The Periphery of the Heart of the Periphery. W.E.B. Du Bois' iconic social survey The Philadelphia Negro (1899) examines the 7th Ward (7th Street to the Schuylkill, Spruce Street to South), the heart of black Philadelphia, with extraordinary detail. In the comprehensive text he covers the history of black Philadelphia, statistics of the current population of the 7th Ward, detailed descriptions (backed by quantitative observations) of the conditions of the ward, and analysis of the sociological problems therein. The 300 Block of South Smedley Street will serve as a case study to illustrate the racial and economic changes of the early 20th century: a varied block at the edge of the ward with the potential to illuminate the racial and economic fluctuation at the dynamic edge stores, white residents, and spectrum of classes of the black 7th ward. Du Bois' survey shows Smedley Street as a mix of white, boarders, and spectrum of classes of the black 7th ward a varied block at the edge of the ward with the potential to illustrate the racial and economic changes of the early 20th century. Only the 'vicious and criminal classes' are absent from this block, and this limited class range is balanced by the mixed-race character.

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Context. This project is situated within the larger context of Du Bois' observations that black rates of home ownership were lower than white, though black ownership on Smedley Street is higher than the 1900 block city average (less than 6% ownership). Every homeowner in 1920 owned their house outright. 1940 also sees a number of live-in servants on the block, which were prevalent as well in 1919 in a smaller number. Though this suggests some increasing affluence of the block, it does not account for the high number of servants who lived in their own homes, evidenced in part by the number of people working in domestic service who resided on the block in other years.

Lodgers. It is not entirely accurate to compare Smedley Street to Du Bois' ward average of 38 percent of households with lodgers in 1900, as that figure encompasses only black residents. It does reflect the pattern of the block, especially the radical change from 65 percent of households (40 percent of the population) in 1920 to twelve percent of households (11 percent of the population) in 1930. Counting lodgers is difficult as there exist variable degrees of interaction with the census family (1900 lists both lodgers and boarders as separate, which are further confused by the varied interpretations of the enumerators. Of note: the only instances of 'lodging-houses' Keply occur in the case of two Irish-headed houses in 1910.

Race. Smedley Street's mixed-race character changes drastically between 1920 and 1930. In the entire ward, the black percentage of the population went from 47% in 1920 to 22% in 1950. There are multiple instances of houses shared between white and black or mulatto families. The majority of the white residents of the block in the years before 1920 are Irish, who were generally less segregated from African Americans than other white ethnic groups. This Irish population declines between 1920 and 1930 and virtually disappears by 1950, by which point the white population is almost entirely native-born (though many of immigrant parents.)

Continuing Efforts. The radical change in race and density between 1920 and 1930 will be explored by further analysis of such factors as occupation and birthplace. The Philadelphia Negro (1899) study of Hartford explains the position of migrants over a similar span of time, but Du Bois shows a different dynamic in Philadelphia in 1900, partially for its geographic location. Continuing work will also include further comparison to ward-level aggregate census data, the possible inclusion of surrounding blocks in the study, and integration with Harvard Worldmap and ArcGIS Online.

Below: Map of the Seventh Ward, 1899


Question and Methodology. How did the demographic, social, and physical makeup of the Seventh Ward change in the 40 years following The Philadelphia Negro? This case-study examination of the 300 Block of South Smedley Street has been primarily based in census data from 1900-1940, accessed through Ancestry.com. City atlases and fire insurance maps and the Pennsylvania Historical Commission's inventory of the block have been helpful in determining the evolution of the parcels and buildings over time, both for the mapping process and establishment of the character of the block.

Ownership. Home ownership is limited, and the data is spotty, but the general trends through to 1920 support Du Bois' observations that black rates of home ownership were lower than white, though black ownership on Smedley Street is higher than the 1900 block city average (less than 6% ownership). Every homeowner in 1920 owned their house outright. 1940 also sees a number of live-in servants on the block, which were prevalent as well in 1919 in a smaller number. Though this suggests some increasing affluence of the block, it does not account for the high number of servants who lived in their own homes, evidenced in part by the number of people working in domestic service who resided on the block in other years.

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