

The Filson Historical Society

**Grand United Order of Odd Fellows in America
Records, 1911-1946**

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Special Collections, James J. Holmburg

Size of Collection:

0.33 cubic feet

Locator number:

Mss. BD G751

Grand United Order of Odd Fellows in America Records, 1911-1946

Historical Note

National Organization

The Grand United Order of Odd Fellows in America is a mutual aid and fraternal organization, first established in 1843 by and for disenfranchised African Americans. The organization served as both a social club and charitable institution, with a focus on morality and temperance. Benefits of membership included defraying the costs of illness, disability, burial, and widowhood.

The G. U. O. O. F. is not to be confused with the once exclusively White organization, the Independent Order of Odd Fellows, established in Baltimore in 1819, which refused to grant a charter to African American men in New York in the early nineteenth century. Unable to establish their own lodge through this American order, the men turned instead to the Grand United Order of Odd Fellows in England, where it is believed "Odd Fellowship" first originated. With the help of Peter Ogden, a ship steward who often traveled between New York and Liverpool, the men were granted a charter through an English G. U. O. O. F. lodge. In 1843, they established the first U.S. lodge of the Grand United Order of Odd Fellows, called the Philomathean Lodge (No. 645), in New York City. By the end of the nineteenth century, the organization had an estimated 300,000 to 400,000 members active in lodges across the U.S. According to their website, the G. U. O. O. F. in America is still operational today, with headquarters in Philadelphia.

Louisville Lodges

The first Grand United Order of Odd Fellows lodge in Kentucky was Union Lodge (No. 1341), established in Louisville in 1867. By 1872, two more lodges, St. John (No. 1364) and St. Luke (No. 1371), were also established in Louisville, and soon many others across the city and state. In 1877, two lodges of the G. U. O. O. F. sister society, the Household of Ruth, were established in Louisville (No. 24 and No. 60), with at least one more established by 1911 (No. 4213). All lodges in the state were overseen by the District Grand Lodge (No. 19), located in New Castle, Kentucky.

For the first 13 years of the G. U. O. O. F. in Louisville, the lodges rented various facilities throughout the city for their meetings and events. In 1880, the lodges pulled together to purchase a meeting place of their own, Armstrong's Hall on Green Street between 13th and 14th Streets. This formed the Consolidated Lodges, made up of the ten Odd Fellow lodges and two Households of Ruth operating in Louisville at the time. The first meeting of the Consolidation was held at the new hall on October 18, 1880.

In 1885, the Consolidation purchased a larger hall at 1230 W. Walnut Street, which they named Odd Fellows Hall. The hall was destroyed by the 1890 tornado but was later rebuilt and enlarged. The G. U. O. O. F. Consolidated Lodges of Louisville owned the hall until it was razed in the 1960s. St. Luke Lodge was in operation until at least 1927, and St. John operated until at least the mid-twentieth century, but no lodges remain in Louisville today. The last active lodge in Kentucky, Washington Lodge (No. 1513) in New Castle, was reportedly struggling financially but still operational in 2018.

References:

Louisville City Directories, 1872-1942 (printed in folder)

Courier-Journal articles, 1885-1887 (printed in folder)

<https://legacy.lib.utexas.edu/taro/aushc/00395/ahc-00395.html>

<https://socialwelfare.library.vcu.edu/eras/grand-united-order-of-odd-fellows-in-america/>

<https://guoof.org/about-us/founder/>

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Scope and Content Note

This collection contains correspondence, member information, and financial records for the Grand United Order of Odd Fellows in Louisville, Kentucky. Most of the material concerns two lodges that were members of the Louisville G. U. O. O. F. Consolidation – St. John and St. Luke – as well as local chapters of the order's sister organization, the Household of Ruth. A few items also concern the District Grand Lodge of Kentucky, located in New Castle.

The membership material in this collection may be of particular interest to researchers. Letters and doctors' notes in folders 1-5 contain some member names and personal details from 1915 to 1942. Folder 6 contains two ledgers from St. Luke Lodge listing members from 1919 to 1924, along with their addresses, occupations, wives' names, and many other pieces of information. This folder also includes a tally sheet listing St. Luke members from 1933 to 1936. Folder 7 contains a ledger believed to have been used by one of the Household of Ruth chapters, which lists members and dues paid from 1931 to 1938. This folder also contains a 1943 membership application for a Louisville Household of Ruth chapter.

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Folder List

- Folder 1: Correspondence of St. John Lodge, 1916-1925.
- Folder 2: Correspondence of unspecified Louisville G. U. O. O. F. lodges, 1924-1945, n.d.
- Folder 3: Correspondence from District Grand Lodge, No. 19 (New Castle, Ky.), 1923-1928
- Folder 4: Minutes for District Grand Lodge, No. 19 (New Castle, Ky.), July 1942
- Folder 5: Doctors' notes verifying illness of members from various Louisville lodges and Households of Ruth, 1915-1942, n.d.
- Folder 6: St. Luke Lodge material, 1919-1946
- Folder 7: Household of Ruth membership material, 1931-1943
- Folder 8: Financial records for St. John Lodge, 1918-1928
- Folder 9: Financial records for Louisville Consolidated G. U. O. O. F., 1918-1945, n.d.
- Folder 10: Publications and ephemera related to various Louisville lodges, 1911-1928, n.d.

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Subject Headings

African American business enterprises – Kentucky – Louisville.
African American fraternal organizations – Kentucky – Louisville.
African-Americans – Kentucky – Louisville – Social life and customs.
African-Americans – Kentucky – Louisville – Societies, etc.
Bowles, Joseph W.
Cary, Archie.
Grand United Order of Odd Fellows in America. District Grand Lodge of Kentucky (New Castle, Ky.)
Grand United Order of Odd Fellows in America. St. John Lodge No. 1364 (Louisville, Ky.)
Grand United Order of Odd Fellows in America. St. Luke Lodge No. 1371 (Louisville, Ky.)
Household of Ruth. No. 24 (Louisville, Ky.)
Household of Ruth. No. 60 (Louisville, Ky.)
Household of Ruth. No. 4213 (Louisville, Ky.)
S. Leroy Mason and Sons Funeral Home (Louisville, Ky.)