

# CONNECTING HISTORIES

## *Learning Package*

### **Commentary**

#### **Researching Black History: a Case Study**

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##### ***The girl in the photograph***

In Birmingham City Archives there is a large souvenir album celebrating the activities of the Children's Hospital Brick League in 1913. Individual children and schools gave money for inscribed bricks to be included in the walls of Birmingham's new Children's Hospital. The album includes individual and class photographs of those who contributed. Amongst the classroom photographs is one of girls attending Nelson Street School and in this photograph is a single black child. Who is she? What can we find out about her life?

##### ***Where to start?***

The obvious first step was to find out about the school. The *Victoria County History for Warwickshire* includes a volume on Birmingham and there is an entry about Nelson Street School. It opened as a Board School in 1876 and it had been built to meet the demands of mass schooling and at the time of building was seen as being 'modern'. It was very much a local school for the local community. The index of school records held in the archives did not include any listing for Nelson Street School, other than plans relating to building of the school and subsequent remodelling. The archivist, however, did know that the School had some archives.

##### ***School visit***

The original school – the one in the photograph – had been demolished in the 1970s and a replacement one built on a site a few hundred metres away. What records did the new school hold of the past? There were log books, a photograph of the outside of the old school taken in the 1960s, but there were no admission registers, which would have listed each child entering the school. The log books contained lots of references to individual children, but no mention of a black girl.

##### ***The Education Census***

Another possible source of identity was the Birmingham Education Census. Counting children and assessing educational need had been undertaken systematically in Birmingham from 1907. School Attendance Officers annually visited every house within the city boundaries and collected information. Data were recorded in census books. For each individual child their age, address, school[s] attended, parents' names and occupation (usually only of the father) and a remark where the enumerator thought it appropriate was recorded in a column. 4,000 census volumes are housed in

Birmingham City Archives. Is it possible to find a match with the girl in the photograph? These records contain sensitive information about people who may still be alive, information which cannot therefore be made public. The way the records were compiled between 1907 and 1970 often means that the living and the dead appear in the same volume with the result that permission to gain access to these volumes requires the agreement of the Director of the City's Education Department.

Having obtained permission several days were spent reading the names of all the pupils recorded as attending Nelson Street School around 1912. No reference was found to a black child, but in one volume a girl with an unusual name – Maphela Cox – was listed as living in Shakespeare Road in June 1912 and attending the school. The age match was possible. In the early autumn of 1913 she moved both school and home. In which order is unclear, but she moved to 24 Carver Street and to St Marks Girls School. The family had previously moved to a court in Garbett Street in May 1910. What would her trail in the Education Census reveal? The return for Carver Street shows that she had left Shakespeare Road on the 12th September 1913, but had only stayed at the Carver Street address for a month before moving on to Wells Street. She, and her siblings, are all listed as attending St Marks School. Mephela is in this census volume is recorded under the name Mehalah. The admission registers for St Marks School survive and are in the City Archives, but there is no mention of her in the Senior Girls admission register. However, she and her brother both appear in the Infants Department admission register, being admitted in January 1905. Mehalah is a Hebrew name meaning tenderness and her name in this register has been anglicised to Amelia.

The Education Census gives date of birth which means that it is possible to locate a birth certificate. The first step was to identify the entry for her birth registration in the Civil Registration indexes (sometimes also known as St. Catherine's House indexes) in the Local Studies and History Service of Birmingham Central Library. Once this entry had been found it was possible to visit the Birmingham Registrar's office and buy a copy of her birth certificate. This birth certificate records her mother's name as Mehalah and her maiden name as Portman. Her father Frederick was recorded as a cooper journeyman and their address is 5 back court 13 Edward Street. Using this information the family can be located on the 1901 census which gives place of birth. In the 1901 census both mother and daughter are named Mehalah and both parents are recorded as being born in Birmingham. So we have some elements in Mehalah's story. In one School we find her being re-named? Was she actually called Amelia in class and another name at home?

### ***The school and its community***

The Education Census also tells us about Mehalah's contemporaries at Nelson Street. It tells us about the size of families, which families had single parents, details about health and disability, when there were deaths in the family, the incarceration of parents in the asylum or prison, the movement of children to Children's Homes, details of illegitimacy and other family relationship. What becomes very clear from reading these volumes is that Mehalah lived in a community which was densely populated and where families regularly moved short distances. In any one street or group of houses children may have played together but did not share the same school. Movement between schools was frequent. It was a community where poverty and ill health were the norm. It was a community of cultural diversity – of German and Jewish families, and later after 1914 of Belgian refugee families. The nature of this community can also be pieced together by looking at maps of the area around the school which detail the local landscape and photographs of street scenes and houses. The 'feel' of the area can

also be imagined by walking the streets which Mehala would have walked. The cityscape has changed, but there are still places in the city where nothing has changed for decades.

Autobiographical writings can also offer some insights into life in past communities. Kathleen Dayus produced four books about her life in this area and she was a contemporary of Mehala, but attended a different school. Her stories of rubbing down benches with paraffin, of washing inkwells on Friday afternoons, of the teacher bringing flowers into school every Monday morning, and of stealing chalk from the classroom to play games in the street are rich in detail and add to our understanding.

### ***The experience of schooling***

The Victorian school had been demolished in the 1970s, but there are numerous building plans, the photograph and school administrative records which enable us to reconstruct the shape and rhythm of life in the school in 1912-13. Schooling was timetabled into a series of systematised activities, exercises and movements from start to finish of each school day, in each week of the school year, for each year of compulsory education. What did the girl – by this time I had come to accept that she was not Mahala – experience in 1912 and 1913? The school log books give details of lessons taught, books read, visits made, moments of ill-discipline and moments of school success, the routines of testing both for competence in learning and also for health defects, pupil and teacher absences, and the impact of the weather.

As the only black girl in the class did the colour of her skin make her an outsider? The area where she lived was one where newcomers speaking languages other than English could be found. Newspaper reports provide evidence of other poor Birmingham children who were black and Dayus also recounts a story that provides further evidence of such settlement in the area but also captures a sense of how blackness was seen in the popular imagination:

"When I got into the street it was nearly dark, so I began to hurry. Just as I turned the corner, I had the fright of my life as I came face to face with a black man. Suddenly I thought this was the bogey man my granny had warned me about, for I'd never seen a black man before. I screamed, dropped the cup and ran for my life." (From "The Best of Times" by Kathleen Dayus, Virago, 1991 page 33)

### ***The girl in the photograph***

This small research project began with a photograph and a question. At the end of it the girl in the photograph remains unknown. So was the pursuit of one child through the archive fruitless. We may never know who she was, but we do know the names of her contemporaries, we also know elements in their life stories and of the families of her community in this part of Birmingham, and by collecting these elements together we can make their lives, individually and collectively, more visible. Researching the past is more than putting names to faces.

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