

Oxley, Lawrence Augustus ^[1]

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by John L. Bell, Jr., 1991

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Lawrence Augustus Oxley, social worker and civil servant, was born in Boston, Mass., the son of William Junius Brutus and Alice Agatha Martin Oxley. His parents sent him to Prospect Union Preparatory School in Cambridge, and he later received special tutoring from Harvard University instructors.

During World War I Oxley enlisted in the army and rose in rank from private to first lieutenant. He served as a special investigator for the Infantry Morale Branch of the War Department Commission on Training Camp Activities for Black Troops. From 1919 to 1941 he retained his reserve commission and became an active member of the American Legion.

Oxley's postwar activities led him gradually to North Carolina and increasingly responsible service there. After serving as assistant industrial secretary at the [Harlem YMCA](#) ^[2] ^[3] in New York City in early 1919, he spent the rest of the year surveying social conditions in Black urban communities in the Midwest and South as a field representative of the War Camp Community Service. His work as executive secretary of the National Student Council of the Protestant Episcopal church placed him in contact with [St. Augustine's College](#) ^[4], Raleigh, where he served as instructor of social sciences, starting in 1920. While in that position Oxley came to the attention of [Kate Burr Johnson](#) ^[5], head of the [North Carolina State Board of Charities and Public Welfare](#) ^[6], who asked him to head the new division of Negro Welfare in 1925.

Funded for six years by the Laura Spelman Rockefeller Memorial Fund, North Carolina's statewide welfare program for Black people was the first of its kind in the nation. As director of this program, Oxley worked through established Black organizations to help them improve community life. When he assumed the post in 1925, there was only one Black social worker in the state, and not a single Black community had been organized for welfare work. Furthermore, the state had no facilities for training Black delinquents, no orthopedic care for Black children, no support for Black people with mental or intellectual disabilities, no state-wide parent-teacher organization for Black parents and teachers, and no training institution for Black social workers. There also had been no systematic study of Black social problems in North Carolina, so Oxley himself conducted and published studies on social problems and capital punishment and supervised other studies.

Under his leadership, social work for Black people made great strides. The [Morrison Training School](#) ^[7] for delinquent and underprivileged Black boys, a Black children's ward at the North Carolina Orthopedic Hospital in Gastonia, a training school for girls at Efland, an industrial school for dependent children in Winston-Salem, and the Bishop Tuttle Training School for social workers in Raleigh were all established after Oxley's work began. In addition, he supervised the organization of some thirty-five counties for welfare work among Black people and placed social workers in twenty-three counties. This work was so impressive that Tennessee, Pennsylvania, Missouri, Michigan, Ohio, and Georgia followed North Carolina's lead in establishing statewide welfare programs for Black citizens.

The advent of the depression offered new opportunities for Oxley to serve the state. In 1931 he organized the Black communities for unemployment relief, a project that was recognized as one of the most effective in the nation. This work and his involvement in the presidential campaign of 1932 helped him obtain the directorship of a New Deal program in North Carolina, the Division of Negro Relief under the Federal Emergency Relief Administration. Impressed with his performance as director, Secretary of Labor Frances Perkins called Oxley to Washington, D.C., in 1934 to serve as a conciliator in industrial labor disputes.

Even more important than this position was Oxley's involvement with the "Black Cabinet," a group of nine Black appointees in the Roosevelt administration who had served as unofficial advisers in the 1932 presidential campaign. Although Oxley was on the periphery of this group, he made valuable contributions, arguing successfully for the same minimum wage for Black people as for white people on the grounds that Black people were as intelligent and industrious as white people. He also sought equal employment opportunities for Black workers, and he urged Black people to shift to those occupations most likely to grow in demand. Oxley remained with the Department of Labor in a variety of positions—all concerned with the improvement of employment opportunities for Black North Carolinians—until his retirement.

After retirement, Oxley continued to pursue his intense interest in political and social issues. His activities in Washington, D.C., ranged from presiding over the Pigskin Club for fifteen years to serving a sixteen-year trusteeship of St. Paul's College, consulting with the U.S. Senate Committee on Aging, serving as a field representative for Senior Citizens for Kennedy in the presidential campaign of 1960, and working with the Boy Scouts. He was also active in the NAACP, the National Urban League, the [Episcopal church](#) ^[8], and the National Conference of Christians and Jews. In 1972 Oxley was honored by the city of Washington for meritorious public service. St. Augustine's College awarded him the degree of doctor of humane letters (1967).

Oxley married Mamie Elizabeth Hill, and they had two daughters: Dora Alice Clara (16 Aug. 1908–1950) and Edna Gertrude Oxley DesVerney (b. 24 Jan. 1910) of New Rochelle, N.Y. He was survived by one daughter, five granddaughters, and six great grandchildren.

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