

Racialized Business Practices: Comparing the Building Efforts of Black and White Fraternal  
Orders at the Turn of the Twentieth Century

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## ABSTRACT

The decades spanning the turn of the twentieth century saw an explosion of organizational activity in the American economy, but also in American social life. People flocked in huge numbers to all kinds of voluntary associations, most of which were segregated by gender and race/ethnicity. Among men, fraternal orders were incredibly popular. The racially exclusionary practices of white men's organizations did not dampen fraternal aspirations among Black men, who went to great lengths to found parallel and independent fraternal orders, sometimes in concert with Black women. Many of these organizations constructed buildings to house their various activities. I trace several specific examples of such building efforts, comparing how these projects were financed, designed, constructed, used, and – in some cases – profited from. Specifically, I focus on the city of Indianapolis and the building efforts of the Masonic Grand Lodge of Indiana, the Prince Hall Grand Lodge of Indiana, the Knights of Pythias, and the Colored Knights of Pythias. Each organization built, or sought to build, a multi-use building in Indianapolis during the first decade of the twentieth century. I leverage sources such as meeting minutes, published proceedings, incorporation records, and organizational histories, in addition to local news coverage, to tell the stories of these buildings. Constructing these narratives allows me to analyze the racialized nature of the business practices used in different building efforts. Practices were either favored by, or out of reach for, specific groups of people by dint of laws, formal rules, or informal practices. The results help to explain some of the lasting inequalities in American business life.