

John Kelly's Washington

## Gathering of segregated D.C.'s old-timers' groups a mystery



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By [John Kelly](#)

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On July 4, 1891, the [Association of the Oldest Inhabitants of Washington](#) met at Willard Hall on F Street NW to celebrate America's birthday in its customary fashion: with a reading of the Declaration of Independence.

Wrote a reporter for The Post: "The strong points of this familiar and famous document were heartily cheered by the old men who have lived a lifetime in a country that has prospered under its beneficent influences."

The paper did not see the need to point out that all the old men were white. To borrow some language from *Thomas Jefferson*, it was a self-evident truth that a group such as AOI would not accept black members (or women). Washington was a segregated city, comprising parallel worlds. There were white churches and black churches, white Masonic lodges and black Masonic lodges, white professional associations and black professional associations. Only occasionally would those worlds intersect.

As in 1919, for example. On the Fourth of July, representatives from the Association of the Oldest Inhabitants shared a stage with representatives from the Association of the Oldest Inhabitants (Colored).

It's the mystery of that interaction -- and the hint it gives at a possible treasure trove of documents -- that now captivates Nelson Rimensnyder.

Nelson is the historian of AOI, which is probably the oldest civic organization continuously in existence in the city. "We always make that statement, and nobody's challenged it so far," Nelson told me. "We'd be quite pleased if someone could challenge it. It'd be fine with us."

AOI was founded in 1865, primarily to fight efforts to move the U.S. capital from Washington. Its earliest membership rolls boasted such names as *Corcoran* and *Riggs*, men with a vested

financial interest in keeping the seat of power here. The group had stringent membership requirements. Original members had to have been born in Washington and be at least 50 years old. For a city that was only 65 years old at the time, that narrowed the membership pool considerably.

The group backed the efforts of *Alexander Shepherd* to modernize the city. It raised money for the statue of *Lincoln* in front of the courthouse. It was also a social group. In 1914, AOI toasted *James Henry Jones*, at 96 its oldest member. Jones remembered the group's birth, telling *The Post*, "In the days before the war we didn't have any use for an organization where old residents could meet in common, talk and reminisce over old times, because there were no old times."

AOI's successes must have inspired black Washingtonians with similarly deep roots in the city to form their own group. AOI (Colored) was incorporated in 1916, modeling the language in its incorporation papers on the older group's. Members met that year at Calvary Episcopal Church at 11th and G NE to celebrate Emancipation Day with a banquet. The president was *Jerome A. Johnson*.

In 1919, the two groups held a joint meeting to commemorate District citizens -- black and white -- who served in World War I. "Given that time and era, that would have been quite an event, to have these two parallel but unequal organizations come together for a common cause," said AOI president *Bill Brown*.

From newspaper clippings, it's clear that AOI (Colored) was an active force. It worked to integrate the city's playgrounds, fire companies -- and the Redskins. Nelson has seen mentions up to the 1970s, but after that, nothing.

"The organization obviously had records," Nelson said. He's checked every library and archive in town but hasn't been able to find them. Could they be in someone's attic, meeting minutes and membership rosters that could illuminate the city's history?

Now integrated, AOI has about 350 members. Full membership is open to anyone 40 or older who has lived, worked or operated a business in the District for at least 20 years or who is descended from someone who meets those qualifications. Others can join as an associate member with nearly "all the privileges of membership." For information, visit [www.aoidc.org](http://www.aoidc.org).

And if you or your family members were involved with AOI (Colored), send an e-mail to [aoiofdc@gmail.com](mailto:aoiofdc@gmail.com). Nelson and Bill are hoping that 90 years after the groups came together for the first -- and perhaps only -- time, they can be united in spirit again.