

## ***Philip Payton: The Father of Black Harlem***

By Kevin McGruder, Chichester, NY: Columbia University Press, 2021, 219 pages, price???

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Philip Payton, the black real estate entrepreneur who helped Harlem become a famous ‘race capital’ in the early twentieth century, has been comparatively well-known for some time. Classic works on Harlem’s growth by scholars such as Gilbert Osofsky recognized Payton’s importance and that of his most high-profile business endeavor, the Afro-American Realty Company (AARC). Yet this work by Kevin McGruder, published over 100 years since his death, constitutes the first book-length biography of the Payton story. One reason for the gap is that Payton and his companies did not leave full archives of their activities. As a result, historians are left to piece together Payton’s career from other sources, such as comments from his peers, newspaper accounts and his occasional brushes with the law. McGruder tackles the methodological challenge posed by this fragmentary evidential record with ingenuity, while the comparatively slim nature of the volume testifies to the unavoidable gaps that remain.

Payton grew up in Westfield, Massachusetts. His parents ran successful businesses catering predominately to the town’s small black community, his father a barber and his mother a milliner. Payton and his siblings attended the majority-white local high school, and among the novel findings on these formative years is an evocative photo of Philip with his younger brother James in the school football team. Yet Philip also briefly attended the all-black Livingstone College in North Carolina, an apparent attempt by his father to stop his son falling in with the wrong crowd at his local school. Payton, therefore, had lived in the North and South, and as part of a black minority and majority, before he subsequently attempted to navigate the evolving color line of New York’s real estate market after 1899. As McGruder

reminds us, despite Payton's story appearing to conform to that of the classic 'self-made man', his success depended on pre-existing personal connections too: his first business partner, for instance, hailed from a nearby Massachusetts town while his wife, Maggie Lee, also came from Westfield before she became a well-connected member of Harlem society in her own right.

Payton's most famous endeavor, the establishment of the AARC, understandably looms large in this biography. Between 1904 and 1909, the AARC played a key role in helping black tenants find accommodation in the newer uptown district of Harlem; they used investment from many associated with Booker T. Washington and his National Negro Business League (NNBL) to break open houses and apartment blocks previously solely in the hands of white landlords and tenants. Payton was the driving force and his initial vision was one where white and black tenants could live side by side. As McGruder reminds us, however, this was a transitory ambition, with racial divisions hardening through the 1900s as white opposition to black settlement intensified in uptown Manhattan. The story of Payton and the AARC thus reveals the double-edged nature of black businesses enterprises in this moment: appealing to notion of racial pride formed the basis of a business strategy that offered the prospect of profits while helping build communities, but it also eventually conformed with and perpetuated segregated settlement.

Following an acrimonious court-case in 1909 where he was sued by dissatisfied fellow AARC share-holders, Payton set up a new real estate venture in his own name. McGruder sheds useful light on neglected elements of Payton's career during this period until his death in 1917. His trip to Liberia in 1910 is one interesting episode, an apparent attempt to explore business opportunities in the 'little Black Republic'. Yet though this voyage is instructive of the transatlantic nature of black economic and political life in this period, we remain one step removed from Payton's true intentions and feelings. His fellow traveller

Bishop Alexander Walters wrote an account of the trip, but Payton did not. McGruder works had to fill in the context, but here as elsewhere, the archival silences mean he still cuts an enigmatic and occasionally elusive figure.

Just before his death in 1917, Payton's career appeared to be on another upswing. His name was attached to two large apartment blocks on 141<sup>st</sup> and 142<sup>nd</sup> street, with an advert seeking 'refine colored tenants'. Once again, though, not all was as it seemed: these large building were actually owned by another firm, despite marketing that suggested Payton's firm was in sole control. This in itself revealed the instructive point that by 1917 there remained a perceived business advantage in associating with the Payton 'brand'. Yet Payton's career was abruptly cut short by his untimely death from liver cancer on August 29 at the age of 41. Obituaries and eulogies praised his pioneering efforts, testifying both to the impact of his work and his success in building and maintaining a public profile of achievement and respectability.

Reflecting on his overall historical significance, McGruder is ultimately sympathetic to the challenges faced by black business entrepreneurs like Payton: of his final deal that traded upon Harlem's hardened racial divides, he acknowledges that 'challenging segregated housing and forgoing' higher rents would have been 'more honorable', but that financial incentives won through (p. 163). Yet more broadly, for McGruder, Payton's story was part of a wider problem where black businesses faced a dearth of alternatives, frequently starved of access of access to white capital and markets both in the 1910s and well beyond. Payton, therefore, emerges as an important figure in the history of Harlem who also helps bring into focus the larger ambiguities and dilemmas inherent in twentieth century black capitalism. One cannot help lament that the lack of a personal archive stops us digging into Payton's motivations at various juncture, but this biography does a neat job of setting his experiences

into context while serving as a useful primer on Harlem's transformative first decades of the twentieth century.