems impossible that Roseland was unaware of Tanner's painting when we look at *The Blessing*, especially as they both studied under Eakins.

The way both artists handle the youthful figures is remarkably similar; both have a golden glow of youth. Roseland's girl especially stands out in contrast to the elderly couple, whom he paints so dark that they appear blue. The little girl has a golden glow, perhaps intended to be the glow of optimism. Interestingly Tanner never returned to the subject matter, focusing on religious subjects for the remainder of his career.





Henry O. Tanner "Thankful Poor", 1894



Harry Roseland "The Blessing" 1905  
Collection of the Brooklyn Museum

Starting in the 1880's Roseland used his summer travels to research subjects for his paintings. The first trips were modest, sailing on Jamaica bay and renting a farmhouse in Noyac with a friend. As soon as he began selling his work, he started traveling farther afield, not only in the South but in New England, the Adirondacks, and California. These trips were inspirational, but he completed the paintings in his Brooklyn studio. He was not a Plein air painter as typified the impressionists.

Harry Roseland spent the summers of 1900 and 1901 at the artist colony in Annisquam near Gloucester, Massachusetts. But instead of focusing only on the dramatic seacoast of Cape Anne, he found a local African American community in which to sketch. The *Brooklyn Eagle* in 1900 reported that he had just returned from the South before departing for Cape Anne.

Once his income allowed it, in 1903 he started traveling internationally, most notably to France and Italy, where he made up for what he missed in his youth. He also took groups of young artists to Europe to study in 1905. These travels did not change Harry Roseland's art. He was American and continued to paint American scenes.

His first studio was in Continental Insurance Building at Court and Montague. Later he moved to the Bank Building at the corner of Clinton and Atlantic. It was here that he found the subject matter for the rest of his career. Roseland's studio overflowed with props he collected for his African American genre paintings. The building was well known for the artists who lived there. In 1895, the Fulton Street Gallery had an exhibition of Bank Building artists, including Margaret Fernie, Gerard Steenks, Harry Roseland, and Zella de Milhau, who had also studied at Adelphi.

Roseland moved his studio to the Ovington building that once housed Mary's father's store on the corner of Clark and Cadman Plaza West. At the time, it was named Fulton Street, not to be confused with the Fulton Mall. As Cadman Plaza did not exist yet, it would have faced other buildings as well as the Fulton Street Elevated, all of which kept it from being a bright and sunny location. Plymouth member and Brooklyn's most famous artist Leon Dabo also had a studio in the building. Dabo taught art history classes at the Arbuckle Institute and was later trapped in Europe at the outset of WWI while looking for paintings for Plymouth Church. He relocated to Manhattan in 1928, though it is unknown what interactions he had with Harry Roseland. I cannot resist mentioning that the building later had another notable artist, Rudolf Abel, known then as Emil Goldfus, the notorious spy arrested by the FBI and traded for the freedom of Gary Powers. Mark Rylance portrayed him in the 2015 Tom Hanks movie *Bridge of Spies*.

Roseland's travels in the South were so well known that when reporting on the Great Mississippi Flood of 1927, The *Brooklyn Eagle* interviewed him



about his time on the river. It is incredible to think that at the time of Rose's return to Brooklyn, catastrophic flooding on the Mississippi affected over 630,000 people, considered the worst flood in the history of the United States. The flooding even made it into Rev. Durkee's sermon on Anniversary Sunday when Rose returned.

Harry Roseland must have been very outgoing as he actively courted the press. The number of articles about his activities is legion, from extensive biographical profiles such as the 1899 article quoted earlier to little blurbs such as the one from 1929 noting that he had painted a portrait of George Wibecan's daughter, Elenore. Was it a commission or a gift? Was it connected to the purchase of the portrait of Henry Ward Beecher and Rose Ward?

#### IV

At the 1900 Republic National Convention in Philadelphia, George Wibecan led the Brooklyn African American delegation, but the Continental Hotel would not honor their reservation because of their race. Fearing a controversy, John C Platt, the Republican Boss of New York State, and Brooklyn's own Timothy Woodruff put aside their competing plans for the nomination of William McKinley's running mate to help. The pair convinced the hotel to give the delegates their rooms. So, George Wibecan won the day, as did Theodore Roosevelt, who was nominated for vice president. Timothy Woodruff had hoped for the nomination himself, but John C. Platt wanted Teddy out of New York's hair. Showing the circular nature of history, the Continental was replaced by the Benjamin Franklin Hotel, which refused the Brooklyn Dodgers in 1947 because of Jackie Robinson.

Also, in 1900, George Wibecan and his wife were refused entry to Brooklyn's Grand Opera House. The following day, he went to the police station and complained about the manager and treasurer, who were arrested, but several days later, the magistrate threw out the case. Part of me is amazed that it got that far, and the other pessimistically thinks of course it got thrown out. George Wibecan tried to spin a victory regardless. Later, Wibecan claimed he and his wife were turned away because the theater was sold out, not because of discrimination.

While Wibecan kept the public eye on the injustices of the time in Philadelphia and at the opera, Mary Ovington also pushed for social reforms. As part of her civil rights activism, on March 4th, 1903, Mary Ovington spoke to the Review Club of Plymouth Church as an expert on the deplorable housing conditions of the poor of Brooklyn. At issue were proposed amendments to a new tenement law. Although not in attendance, Dwight Newell Hillis's sentiments were as the presiding club member quoted his Sunday evening sermon. Hillis, he said, "considered the problem of the slums as the great peril of the American people." Real estate concerns and construction companies proposed these amendments, intending to gut the reforms proposed in the new law. By March 13th, Plymouth Church hosted a "great citizens' mass meeting," according to the Eagle. As Rev. Hillis was still traveling, Rev. Lyman Abbott spoke in his place, pointing out that "the three cheapest things in the world are air light and water, . . . necessities of life, and no man is deprived of them except through the fault of his fellow men." The mass meeting passed a resolution rejecting the amendments.

A few years later, in 1906, Harry Roseland had a well-reviewed show at the Salmagundi Club in Manhattan. The exhibition titled *Life of the South* showed twenty-five of his African American genre paintings, including *To the Highest Bidder* and *The Blessing*, the former considered his greatest work. The latter is still in Brooklyn. In 1908, the Eagle opined that it may have been the zenith of his career, tastes had changed.



Harry Roseland "To the Highest Bidder", Collection of Oprah Winfrey



Harry Roseland was not political if you define politics only as Republican or Democratic party activity and elections. Still, he was active in the artistic community of Brooklyn, which must have required its own sort of political savvy. The same year as his major exhibition in 1906, the great San Francisco earthquake devastated the artists of San Francisco, many of whom became homeless and lost much of their work. Emil Carlsen, who moved to New York City from San Francisco, related the conditions after the quake and fire. Brooklyn artists went to their aid by holding an exhibition and auction. Harry Roseland and Gustave Wiegand lead the committee. Although Carlsen was a Manhattanite, the exhibition was held in Brooklyn at the Bank Building, where Roseland had his studio.

Continuing her anti-racism efforts, Mary Ovington founded the Cosmopolitan Society in 1906. A snarky article in *The Brooklyn Eagle* in 1907 snipes, "Intermarriage of the races is not preached by all the members, and it is understood that there will be no immediate propagandizing in that direction. Although the whites in the society have been meeting the negroes on terms of social equality, some of them are not quite reconciled to the idea of taking on helpmates of negro blood." By 1908, on occasion, the group met at restaurants. Scandals ensued. Mary Ovington had the nerve to sit next to an African American man and was anointed the High Priestess of Amalgamation. George Wibecan was active in the Cosmopolitan Society as well. A dinner in 1908 in downtown Brooklyn illustrates the circle in which George Wibecan worked. Mary Ovington presided, and Mrs. Garnet was an honored guest. Another founder of the NAACP spoke, Oswald Garrison Villard, whose mother was William Lloyd Garrison's suffragette daughter Helen and whose father was Harry Villard, the railroad magnate who built the Villard house, now the Palace Hotel. George Wibecan also hosted meetings at his house on Pulaski Street in 1909. The Cosmopolitan Society would later evolve into the NAACP.

Through a service organization called the Armstrong Association, by 1907, the Brooklyn Heights elite raised money for the Hampton Institute in Virginia, one of the schools that, like Howard University, was established to educate the newly freed. One notable early Hampton Institute graduate was Booker T. Washington, who not only studied but also taught there before leaving to start Tuskegee University in 1881. Named for the Hampton Institute founder General Samuel C. Armstrong, the Armstrong Association

was a who's who of Brooklyn society. As with many of these schools, the American Missionary Association helped establish and support the school, and one of its founders was famed NY abolitionist Lewis Tappan. One of the most significant events of the association was the 1908 annual meeting. Held at Plymouth church, the Secretary of War and future President of the United States William Howard Taft spoke, along with Booker T. Washington. After his presidency, Taft became President of the Hampton University Board of Trustees. Sparing such illustrious guests time and boredom, the actual annual meeting to elect officers and conduct regular business was held a few days before. At that meeting, Mary Ovington spoke to remind the club leadership that Brooklyn had its own African Americans in need.

Although invited to participate in the Niagara Movement, George Wibecan declined. In a letter to W.E.B. Dubois from 1909, he said the meeting occurred while he was on vacation. It seemed this was an annual scheduling conflict. He wrote, "Devoting as I do all but three weeks of the year to public and race work, I feel that the vacation I get is very much needed, and so I go to the mountains and stay there until it is over." He goes on to say that "because of a recent conference on the status of the negro that there would be no meeting this year of the Niagara movement." Was this conference one of the first meetings of the NAACP? He voices his frustration at the Niagara Movement in New York as "impotent." By 1909, the Niagara Movement was winding down as the NAACP grew.

Although Mary Ovington was one of the principal co-founders of the NAACP, she did not desert her work in improving the lives of those living in the tenements of Brooklyn. Her biographies tend to limit their discussion of her efforts in Brooklyn and only mention her childhood. We will focus on Brooklyn Heights, Greenpoint, and particularly on Fleet Street, where she founded the Lincoln Settlement house at 105 Fleet Street in 1908. She was the head of the board, not a staff member. Maybe the work is overlooked because she was working on her first book at the time. In 1904, she started her research for her book *Half a Man*, published in 1911, about the plight of African Americans not in the South but New York. The neighborhood where the settlement house was located was razed and replaced with Ingersol Houses and was one of the poorest slums in New York. George Wibecan was active from the very beginning. The settlement house provided daycare for working mothers, kindergarten for older children, and afterschool programs teaching carpentry and sewing for teens. Eventually, a playground was built.





*Fair Street around the corner from the Lincoln Settlement House. As a reminder, when *The Brooklyn Eagle* visited James and Rose Hunt in DC before Rose returned to Brooklyn in 1927, the reporters mocked their house, describing it as “a narrow little two-story affair, is one of a short row. It has cast-iron steps leading up to the tiny vestibule, inside the air is dark and rather heavy.” And yet these houses were where the reporters’ neighbors lived.*

In 1909, Mary Ovington presided over a meeting at the Lincoln Settlement House regarding the deplorable living conditions in the area. George Wibecan spoke as well as Rev. Newman of the Willow Chapel and Rev. Cooper of the Bridge Street AME Church. Stanley Durkee’s future colleague Rabbi Lyons also attended. Rev. Newman is quoted in *The Brooklyn Eagle* “Vice and immorality are so rampant in certain parts, where fourteen people are found occupying two rooms and five in one bed.” Rev. Newman suggested founding a corporation to buy up properties to improve them. Mary Ovington related some successful techniques used in Manhattan to improve slums. The *Eagle* reported that Wibecan wondered that as African American people had already lost investments totaling \$200,000, they may not be eager to purchase the properties. African Americans with means were not heartless and recognized the poor housing conditions. He said that “rich and influential men should be reached and induced to build suitable houses.” Rabbi Lyons said more publicity was needed. Mary Ovington’s book *Half a Man* would, in part, shine a light on these conditions.

Not only was George Wibecan involved at the Lincoln Settlement house, but Mabel Wibecan, George's wife, performed music at events. His Republican ally Maria Lawton was active in fundraising for the settlement house. She deserves a slight digression. In a way, Maria Lawton was the female political counterpart of George Wibecan. She was president and a founder of the State Federation of Colored Women's Clubs. She was a committed Republican activist, and when George Wibecan returned from the 1936 Republican convention, a party was thrown in his honor. It was Maria Lawton who presented him a gift to mark the occasion, symbolically a travel bag, due to the amount of traveling Wibecan would do while campaigning for Alf Landon. She was also active in Crispus Attucks Community Council, taking over the leadership from Wibecan.

Brooklyn Heights was late to the playground movement as other neighborhoods had playgrounds by 1903. The Heights was so densely settled that finding a site was difficult. By 1912 the movement had gotten traction. As *The Brooklyn Eagle* reported, the meeting was filled with First Assembly District civic and political organizations. Mary Ovington was selected as one of many vice chairmen. With 17 years of advocacy for good housing, safe outdoor play areas would have been right in her wheelhouse. The site selected was at the foot of State Street, in the vicinity of what is now Adam Yauch playground. It is interesting to consider that in 1914, Plymouth Church was about to expand with the Arbuckle Institute, also built as a haven for the youth, albeit young adults older than those that usually use playgrounds.

As Ovington and Wibecan were busy with civil rights and fair housing, Roseland, although omnipresent in the Brooklyn art scene, did have an artistic setback in 1913. The Institute of Art and Science, now the Brooklyn Museum, declined ex-mayor Charles Schieren's donation of maybe Roseland's greatest painting: *To the Highest Bidder*, stating that they didn't want any more paintings of negroes. The Armory Show introduced European modernism in 1913, which probably did not affect the museum's decision to decline the gift but illustrates the rising tide of the avant-garde that Roseland would face for the rest of his career. The Brooklyn Museum has several exceptional Eastman Johnson paintings, and Roseland's piece would have been an excellent addition. But Brooklyn's loss became Oprah's gain as it is said to be her favorite painting in her collection. In 1927, Roseland's painting *The Blessing* entered the Brooklyn Museum's collection.



In 1915, Mary Ovington, along with Dwight Newell Hillis, Horatio King, and Lyman Stowe, held a fundraising drive for the Beecher memorial endowment for Talladega College in Alabama to raise \$50,000 in ten days. Talladega College was another of the schools founded with the help of the American Missionary Association. It shared the same mission as Howard University and the Hampton Institute. Although the Minister of Plymouth Church, one of the prominent lay leaders, and Harriet Beecher Stowe's grandson were involved, it was not a Plymouth Church project. They did not even meet at Plymouth, holding their meetings at the Hotel Bossert. This effort parallels the Armstrong Association, which raised money for the Hampton Institute. The association conducted the ten-day fundraising drive during World War I because domestic charities struggled during the war.

Even after publishing her first book, Mary Ovington remained committed to the Lincoln Settlement House and civil rights. As president, she presided when Lincoln Settlement House held its annual meeting at Plymouth in 1916 with W.E.B. Du Bois as the guest speaker. Rev. Hillis was traveling, so Lyman Abbot took the pulpit. The Fisk Jubilee Singers performed.

Harry Roseland found himself embroiled in drama as art critic Helen Appleton Read failed to mention his work in her review of the 1918 Brooklyn Society of Artists' first members' exhibition. As the second vice-president of the group, Roseland wrote a letter to the editor of *The Brooklyn Eagle* to bash her praise for two artists who emulated a more modern style. It devolved into a duel of sniping letters to the editor as Helen Read shot back that Roseland just wanted to get his name in the newspaper. Roseland's friend Gustave Wiegand jumped in, decrying the "fierce faddism" of Modernism. The awareness of modern art was growing in America, and Roseland and Wiegand would have been part of the old guard. The rest of the board disavowed Roseland's digs at Read. By February, *The Eagle* ran an article about the Brooklyn Society's internal debate about modern art, quoting Roseland as saying the club should be thanked for the dust-up with Helen Appleton Read because it drummed up more interest in the show. By 1921, Roseland was president of the Society.

Oddly, the Spanish Flu epidemic did not seem to affect the lives of George Wibecan, Mary Ovington, Harry Roseland, or anyone else in Brooklyn, for that matter, which seems utterly baffling given what we have been going through for the last two years. The Spanish Flu epidemic does not appear

in any of the articles referred to in my research. As the previous paragraph shows, the artists were out to socialize. In November of 1918, in the middle of the second and deadliest wave of the flu, Wibecan spoke to a group of 200 about African American participation in World War I. Mary Ovington's work at the Settlement House did not stop during that time; in fact, the need for daycare became even more critical because more women had to join the workforce due to their husbands' military conscription. In addition, one would think the crowding of the slums where Mary Ovington worked would spread the contagion quickly, but there's no indication that it did. For that matter, Plymouth Church also did not suspend services.

Likewise, the first Red Scare of 1919-20 didn't seem to touch socialists Mary Ovington and W.E.B. DuBois, nor did Republican stalwart George Wibecan race to the ramparts to rage against the Bolsheviks. In fact, Mary Ovington's commitments to the NAACP increase 1919 when she became Chairman of the Board of Directors despite the Red Scare.

In 1923, political adversaries put aside their differences to attend a dinner to honor George Wibecan's 35 years of service to the Postal Service. Both Brooklyn Democratic boss John McCooey and his Republican counterpart Jacob A Livingstone attended, which was terrific given Wibecan's partisanship. As a reminder, ten years later, the same John McCooey is the Catholic official who helped the Nazarene Congregational Church. I suppose religion topped politics in this case, for George Wibecan was also a Catholic and an active member at St. John's Catholic Church, which answers why Wibecan was not involved with the Nazarene Congregationalist's new building acquisition.

While Mary Ovington and George Wibecan were fighting for civil rights, Harry Roseland engaged in more frivolous matters like the defense of his painting *Motherhood* in 1924. In *The Brooklyn Eagle*, the critic of the painting and sculpture exhibition at Pratt Institute took issue with the mother's appearance, writing that she looked too much like a flapper, with bobbed hair and pouty lips. In a letter to the editor, Harry Roseland responded that not all mothers look like mothers. "Rattlesnakes are also mothers (the female) but I doubt if they show it on their face." He adds a P.S. "Nothing being said about the child, I guess it looks like one."





*Harry Roseland "Motherhood"*

In 1925, George Wibecan's son Kenneth was barred from one of the Parkway Baths, a Coney Island commercial pool. A Columbia University student, Kenneth was arrested for disorderly conduct after the manager claimed Kenneth assaulted him, though Kenneth said it was the other way around. He was found guilty, but the judge suspended the sentence because of his father's prominence. Before sentencing, George Wibecan convened civic leaders at the Carlton Y, including congressmen Michael Hogan and Lester Volks, to protest the prosecution. The outcry rang out from the pulpit of the Nazarene Congregational Church and the NAACP. The demonstration may have pushed the judge to suspend the sentence, but it failed to get the charges thrown out.

Also, in 1925, George Wibecan spoke at Nazarene Congregational church to protest the impending KKK march in Washington, DC. Tenth Congressional

District Representative Emanuel Celler spoke against the march, stating, “I am opposed to the Klan or any order that has for its tenets that which harks back to the prejudices of the middle age.” Rev. Proctor saw the Klan parade as inevitable and read his letter of protest addressed to President Coolidge. Rev. J.C. Olden of Washington DC’s African American Plymouth Church gave a dose of sad reality, stating that the KKK “It has never been proven a lawless organization and legally the Klan has outrun all of the rest of us.” Wibecan emphasized the “prejudice of the press, theaters, restaurants, and hotels against the colored race.” However, The *Brooklyn Eagle* added the word “alleged” before his statement, essentially proving his point.

Through the Crispus Attucks Community Council, Wibecan pushed for more African American employment in the department stores on Fulton. In 1915, he sued a Washington Street restaurant for not serving him under the Levy Law. The small article in The *Brooklyn Eagle* thought his case had hopes of succeeding. “With a Negro-Jew lawyer and the Levy statute to sue on, he may make the other fellow see stars. As for Wibecan, he is an unhyphenated American.” Unhyphenated certainly harkens back to Crispus Attucks. The African American community was American from the beginning.

The Unitarian Universalist History and Heritage Society’s biography of Mary Ovington mention that her mother fell ill in 1909. As the spinster daughter, Mary was obliged to care for her until she passed away in 1927. At the same time, Mary wrote books and led the board of the Lincoln Settlement, which merged with the Brooklyn Urban League in 1927. The Urban League continued at 105 Fleet Street until recently. The building still stands for the time being, although there are plans to tear it down. With a reputation as a bleak slum, it should not be a surprise that the entire area was razed in 1944, and the Walt Wittman and Ingersol houses were built.

In 1927, George Wibecan greeted at the rail station and introduced Teddy Roosevelt’s son, Theodore Roosevelt Jr., to a crowd of Brooklyn Republicans. More known as a soldier, later being the highest-ranking officer, Brigadier General, and oldest at 56 to storm the beaches at Normandy on D-day Roosevelt Jr. was known as Colonel in 1927, the same rank as his father. He does not appear to be running for a particular office but spoke of the poor treatment of the African Americans in the South, reminding the audience



that the South was a Democratic Party stronghold.

Two stories on a lighter note: one, in an article in *The New York Age* in 1931, the Harlem newspaper skewers *The Brooklyn Eagle* for accidentally identifying Wibecan as Reverend. So many African American leaders were Reverend without a pulpit, like Jessie Moorland, but Wibecan was not one of them. He was Catholic on top of it. It is a testament to his prominence in the community that this error was newsworthy. Another fun story: in 1935, at the inaugural game of a newly formed team in the National Negro League named *The Brooklyn Eagles*, Wibecan threw out the first pitch. The fact that the team shared its name with the local newspaper amuses me no end.

In 1935, Wibecan led a boycott of Golden Eagle Insurance Company until it integrated its office staff. He first met with the owner to inquire why they employed no African Americans. The owner responded that he wasn't going to let an African American organization tell him how to run his business and that each African American they hired as an agent would have to provide a \$200 bond. Wibecan agreed but then was told no positions were available. He worked with the Ministers' Alliance and the Carlton Y to organize the boycott.

In 1939, when a group of Bedford Stuyvesant residents interested in electing an African American to city council could not come to a decision, the alliance broke down, and Wibecan announced his intention to run for city council. Wibecan said he would only run if nominated by a major party, preferably the Republicans. He did not run then, but in 1941, he ran for city council and lost. He was the first African American to receive a nomination from the GOP for the city council.

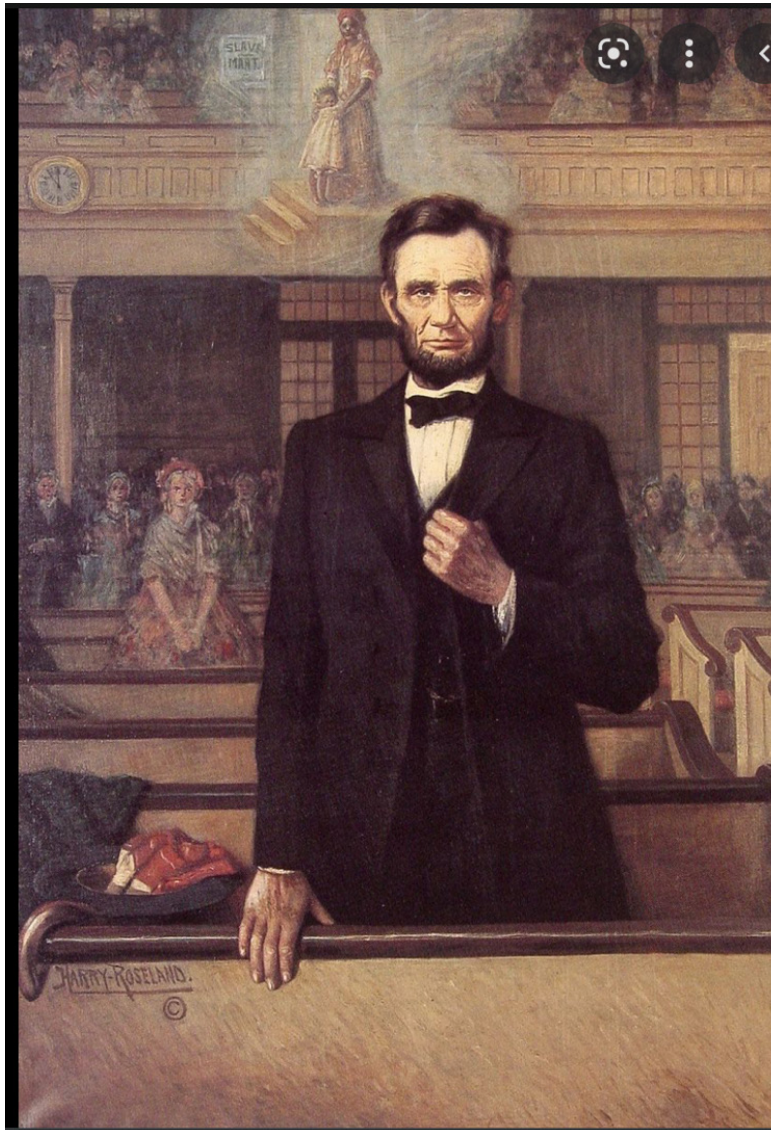
A committed Republican to the end and a critic of the New Deal and the Democratic Party, George Wibecan complained the New Deal excluded African Americans. He continued to support Republican presidential candidates Alf Landon and Wendell Wilke. As the rest of his community shifted their allegiance to FDR, Wibecan could not leave the party of Lincoln.

One of George Wibecan's obituaries credits him with desegregating schools in Brooklyn. I believe this is because he was the first African American to attend a white high school in Williamsburg. As early as 1827, Brooklyn

had “colored only schools” but there were no “colored only” high schools. Wibecan would have graduated from high school around 1882 so his only option was to integrate a white school. In 1887, a law passed ending “colored only” schools. Before we gloat, it hardly changed anything. Whites simply stopped sending their children to schools where there was a large percentage of African American children. New York still wrestles with the fact that different ethnic groups tend to congregate at different schools, limiting children’s ability to experience the wonderful diversity of our city.

Harry Roseland must have known paintings of widely celebrated Abraham Lincoln would be of interest, so he painted two paintings commemorating the time Lincoln visited Plymouth. Both show Lincoln in the sanctuary standing at the Henry Bowens pew where he worshipped when visiting Plymouth in 1860. The first version with the basic title *Lincoln at Plymouth* shows other worshipers behind him and Roseland’s painting *To the Highest Bidder* in a thought cloud above Lincoln’s head, which evokes Rose and her grandmother. The second painting, entitled *The Inspiration*, shows Lincoln again standing in worship, but this time, he is holding the famous Plymouth Hymnal with God the Father floating over his shoulder. The location of both paintings is unknown, but both have passed through auction houses in the last 25 years. There is a third horizontal painting of Lincoln at his desk, which hangs at Abraham Lincoln High School in Brooklyn.





Harry Roseland "Lincoln at Plymouth Church"

In 1930, Roseland lamented the lack of local support for Brooklyn artists in an article in *The Brooklyn Eagle*, complaining that one of his best paintings, *The Inspiration*, was headed to Michigan, and the rest of his best works moldered in storage. Captain Sparks of Jackson, Michigan, had seen *The Inspiration* when visiting the Union League Club in New York, where it was displayed. Sparks said that he bought it for the town and a planned art museum that was never built. One has to wonder what Harry Roseland would make of the contemporary art world today with New York replacing



Paris as its global capital and many celebrated artists with their studios in Brooklyn.

Although not connected with the donation of the Roseland painting to Plymouth, Mary Ovington is tied to Harry Roseland as he illustrated one of her two children's books she wrote. *Hazel*, published in 1913, was the first book written specifically for young African American readers. The story follows a young African American girl from Boston who spends a winter in Alabama with her grandmother at the beginning of the twentieth century. Mary Ovington paid a division of NAACP Crisis Publishing to print the book because the publishers she approached did not think it would sell. She also had to fund distribution and manage sales, later turning it into a play that the children of the Lincoln Settlement House performed at the Carlton Y.



Illustrations by Harry Roseland for "Hazel" by Mary Ovington



A word needs to be said before we go on to the story of the gift of the painting to Plymouth Church. It is fitting to bring it up only after learning about the civic commitment of Mary Ovington and George Wibecan. Yes, he worked with racial stereotypes and engaged in melodrama, both wildly out of fashion today. Some today wonder if he was racist. The truth is, he is not a great artist, yet the paintings are not mean-spirited nor demeaning. He painted scenes of piety, honor, and sagacity, such as an elderly couple saying grace or paying respect to a portrait of Abraham Lincoln. There are no minstrel scenes or characters like Stepin Fetchit. This issue is our struggle today, but it was not an issue then. I do not believe Mary Ovington would have commissioned him to illustrate her book if she felt he were racist, nor would George Wibecan let his daughter sit for a portrait.

I already mentioned that George Seurat had already painted his masterpiece *Grande Jatte*, while Roseland was formulating his mature style. Harry Roseland's work has not aged well as not only was it eclipsed by the realism of the Ash Can School, but Americans' knowledge of Modernism expanded after the Armory Show. Still, Roseland lived long enough to witness the opening of the Museum of Modern Art and the work and fame of Jackson Pollack. A famous spread in Life Magazine would have made it hard to miss the drip paintings. It is hard to imagine his thoughts on Abstract Expressionism.



*Harry Roseland and the Portrait of Henry Ward Beecher and Rose Ward in his studio*

As noted, Roseland was inspired by Rose Ward Hunt's return to Plymouth in May of 1927, and he completed his painting quickly in a flurry of inspiration. His motivation is not certain, but he had a canny ability to take advantage of events for personal benefit. Finishing the painting quickly was the best way to monetize public interest in the story of Rose Ward Hunt and Henry Ward Beecher. He finished the painting in November of the same year. Harry Roseland did not create the painting as a pure imagination as he conferred with Bishop Falkner and Charles Halsey, who were present at the service in 1860. In addition, William Beecher loaned Roseland a photograph of his father from the 1860's so he could capture the likeness, and a fellow artist in a neighboring studio modeled for Henry Ward Beecher as they shared



a similar physique. In addition, Rose's face is modeled on a photograph taken in 1860 of Rose on her first day of freedom. The Eagle published it in 1927 and later shared it with Roseland. Two nine-year-old girls, Anna and Elizabeth Simpson, were used for Rose's figure as their parents were members of Plymouth.



*Comparing the photo of Rose to Roseland's portrait*

*The Eagle* reported that when Roseland unveiled it to the public in his studio in the Ovington Building, ministers from African American churches were present. The surface of the painting illustrates the rush of it being painted light rather than the more dramatic brushwork of his earlier paintings.

By February of 1928, the painting was already hanging at Plymouth Church as part of a celebration of the 119th Anniversary of Lincoln's birth, along with *Lincoln at Plymouth* and *To the Highest Bidder*. News of the painting had reached Rose Ward Hunt by this time. The *Brooklyn Eagle* reported that she wanted to return to Brooklyn to see the painting. Alas, she passed away in 1928 before she could. After the exhibition closed at Plymouth, the

paintings moved to Loeser Gallery, located on the fourth floor of Frederick Loeser & Co. department store on Fulton Street.

## VI

We have learned how the painting came to be in 1927, but the story of its donation, largely the work of George Wibecan, begins on the hundredth anniversary of Henry Ward Beecher's first sermon in 1913. In July of that year, Wibecan convened a meeting of African American civic leaders of Brooklyn at the Carlton Avenue YMCA. The focus of the meeting was how to honor Henry Ward Beecher and Plymouth Church. Beecher had been gone for 26 years but still evoked vivid memories. Mrs. W.E.J. Parker of Fleet Street Church spoke of her personal connection to Beecher, and Rev. Dr. Joseph Brown of the Berean Baptist Church spoke of the times he met with Beecher at both Plymouth and his home. There was a discussion about the importance of honoring Beecher not just as a preacher but as a patriot and statesman, singling out the significance of his speech in Liverpool as his good works, not from a sermon. George Wibecan and Maria C. Lawton were elected to be committee officers.

Later, on October 23rd, *The New York Age* reports that George Wibecan hosted a centennial celebration of Henry Ward Beecher's birth at Plymouth Church. While it wasn't a Plymouth congregation event, it shows a degree of openness that they were even willing to rent the hall to an African American group. Two nationally known civil rights activists spoke. The suffragette Addie Waites Hunton again joined Wibecan as well as Professor Kelly Miller, a dean at Howard University and a polymath known as the Bard of the Potomac. The professor is an example of controversies of Rev. Dr. Stanley Durkee's tenure at Howard University. Rev. Durkee later demoted Miller in 1919 from Dean of Arts and Science to the dean of a newly founded junior college. The event at Plymouth was on a weeknight, and there is no mention of Rev. Hillis nor any Plymouth leadership.

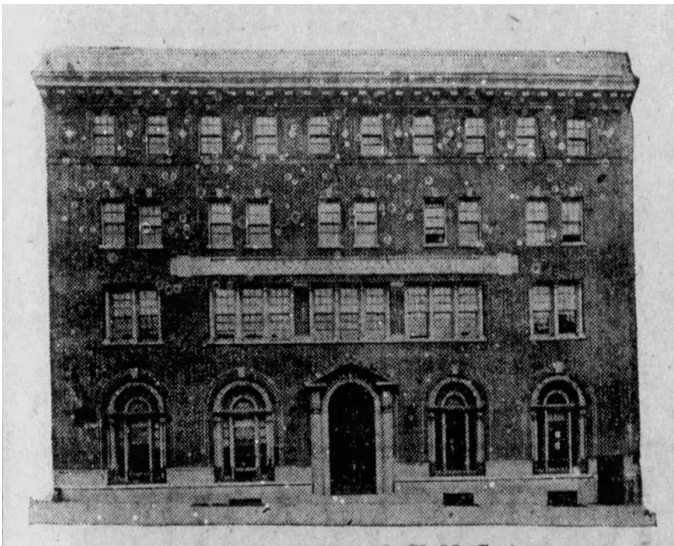
Although the idea of a gift to Plymouth was born in 1913, George Wibecan and his committee did not find the appropriate way to honor Henry Ward Beecher until the November 1927 unveiling of the Roseland painting. They announced their intention to donate the painting in May of 1928, seven months after its creation and almost exactly a year from Rose's return. It



took four years to raise the thousand dollars they needed. At the annual meeting of the Sons and Daughters of North Carolina, Wibecan spoke on the life of Henry Ward Beecher and discussed the painting in one of the many fundraising efforts.

Although the portrait of Henry Ward Beecher and Sally Diggs was exhibited at Roseland's studio, at Plymouth, and department stores, it eventually hung at the Carlton Avenue Y before the presentation at Plymouth.

In the previous essay, we learned a little about the national African American YMCA program. Led by Rev. Dr. Durkee's friend Rev. Jesse Moorland, the program was started in 1890, but its office was disbanded in 1946 when the YMCA came out against segregation. Julius Rosenwald of Chicago, the part owner of Sears, had offered a challenge grant of \$25,000 to build new Y buildings if the African American community could raise \$75,000. Twenty-five cities successfully took up his challenge.



*The Carlton YMCA when completed*



*The Carlton YMCA building today*

The Carlton Avenue YMCA was founded in 1902 in a brownstone at 405 Carlton, sitting on the northern end of Cuyler Gore Park. Charles H. Bullock of Virginia was tasked with opening the Carlton Y, hoping to repeat his success from a YMCA he founded in Charlottesville. After a flurry of fundraising to match Rosenwald's challenge grant, a traditional Y building was erected in 1918. Governor of New York Charles Seymour Whitman spoke at its opening. Its mission was to assist the new arrivals from the great migration and youth in the community. Women were also allowed to participate in the programs. The building still stands today, but much of the original architectural detail was removed at some point. The same construction company that built the Arbuckle Institute built the Carlton Y, which might be why they used to resemble each other.

Although the building was grand enough to allow for many programs, it can only be described as modest compared to the Central YMCA of Brooklyn at 55 Hanson, just a few blocks away. With over 14 stories, the Y for white people dominated an entire block and was the largest Y in the country in its heyday. Even progressive Brooklyn illustrated that separate was rarely equal.



Central YMCA



Some news reports credited the Carlton YMCA for donating the Roseland painting to Plymouth Church. Jesse Moorland did speak at the donation event, but was that as a representative of the Y or because of his friendship with Rev. Durkee? Did George Wibecan need a legal entity to make the donation? Symbolically, the Carlton YMCA was at the heart of the gift. The idea of a memorial started there in 1913, and the painting was exhibited there until it arrived at its permanent home.



*Harry Roseland Henry Ward Beecher and Rose Ward as it hangs today at Plymouth Church*

On Thursday, June 2nd, 1932, Plymouth Church held a ceremony to celebrate the gift. Hundreds of both whites and African Americans attended the service. Several local politicians attended, the most prominent being State Senator William L. Love. Fittingly, George Wibecan presided over the service since he was the engine behind the gift.

Dr. Edward Ernest Tyler of Bridge Street AME church opened the service with a scripture reading, and James B. Adams of Concord Baptist Church gave the invocation. Rev. Dr. S. T. Eldridge of Pastor Berean Baptist Church said, "Beecher's efforts had not been in vain. The colored race has accomplished much since being given its freedom. It has never failed in any duty to the country."

From the Brooklyn Citizen: "Those who addressed the mixed audience last night emphasize the need for another Henry Ward Beecher in these times to free the same race from 'economic slavery,' and each expressed the opinion that Henry Ward Beecher will be remembered as long as there is a black man or woman alive to breathe his name."

Stanley Durkee accepted the gift, praising the achievements of African Americans since Emancipation. He went on to retell the story of befriending Rose Ward Hunt and her return to Plymouth.

United Church Choir sang Beecher's favorite hymn, "Love Devine All Love Excelling." Before the unveiling, Harry Roseland spoke of the process of researching the painting. Maria Lawton also spoke, along with George Wibecan, as the only remaining members of the original committee. Her nine-year-old granddaughter, the same age as Sally/Rose in 1860, unveiled the painting. Amazingly, two African American Civil War veterans attended: Pierre Zeno and Pierre Henry.

The donation of the Roseland painting was not the last time Crispus Attucks Community Council or Maria Lawton honored Henry Ward Beecher. Three years later, in 1935, sixty children from three churches honored the memory of Henry Ward Beecher with a song at the base of the John Quincy Adams Ward sculpture.

The Crispus Attucks Community Council also rose to defend the John



Quincy Adams Ward sculpture of Henry Ward Beecher in 1937. In the designing phase of the new Cadman Plaza, one suggestion was to move the sculpture to a less prominent sunken garden in Brooklyn Bridge Plaza facing the never-realized sculpture of Parkes Cadman. It should be noted that the John Quincy Adams Ward sculpture was moved from right in front of Borough Hall to its current location at the top of the plaza, not in a sunken garden.

Here the story ends. It began with a desperate elderly freedwoman named Cloe Diggs searching for a way to rescue her granddaughter from enslavement. Henry Ward Beecher and the Falkner brothers engaged the congregation of Plymouth Church to save Rose. After the country was shattered by the Civil War, devastated by the carnage of WWI, and ravaged by the 1918 epidemic, Rose Ward Hunt returned, showing the country how the freed could prosper. Rose's visit galvanized the African American community to honor Henry Ward Beecher while they continued their fight for equal rights. In the act of unforgetting, we must honor these newly discovered relationships and collaborations. We can still improve our connections to the broader communities of Brooklyn. From George Wibecan to Mary Ovington, they are fitting role models as we honor our past and strive to continue fighting for equality for all.

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Philip Dempsey

Now that the story has reached its conclusion, I have a long list of people to thank. My wife, Lisa, who is still putting up with this project and will still have to deal with me figuring out what to do now with all this research. Plymouth Church and The History Ministry for inspiring me to continue my work. The Center for Brooklyn History for their resources and enthusiasm for the first two essays. A special thanks also to Caroline Gillespie at the Brooklyn Museum for showing me Harry Roseland's, *The Blessing*, and for her insights into American Painting. And none of this would have been possible without the editing of Julie Odell who went above and beyond.

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