

THE SPECTER OF BLACK LABOR: AFRICAN AMERICAN WORKERS IN ILLINOIS  
BEFORE THE GREAT MIGRATION, 1847 TO 1910

BY

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## ABSTRACT

*The Specter of Black Labor* is interested in examining the actions, reactions and opinions of Afro-Illinoisans during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in relation to their own position as laborers. While previous studies on Black workers in Illinois focus heavily on African Americans and their relationship to the larger labor movement of this period, the goal in this project is to view these workers primarily through the lens of the African American experience. By deemphasizing the role of white workers and the labor movement in general, this project seeks to unearth previously muffled voices within the relatively small Black communities throughout Illinois during the largely understudied period prior to the Great Migration. By utilizing a racial formation theoretical framework, this project seeks to provide a foundation for a critical examination of race as it acquires different meanings, depending on specific historic circumstances. The contention here is that the process of racializing labor during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries affected not only the type of labor Black people could procure, it also systematically eliminated them from the larger labor movement and virtually forced them into “anti-labor” roles such as strikebreaking. As the labor movement gained significant momentum throughout Illinois, Black workers faced with the decision to be a part of the labor movement was not easy—while other workers contended with nineteenth century labor issues such as unionization, better working conditions and the eight hour work day, Black workers were also entangled within a struggle for citizenship, voting rights, and the right to work and live where they chose. Thus, like other workers, Afro-Illinoisans struggled to adjust to the modernization of the late nineteenth century workplace. Yet they were also compelled to adjust to a system of racialization within a workplace that castigated them as stereotypically ineffectual workers that would somehow degrade the labor of European American workers. This process

resulted in frequent conflicts with European American workers who, in their effort to secure their own tenuous position as laborers within the political economy, competed against Black workers for even the lowliest occupations. The devastating consequence of this racialization process in the workplace by the end of the turn of the twentieth century led to the idea that Afro-Illinoisans were anti-union and unsympathetic to the plight of the rights of all workers.

*For Billye and George*

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## INTRODUCTION

### “WE DEMAND AN EQUAL SHOW UPON MATTERS AFFECTING OUR INDUSTRIAL WELFARE”: THE BLACK WORKER AND AGENCY

In 1897, during one of the most violent decades in the history of labor relations in Illinois, former African American assemblyman of Cairo, Jacob Amos, wrote a series of letters and articles for the African American newspaper, the *Illinois Record*, in which he discussed the political and economic condition of African Americans. He was particularly incensed over the lack of interest in the labor condition of Afro-Illinoisans as well as the racial exclusiveness of the nation's major labor unions. “Almost every branch of skill[ed] labor is organized,” he wrote, “and most of their constitutions require...that an applicant must be a white male twenty-one years of age.” He insisted that the labor situation was so desperate that he entertained the idea that Afro-Illinoisans would be “better off” if they relinquished their voting rights in exchange for being “permitted to work and sustain.” However, Amos stopped short of abandoning the franchise because the “Constitutions of the United States [gave] us the right to vote and we refuse to surrender this right.” Instead of accepting the steadily degraded position of Black workers, Amos insisted on fair treatment: “As a people we demand [an] equal show upon matters affecting our industrial welfare.” Yet in spite of his demands for equality and better treatment, the Black worker was consistently relegated to the bottom of the economic ladder; labor unions continued to exclude them, and European American workers often physically intimidated them and refused to work with them. As a result of this anti-black campaign that forced many Black workers to abandon skilled and semi-skilled occupations, they were invariably forced to the periphery of the labor movement. By the end of the nineteenth century, because of limited

occupational options, Black workers commonly worked as “replacement” workers in the most violent labor conflicts in Illinois.<sup>1</sup>

This dissertation is primarily interested in examining the actions, reactions and opinions of Afro-Illinoisans during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in relation to their own position as laborers. What type of labor were Afro-Illinoisans able to procure? What was their relationship to the larger labor movement of the nineteenth century? If their relationship was limited, how did they function on the movement’s periphery? This project seeks to understand the process of racialization in labor—i.e., how the Black worker gradually attained an “anti-union” categorization by the turn of the twentieth century. To be sure, Jacob Amos was not the lone voice on the issue of the Black worker—in fact, among Afro-Illinoisans during the late nineteenth century, Amos was merely one of a myriad of voices debating about what the best economic direction for African Americans. This introduction will briefly discuss previous scholarly treatment of African Americans and labor, elucidate the details of my intervention and argument, and lay out the structure of this project.

Labor history has had a troublesome history in dealing with race and African American workers. Labor historians of the early twentieth century generally regarded the Black worker as only a peripheral figure to be studied indirectly in relation to the larger labor history of the United States. Primarily viewed through the lens of predominantly white labor unions, Black workers, under the “old labor history,” were often examined as a problem that impeded the progress of the labor movement. In addition, most studies during this period ignored the

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<sup>1</sup> “Ex-Alderman Jacob Amos of Cairo Writes on the Industrial Situation,” *Illinois Record*, December 11, 1897.

unorganized laborer—which, by the latter decades of the nineteenth century, included many African Americans due to the racist nature of the major labor unions.<sup>2</sup>

Fortunately, there were a few significant studies that emerged from the old labor history that showed real interest in the conditions of African American workers. These studies appeared during the height of early twentieth century white supremacy and relied upon a race-relations model developed by sociologists, economists, and historians. Counteracting the prevailing racist stereotypes of the day, these scholars rejected negative images of the Black worker and emphasized the discriminatory attitudes and behavior of white workers, employers and the state. For example, *The Negro Artisan*, written in 1902 by the preeminent scholar, W.E.B DuBois, was the first comprehensive study of African American workers as well as the first study presented from their own perspective. Richard. R. Wright, Jr. made significant contributions to the study of the African American economic and social condition with several important articles: “The Negro in Times of Industrial Unrest,” “The Negro in Unskilled Labor,” and “The Skilled Mechanic in the North.” Historian Charles Wesley examined the Black work experience from slavery through the 1920s in his ambitious study, *Negro Labor in the United States, 1850-1925: A Study in American Economic History*. Emphasizing the significant role of the slaves in the Southern economy, Wesley argued capitalistic exploitation was a vital factor in the degradation of the Black worker, who struggled against both “normal” labor obstacles as well as “the special handicaps of race and color.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> James A. Gross, “Historians and the Literature of the Negro Worker,” *Labor History*, Vol. 10, No 3, 1969, 539; also see Herbert Hill, “The Importance of Race in American Labor History,” *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society*, Vol 9, No 2, Winter, 1995, 317-343; Joe William Trotter, Jr., “African-American Workers: New Directions in U.S. Labor Historiography,” *Labor History*, Vol 35, No 4 1994, 495-523.

<sup>3</sup> W.E.B. DuBois, *The Negro Artisan: Report of a Social Study Made under the Direction of Atlanta University; together with the Proceedings of the Seventh Conference for the Study of Negro Problems, held at Atlanta University, on May 27, 1902*, (Atlanta University Publications, no. 7, Atlanta, 1902); Richard R Wright, Jr., “The Negro in Times of industrial Unrest,” *Charities*, vol. 15, October 7, 1905, 69-73; “The Negro in Unskilled Labor,”



Later studies expanded on the devastating impact of slavery and racial exclusion in labor unions and were more critical of capitalism and its effects on Black Americans. Social scientists, Sterling Spero and Abram Harris, for instance, argued that the discrimination African American workers faced in industry was a product of slavery, and was maintained and perpetuated by organized labor. Economist Robert C. Weaver also indicted the slave system for the condition of Black workers by arguing that their position at the bottom of the economic hierarchy was due to a set of historical and contemporary conditions in the context of a defective capitalist economy. In *Organized Labor and the Negro*, Herbert Northrup, studied the policies of various industries and concluded that their racial policies depended upon their location. Labor historian, Philip S. Foner, on the other hand, lambasted union leadership for its pattern of racist policies. Similar to Spero and Harris, Foner concluded that union leaders were hypocritical and made empty promises to African American workers. To varying degrees, all of these works focused on the complex interaction of Black workers and established valuable groundwork for contextualizing their lives within the larger socioeconomic and political framework.<sup>4</sup>

During the 1960s, a new group of labor historians shifted the focus from labor organizations and paid closer attention to working class communities. Lead by historian Herbert

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*Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, vol. 49, September 1913, 1006-1044; "The Skilled Mechanic in the North," *Southern Workman*, vol. 38, March 1909, 155-168; Francille Rusan Wilson, *The Segregated Scholars: Black Social Scientist and the Creation of Black Labor Studies, 1890-1950*, (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2006), 31; Trotter, 597-598; Charles Wesley, *Negro Labor in the United States, 1850-1925: A Study in American Economic History*, (1927; reprint, New York: Russell and Russell, 1967); see also Lorenzo J. Greene and Carter G. Woodson, *The Negro Wage Earner* (1930, reprint, New York: Russell and Russell, 1969); Horace R. Cayton and George S. Mitchell, *Black Workers and the New Unions* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1939).

<sup>4</sup> Sterling D. Spero and Abram L. Harris, *The Black Worker: The Negro and the Labor Movement*, (1931, reprint, New York: Atheneum, 1968); Robert C. Weaver, *Negro Labor: A National Problem* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1946); Herbert R. Northrup, *Organized Labor and the Negro* (New York: Harper, 1944); Philip S. Foner, *Organized Labor and the Black Worker, 1619-1973* (New York: Praeger, 1974); see also, Alma Herbst, *The Negro in the Slaughtering and Meat-Packing Industry in Chicago* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1932); Ira De Augustine Reid, *Negro Membership in American Labor Unions* (New York: National Urban League, Department of Research and Investigations, 1930); Ray Marshall, *The Negro and Organized Labor* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1965).

Gutman, among others, disciples of the “new labor history” emphasized a neo-Marxist social history that highlighted the agency of Black workers and displayed broader dimensions with African American communities. For example, Gutman’s groundbreaking study on African American labor leader, Richard L. Davis, and his relationship with the United Mine Workers, shed important light on Black involvement in both the coal mining industry and its most important labor union. Other significant studies followed and added much needed depth to the lives of African American workers and their relationship with labor unions. Studies such as *Black Coal Miners in America: Race, Class, and Community Conflict, 1780-1980* by Ronald L. Lewis, and Joe William Trotter’s *Coal, Class, and Color: Blacks in Southern West Virginia, 1915-32*, established much-needed groundwork in the development of African American communities by focusing on working class African Americans while deemphasizing the role of the Black elite.<sup>5</sup>

Labor historians specifically focusing on Illinois took a similar trajectory to studies that were broader in scope. In particular, the new labor historians produced significant local studies that focused on working class labor conditions, as well as the worker’s ethnic and racial

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<sup>5</sup> Herbert Gutman, “The Negro and the United Mine Workers of America: The Career and Letters of Richard L. Davis and Something of their Meaning, 1890-1900,” in Julius Jacobson, ed., *The Negro and the American Labor Movement* (New York: Doubleday, 1968); for other examples of Gutman’s influence on the “new” labor history, see also *Work, Culture, and Society in Industrializing America: Essays in American Working-Class History* (New York: Vintage Books, 1977); and his preface in Spero and Harris, *The Black Worker*, vii-xii; Ronald L. Lewis, *Black Coal Miners in America: Race, Class, and Community Conflict, 1780-1980* (Lexington: University of Kentucky, 1987); Joe William Trotter, *Coal, Class, and Color: Blacks in Southern West Virginia, 1915-32* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1990); other examples that focused on Black workers include: William H. Harris, *The Harder We Run: Black Workers Since the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982); August Meier, John H. Bracey, and Elliott Rudwick, *Black Workers and Organized Labor* (Belmont: Wadsworth Publishing, 1971); Dennis C. Dickerson, *Our of the Crucible: Black Steelworkers in Western Pennsylvania, 1875-1950* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1986); August Meier and Elliott Rudwick, *Black Detroit and the Rise of the UAW* (); Eric Arnesen, *Brotherhoods of Color: Black Railroad Workers and the Struggle for Equality* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001); Daniel Letwin, *The Challenge of Interracial Unionism: Alabama Coal Miners, 1878-1921* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998); Peter J. Rachleff, *Black Labor in the South: Richmond, Virginia, 1865-1890* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1984); Brian Kelly, *Race, Class, and Power in the Alabama Coalfields, 1908-21* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001); Eric Arnesen, *Waterfront Workers of New Orleans: Race, Class, and Politics, 1863-1923* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994).

backgrounds. Both Victor Hicken and Gutman examined major labor conflicts in small coal mining towns in Illinois that concentrated on working class laborers. Hicken's article, "The Virden and Pana Mine Wars of 1898," offered a glimpse into the important role of race in labor conflicts of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Gutman wrote two essays on the miners of Braidwood, Illinois and the labor conflicts they incurred during 1874 and 1877. In "Labor in the Land of Lincoln," he focused on labor politics from the interworking of work and community relations of the small mining town. Historian John Keiser's article expanded on race relations in connection with labor conflict in his 1972 article, "Black Strikebreakers and Racism in Illinois, 1865-1900." He argued that racism in Illinois was one of the leading factors that kept the Black population in Illinois small in the late nineteenth century. William M. Tuttle's "Labor Conflict and Racial Violence: The Black Worker in Chicago, 1894-1919" correlated labor conflict with racial violence. He argued that the labor conflicts in Chicago, beginning with the 1894 Pullman strike, was one of the leading factors to cause the 1919 Chicago race riot.<sup>6</sup> Along with the new labor studies that focused on broader national labor issues, local studies provided a more nuanced perspective of the working class during the tumultuous decades of the nineteenth century.

Great Migration studies have also added to our understanding of the structure and inner-workings of working class communities of the late nineteenth century. More specifically, they have been an excellent source for unearthing vital economic and occupational data on African

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<sup>6</sup> Herbert Gutman, "The Braidwood Lockout of 1874," *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society*, Vol. 53, No. 1 (Spring, 1960), pp. 5-28; "Labor in the Land of Lincoln: Coal Miners on the Prairie," in *Work, Culture, and Society in Industrializing America: Essays in American Working-Class History*; Victor Hicken, "The Virden and Pana Mine Wars of 1898," *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society*, Vol. 52, No. 2 (Summer, 1959); John H. Keiser, "Black Strikebreakers and Racism in Illinois, 1865-1900", *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society* 65 (Autumn 1972); William M. Tuttle, "Labor Conflict and Racial Violence: The Black Worker in Chicago, 1894-1919," *Labor History*, (1969).

Americans as they relocated to urban northern locations. In their classic study, *Black Metropolis*, St. Clair Drake and Horace R. Cayton examined African American life in Chicago during the first half of the twentieth century. Along with providing a superb overview of the migration to a large northern city Drake and Cayton delve deeply into the occupational status of Black Chicagoans as they attempt to adjust to urban life. Historian James R. Grossman, in *Land of Hope*, was particularly interested in the perspectives of Black migrants and their economic position in Chicago. He argued that Black migrants represented “a crucial transition in the history of Afro-Americans, American cities, and the American working class.” Their transition was shaped by a complex interaction between structural forces in the south, the migration experience, structural forces in the north racial attitudes, and the migrants’ perceptions on each of these.<sup>7</sup>

Similar to Great Migration studies, Black community studies have been vital to enriching our understanding of an Afro-Illinoisian perspective of labor issues. Historian Shirley Carlson demonstrated that Black migrants were not only moving to the urban North. She examined the migration of African Americans to Pulaski County—a largely rural county located in southern Illinois. Southern African Americans were largely a rural people, and many of them rejected city-life for a more rural and familiar setting. Black studies scholar, Sundiata K. Cha-Jua’s

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<sup>7</sup> St. Claire Drake and Horace R. Cayton, *Black Metropolis: A Study of Negro Life in a Northern City*, (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1970); James R. Grossman, *Land of Hope: Chicago, Black Southerners and the Great Migration*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), 30-33.; Kimberly Phillips, *Alabama North, African-American Migrants, Community, and Working-Class Activism in Cleveland, 1915-45* (University of Illinois Press, 1999); Peter Gottlieb, *Making Their own Way: Southern Blacks’ Migration to Pittsburgh, 1916-30* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987); Joe W. Trotter, *Black Milwaukee: The Making of the industrial Proletariat, 1915-45* (University of Illinois Press, 1985); Joe W. Trotter, ed. *The Great Migration in Historical Perspective: New Dimensions of Race, Class, and Gender* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991). For examples of the “Ghetto Synthesis” of the Great Migration see: Gilbert Osofsky, *Harlem: The Making of a Ghetto, 1890-1930*, 2nd ed. (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1971); Allen Spear, *Black Chicago: The Making of a Negro Ghetto, 1890-1920*, (Chicago: University of Chicago press, 1967); and Kenneth L. Kusmer, *A Ghetto Takes Shape: Black Cleveland, 1870-1930* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1976); Joe W. Trotter, “African American Workers: New Directions in U.S. Labor Historiography” 495-496.

examination of Brooklyn, Illinois--an all-Black town in Southeast Illinois—provides significant theoretical evidence to support his assertion about the “super-exploitative” nature of the relationship between Afro-Brooklynites and whites in neighboring towns. “Although Blacks who moved to the metro-east,” he wrote, “were motivated mainly by economic reasons, the decision to live in Brooklyn, instead of East St. Louis...was determined primarily by race and racism.” The self determination of Blacks and the decisions they made in an effort to survive within an inherently racist society has been a woefully underdeveloped factor in labor studies. Fortunately, Cha-Jua accentuates this important dynamic throughout his study.<sup>8</sup>

While these scholars have undoubtedly added to our comprehension of Black workers, their studies have been limited in scope. The old labor scholars relied too much on evidence procured from large labor unions and subsequently paid minimal attention to non-union laborers. With the lack of attention on unorganized labor, many of these scholars minimized the significance of the labor of African Americans. The advent of the new labor history corrected some of the shortcomings of the old history. However, this school was often mired by overcompensation of their use of working class evidence, and the downplaying of the significance of the labor union. Further, with the tendency to overcompensate for working class formation, new labor historians have notoriously undervalued the significance of race in labor relations. Inevitably, with the downplaying of the significance of race in labor history, the perspectives of racial groups deemed outside of the working class are barely audible. While new

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<sup>8</sup> Shirley J. Carlson, “Black Migration to Pulaski County, 1860-1900,” *Illinois Historical Journal*, Vol 80, No. 1 (Spring, 1987), “The Black Community in the Rural North: Pulaski County, Illinois, 1860-1900,” (PhD Dissertation, Washington University, 1982); Sundiata K. Cha-Jua, *America’s First Black Town: Brooklyn, Illinois, 1830-1915*. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000), 150; see also Christopher K. Hays, “Way Down in Egypt Land: Conflict and Community in Cairo, Illinois, 1850-1930” (PhD Dissertation, University of Missouri-Columbia, 1996), “The African American Struggle for Equality and Justice in Cairo , Illinois, 1865-1900,” *Illinois Historical Journal*, Vol. 90, No. 4 (Winter, 1997).

labor scholars expressed general sympathy for the Black worker, noted Herbert Hill, they treated their collective identity and their racial group interests “as an interference in the formation of a unified working class” and regarded the issue of race as “an impediment to the class struggle.”<sup>9</sup>

In particular, labor studies that focused specifically on Illinois and the labor conflicts during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries have been especially prone to these shortcomings. Hicken and Gutman’s studies were both instrumental in unearthing significant information on the lives and communities of Illinois miners mired in labor conflicts against mine owners. Yet both studies were severely lacking in information about the Black workers who were used as strikebreakers in the conflicts. We were given some idea of where they came from, but neither historian provided much detail about who these people were, or what their thoughts were on their role within these conflicts. Gutman went into some important details about Black workers in Braidwood who remained in town after the conflict ended. Yet, like many of the labor histories of Illinois, very little attention was given to the perspective of Afro-Illinoisans—what did they think of African Americans strikebreaking? In John Keiser’s “Black Strikebreakers and Racism in Illinois, 1865-1900,” we were led to understand that strikebreaking by Black workers was one of the main factors in heightened antagonism toward African Americans in the state. However, Keiser failed to provide any substantial background on Black labor in the state during the nineteenth century, and the reader is never given any idea of the circumstances that may have led to the advent of strikebreaking by African Americans in the first place. Offering a more balanced perspective on the thoughts and actions of black and white workers, historians Felix L. Armfield and Caroline A. Waldron examined the 1895 labor conflict in Spring Valley, Illinois.

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<sup>9</sup> Herbert Hill, “The Importance of Race in American Labor History,” *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society*, Vol 9, No 2 (Winter, 1995), 319.

While both studies acknowledged race as the driving force motivating violence, Armfield's attention to the Black community in Spring Valley was particularly impressive. Waldron's attention to the details of the aftermath of the conflict, in which Afro-Illinoisans rallied to defeat their assailants through the legal system is also worth noting.<sup>10</sup>

This dissertation will continue the recent trend in African American labor studies that are attentive to the perspectives of Black workers, the overlapping context of work, culture, politics, and community. For a fuller comprehension of these aspects within the context of the African American experience, racial identity must be at the core of the analytical framework.<sup>11</sup> This project will utilize the racial formation theoretical framework because it provides a foundation for a critical examination of race as it acquires different meanings, depending on specific historic circumstances. Racial formations are class societies in which peoples and nationalities have been converted into races. Each racial formation has a unique composition that distinguishes it from other instances of racial formations and, more important, from other social formations.<sup>12</sup> A crucial element within this framework is the concept of racialization, which is defined as the extension of racial meaning to a previously racially unclassified relationship, social practice or group. Racialization is a historically specific ideological process that is constructed from

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<sup>10</sup> Felix L. Armfield, "Fire on the Prairies: The 1895 Spring Valley Race Riot," *Journal of Illinois History*, Vol 3 No 3 (2000); Caroline Waldron, "Lynch-law Must Go!": Race, Citizenship, and the Other in an American Coal Mining Town," *Journal of American Ethnic History*, Vol. 20, No. 1 (Fall, 2000); for an excellent example of Afro-Illinoisans and self-defense strategies they employed, see Sundiata K. Cha-Jua, "A Warlike Demonstration': Legalism, Armed Resistance, and Black Political Mobilization in Decatur, Illinois, 1894-1898," *The Journal of Negro History*, Vol. 83, No. 1 (Winter, 1998).

<sup>11</sup> Trotter, "New Directions," 496.

<sup>12</sup> Sundiata Keita Cha-Jua, "Racial Formation and Transformation: Toward a Theory of Black Racial Oppression," *Souls: A Critical Journal of Black Politics, Culture and Society*, Vol. 3, (Winter 2001), 25-60, Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1980s*, (New York: Routledge, 1986); Harold Baron, "Racism Transformed: The Implication of the 1960s," *Review of Radical Political Economics*, Vol. 17 (Fall 1985); Sundiata K. Cha-Jua, "The New Nadir: The Contemporary Black Racial Formation," *The Black Scholar* (2010); ; Hill, 321; There are several useful variations of Racial Formation frameworks including Omi and Winant and Harold Baron, and this project utilizes various aspects from each of them. However, their focus is primarily on the 1960s and 1970s. Cha-Jua's Black Racial Formation Transformation framework is more useful for this project because it focuses on earlier periods in the African American experience.

preexisting conceptual elements and emerges from the struggles of competing political projects and ideas seeking to articulate similar elements differently.<sup>13</sup> I argue that the process of racializing labor during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries affected not only the type of labor Black people could procure, it also systematically eliminated them from the larger labor movement and virtually forced them into “anti-labor” roles such as strikebreaking. As the labor movement gained significant momentum throughout Illinois, Black workers faced with the decision to be a part of the labor movement was not easy—while other workers contended with nineteenth century labor issues such as unionization, better working conditions and the eight hour work day, Black workers were also entangled within a struggle for citizenship, voting rights, and the right to work and live where they chose. Thus, like other workers, Afro-Illinoisans struggled to adjust to the modernization of the late nineteenth century workplace. Yet they were also compelled to adjust to a system of racialization within a workplace that castigated them as stereotypically ineffectual workers that would somehow degrade the labor of European American workers. This process resulted in frequent conflicts with European American workers who, in their effort to secure their own tenuous position as laborers within the political economy, competed against Black workers for even the lowliest occupations. The devastating consequence of this racialization process in the workplace by the end of the turn of the twentieth century led to the idea that Afro-Illinoisans were anti-union and unsympathetic to the plight of the rights of all workers.

Prior to the mass migration of African Americans to Chicago and other Northern urban enclaves during the early twentieth century, the relatively small, but diverse, Black population in Illinois held varying ideas of their economic and occupational advancement within a rapidly

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<sup>13</sup> Omi and Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States*, 64.



industrializing society. Making decisions relating to labor was especially difficult for Afro-Illinoisans considering their precarious position. They were forced to reckon with the state's anti-black laws that were not only designed to severely limit their civil rights and population, but also to protect white Illinoisans from "unwanted" Black labor. As Illinois lifted its racial restrictions after the Civil War, working-class white racial hostilities increased—the specter of the Black worker lurked beyond the horizon, and white workers feared that their own precarious economic and occupational position was in jeopardy. As a result, white Illinoisans, with the backing of political demagogues, attempted to compensate for their perceived loss of state-sponsored support for racial homogeneity. By unleashing an onslaught of intimidation and violence levied against Black workers in order to maintain racial supremacy in the workplace and virtually every other socio-political aspect, the process of racialization in labor was launched. White workers refused to work with Afro-Illinoisans, and physically intimidated those that dared to remain on the job. As racial lines continued to solidify in the workplace, white workers bolstered their occupational position by demanding the racialization of labor unions. By the end of the nineteenth century, Black workers were effectively barred from coveted skilled labor positions and labor unions.

Yet Afro-Illinoisans never played the role of hapless victims during this historical process. This dissertation is as much about their struggle against all attempts to consign them to a prescribed occupational status. The heroic efforts of John Jones, H. Ford Douglass, and Ida B. Wells-Barnett, as well as countless lesser-known working class Afro-Illinoisans who openly combatted, debated, and protested racist treatment in the workplace, are vital to our understanding of their collective experience in labor. Evidence suggests that Afro-Illinoisans rarely spoke in unison on matters related to labor because they were not afforded the luxury of

being only workers—they were always *black* workers laboring within a system that invariably associated them with slave labor because of their race. Former Cairo alderman, Jacob Amos, represented a small portion of Black Illinoisans who voiced their concern for the African American position within the larger framework of labor. While Amos chided Black clergymen for their continued focus on politics and loyalty to the Republican Party, other Afro-Illinoisans (like Amos) felt the Grand Old Party had taken them for granted. Some Black Illinoisans adhered to the “self-help” policies of Tuskegee Institute president, Booker T. Washington, who argued that the best avenue for economic success for African Americans was to remain in the South where they should place their work energy in “common” occupations. Many Afro-Illinoisans were not satisfied with the conciliatory rhetoric of Washington’s message, however, and gravitated toward the more radical actions of activists like T. Thomas Fortune and his Afro-American League. Under the local leadership of L.B. Stevens, the Afro-American League disrupted the strike of the 1894 American Railway Union (ARU). His “anti-strike” stance resonated with many Afro-Illinoisans because the lily-white ARU openly rejected bi-racial unionism.

In an effort to trace the formation of racial policies within a national historic context, as well as develop a better understanding of how these racial policies were altered and affected the racialization of labor, this dissertation utilizes a state-wide synthesis to examine Black workers in Illinois. To be sure, the vilification of Afro-Illinoisans in relation to the labor movement was not an instantaneous process—instead, it was a process that began as soon as the possibility of Black workers entering the Midwest seeped into the bloodstream of white Illinoisans. During the post-Civil Wars years working class white Illinoisans believed their position within the racial hierarchy was under siege due to drastic changes in labor produced by rapid industrialization.

Massive alterations in labor created whole new categories of workers displaced and disposed by economic forces. In addition, the threat of newly emancipated Black workers struck fear into the hearts of working class white Illinoisans. Once insulated from a massive influx of Black labor through various anti-black legislation, white Illinoisans faced a direct challenge to their status as workers within a vastly altered political economy. Thus, in an effort to preserve racial superiority, white Illinoisans developed new forms of self-definition that would establish a sharper distinction between “white” and “black” work, and between “superior” and “inferior” peoples.<sup>14</sup>

While Afro-Illinoisans gradually sought anti-union measures to protect their own interest as workers during the latter years of the nineteenth century, this dissertation will also highlight Black workers who fought for workers’ rights within the labor movement. At the height of some of the most tumultuous labor conflicts in Illinois, Black workers were often at the vanguard of labor activism. For example, Black waiters from Chicago were amongst the earliest and most vocal workers in the restaurant industry to form labor unions. They formed unions to demand better pay and hours and were often forced to form separate all-black unions because European American waiters refused to organize with them. Black waiters responded by not only unionizing themselves into separate unions or joining progressive bi-racial unions, they also established a firm pattern of agitation against continued racial discrimination in (and sometimes outside) the workplace. Towering pro-union African Americans such as Richard L. Davis, who was a well-respected labor leader and wrote numerous articles for the *United Mine Workers Journal*, represented over 20,000 Black members of the United Mine Workers union by the turn of the

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<sup>14</sup> Jacqueline Jones, *American Work: Four Centuries of Black and White Labor* (New York: WW Norton, 1988), 275.

twentieth century. Like other American workers, Afro-Illinoisans represented various opinions about labor and based their economic and occupational decisions based on their own perspective.

In an effort to comprehend the trajectory of Black workers in Illinois and their collective determination to navigate various racialized strategies designed to thwart their economic and occupational progress, my dissertation traces their struggle chronologically. Chapters one and two display the earliest efforts by white Illinoisans at reducing the Black population—starting with the 1847 constitution convention. As the sectional conflict heightened, notions of a potential inundation of Black migrants struck fear into many white Illinoisans. The solution to tighten anti-black restrictions already in place since the state’s inception in 1819, was considered the best way to protect white workers from the importation of “cheap labor.” An increasingly vocal Afro-Illinoisan population fought vociferously against the local anti-black legislation, as well as the 1850 national “compromise” with the slave South. Even during this early stage, Afro-Illinoisans debated about various strategies to circumvent racist policies. Led by activists, such as John Jones, prominent Black Illinoisans attended a series of local and national conventions to devise strategies to improve the condition of African Americans. They also developed or contributed to a complex network of supportive institutions, including the Black church, the Underground Railroad (through Illinois), secret para-military organizations, and a Black population that increasingly employed methods of defending itself during the volatile years after the enactment of the Fugitive Slave law of 1850.

Chapter three explores the limited post-Civil War gains Afro-Illinoisans obtained and the ways disparate groups attempted to thwart those goals. Immediately following the war, Illinois Democrats led a vicious campaign to stir up racial antagonism among white Illinoisans. Many of them remained uneasy about Emancipation and the prospect of Black workers migrating to the

state. With the eventual abolishment of the Illinois “Black laws,” whites were no longer insulated from a massive influx of Black labor. Not only did they face a direct challenge to their tenuous economic status as workers, they also believed their position within the American racial hierarchy to be in jeopardy. Meanwhile, Afro-Illinoisans continued to devise strategies that would enable them to protect their civil rights. As they acquired the right to vote and citizenship, their newfound political rights did not necessarily translate into significant economic or occupational improvements due to increasingly exclusionary practices of newly formed labor organizations.

Chapter four examines the solidification of racism in the labor movement. While disaffected European American workers continued to agitate over working conditions and wages, Northern employers sought to replace them with Black workers. Particularly prevalent in Illinois and other Midwestern states, this trend played a significant role in the exaggerated perception that Black workers were “anti-union” workers. Afro-Illinoisans had their own agenda, however. Refusing to submit to prescribed roles in labor, many Black Illinoisans not only condemned strikebreaking as a practice, they were often at the vanguard of labor activism. Often at the forefront of the progressive bi-racial labor movement, many Black and white workers together, battled against employers for better working conditions, higher wages, and shorter work hours. Yet the weight of racism took a toll on this bi-racial relationship by the last decade of the nineteenth century. White workers increasingly shunned progressive unions in favor of the more exclusive craft unions. With membership dwindling, in addition to an unfavorable reputation in labor conflicts, bi-racial unions barely existed by the end of the century. While craft unions such as the American Federation of Labor, proclaimed racial inclusiveness, Black workers were largely excluded from these unions. Furthermore, due to increasingly racialized discourse

throughout the country that insisted upon the inferiority of African Americans in every socio-political aspect, Black workers were unfairly castigated as anti-union workers who willingly undercut the wages of white workers and usurped their jobs.

The final two chapters covering the years prior to the Great Migration witnessed a barrage of violent labor conflicts. However, the most violent labor conflicts during the decades bracketing the turn of the twentieth century always included Black strikebreakers. Chapters five and six display the occupational position of Afro-Illinoisans and exhibits their continued struggle against racial discrimination in labor. In particular, chapter six displays how the racialization of labor affected Black workers and the strategies they continued to utilize. Afro-Illinoisans brazenly battled against the acceptance and normalization of anti-black discrimination within the labor movement. They were gradually leaving the South and their rural roots in pursuit of industrial occupations in larger cities during the years prior to the Great Migration. While some African Americans abandoned their Southern farms, and moved to southern urban locations, many Northern African Americans also left smaller locations for urban areas with better employment opportunities. In the new urban setting, Black workers were largely excluded from skilled and semi-skilled positions and were often in direct competition with recent-arriving European immigrants. Through a variety of forums and self-defense tactics, including the print media, indignation meetings, strikebreaking, Afro-Illinoisans, regardless of social class and gender, forged various strategies to reverse the descent into the period that became known as the nadir of race relations in the post-Reconstruction United States.

Leading up to the Great Migration, Afro-Illinoisans employed various ideas and strategies in order to navigate the racialization of labor in the nineteenth century. Adjusting to the modernization of industry proved to be difficult enough for all workers. Yet, as this project will

display, their struggle to locate and maintain viable employment within a society that increasingly deemed them inferior—as workers and citizens—required far more ability than African Americans have been given credit for.

## CHAPTER 1

“I AM ENTITLED TO MY LIBERTY”:  
AFRO-ILLINOISANS AND THE BATTLE AGAINST  
THE BLACK LAWS, 1847-1854

In 1847, Illinois proposed a new constitution that included a requirement for the General Assembly to pass laws that prohibited the emigration of free African Americans into the state and prevent slave owners from manumitting slaves within state boundaries. The “Black Laws” not only restricted the emigration of free Blacks into the state, it also denied suffrage, public education, benefits of welfare, testimony against, interracial marriage, imposed restrictions on militia service, immigration, and employment to the free Black population already living in Illinois. Although the laws were passed at the first session of the assembly after the adoption of the constitution, the state legislature did not implement the Black laws until 1853.<sup>1</sup> Section three of the 1853 Black laws states the following:

“If any negro, or mulatto, bond or free, shall hereafter come into the state and remain ten days, with the evident intention of residing in the same, every such negro or mulatto shall be deemed guilty of a high misdemeanor, and for the first offense shall be fined the sum of fifty dollars, to be recovered before any justice of the peace in the county where said negro or mulatto may be found.”<sup>2</sup>

Illinois adopted its first comprehensive slave codes (also known as the “Black Laws”) in 1819.<sup>3</sup>

Through the codes, Illinois discouraged the immigration of free Blacks by compelling them to

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<sup>1</sup> Illinois Constitution of 1848, Art., XIV; Laws of Illinois, 18 G.A. (1853), 57; Paul Finkleman, “Slavery, the ‘More Perfect Union,’ and the Prairie State,” *Illinois Historical Journal*, Vol 8, No 4, (Winter, 1987), 257.

<sup>2</sup> Laws of Illinois, 18 G.A. (1853), 57; J.N. Gridley, “A Case Under An Illinois Black Law,” *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society*, vol. 4, no. 4 (January, 1912).

<sup>3</sup> For a full explanation of the origins of the Illinois Black Laws, see N. Dwight Harris, *The History of Negro Servitude in Illinois and of the Slavery Agitation in that State, 1719-1864*, (Chicago: AC McClurg, 1904); Zebina Eastman, *Black Code of Illinois*, (Chicago, 1883); Elmer Gertz, “The Black Laws of Illinois,” *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society* 6, no. 3 (1963), 454-473; for a comparative perspective of Illinois’ Black laws with other Midwestern states, see Stephen Middleton, *The Black Laws in the Old Northwest: A Documentary History*, (Westport.: Greenwood Press, 1993), 269-342.



produce a certificate of freedom and to register with a county clerk. Refugees without a certificate would not have legal residence and could be sold as runaway slaves. Illinois did not welcome free Black people; it welcomed slave holders who brought along Blacks as laborers. Beginning with the initial statehood constitution in 1818, these laws designed to curtail the free Black population were amended at least five times until they were finally abolished in 1865.<sup>4</sup> Historian V. Jacques Voegeli explained, the prospect of an inundation of African Americans migrating to Midwestern states “touched a nerve” within the white populations of that region.<sup>5</sup> Midwestern whites—especially those who may have been only a generation removed from their migration from the South—often brought with them a particular disdain for free Black people and used any political clout they had to keep them out of their particular state. While Midwestern whites may have simply been reflecting the racial prejudices that were typical for the mainstream antebellum population, historian N. Dwight Harris suggested that the Illinois Black Laws were often justified on an “economic ground,” and instituted to protect whites from the “evils associated with an oversupply of Negro laborers.”<sup>6</sup> Therefore, not only were the laws designed to keep Illinois racially homogenous, it also had the added “benefit” of excluding a people who were associated with slavery.

The free Black population managed to live and work in antebellum Illinois, in spite of all efforts to limit their population, or eliminate it all together. The goal of this chapter is to unearth the occupational status of Black Illinoisans in the context of the stringent laws that were intended to not only keep them out of the state, but also to severely limit the rights of free Black people

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<sup>4</sup> Middleton, 272-273.

<sup>5</sup> V. Jacques Voegeli, *Free but not Equal: The Midwest and The Negro during the Civil War* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1968), 5.

<sup>6</sup> Harris, 188.

living in the state. How did the Black laws affect the economic status of Afro-Illinoisans? What type of employment were they able to secure? More than ninety percent of Black workers in the United States during the pre-Emancipation period were forced to work as slaves. Therefore, free Blacks were often consigned to menial labor because of their indirect association to slaves. Free Black labor during the mid-nineteenth century, noted abolitionist and editor, Frederick Douglass, was “branded with the stigma of the auction block and the victims of discrimination,” persecution and the double measure of oppression, and they occupied a status only a degree higher than that of the slaves themselves. The prejudice levied against them, he continued, “was so intense that it became difficult for them to get employment, particularly after the heavy influx of immigration began in the early 1840s, and a demand arose for new kinds of skills which the Negroes did not have and were not permitted to acquire.”<sup>7</sup> This chapter will also display how, in spite of all efforts to the contrary, many Afro-Illinoisans managed to carve out a decent living and procure viable employment. Black Illinoisans did in fact suffer disproportionately in relation to other Illinoisans. However, in spite of all the anti-black legislation and largely unwelcoming European American population in Illinois during the pre-Emancipation period, many Black Illinoisans, with the help of burgeoning community institutions such as the Black church, managed to survive economically, while a few even prospered.

African Americans did not simply remain passive victims of discrimination as white Illinoisans vied to create a racially homogenous state, however. Both prominent and lesser-known Afro-Illinoisans fought vociferously for their collective rights, against the Fugitive Slave law of 1850, for the repeal of the state’s Black Laws, and the right to earn viable wages for their

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<sup>7</sup> “Colored People’s Convention,” *Frederick Douglass’ Paper*, March 4, 1853; Carol Wilson, *Freedom At Risk: The Kidnapping of Free Blacks in America, 1780-1865* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press 1994), 9.

labor. This chapter will examine the methods and strategies they employed to fight against national and local anti-black legislation, an unwelcoming white population, and efforts to improve their economic and sociopolitical condition. Prominent Afro-Illinoisans attended conventions during the 1840s and 1850s to develop and implement ideas to improve the economic plight of Black workers in Illinois and throughout the rest of the nation. These leaders often focused on the type of labor African Americans performed because they believed respectability and labor skills were symbiotic. By improving their overall business and labor skills, African Americans would accumulate more wealth, and thereby more respectability as a race. Chicagoan John Jones, among other leaders, urged African Americans to stay away from menial labor “except where necessity compels the person to resort thereto as a means of livelihood.” They recommended “the necessity of obtaining knowledge of a mechanical trade, farming, mercantile business, the learned professions...as essential means of elevating us as a class.”<sup>8</sup> Often working in conjunction with Black conventioners, Afro-Illinoisans developed a complex network of anti-slavery institutions, including the Black church, the Underground Railroad, secret para-military organizations, and a Black population that increasingly employed methods of defending itself during the volatile years following the enactment of the Fugitive Slave law of 1850.

### *The Illinois Constitution Convention and the Black Convention Movement*

In June 1847, Benjamin Bond, a lawyer from Clinton County introduced a provision at the Second Illinois Constitutional Convention to prohibit free Blacks from entering the state and

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<sup>8</sup> “National Colored Convention” *The Liberator*, October 20, 1848.

slaveowners from manumitting their slaves within state boundaries. The introduction of the Bond Resolution ignited the most heated debate in Illinois over free Blacks since the convention controversy of 1824.<sup>9</sup> Tensions over slavery and the Black Laws had already reached a fevered pitch during the 1840s as Illinois abolitionists maintained pressure on the state's legislators by distributing two hundred copies of literature that demanded the repeal of the laws. In July of that year, they circulated a petition advocating the abolition of slavery signed by seventy one abolitionists and read in the state senate. In two cases during the 1840s, *Baily v. Cromwell* and *Kinney v. Cook*, the legal basis for slavery's existence in Illinois was sharply reduced by establishing the freedom of all persons within the state, regardless of color, and the sale of free people was illegal. These cases marked a turning point as the Illinois Supreme Court interpreted the state's anti-black statutes narrowly and reluctantly helped owners of fugitive slaves recapture their property.<sup>10</sup>

The reaction of white Illinoisans to the abolition movement was, at the least, unwelcoming—at worst, they violently assaulted anti-slavery activists. Influential Illinoisans accused abolitionist of being “outsiders” and foreign agents who disrupted the peace of society by provoking debates on slavery. The pattern of riots during the 1840s throughout Illinois constituted a violent response to the initial phase of the abolitionist movement, and local leaders

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<sup>9</sup> The call for a new state constitution in 1824 that would legalize slavery in Illinois was led by wealthy slave owners that already owned “indentured” Black servants in Southern Illinois. Confident in their ability to influence the population of Illinois, political leaders sought to extend slavery to Illinois by legal measures starting in 1823. Pro-slavery men such as John Hart Crenshaw operated salt mines in Gallatin, Illinois, were well known for employing slave labor and were instrumental in pushing forth the measure to legalize slavery in Illinois. Opponents against the call for a constitution convention and the legalization of slavery in Illinois won by a vote of 6,640 to 4,972 ; for full and detailed treatment of the 1824 Referendum, see N. Dwight Harris, *The History of Negro Servitude in Illinois and of the Slavery Agitation in that State, 1717-1864*, 47-49; see also chapter 3: “The Debate Over Slavery: The Convention Movement and the Development of Free Soilism, 1819-1824 in Charles N. Zucker, “The Free Negro Question: Race Relations in Antebellum Illinois, 1801-1860,” (PhD Dissertation, Northwestern 1972), ; Eugene H. Berwanger, *The Frontier Against Slavery: Western Anti-Negro Prejudice and the Slavery Extension Controversy*, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1967) 10-11.

<sup>10</sup> Gertz, 468-469.

who were unwilling to tolerate the presence of abolitionist spokesmen resorted to mob action as an extra-legal means of social control.<sup>11</sup> The murder of abolitionist editor Elijah P. Lovejoy in 1837, who was killed while defending against the destruction of his printing press from a mob of angry whites in Alton, Illinois, was the most infamous case in anti-abolitionist violence in Illinois. Though the riots culminated in the martyrdom of Lovejoy, it represented perhaps the most well-known cases of violence against abolitionists in the nation. In all, Illinois had a number of serious disturbances starting in 1836 leading up to the Constitution Convention of 1847.<sup>12</sup>

Illinois legislators contributed to the climate of violence by condemning the abolitionist movement while condoning the mob action of the citizens. When it became apparent that the anti-slavery movement would not be squelched through violence, mob action subsided and the legislature took the initiative by enacting new anti-black legislation. They revised the Black Laws by adding another section in 1845, which prohibited interracial cohabitation in an “open state of adultery or fornication.”<sup>13</sup> By the mid-1840s Illinois legislators shaped the laws (through several revisions) to not only severely restrict the rights of free Black people within the state, but to also maintain the subordinate status of Black indentured servants. Anti-slavery agitation, however, caused many white Illinoisans to clamor for a state that would remove Black people from the state altogether.

While Illinois legislators devised methods to form a racially homogenous state, African Americans devised methods to counteract anti-black legislation. With few exceptions, before the

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<sup>11</sup> Zucker, 218.

<sup>12</sup> Paul Simon, *Freedom's Champion: Elijah Lovejoy*, (Carbondale: Southern Illinois Press), 130-132; Harris, 93-98; Zucker, 217-218.

<sup>13</sup> Paul M. Angle, “The Illinois Black Laws,” *Chicago History*, Vol 8, No 3, (Spring 1967) 66-67.

1840s, Illinois abolitionists consisted of mostly white Northeasterners and their descendants. The African American population of the 1840s was a small minority in a state that displayed a long history of disdain for them. Vastly outnumbered in a state that clearly did not welcome them, most Black Illinoisans thought it wise not to agitate unless they were prepared for mob action or worse. Furthermore, the vast majority of Afro-Illinoisans lived and worked in the southern section of Illinois, where even the slightest disturbance from them was viewed as grounds for exclusion or, worse yet, cooperation with local slavecatching agents who were often aided by the population in the southern county region. Afro-Illinoisan, John Jones was instrumental in changing the racial dynamic of abolitionism in the Prairie State during the late 1840s. He not only defied occupational odds placed against African Americans by owning a prosperous tailoring business, he also dedicated himself to ridding Illinois of the odious Black Laws. Jones and his wife moved to Chicago from North Carolina in 1845 after they obtained their certificates of freedom from the Clerk in Madison County in accordance with Illinois law. By the end of the decade Jones established himself as one of the leading spokespersons for African Americans in Illinois and the nation.<sup>14</sup>

Jones was relentless in his attack against the destruction of the anti-black statutes. In 1847, with strong encouragement from white abolitionists, Jones wrote two scathing articles in the abolitionist newspaper, the *Western Citizen*, which challenged the constitutionality of the 1845 version of the Black Laws and the proposed provision to exclude African Americans from Illinois. "Members of the Revolutionary Congress," he wrote, decided that free Black people "or whatever caste, are entitled to all the privileges and immunities of the citizens of the several

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<sup>14</sup> Charles A. Gliozzo, *John Jones and the Repeal of the Illinois Black Laws*, (Duluth: University of Minnesota, 1975), 1-3.

states.” The authors of the Constitution, he reminded his readers, refused to insert the word “white” into their definition of free citizens and their privileges. Furthermore, the Confederation had provided for raising money by taxing all people except Native Americans. Since African Americans were taxed, he reasoned, then they must be citizens. Also, by using historical evidence, appealing to the “Christian spirit” of Illinoisans, and imploring the common sense of the legislators, Jones elegantly, but forcefully, pled his case: “what has caused the people of Illinois to disenfranchise a portion of her citizens, regardless of her republican form of government?” The Black Laws were in direct violation of the Northwest Ordinance of 1787, which banned slavery in the region. The provision of the laws were also in violation of the first section of the 1818 Illinois Constitution which allowed to join the Union as a free state, and did not allow for the disenfranchisement of free Blacks. His poignant arguments for the repeal of the Black Laws, however, fell upon deaf ears as the Illinois Constitution Convention proceeded with the Bond Resolution.<sup>15</sup>

The Bond Resolution reflected the general negrophobic attitude of antebellum white Illinoisans, who were determined to resist any ameliorative alterations to the state’s system of racial subordination. Unwilling to tolerate the presence of free Blacks in their midst, white Illinoisans sought to achieve a racially homogeneous society through a policy of legal exclusion and, when that failed, forcible expulsion.<sup>16</sup> Many delegates from Southern Illinois claimed to “understand the negro problem” better than their northern county counterparts because they simply had experience dealing with large Black populations. William Kinney of St. Clair County, for example, informed the convention that the question of Black exclusion was one with

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<sup>15</sup> *The Western Citizen*, September 21, 1847; September 28, 1847; Howard Bell, “Chicago Negroes in the Reform Movement, 1847-1853, *Negro History Bulletin*, Vol 21, No. 7 (April 1958) ,153.

<sup>16</sup> Zucker 298.

which his constituency was deeply concerned. St. Clair County was near St. Louis, he explained, nearly five hundred free Black people had already settled there, and whites were “perfectly familiar” with their habits.<sup>17</sup> Kinney also complained that the free Black population in his county were “idle and worthless” people and his constituents were “anxious to get rid of them.” Furthermore, he claimed that he received a letter from his constituents that accused St. Clair Blacks of stealing, and therefore it was necessary to constantly “keep a watch” on them. He hoped that some provision would pass that would settle the matter and “prevent scenes of violence.”<sup>18</sup>

Southern Illinois delegates were not the only members of the convention to favor the Bond Resolution and the exclusion of African Americans from the state. James Singleton, a delegate from Brown County, located in Western Illinois, maintained that his constituents were “praying for action against the free negroes.” Unlike many of the Southern Illinois delegates who had relatively large Black populations in their respective counties, Brown County only had four African Americans 1840, and sixteen by 1850.<sup>19</sup> Despite the scarcity of free Blacks in his county, Singleton was among the most outspoken advocates for racial exclusion because the postponement of the measure would allow abolitionists’ “iniquitous schemes” to grow in influence while African Americans would become “emboldened.” A Virginia native, and a self-proclaimed proslavery advocate, Singleton claimed he had “deep sympathy” for slaves. He maintained that he “knew that the conduct of those men in this state and in others, who pretended to be endeavoring to better the condition of slaves, instead of bettering their condition, was

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<sup>17</sup> Zucker, 303-304.

<sup>18</sup> Arthur C. Cole, ed., *The Constitutional Debates of 1847, Collections of the Illinois State Historical Library*, vol XIV (Springfield: Illinois State Historical Library, 1919), 218.

<sup>19</sup> Harris, 235; *U.S. Census Bureau 1840*, compiled by the author May, 2011 using “Heritage Quest Online” <http://www.heritagequestonline.com>; *U.S. Census Bureau 1850*.



involving them in deeper degradation.” The free white citizens, he continued, would be astonished at the extent of the privileges abolitionists favored for the “degraded race,” and if such privileges were extended, the refinements of white society would be “crushed and swallowed up” until not a single virtue remained to mark the “once exalted and dignified race.”<sup>20</sup> Any alleged “sympathy” men like Singleton may have had for slaves or free Black people was far less important than his desire for a racially homogenous state or maintaining the racial purity of white Illinoisans.

The possibility of full citizenship and equal rights also presented white supremacists, like Singleton, with a troubling contradiction. If African Americans were actually inferior to whites, then granting them citizenship should not be an actual economic (or any other) threat to the superiority of white Illinoisans. The rhetoric of white supremacy may have served to hide deep-seated doubts concerning the alleged inferiority of African Americans. While advocates of Black exclusion claimed a permanent “natural” barrier existed between the races, they were also compelled to demand the implementation of legal barriers to ensure the very subordination of African Americans they claimed already existed. A large portion of white Illinoisans in the 1840s and 1850s (especially in the southern region of the state) must have recalled the devastating economic effects of slave labor on their lives in the South. Singleton himself acknowledged that whites migrated to Illinois in order to flee slavery, and they looked to “avoid the evils attending that institution, seeking repose, and endeavoring to get rid of the annoyances to which they were subjected in a slave state.” Whites had a right, he further argued, to use any means in their power to keep free Blacks out of the state.<sup>21</sup> On one hand, white supremacists

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<sup>20</sup> Zucker, 300-301; Cole, *Constitutional Debates*, 233-238.

<sup>21</sup> Cole, *Constitutional Debates*, 233-238; Zucker, 301-302.

were comfortable with professing support for slavery, and on the other hand, condemning the institution with its “annoyances” and “evils” for whites subjected to the economic competition of Black workers.

The catalyst for the Southern defense of slavery was the launching of a Northern abolitionist attack in the 1830s. Although it stimulated vigorous Southern rebuttals, in a larger sense, Southerners took advantage of the general shift toward racialist thinking in Europe and the United States. Racialist thinking was used to justify more than slavery—it also served to defend the subordination or even extermination of non-European peoples throughout the world and Europeans believed it explained the ever-increasing gulf in power and progress separating them from non-whites. The overt intellectual argument for innate Black inferiority was developed in America before the full surge of abolitionism. However, it was not entirely restricted to the South during this early period, and it was not peculiar to those who wished to defend slavery.<sup>22</sup> For example, one Illinois delegate during the Convention doubted whether African Americans were actually human. “If any gentleman thought they were, he exclaimed, “he would ask him to look at a Negro’s foot!” This inanity caused great laughter, which encouraged more absurdity from the delegate: “What was his leg doing in the middle of it? If that was not sufficient, let him go and examine their nose; (roars of laughter) then look at their lips. Why, their skulls [sic] were three inches thicker than white people’s.”<sup>23</sup> Thus, the intellectual justification of Black inferiority served to protect and defend slavery for Southerners, while it simultaneously offered Northern racists ammunition to exclude Black people from their white communities.

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<sup>22</sup> George M. Frederickson, *The Black Image in the White Mind: The Debate on Afro-American Character and Destiny, 1817-1914*, (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1972), 43-45; Reginald Horsman, *Race and Manifest Destiny: The Origins of American Racial Anglo-Saxonism*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986), 117-123.

<sup>23</sup> Cole, *Constitution Debates*, 226.

Approximately seventy percent of the voters supported the exclusion of free African Americans from Illinois—eighty-two of one hundred Illinois counties returned majorities in favor of the measure, with the southern counties predictably leading the exclusionary vote. Article XIV of the 1848 Constitution instructed the General Assembly to prohibit free Blacks from entering Illinois, and slaveowners were not allowed to emancipate their slaves within the state. While the state legislature had attempted to restrict the immigration of free Black people for more than three decades without real success, the authors of this clause seemed convinced that the General Assembly under the new Constitution would be able to achieve the elusive goal. However, before this law could be implemented, it was necessary for the men in favor of exclusion to achieve a solid majority in the General Assembly. Efforts to enact a law on the exclusion based on the provision failed in 1849 and 1851.<sup>24</sup> The legislature did not implement this provision until 1853 when it passed a law providing that “any person who brought a negro, free or slave, into the state would be fined not less than \$100 or no more than \$500 and imprisoned not more than one year.” Any Black person who entered the state on his own volition and remaining ten days would be “subject to a fine of \$50 and if the fine was not paid, sold to any person who would pay it.”<sup>25</sup>

One effective method employed by John Jones and other prominent Afro-Illinoisans that brought attention to the plight of the free Black population was to express outrage in the press. Once again, Jones utilized the *Western Citizen*, and argued that the Black Laws were “at war with the constitution.” He viewed the anti-black statute with “regret and alarm,” because it attempted to prohibit natural-born citizens of the United States from settling in the state on

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<sup>24</sup> Zucker, 311-313.

<sup>25</sup> Angle, 70.

account of color of skin.<sup>26</sup> As Jones continued to hammer away at the laws in the press, prominent abolitionists began to champion the cause of Afro-Illinoisans. In his national abolitionist newspaper, the *North Star*, abolitionist Frederick Douglass asked: “Is [Illinois] fearful that her internal quiet will be (jeopardized) by the advent of a few poor, ignorant, friendless Negroes, seeking only the means of subsistence and debarred from all political power?” He called the provision “ungenerous, because it is an assault upon the weak and powerless.”<sup>27</sup> The *Western Citizen* requested that some of the “friends” of the black clause to step forward and “reconcile it with the Declaration of Independence” and if they could not do this, “they certainly ought to abandon one or the other.” In the pursuit of happiness, a man who has a Black skin wishes to come to this state, “how dare they say he shall not come.”<sup>28</sup>

Jones and his allies did more than complain about the Black Laws in the newspapers—on August 7, 1848, a group of prominent Black Chicagoans convened to discuss their plans for an active campaign to end Black exclusion from Illinois. This new militancy, according to historian Howard Bell, had its basis in African American’s reevaluation of their own significance as individuals and as a force to be reckoned with in the changing American scene. The attention they received as a result of their national conventions during the 1830s led many African Americans to recognize that they had a voice to which the ear of the nation was attuned, but that attention also engendered a new self-confidence which encouraged them to speak for themselves and fight their own battles.<sup>29</sup> Henry O. Wagoner, James D. Bonner, and the Reverend Abraham T. Hall were among a few other prominent Afro-Illinoisans encouraged by this new militancy.

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<sup>26</sup> *The Western Citizen*, July 11, 1848.

<sup>27</sup> “Black Laws of Illinois,” *The North Star*, April 28, 1848.

<sup>28</sup> *The Western Citizen*, August 1, 1848.

<sup>29</sup> Howard H. Bell, “Negro Militancy in the North, 1840-1860,” *The Journal of Negro History*, 45, no 1 (January, 1960), 11.

They participated in local and national conventions during the 1840s and 1850s, and kept the Chicago community active in projects designed to eliminate anti-black discrimination.<sup>30</sup>

Eager to maintain their momentum and forceful stance, Jones and other activists met at Baptist Church in Chicago to discuss their reform agenda. They selected Jones and Reverend Hall as their representatives to attend the National Convention of Black Freemen to be held in Cleveland, Ohio for a three day meeting. Jones and Hall were instructed to report to the National Convention about the intellectual development of Blacks in Illinois, their financial status, and their interest in freedom. The Chicago committee reported that the “unjust and partial laws” existing in the state rendered African Americans “dumb,” so that he could not “be a party in law against a white man.” They resolved that the laws were “unconstitutional and therefore anti-republican and should be repealed immediately.” A committee would be appointed to correspond with African Americans throughout the state and stress the necessity of calling a convention in Springfield for the purpose of taking into consideration the expediency of petitioning the legislature to repeal the Black Laws.<sup>31</sup>

Between fifty and seventy delegates assembled at the Cleveland, Ohio Convention on September 6, 1848 with more than the usual degree of confidence in the belief that slavery and second class citizenship could be challenged successfully.<sup>32</sup> The delegates included Frederick Douglass, who was selected as president, co-editor of the *North Star* and emigrationist, Martin R. Delany, and newspaper editor and escaped slave, Henry Bibb. Most of the other delegates were

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<sup>30</sup> Howard H. Bell, “Chicago Negroes in the Reform Movement, 1847-1853,” *Negro History Bulletin* 21, no 7, (April 1958), 153.

<sup>31</sup> “Meeting of the Colored People,” *Western Citizen*, September 19, 1848; Charles A. Gliozzo, “John Jones and the Black Convention Movement, 1848-1856,” *Journal of Black Studies*, vol 3 no 2 (December 1972), 228; Bell, “Chicago Negroes in the Reform Movement, 11.”

<sup>32</sup> Howard H. Bell, “The National Negro Convention, 1848,” *Ohio Historical Quarterly*, 68 (October 1958), 357-358.

also self-made men from the Midwest, Northeast and from Canada. They represented free Black people from a variety of skilled occupations: printers, carpenters, blacksmiths, shoemakers, engineer, dentist, gunsmiths, editors, tailors, merchants, wheelrights, painters, farmers, physicians, plasterers, masons, students, clergymen, barbers and hairdressers, laborers, coopers, livery stable keepers, bath house keepers, grocery keepers. Among the pertinent issues discussed included women's rights, racial equality in the judicial system, and political interests. Delegates agreed to endorse the national political campaign of the Free Soil Party with its demand for holding the slave institution within its current bounds. The convention also took a definite stand in adopting the resolution that "whereas American slavery is politically and morally an evil of which this country stands guilty, the two political parties of the Union have by their acts and nominations betrayed the sacred cause of human freedom." The slogan of "Free Soil, Free Speech, Free Labor, and Free Men" voiced effectively the desires of the African American leaders at Cleveland.<sup>33</sup>

The most controversial topic of the convention, however, was the issue of African Americans and labor. Many delegates were critical of Black working men and women for "settling" for menial labor instead of securing more skilled occupations that were "respectable." In response to this issue, the committee adopted the following resolutions:

Resolved, That whatever is necessary for the elevation of one class is necessary for the elevation of another; the respectable industrial occupations, as mechanical trades, farming or agriculture, mercantile and professional business, wealth and education, being necessary for the elevation of the whites; therefore those attainments are necessary for the elevation of us"

Resolved, That we impressively recommend to our brethren throughout the country, the necessity of obtaining a knowledge of mechanical trade, farming, mercantile

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<sup>33</sup> *Report of the Proceedings of the Colored National Convention held at Cleveland, Ohio on Wednesday, September 6, 1848*, (Rochester, 1848), 12; Howard H. Bell, "Chicago Negroes In the Reform Movement, 1847-1853," *Negro History Bulletin*, vol 21, no. 7 (April, 1958), 153-154; Gliozzo, 229.

business, the learned professions, as well as the accumulation of wealth,--as the essential means of elevating us as a class.”

Resolved, That the occupation of domestics and servants among our people is degrading to us as a class, and we deem it our bounden duty to discountenance such pursuits, except where necessity compels the person to resort thereto as a means of livelihood.<sup>34</sup>

To the convention’s largely Black middle class assembly, free Blacks would continue to suffer from the inequality of anti-black statutes and other forms of racial discriminatory measures as long as they toiled in servile and unskilled occupations. Undoubtedly, such advice was easier for the Black rank and file to hear than to enact, and even hearing it was likely raised the ire of those in economic straits too dire to hope for easy redemption.<sup>35</sup>

Martin R. Delany was among the many advocates for “elevating the race” through more “reputable” occupations. So passionate about this cause, he reportedly stated that he would rather “receive a telegraphic dispatch that his wife and two children had fallen victims to a loathsome disease,” than to have them working as servants. Although he later attempted to clarify his position and justify his statement, it was evident that he believed that African Americans could not attain respectability in America without rejecting menial labor. Four years later in his book entitled *The Condition, Elevation, Emigration, and Destiny of the Colored People of the United States and Official Report of the Niger Valley Exploring Party*, Delany expounded his thoughts about the equation between the elevation of African Americans and the type of work they performed:

How do we compare with them? Our fathers are their coachmen, our brothers their cookmen, and ourselves their waiting-men. Our mothers their nurse-women, our sisters their scrub-women, our daughters their maid-women, and our wives their washer-women. Until colored men, attain to a position above permitting their mothers, sisters, wives, and daughters, to do the drudgery and

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<sup>34</sup> Proceedings...at Cleveland, 13.

<sup>35</sup> *Proceedings...at Cleveland*, 5; Bell, “Chicago Negroes in the Reform Movement,” 154.

menial offices of other men's wives and daughters; it is useless, it is nonsense, it is pitiable mockery, to talk about equality and elevation in society. The world is looking upon us, with feelings of commiseration, sorrow, and contempt. We scarcely deserve sympathy, if we peremptorily refuse advice, bearing upon our elevation.<sup>36</sup>

Considering Delany's stature among his peers at the convention in Ohio, and his views on the occupations of Black people, it may not be an overreach to suggest that he was instrumental in the writing of the resolutions the delegates conceived on the issue of labor and African Americans. However, not all of the delegates at the convention agreed with Delaney's extreme stance on Black workers. Some believed that Black laborers were in a precarious position when it came to their occupational choices and called for a more sympathetic perspective. They argued that African Americans were left with few alternatives when it came to their occupational choices, and thereby virtually forced into servile and menial labor. For example, one delegate argued that members of the committee "not in places of servants, must not cast slurs upon those, who were in such places from necessity." Some believed they may have gone too far in their condemnation of menial labor. As a result, Douglass and others made an attempt to have all labor classified as honorable. The measure was voted down, however, because many of them who had relative economic success were in no mood to condone lesser accomplishments in others. This superior and uncompromising attitude drew criticism in many corners. However, they agreed that they were "aiming for the same thing," but they sought different methods of achieving their goal.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Martin R. Delany, *The Condition, Elevation, Emigration, and Destiny of the Colored People of the United States and Official Report of the Niger Valley Exploring Party*, (New York: Humanity Books, 2004), for a full treatment on Delany's position on the elevation of Black people, see 67-74.

<sup>37</sup> *Proceedings of the Colored National Convention held at Cleveland, 5*; Howard H. Bell, "The National Negro Convention, 1848," *Ohio Historical Quarterly* (October, 1958), 360.



Many of the delegates were, in fact, exceptional men, who had achieved a status within America that most white males could not achieve. Furthermore, they seemed to lack sufficient connection to those they lectured and had difficulty understanding the exact nature of their economic plight. While a few of the delegates implicitly acknowledged that working class African Americans were forced, through prejudice and discrimination, into modes of “non-productive labor,” the idea that the common Black laborer could simply decide that he would quit his “unrespectable” job, and become an entrepreneur or an independent farmer was unrealistic. In essence, Ohio delegates did very little to mitigate the inferiority among Black workers; nor did they appear to make any real effort to make the common Black laborer feel that their work may be reputable. In their concluding address on the issue they wrote:

“The fact is, we must not merely make the white man dependent upon us to shave him, but to feed him; not merely dependent upon us to black his boots, but to make them. A man is only in a small degree dependent on us, when he only needs his boots blacked, or his carpet bag carried; as a little less pride, and a little more industry on his part, may enable him to dispense with our services entirely. As wise men it becomes us to look forward to a state of things, which appears inevitable. The time will come, when those menial employments will afford less means of living than they now do. What shall a large class of our fellow countrymen do, when white men find it economical to black their own boots, and shave themselves? What will they do when white men learn to wait on themselves? We warn you brethren, to seek other and more enduring vocations.”<sup>38</sup>

These lofty expectations came from influential and exceptional men who managed to prosper during a period when most free Northern Black workers were worried about whether they could locate viable work at all. Furthermore, as the sectional debate among European Americans increased over slavery and the idea that Black labor was a potential threat to their precarious status as workers, they increasingly expressed their fear and angst through violence—almost

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<sup>38</sup> *Proceedings...at Cleveland*, 19-20.

always aimed at Black people. Striving for better employment was indeed a laudable plan for garnering a more respectable status among free Blacks. However, what the delegates failed to address was the idea that since the vast majority of Black people were toiling as slaves in the South, European-Americans lacked respect for them because they were invariably associated with slavery.

Not only did the Ohio delegates disapprove of the occupational choices of many free Blacks—they also had deep misgivings over their lifestyle choices and behavior. They expressed misgivings over their spending habits and implored them to save their money, “live economically,” and “dispense with finery, and the gaieties” which they believed had rendered Black people “proverbial.” Delegates also railed against the dangers of urban life, the greatest of which was the supposed erosion of the work ethic. City living, through the many ills it allegedly fostered, was thought to undermine the quality of Black residents’ morals. They believed that cities gave African Americans no opportunities to escape menial occupations, and hence brought “discredit” to the race. Cities were places, according to one critic, where “medium wealth and mediocre talents are completely thrown in the shade, where to attract the least general attention or command the slightest general respect requires a degree of wealth attainable by only a favorable few.” Since the cities were “overrun with menial laborers,” the delegates suggested African Americans turn to agricultural pursuits. They argued that since the “country is eloquently pleading for the hand of industry to till her soil, and reap the reward of honest labor,” African Americans would prosper in this occupation. One writer from the *North Star* endorsed the words of another newspaper that declared, “one great cause, if not the great cause, of the degradation of the colored men at the North, is, no doubt, the way they crowd together in cities.” There were too many African Americans flocking to urban areas, he continued, where they became “engaged as

waiters about hotels, barbers or boot-Blacks, and the women washing white people's dirty clothes.<sup>39</sup>

Members of the 1848 Ohio Convention Committee agreed that the "elevation of the race" was essential to the survival of free Blacks. Respectability would be earned by abandoning servile and menial labor, and obtaining knowledge of the mechanical trades, farming, mercantile business, the learned professions, as well as accumulating wealth. African Americans must forego urban environments for smaller, rural settings, where they could own land, grow their own food, and accumulate capital. The committee also argued that the occupational status among free Black people was crucial to gaining respectability from whites. "The occupation of domestic servants among our people is degrading to us as a class, and we deem it our...duty to discountenance such pursuits," they wrote in the convention resolutions. They requested African American ministers throughout Northern states collect statistics of the conditions of African Americans; their general social condition, as well as an accurate count of Black farmers, mechanics, merchants, storekeepers, teachers, lawyers, doctors, ministers and editors.<sup>40</sup>

### *Occupational Status and Location of Black Workers in 1850*

By the 1850s, the overall statistical outlook was relatively bleak for Afro-Illinoisans. In an era of expanding opportunities and social mobility, Northern African Americans faced increasing economic discrimination and exploitation. For the greater portion of the Black labor force, racial discrimination meant much more than restrictions at the polls, or segregation in public spaces; it manifested itself in the daily struggle for existence, in the problems of

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<sup>39</sup> "Fugitives in Canada," *The North Star*, February 23, 1849; *Proceedings ...at Cleveland*, 19-20; Rael, 191.

<sup>40</sup> "National Colored Convention," *The Liberator*, October 20, 1848.

subsistence living, employment in the lowest paid unskilled jobs, hostile native and immigrant white workers, exclusionist trade unions, and sub-par housing in areas specifically designated for the Black population. The absence of African Americans from skilled and professional occupations confirmed their alleged inferiority.<sup>41</sup> White Illinoisans maintained that free Blacks were indelibly linked with slavery, would cause massive wage reductions, and were unfit to perform skilled labor or enter the professions. Ironically, due to the growing belief in Black intellectual inferiority during the antebellum period, African American workers were increasingly barred from apprenticeship, and therefore could not obtain the necessary skills to perform many skilled occupations. As a result, African Americans lagged further and further behind in occupational status—especially when compared with European Americans.

Throughout Illinois, African Americans worked overwhelmingly in menial positions such as common labors, domestic servants, cooks, and boatmen or roustabouts. To a far lesser degree they also worked in professions and trades that required skills, such as farmers, carpenters, blacksmiths, and coalminers. Nearly forty-six percent of Afro-Illinoisan family heads in select counties with relatively large African American populations were unemployed. Approximately twenty-five percent found employment as common laborers while another thirteen percent toiled at occupations that required only a minimal degree of training. Less than five percent of Black family heads, on the other hand, worked as skilled laborers or tradesmen. Although many African American families had a background in agriculture, only ten percent of Black Illinoisans were engaged in agriculture—and the majority of them did not own the land they farmed. Moreover, only one percent of Black family heads were engaged in business and the professions.

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<sup>41</sup> Leon Litwack, *North of Slavery: The Negro in the Free States, 1790-1860*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), 153, 157.

Without African American doctors, lawyers, educators, merchants, and financiers, the free African American community in Illinois were deprived of an important means of economic growth and of access to invaluable services.<sup>42</sup> Overall occupational opportunities for Black Illinoisans did not improve appreciably over the following decade. The unemployment rate had declined from forty-six percent to thirty-four by 1860, there was not a significant trend towards the movement of African American workers into more rewarding careers. The proportion of Black family heads employed as common laborers did increase from twenty-five percent to thirty-one percent over the next decade, which indicated that white employers were finding more advantages to utilizing Black males. The percentage of African Americans employed as either semi-skilled or skilled workers remained relatively constant. While the percentage of African American businessmen increased by a small margin (1.5 percent), Black professionals remained as scarce in 1860 as they had been ten years earlier. The involvement of African Americans in agriculture did increase significantly during the 1850s, but primarily in the area of farm labor rather than farm ownership. Increased agricultural pursuits throughout the decade indicated that African American migrants were initially attempting to maintain their rural roots. However, limited landownership opportunities, and especially overall white antipathy may have been one of the main factors contributing to African Americans seeking more urban settings with larger and more established Black communities.<sup>43</sup>

Yet, despite the entreaties of the Ohio delegates, Afro-Illinoisans were not necessarily flocking to urban areas prior to 1850. According to historian Jack Blocker, African Americans

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<sup>42</sup> The observations of the condition of African Americans in Illinois are based on the results of statistical analysis from the following counties: Jo Daviess, Gallatin, Alexander, Madison, Randolph, Sangamon, Knox and Cook; *U.S. Bureau of the Census, Federal Population Census 1850, Illinois. U.S. Bureau of the Census, Federal Population Census 1860, Illinois*; Zucker, 324.

<sup>43</sup> Zucker, 324.

were moving to urban locations in Illinois with a higher frequency than white Americans. However, Black rural population growth nearly matched that of whites in the largest cities of Ohio, Indiana and Illinois. Although the largest cities attracted Black migrants, the migration stream did not concentrate there either. Using census data across three Midwestern states, Blocker noted that at least two-thirds of the African American population had lived in rural areas on the eve of the Civil War, but African Americans were still a more urban people than European Americans. Large urban areas attracted Black migrants, yet the migration stream did not concentrate their either. Instead, African Americans distributed themselves across the urban hierarchy, settling in small towns and mid-sized cities as well as in larger cities and the rural areas.<sup>44</sup>

**Table 1.1** Blacks and Whites in Illinois's Urban Hierarchy, 1860<sup>45</sup>

Size Category	Places 1860	1890	Whites	Percent of Whites	Blacks	Percent of Blacks
100,000+	1	1	111,214	6.5	958	12.6
25,000-99,999	0	2	—	0.0	—	0.0
10,000-24,999	1	18	27,502	1.6	261	3.4
2,500-9,999	19	55	101,459	6	1,255	16.4

<sup>44</sup> Jack S. Blocker, *A Little More Freedom African Americans Enter the Urban Midwest, 1860-1930*, (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2008), 31, 39; according to Blocker's chart in Appendix A, by 1860, 67.6 percent of all Black Illinoisans lived in a rural area and 12.6 lived in urban areas. 85 percent of the white population lived in rural Illinois, and only 6.5 lived in a city, Blocker 223, appendix A.

<sup>45</sup> From Blocker, Table A.3, Appendix, 223.

Table 1.1 (cont.)

Size Category	Places 1860	1890	Whites	Percent of Whites	Blacks	Percent of Blacks
Rural			1,464,148	85.9	5,154	67.6
Total Urban			240,175	14.1	2,474	32.4
Total			1,704,323		7,628	

According to the 1850 census, seventy-six percent of all African Americans lived in southern counties—the Southeast (SE), Southwest (SW), West Southwest (WSW), East Southeast (ESE). 1,467 (26 percent) of all African Americans living in Illinois lived in the Southwest district (SW). With the exception of Cairo, and East St. Louis, Illinois, the vast majority of these southern Illinois locations were considered small to mid-sized towns. The second and third most populous districts with African Americans were also in the southern region of the state: the west southwest (20 percent), and the Southeast (17 percent). The least populated areas were the east (1.5 percent) and the central (3 percent).<sup>46</sup>

Table 1.2 Illinois Counties with the Highest African American Populations in 1850

Counties	Population	% of Illinois African American Population
St. Clair	581	10.5
Randolph	383	6.9

<sup>46</sup> United States Department of Agriculture, National Agriculture Statistic Service: [http://www.nass.usda.gov/Statistics\\_by\\_State/Illinois/Publications/County\\_Estimates/2012main.htm](http://www.nass.usda.gov/Statistics_by_State/Illinois/Publications/County_Estimates/2012main.htm); The district breakdown includes 9 total districts: northwest, northeast, west, central, east, west southwest, east southeast, southwest, southeast.

*Table 1.2 (cont.)*

Counties	Population	% of Illinois African American Population
Cook	378	6.8
Gallatin	353	6.4
Lawrence	278	5.0
Sangamon	253	4.6
Jo Daviess	218	3.9

Table 1.3 Occupations of African American Workers in 1850<sup>47</sup>

Leading Occupations	Total	Percentage of workers
(Unspecified) Laborer	229	45
Farmer	124	24
Barber	34	7
Domestic servants	13	2
Boatmen/sailors	21	4
Cooks	17	3
Carpenters	11	2
Coopers	8	1.5
Blacksmiths	7	1.4
Coalminers	7	1.4
Total	505	

<sup>47</sup> Total of the most populous counties for African Americans in 1850, compiled by Alonzo Ward in May, 2011 using "Heritage Quest Online" <http://www.heritagequestonline.com>.



A closer examination of the individual locations throughout Illinois reveals that while African Americans lagged behind white Illinoisans in occupational and property wealth, their economic statistics was more complex and not always consistent with the aggregate statistics. For example, wealth was extremely contradictory for African Americans in Brooklyn, Illinois, although they consistently lagged behind their white peers. Black studies scholar and historian, Sundiata K. Cha-Jua noted that twenty out of twenty-six African American households in Brooklyn owned real estate. This figure is remarkable considering only sixteen African Americans owned real property in nearby St. Louis. Yet the total value of African American real property was only \$7,700. Property owned by African American families had a mean value of \$208.10. These figures clearly indicate economic marginality, but even this dismal level of assessed property value masks the true impoverished status of the African American community.<sup>48</sup> In reality, Brooklyn in 1850 was a community composed mainly of poor and propertyless African Americans and European immigrant workers. Although their actual wealth was minimal, this reality was complicated by the high percentage of Blacks who owned some real property. African Americans in Brooklyn had more property and wealth than most quasi free Blacks. They had achieved a higher degree of success; they had climbed far above enslaved and destitute free Blacks. Yet they had obtained only about 58 percent of the wealth of whites.<sup>49</sup>

In some locations the unemployment rate was not as dismal as the statewide average—especially if there were more menial jobs to be had. For example in Vandalia, Illinois, located in Morgan County (West Southwest region) there were one hundred and twenty-five African Americans, and between 1850 and 1860 the rate of unemployment was approximately eight

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<sup>48</sup> Sundiata K. Cha-Jua, *America's First Black Town: Brooklyn, Illinois, 1830-1915* (Urbana Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 2000), 58-60.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid*, 47.

percent, compared to forty-six percent for African Americans throughout Illinois in 1850, and thirty-four percent for 1860. Statistics concerning the percentage of the work force employed as “laborers” (unskilled) fluctuated sharply over the ten-year period in Vandalia and the nearby city of Jacksonville (approximately 100 miles apart); between 1850 and 1860, the percentage of unskilled workers in Jacksonville rose from nineteen to twenty-five percent, while in Vandalia rose from seven to thirty-five percent.<sup>50</sup> In Jacksonville, located in Morgan County, the portion of Blacks reporting no gainful occupation was less than twenty percent in 1860. Jacksonville was also unique for its reputation of being relatively congenial to its small Black population. The town was known as one of the state’s several benign havens for freedmen and runaway slaves. By 1850 almost one hundred Black residents made up less than 4 percent of the total population. Except for a few who were clergymen and farmers, Jacksonville Blacks served in menial positions as servants and unskilled laborers, or in personal services as barbers or waiters. In 1850, forty percent of the Black population (non-dependent) reported no occupations, and were apparently living off of their income from taking in boarders.<sup>51</sup>

Some African Americans were able to flourish economically in spite of the glaring restrictions against them. John Jones, for example owned and operated his own tailoring business in Chicago, as well as his active role in the community and politics. Jones was born in 1816, in Greene County, North Carolina. He moved to Alton, Illinois in 1841 and had to obtain his certificate of freedom from the clerk of Madison County in 1844. He and his wife moved to Chicago in 1845 with and rented a one room cottage and shop for his tailoring business, and bought furnishings for both. He pawned his watch to purchase two stoves, one for his home and

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<sup>50</sup> Zucker, (footnote 42), 372-373.

<sup>51</sup> Don Harrison Doyle, *The Social Order of a Frontier Community: Jacksonville, Illinois 1825-1870*, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1978), 146-147.

one for his shop. According to the 1850 census, Jones owned \$1500 worth of property. By the time of his death in 1879, Jones owned real estate worth \$85,000, much of which was located in downtown Chicago.<sup>52</sup>

“Free Frank” McWorter offers another example. He was born a slave in South Carolina, and sold when he was eighteen to a planter in Kentucky. After working for him for several years he “hired his time,” agreeing to pay a certain amount per annum. He then engaged in the manufacture of saltpeter, which he sold for good prices; and in that way, by hard work and strict economy for a number of years, he saved money enough, after paying his master for his hire, to purchase his freedom” After he had earned enough money to purchase the freedom of his wife Lucy, the couple and their three free born children (thirteen had been born slaves and remained in bondage in Kentucky) moved to Illinois. In 1829 they arrived in Hadley Township, Pike County, where they were the townships first settlers and the only residents for two years. Having been born a slave, Frank had no legal surname until 1837, when by a special act, the state legislature made him McWorter. He was an enterprising man and laid out the site for the town of New Philadelphia, which at that time showed promise of becoming a prosperous community. He was also successful at farming and raising stock. With the sizable fortune he built, he purchased the freedom of all of his children and two of his grandchildren. Altogether before his death, the cost of purchasing freedom for all was ten thousand dollars. After his death in his will he provided funds to free his remaining four grandkids.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Sylvestre C. Watkins, Sr., “Some of Early Illinois’ Free Negroes,” *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society* Vol. 56, No. 3, Emancipation Centennial Issue (Autumn, 1963) , 503-504.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid*, 499; Zucker, 332-333; Juliet E.K. Walker, *Free Frank: A Black Pioneer on the Antebellum Frontier*, (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1983).

William Fleurville, from Springfield was able to establish a respected and successful barbering business as well as several lucrative real estate ventures. During the Haitian Revolution, Fleurville's godmother fled with him to Baltimore, where he learned the barbering trade. In the fall of 1831, after a brief stay in New Orleans, he arrived nearly penniless in New Salem, Illinois where he met Abraham Lincoln, who introduced him at the local tavern where he earned some barber fees. He soon moved to Springfield, and eventually earned enough money to buy his own barbershop equipment to open his own business. His business place became a sort of meeting spot for most of the men in town, and Lincoln made it a "second home." He and his wife Phoebe headed Sangamon County's only independent free Black household, and were considered to be among the leading citizens of the state capital.<sup>54</sup>

Springfield's Black population had been growing steadily since the early 1830s when Fleuville arrived. Located in central Illinois, in Sangamon County, Springfield had one hundred and seventy-one Black residents—Sangamon was the sixth most populous county in Illinois for African Americans by 1850 (253, 4.6 percent). Unlike Fleuville, most of the African American community was not prosperous. They were a combination of laborers and artisans who settled in the community from various locations of the country during the antebellum decades. However, as Illinois historian Richard Hart has noted, it is a myth that all of Springfield's African American population were menial or domestic workers and incapable of activism on issues of racial justice. Approximately forty-five percent of Springfield's African Americans were born in slave states, and half were native to Illinois, and the remaining five percent hailed from places as diverse as Washington DC, Indiana, New York, Ohio, Pennsylvania and the West Indies. Among

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<sup>54</sup> Watkins, 500; Thomas W. Bahde, "Race and Justice in the Heartland: Three Nineteenth Century Lives, vol 1, (PhD Dissertation, University of Chicago, 2009), 162-163.

the most economically successful in the community, but there were also bill posters, cooks, draymen, farm laborers, hostlers, laborers, servants, shoemakers, and whitewashers, all of whom met with varying degrees of economic success.<sup>55</sup>

Part of the reason for the disparity among African Americans in Illinois was the type of work they performed, which often depended on the color of their skin. Historian, Leon Litwack suggested skin color was a significant factor in determining the social economic order of African Americans. In Springfield, among those listed as mulatto, average wealth was about fifty dollars more than those listed as Black. By 1850, “mulattoes” or African Americans of mixed ancestry comprised approximately twenty-five percent of all Northern Blacks. Lighter skin color did not automatically secure their place in the hierarchy, though it often afforded them greater economic opportunities, which, in turn, assured them of a higher rank within African American communities. In many cases whites simply preferred to hire mulattoes, feeling that their closer proximity to white features also made them more intelligent and physically attractive. This type of preference invariably made lighter Blacks more employable within a racist structure. By 1860, the rate of unemployment for “blacks” stood at thirty-eight percent while that of “mulattoes” was twenty-eight percent; only twelve percent of black family heads had secured employment as either semi-skilled or skilled laborers compared to twenty-five percent for mulatto family heads. Of course, better employment conditions for mulattoes translated into better economic wealth and living conditions.<sup>56</sup>

Color conveyed real occupational, material, social, and psychological advantages in a racist society. The mulatto question is the gray area that best exposes the ideological character of

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<sup>55</sup> Baude, 163-167.

<sup>56</sup> Zucker, 336-337.

racial designations. Perhaps even more than the categories “black” and “white,” the “mulatto” category showed that race is predominantly a social construction, and is therefore a highly unstable category. For example, a third of African Americans changed “color” from census to census. More importantly, this change was connected with occupation. Mulattoes who experienced occupational downgrading were also “downgraded” in terms of color; they were “reduced” to “black” in subsequent censuses. Conversely, some African Americans who improved their occupations, and thus their social status, lightened over time. The prevalence of this practice suggests that economic position signified “race” and “color.” Historian John Blassingame posited that white’s attitudes towards color had a profound effect on the way African Americans viewed themselves. He argued that acceptance of white beliefs about race led many African Americans of mixed ancestry to draw the color line in relationships with Blacks and prompted some to seek to pass into the white world. On the other side of this, an African American applied the same criteria toward light-skinned Blacks, and believed they enhanced their position by marrying a lighter-skinned African American.<sup>57</sup>

Despite the arbitrariness of color categories, they represent real social relations and can therefore help explain much about internal dynamics and external relations in areas where there was a relatively large African American population.<sup>58</sup> For example, by 1850, African Americans in predominantly Black communities such as Brooklyn, Illinois, had acquired the numbers, concentration, and proximity to generate the social interaction necessary to build institutions, create a consciousness of kind, and produce a set of shared values to mold themselves into a community.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> John Blassingame, *Black New Orleans, 1860-1880* (Chicago, 1973), 21-22.

<sup>58</sup> Cha-Jua 67-68.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid*, 47-48.

The occupational status of Black Illinoisans by 1850 was not particularly impressive. However, given the extreme discriminatory circumstances which Illinois African Americans faced in employment opportunities, along with a general Illinois population that did not want them living and working amongst them, many African Americans managed to earn a decent living. Many Black leaders believed the best solution for African Americans was to avoid menial occupations. John Jones and other prominent Afro-Illinoisans maintained that respectability was directly tied to the type of labor one performed. While some African American workers managed to prosper in the face of overwhelming discrimination, the majority of Black workers in Illinois continued to struggle in low paying and low skilled jobs. In the coming years, African American anxiety would be pushed to new heights as the federal government and Illinois lawmakers enacted provisions for the benefit of Southern slaveowners.

### *The Fugitive Slave Law of 1850*

In 1850 congressional leaders adopted a series of resolutions to settle all outstanding points of conflict between the North and South to the extent that they intersected with national politics. The so-called Compromise of 1850 admitted California into the Union as a free state, suppressed the slave trade in the District of Columbia, and organized the New Mexico and Utah territories on the basis of popular sovereignty. The compromise also incorporated a controversial new fugitive slave law that sparked debate throughout the country. The new legislation was designed to add strength to the outdated Fugitive Slave Act of 1793 by giving authorization to slaveholders to send slavecatchers across state lines to seize runaway slaves. In essence, the new act was intended as a pro-Southern measure that would offset measures that appeared to favor antislavery advocates, such as the abolition of the slave trade in Washington DC. It was not

entirely clear how the rights of free Blacks would be secure, in large part, because under the new fugitive act free Black people could be enslaved. The absence of due legal process was the norm in the case of a slave, but not in the case of free African Americans. This problem became acute when the purpose of the trial was precisely to determine whether the prisoner was a slave or free Black person. The 1793 act was essentially undermined by “personal liberty” and anti-kidnapping laws in many Northern states. Massachusetts and Pennsylvania adopted personal liberty laws in order to shield free Blacks from unscrupulous slave catchers. Rather than adopt personal liberty laws, the states in the Old Northwest (what would later be referred to as the Midwest), including Illinois, adopted modest laws against kidnapping. Unfortunately, for the free Black community in Illinois, these laws were rarely an effective deterrent to violence against them.<sup>60</sup>

The 1850 Fugitive Slave Law gave federal commissioners the authority to summarily decide the fate of the accused and provided an extra five dollar fee if they decided in favor of the claimant slaveowner. It left Northern African Americans at the mercy of venal tribunals, with no legal protection whatsoever. It also imposed heavy fines on Northern whites who hid fugitives or helped them in any way. In short, the fugitive law committed the entire country to the task of the protection of slave property and made slavery a national matter with which every citizen in the country had to be concerned.<sup>61</sup> Defenders of the new law ignored these objections and the dangers now faced by the free Black population whose rights they believed to be inconsequential. At the heart of the problem was the inescapable fact that effective recovery of

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<sup>60</sup> Don E. Fehrenbacher, *The Slaveholding Republic: An Account of the United States Government's Relations to Slavery*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 231-232; Eric Foner, *Gateway to Freedom: The Hidden History of the Underground Railroad*, (New York: W.W. Norton, 2015), 124-125; Middleton, *The Black Laws in the Old Northwest*, 309.

<sup>61</sup> Foner, 124-125.



fugitive slaves was incompatible with effective protection of free African Americans against wrongful seizure. As a result, Northern state authorities took their own action to protect African Americans against abduction, which they tried to enforce through personal liberty laws. Generally, these laws were weak and poorly enforced in Illinois, and Afro-Illinoisans were on constant guard against the possibility of being kidnapped. Furthermore, they contrasted sharply with other states laws, which closed their facilities to slavecatchers in the 1840s and 1850s and in other ways attempted to deter the removal of Black people from their jurisdictions. This fear was especially acute within Black communities in the southern section of Illinois—not only because of the frequency of such kidnappings, but because of the well-known fact of white Illinoisans' hostility towards the small, but growing, Black population within that region.<sup>62</sup>

According to historian Carol Wilson, the possibility of being kidnapped and sold into slavery was shared by the entire African American free community. Black people were kidnapped and forced to work on plantations, and the fear of kidnappings was felt throughout all sectors of the African American community, regardless of age, sex, or class. Geography may have been the most important factor influencing the degree of risk, as residents of the states bordering the Mason Dixon line were especially vulnerable.<sup>63</sup> While geography and other factors played significant roles in determining how susceptible African Americans were to being kidnapped, by the end of the eighteenth century, free Black people were the only people in the United States that consistently faced the unspeakable possibility of being sold into slavery. Blackness was the determining factor in who could be a slave in the United States, and it became

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<sup>62</sup> John Ashworth, *Slavery, Capitalism, and Politics in the Antebellum Republic, vol. 1: Commerce and Compromise, 1820-1850*, (New York and Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 38; Paul Finkleman, "Slavery, the 'More Perfect Union,' and the Prairie State," *Illinois Historical Journal*, vol. 80, no 4 (Winter, 1987), 261.

<sup>63</sup> Wilson, 9.

indelibly linked to slave labor. Thus, free African Americans suffered in every aspect of their lives as a result of this connection regardless of where they lived in the United States.

Illinois was bordered by two slave states—Kentucky at the southern tip of the state, and it shared a long border with Missouri. Illinois' proximity to the two slave states, decreased the possibility that potential kidnappers would be captured. Typically, two or three kidnappers acted together—one would establish himself in a border town or city like St. Louis, and develop a reputation as a seller of slaves. The other kidnapper would move about Illinois counties on the lookout for Black people, free or slave. These men were not concerned about the status of the African Americans they approached—the question was: could they be kidnapped without arousing the local authorities? The chances of course increased the more isolated the victim was—that is, no family, friends, or owner. The slave hunters seized their victims secretly, or enticed them to accompany them under false pretenses, placed them in wagons, and drove as rapidly as possible to the borders of the state. Usually they succeeded in getting several hours ahead of the county sheriff, or other persons likely to pursue them, and escaped safely. There were times, however, they were caught and compelled to release their victims. Whatever the risk involved, it was profitable business because kidnappers understood that young, able-bodied African Americans brought good prices on the slave market.<sup>64</sup>

With the passage of the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850, the business of kidnapping and selling African Americans, in effect had been legalized under the guise of recapturing fugitive slaves. The issue of fugitive slaves created a fissure in public opinion throughout Illinois—in essence, slavecatchers were the agents of Southern slaveholders, who, in accordance with the

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<sup>64</sup> Harris, 54-55.

law, were engaged in an effort to secure their lost property. Southern Illinoisans overwhelmingly sympathized with slaveowners, because masters, they believed, were asserting their rights, and should not be hindered in the effort to regain their runaway slaves. Many Southern Illinoisans, in fact, believed that they had a duty to assist the Southern slaveowner in regaining their fugitive slaves.<sup>65</sup> The “Slave Power” demanded the slave act, remarked the *Western Citizen*, demanded it in the same spirit, and for the same purpose that “the conqueror exacts the homage of his conquered rival.”<sup>66</sup>

One of the unintended consequences of the compromise was that it galvanized abolitionist forces throughout the country by unifying them against the powerful slaveholding monopoly, as well as the idea that they conspired to extend slavery into newly acquired territories.<sup>67</sup> The northern and central sections of Illinois were relatively sympathetic to the plight of African Americans. Although, as many Southern Illinoisans were quick to point out, African Americans were relatively sparse outside of the southern portion of the state in the mid-nineteenth century, and therefore, they were not viewed as a “problem” to white populations of these sections. Nevertheless, white communities outside of the southern section of the state were shocked by the notion of slave catchers roaming the state in search of fugitives. They were further appalled by the fact that many of these slave catchers were actually in search of free African Americans to be stolen and sold into slavery.<sup>68</sup>

The new fugitive law caused great angst within African American communities throughout Illinois. Black people that escaped slavery years before and had begun new lives

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<sup>65</sup> Harris, 57.

<sup>66</sup> “More Effects of the Fugitive Slave Law,” *The Western Citizen*, January 7, 1851.

<sup>67</sup> Harris, 57-58.

<sup>68</sup> The Illinois Writers Project: “The Negro in Illinois,” Box 007, folder 1, Vivian G. Harsh Research Collection of Afro-American History and Literature, Chicago Public Library.

were once again haunted by the thought of being captured and re-enslaved. Many determined to remain where they were and fight back; others fled the country for Canada. Approximately 60,000 African Americans, reportedly had moved to Canada, and 20,000 had moved after the Fugitive Slave Law in 1850. Canadians were relatively welcoming to African Americans, and in spite of attempts upon the part of the Southern interests to extradite the runaways, the people of Canada often reiterated that theirs was a “free land and that there was to be no pursuit of slaves within their border.”<sup>69</sup>

Another by-product of the new slave law was the emergence of the Underground Railroad. The *Western Citizen* explained that the “road” was doing “better business” because the Fugitive Slave Law had given it “more vitality and more activity.”<sup>70</sup> Prior to the 1850s, the Underground Railroad and abolitionist movement in Illinois was dominated by benevolent whites due to the sparse population in the western edge of Illinois, and the small African American population. The region the runaways moved through in Western Illinois fell within the boundaries of three significant rivers. The northern boundary, the Rock River, enters the state at about the midpoint along the Illinois/Wisconsin border and flows south before turning sharply west and eventually emptying into the Mississippi. The Mississippi was the western border, and the Illinois was the eastern and southern boundary. This roughly shaped triangle was given the name “Military Tract” by Congress when it was set aside to be offered in sections as bounties to War of 1812 veterans. The Military Tract possessed several major ingredients that were favorable for running a successful Underground Railroad, according to historian William Muelder. First, runaways bolting from a slave state bordering a free state and coming in large

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<sup>69</sup> The Illinois Writers Project, “The Negro in Illinois,” Box 007, folder 1.

<sup>70</sup> The Illinois Writers Project, “The Railroad to Freedom”, Box 007 folder 2; *The Western Citizen*, quoted in The Illinois Writers Project, “The Negro in Illinois,” 3.

enough numbers; second, to require a sufficient cluster of Underground Railroad “agents,” “conductors” and “operators” to support their movement to Canada; and third, waterways to enhance quick passage through the North. Muelder also noted that a fourth significant factor in Illinois and Iowa was the existence of tall grass prairie which was not found in most parts of the United States and considered a crucial “extra” that helped slaves to freedom.<sup>71</sup> The Illinois version of the railroad was known as a “cluster,” a “web,” or network that was more like a maze of a large maple tree’s root system. The most significant cities located in the web (referred to as the “Quincy Line”) followed straight from Quincy to Galesburg, to Princeton, Illinois. In reality, however, throughout the entire area, a web of numerous possible hideouts existed for fugitive slaves on the run. In essence, the Underground Railroad in Illinois was not simply a single passageway that runaway slaves traversed. Instead, a runaway may have been taken on a zigzagged course that weaved back and forth.<sup>72</sup>

The excitement among Northern African Americans, according to the *Western Citizen*, was “intense,” and popular sympathy supported them. The “outrage upon the sentiment and moral sense of the people is such, that no man can hold up his head for a moment who attempts to be the instrument of executing the bill.” The *Citizen* further warned that African Americans in Chicago were “on the alert to spy out any agents who may be prowling about to make seizures,” and would “defend themselves to the death.”<sup>73</sup> The anti-slavery newspaper posted the following petition:

To the Honorable, The Senate and House of Representatives, in Congress assembled:

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<sup>71</sup> Owen P. Muelder, *The Underground Railroad in Western Illinois*, (North Carolina: McFarland, 2008), 12.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid*, 18-19.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid*.

The undersigned, inhabitants, and legal voters of the state of Illinois, respectfully and most earnestly petition your honorable body, for the immediate, total, and unconditional repeal of the Bill enacted into law during the past Session of Congress, providing facilities for the recapture and remanding back into captivity of such persons as may have escaped from the condition of slavery. And, as in duty bound, your Petitioners will ever pray, &c.<sup>74</sup>

The fugitive law, warned the *Citizen*, opened the broadest avenue to kidnapping and gave the largest facilities for its practice. “No colored man is safe while it is in force,” they continued. “The liberty of a free man under this law, may be sworn away in five minutes, by men of whom the community here knows nothing, and whose testimony cannot be impeached, and who almost as soon as the certificate of the slavery of their victim was given them, would take care to be beyond the reach of pursuit.”<sup>75</sup>

Black communities throughout Illinois had many reasons to fear the new laws. Instead of fleeing for Canada or other safe havens, Afro-Illinoisans were often openly defiant towards local authorities or anyone else who wanted to enforce anti-black laws. Rumors emerged of a clandestine organization headed by Moses Dickson named the International Order of Twelve. According to the organization’s manual, the order was a secret para-military group dedicated to the violent destruction of slavery. The group’s leader was born free in Cincinnati in 1824, where he later attended school and received training as a barber. He toured the South at the age of sixteen, and witnessed the harsh reality of slavery, which made his “African blood boil” with “suppressed indignation.” Moses was inspired by this indignation and formed the organization in St. Louis, Missouri. It was made up of twelve African American men who agreed to adopt

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid, “The Fugitive Slave Bill,” October 15, 1850.

Dickson's proposal that the secret military organizations must be established within the slaveholding states, and to never reveal the identity of any of the members of the organization.<sup>76</sup>

Black Chicagoans were also willing to fight back against any attempts of kidnapping. They openly defied slaveholders, and proclaimed their vigilance in protecting members of their community. For example, John Jones called his cane a "peace-maker," and suggested that it may be more effective than a good speech. He proclaimed that he "did not want to meet with a creature requiring its use," but should he need to, he would "use it with a stout arm and humane motive."<sup>77</sup> Even the relatively mild-mannered Frederick Douglass vowed to commit violence against potential kidnappers: on a speaking tour in Illinois in 1853, he advocated killing slave catchers if necessary for the preservation of the liberty of escaped slaves.<sup>78</sup>

*A good revolver, a steady hand, and a determination to shoot down any man attempting to kidnap. Let every colored man make up his mind to this, and live by it, and if needs be, die by it. This will put an end to kidnapping and to slaveholding too. We blush to our very soul when we are told that a negro is so mean and cowardly that he prefers to live under the slavedriver's whip—to the loss of life for liberty. Oh! That we had a little more of the manly indifference to death, which characterized the Heroes of the American Revolution."*<sup>79</sup> (his emphasis)

Self-defense was the new mantra throughout Black communities in Illinois. Unlike earlier years when Afro-Illinoisans may have been fearful of being too defiant in the past, the passage of the

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<sup>76</sup> According to two sources, Dickson settled in Galena, Illinois by 1856, and according to the *Manual of the International Order of Twelve Knights and Daughters of Tabor*, Dickson's original members swelled to a liberation army composed of more than 47,000 men who were "well drilled, with ample arms and ammunition." Atlanta, Georgia was selected as the gathering point, whenever Dickson gave the order, 150,000 well-armed men were expected to do battle. Plans were made to pass the order for mobilization in July 1857, but Dickson saw the "gathering storm" developing and decided against it. The numbers of men gathered seems unusually high, considering there were so few free Black men in the north during that time. Moses Dickson, *Manual of the International Order of Twelve Knights and Daughters of Tabor* (Glasgow, 1918), 14; Watkins, 502-503.

<sup>77</sup> *The Western Citizen*, December 15, 1853.

<sup>78</sup> Howard H. Bell, "Expressions of Negro Militancy in the North, 1840-1860," *The Journal of Negro History*, Vol. 45, no.1 (January 1960), 11-18.

<sup>79</sup> "The Late Fugitive Slave Case," *Frederick Douglass' Paper*, June 9, 1854.

fugitive act seemed to spark a fire within them. B.L. Ford, a former slave living in Chicago, berated his former owner in a letter reprinted in the *Western Citizen*. “I have thought seriously and deliberately on this matter, and...I am entitled to my liberty,” Ford exclaimed. “Now sir, I must bid you farewell; I expect to go to Canada...and if you will excuse this liberty, I shall not impose any more of my letters upon you.”<sup>80</sup>

Throughout the state, prominent and lesser known Afro-Illinoisans attended meetings to devise methods of protection against local authorities. In October 1850, John Jones and H.O Wagoner met with concerned Chicagoans at the African Church to discuss the fugitive law and how they planned to protect Afro-Illinoisans:

“We have always quietly submitted to the laws of the land, however rigorous they may have been, and without any disposition on our part, as a people to rebel or disobey the laws of either general or state governments; and as there are times in the affairs of men when forbearance ceases to be a virtue and since we must abandon the hope of any protection from government, and cannot rely upon protection from the people, we are, therefore, left no other alternative but a resort to self-protection.”<sup>81</sup>

The committee members added that they would “stand by each other in case of attacks are made upon our liberties, to reduce us to a state of servitude; and we do not wish to offer violence to any person, unless driven to the extreme, in which case we are determined to defend ourselves at all hazards, even should it be to the shedding of human blood.” They further argued that the fugitive law would “enslave every colored man in the United States,” because no provisions were made in the law to guard against false claims, inasmuch as the slaveholders claim by himself or agent, is to be considered *prima facie* evidence of its validity.<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> *Western Citizen*, October 29, 1850, p. 2, col. 2.

<sup>81</sup>“Meeting of the Colored People,” *The Western Citizen*, October, 8, 1850.

<sup>82</sup> *ibid.*



On several occasions Black Chicagoans took matters into their own hands and fended off kidnappers. Approximately two hundred African Americans were armed with clubs, knives, pistols and guns and “other utensils of war”, were enraged over the abduction of a family (including three children) of alleged runaways in Chicago. According to the *Chicago Daily Journal*, the angry mob descended upon the home of the informant in an effort to get into the house through a window. Before the mob was able to get into the home, the police arrived, and removed the man for his protection. While the police escorted the man, the mob followed, and made several attempts to strip him from the police. More police arrived shortly and began to use their clubs to fend off the mob.<sup>83</sup> A few months later a slavecatcher and a local deputy in Chicago were armed with a warrant for an alleged runaway slave named Eliza, who had been working as a maid. Although the girl pleaded with the authorities, the deputy drew his pistol and hauled the terrified child away. Word of Eliza’s abduction quickly spread throughout the Black community, and a large mob of angry African American men soon caught up with the abductors, as they dragged Eliza, kicking and screaming, down the street. The deputy and slave catcher became alarmed over the increasing size of the mob of African Americans, and quickly placed their prisoner in a cell for safe keeping. The angry mob, armed with clubs and knives, surrounded the prison and demanded her immediate release. When the authorities tried to relocate Eliza to another jail, the persistent crowd managed to overpower the men, and rushed the girl off to safety. The *Daily Journal* noted that the angry men not only threatened the sheriff and her former employer who apparently revealed her identity, they also managed to get her to

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<sup>83</sup> *Chicago Daily Journal*, April 4; April 5, 1861; the initial report of the story in the April 4 *Daily Journal* conflicts with the updated version reported the next day. In the first version the informant “was set upon by the mob and severely beaten, but finally managed to make good his escape by rushing into a second hand clothing store and securing a back door exit.”

agents of the Underground Railroad.<sup>84</sup> This vigilantism was not unusual—and it did not necessarily coincide with the 1850 Fugitive Slave Law. The *Daily Journal* reported back in 1848 that “one hundred lashes were laid on the bare back” of a man by a mob of angry Blacks who suspected the man of spying upon fugitives who had come into the city.”<sup>85</sup>

Expanding Black institutions also played a significant role in providing protection for Afro-Illinoisans. African American churches, for example, played a complex role within Black communities throughout the North and assumed more comprehensive burdens in their communities than was true of most white churches. Many Black churches throughout Illinois held mass meetings concerning the well-being of Black Illinoisans, including meetings about the Black Laws, the Fugitive Slave Law, and suffrage for African Americans. In Chicago, the “mother church” of the Midwest was Quinn Chapel African Methodist Episcopal Church. Organized in 1847 by the Reverend J.H. Ward, Quinn provided all kinds of social and organizational benefits for Chicago African Americans. Black churches in Illinois provided an important vehicle for the transmission of African American culture and identity within the dominant white society. Not only did the church provide accommodations for fugitive slaves, but it also aided them on their way to Canada. After the Fugitive Law was passed, Reverend George W. Johnson, Quinn’s pastor, held a “large and enthusiastic meeting” at the church on September 30, 1850. On October 2, the meeting reassembled and adopted a report calling for the organization of a Liberty Association for the general dissemination of the principles of Human Freedom, and set up a vigilance committee which later had seven police divisions.<sup>86</sup> As an

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<sup>84</sup> *Chicago Daily Journal*, November 12, 1861.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid*, February 7, 1848.

<sup>86</sup> Miles Mark Fisher, “Negro Churches in Illinois: A Fragmentary History With Emphasis on Chicago” *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society* Vol. 56, No. 3, *Emancipation Centennial Issue* (Autumn, 1963), 554; C. Eric Lincoln and, Lawrence H. Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African American Experience*, (North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1990); Zucker, 338-339.

important meeting ground providing spiritual, as well as emotional support, Black churches in Illinois became an essential institution offering protection to African Americans during a period when Illinois was unwilling to provide such protection.

The Black Church also served as a venue in which Afro-Illinoisans felt they would be safe to express their grievances openly amongst all-Black audiences with little fear of offending whites. Restricting whites served dual purposes: first, the prejudice against Afro-Illinoisans—especially in the context of the growing slavery debate—had increased substantially. The hostility expressed by white Illinoisans had been expressed emphatically at the 1847 Illinois Constitution Convention, and Black Illinoisans had less reason than ever to expect sympathy from an unwelcoming white Illinoisan population. Secondly, as mentioned earlier, Afro-Illinoisans were gradually becoming more militant in their outlook, and were increasingly less receptive to white ideas of conciliation or patience in the face of obvious injustices. As Black militancy and the demand for self-expression rose, the demand for equality and the right to be heard hardened also. Even before the Civil War, Afro-Illinoisans were no longer pleading for their rights—they were demanding them.

*“An Act to Prevent the Immigration of Free Negroes into this State”*

If the previous anti-black legislation had not convinced Afro-Illinoisans to take action against Illinois legislators, the enactment of the 1853 version of the Black Laws certainly did. This new legislation, led by John A. Logan of Williamson County, was the final effort of conservative Democrats to keep African Americans out of the state. The new version of the Illinois Black Law contained familiar language regarding the illegality of setting free a slave

within state boundaries. As the title of the new act states, the goal of the new version intended to keep all Black people from emigrating to the state:

Section 3—It any negro...shall hereafter come into this state and remain ten days, with the evident intention of residing in the same, every such negro or mulatto shall be deemed guilty of a high misdemeanor, and for the first offense shall be fined the sum of fifty dollars, to be recovered before any justice of the peace in county where said negro or mulatto may be found. Said proceeding shall be in the name of the people of the state of Illinois, and shall be tried by jury of twelve men...”<sup>87</sup>

One of the more striking aspects of the new bill was the portion that virtually allowed for the selling of free African Americans into slavery if they did not abide by the law. Section four of the law read as follows:

“If said negro or mulatto shall be found guilty, and the fine assessed be not paid forthwith to the justice of the peace before whom said proceedings were had, it shall be the duty of said justice to commit said negro or mulatto to the custody of the sheriff of said county, or otherwise keep him, her or them in custody; and said justice shall forthwith advertise said negro or mulatto, by posting up notices thereof in at least three of the most public places in his district, which said notices shall be posted up for ten days, and on the day and at the time and place mentioned in said advertisement, the said justice shall, at public auction, proceed to sell said negro or mulatto to any person or persons who will pay said fine and costs for the shortest time; and said purchaser *shall have the right to compel said negro or mulatto to work for and serve out said time*, and he shall furnish said negro or mulatto with comfortable food, clothing and lodging during said servitude.” (my emphasis) <sup>88</sup>

Afro-Illinoisans defiantly spoke out against the act and vowed to oppose anyone who tried to enforce it. Even before the new law was officially passed, John Jones met with other prominent Afro-Illinoisans to authorize Joseph H. Barquet of Cook County to canvass northern counties of the state for signatures to a petition to be presented to the state legislature. Jones reasoned that the laws were supposed to protect its citizens, but Illinois had apparently forgotten the principles of

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<sup>87</sup> *General Laws of the state of Illinois, Passed by the Eighteenth General Assembly, convened January 3, 1853*, 57.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid*, 57-58.

democracy. Steps were also taken at the meeting to carry on the petition for the repeal of the Black Laws, a committee of correspondence within the state was appointed, and a vote of thanks was given to the people of the cities who had supported the petition circulated by Barquet<sup>89</sup>.

Reaction among white Illinoisans to the law was mixed. While many Northerners opposed slavery in principle, many also opposed allowing free Blacks to migrate into the state. Others remained consistent in their opinions and refused to support slavery or black exclusion.<sup>90</sup> For example, Congressman Asahel Gridley, from Bloomington, Illinois, opposed the new bill because he believed that Afro-Illinoisans in his section of the state were “good citizens,” who were industrious, and “performed many services that whites were unwilling to perform.” The Black Laws would “give power to make Illinois a slave state,” he continued. “Blacks coming to this state, in a section where slavery was desired, or where a negro was not regarded as possessing the rights of a man, it would be easy to sell him for a term of years that would make his servitude perpetual.” He wished the bill recommitted to render its features “more in harmony with the humane principles of the day.”<sup>91</sup> The *Chicago Tribune* echoed Gridley’s sentiment more emphatically:

“We have claimed to possess a Christian civilization, here in Illinois, but our recent legislature appears to have stripped us of all such pretension, and written us down Barbarians! “

“...the cause for inflicting this terrible punishment is not that [an African American] has committed say theft or assault, or infringed upon any one’s rights; but because our Heavenly Father gave him a skin of a shade darker hue than some of his brethren.”<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> Bell, “Chicago Negroes in the Reform Movement,” 154.

<sup>90</sup> Dennis Rieke, “Illinois Blacks Through the Civil War: A Struggle for Equality,” (MA Thesis, Southern Illinois University, 1970), 68.

<sup>91</sup> “The Negro Law,” *Illinois Journal*, February, 17, 1853.

<sup>92</sup> “The Black Law,” *Chicago Tribune*, February 24, 1853.

Illinois Democrats maintained that the bill was necessary to protect the state from potential “black hordes” who would end up as “paupers” and wards of the state. Regarding the punishment for resisting the Black Laws, the *Illinois State Register* argued that the sale of African Americans to the lowest bidder amounted to “nothing more than imprisonment as a punishment.” The law was no more slavery than confinement in prison, and there was no trampling of black rights “unless it can be shown that it is wrong to prohibit the immigration of blacks into the state.” *The Register* also admitted that they would like to see slavery abolished so that “blacks will begin to diminish, and [in] a few generations will rid our country of this kind of population.” The Black Laws, they concluded, “will contribute to that result.”<sup>93</sup> Although white Illinoisans had a difficult time arriving at a consensus about why Blacks should be barred from the state, they could apparently agree that did not want to live amongst them.

The new version of the Illinois Black Laws confirmed what a growing contingency of African Americans believed—they could never attain full citizenship in the United States. Through many channels African Americans endeavored not only to provide for the individual self-expression which they lacked, but also to achieve full citizenship within the nation. As these goals remained unreachable, Black leaders increasingly thought in terms of self-government. If protest, petition and political affiliation with whites proved ineffective, then they must seek their fulfillment through the development of a unity based upon mutual interests. The hopes of African Americans had been raised by the Free Soil Party movement of 1848, only to be dashed by the

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<sup>93</sup> “The ‘Negro Law,’” *Illinois Daily Register*, February 23, 1853.

enactment of the stringent 1850 Fugitive Slave Law. Increasingly proscriptive laws were being enacted—including the Illinois legislature's enactment of the Black laws.<sup>94</sup>

Some African Americans saw the answer to their plight in a type of racial self-government within the United States. Others, such as Samuel S. Ball of Springfield, grew weary of the struggle for equality in America and saw the answer in emigration and the formation of a new nation where Black people would be sovereign. Ball was a successful thirty-five year old barber who owned a well-known shop on the south side of the Capital Square in Springfield, Illinois. Between 1849 through 1851, the *Illinois Journal* printed a number of advertisements for Ball's barbershop. One such advertisement on March 28, 1849, stated that his shop would be open at all times from Monday morning until Saturday night and would have on hand "Ball's celebrated Restorative, so famous for the restoration of hair, and preventative of baldness." Despite his success, Ball was captivated by the plight of African Americans, and searched for ways to improve their lot. As a Baptist elder, he attended a meeting of the Colored Baptist Association in Madison County, Illinois in 1847, and took an interest in their colonization efforts. Ball volunteered to visit Liberia as an agent to inquire into the condition of the country as a potential destination for other African Americans willing to leave the United States. In preparation for his visit, he obtained a letter of introduction from Illinois Governor August C. French, who was an advocate of colonization. He called Ball a man "worthy of the encouragement and confidence of all friends of colonization." Yet despite this endorsement, the anticipated interest among Afro-Illinoisans in colonization failed to materialize, as Ball's report on Liberia failed to meet the expectations of the white colonizationists. Although a few Black Illinoisans ventured across the Atlantic to Liberia,

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<sup>94</sup> Howard H. Bell, "The Negro Emigration Movement, 1849-1854: A Phase of Negro Nationalism," *The Phylon Quarterly*, vol 20, no. 2, (2<sup>nd</sup> Qtr, 1959), 132; see Louis R. Mehlinger, "The Attitude of the Free Negro Toward African Colonization," *The Journal of Negro History*, vol 1, no. 3 (June 1916), 276-301.

prominent white spokesmen—including Lincoln—continued to support the removal of free Blacks as a solution to the race problem.<sup>95</sup>

During the 1840s and 1850s, there were few prominent African American leaders that favored emigration, but for the next fifteen years there was to be no dearth of advocates of this cause. The new interest in Africa could be attributed to the 1847 Liberian declaration of independence. A “Black nation” had thereby replaced the American Colonization Society as chief authority in the Anglo-African settlement, and therefore had gained the trust of previously suspicious African Americans. Martin R. Delany, who became Black Nationalism’s chief advocate, was once suspicious of the early colonization movement under the aegis of white Americans. As late as 1851, Delany clung to the belief that Black Americans should not be lured away to foreign land as late as 1851. By the spring of 1852, however, Delany came forth with a fully developed plan for a Black empire in the Caribbean area, and for more than a decade he devoted his chief efforts to encouraging Black emigration and Black Nationalism.<sup>96</sup>

The old vanguard of African American leaders immediately rejected the resurgence of the emigration movement. John Jones stated that “any form of colonization was calculated to increase pro-slavery prejudice, to depress moral energies, and to unsettle all our plans for improvement.” In a letter to Frederick Douglass, Jones stated that Afro-Illinoisans “have no sympathy with the Emigration, or Colonization movement, set on foot by our misguided friends.”<sup>97</sup> He also berated his friend, Samuel Ball, in a letter reprinted in the *Western Citizen*:

“This miserable scheme of expatriation and cruel exile promulgated by slaveholders themselves, and that, too, by some of the most influential and

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<sup>95</sup> Ibid; Zucker, 318-319; Ball’s report, entitled Liberia, “The Condition and Prospects of that Republic; Made from Actual Observation,” *African Repository*, April, 1850.

<sup>96</sup> Howard H. Bell, “The Negro Emigration Movement: 1849-1854; A Phase of Negro Nationalism,” 134.

<sup>97</sup> Letter from John Jones to Frederick Douglass, reprinted in *Frederick Douglass’ Paper*, November 18, 1853.



leading slaveholders of the south...it is a source of regret to me that you have so far forgotten the poor colored man's interest in this country. Your speech at Springfield and St. Louis, sir, has done more to impede all of our efforts to obtain our rights here than twenty times that number of white men, could have done. I am sorry to see the course you have taken in this colonization movement. There has not a convention of colored men met for sixteen or twenty years that has not condemned this black scheme."<sup>98</sup>

To some degree, the idea of leaving the United States permeated throughout African American communities since the 1820s. However, historian Leonard Curry stated that free Blacks perceived a great and iniquitous difference between the movement (or flight) of individual Blacks to settled and developed areas outside the United States in search of freedom and opportunity and the American Colonization Society's proposed massive resettlement of an entire population in an uninhabited area on another continent. Though colonization spokesmen might present their scheme as an encouragement to the abolition of slavery, and though some whites in the Lower South suspected that the organization was tainted by abolitionists' ideas, African American communities often perceived it to be a racist program for the elimination of the free Black presence in the United States.<sup>99</sup>

The anti-colonizationists were eager to develop a new plan to improve the conditions of African Americans and prove that emigrationists were wrong in advocating colonization. The *Frederick Douglass Paper* called for a National Convention that would "confer and deliberate upon their present condition, and upon principles and measures important to their welfare, progress and general improvement." In July 1853, one hundred and forty delegates, including John Jones and H.O. Wagoner, met in Rochester, New York to discuss these pertinent issues and

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<sup>98</sup> *The Western Citizen*, July 2, 1850.

<sup>99</sup> Leonard Curry, *The Free Black in Urban America, 1800-1850: the Shadow of the Dream*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 232; Perhaps the most incontrovertible evidence of the purpose of colonization was incorporated in the Maryland act of 1831 which imposed a tax to support the transportation of Blacks to Liberia. The levy was apportioned among the counties, not on the basis of their slave population, but in proportion to the number of free persons of color within their boundaries, 232-233.

to devise a plan of direct action. Among the litany of issues concerning the delegates were the “social barriers erected against our learning trades...” Delegates proposed a “manual school” where African Americans would be trained in better skilled occupations in an effort to elevate their status. The committee on manual labor was instructed to establish an industrial college which would train African American youths to be self-reliant and to be skilled workmen.

“Employments have much more to do with molding and stamping the character of a people than we have yet calculated for,” committee members reasoned. The committee on business relations would maintain a registry of Black mechanics, artisans, and businessmen throughout the nation. This registry would also include all persons willing to employ Black men in business and persons willing to teach African Americans mechanical trades, liberal-scientific professions, and farming. African Americans who were interested in instruction or in employment were informed to contact the Committee.<sup>100</sup> Commerce led to respectability, the committee argued, and “it is because we have not been found in this and similar avenues leading and directing, that we have been dependent and so little respected; and is in fact the reason why we are now the proscribed class of the community.”<sup>101</sup> While these were similar ideas to the 1848 convention in Ohio, delegates of the 1853 convention had a new plan to implement these ideas.

Rochester delegates did not miss the opportunity to criticize the emigration movement during the convention. They agreed that the movement was merely a “scheme” for which they had “no sympathy for” because they had “long since determined to plant [their] trees on American soil, and repose beneath their shade.” According to historian Howard H. Bell, national organization on the home front—from food supply to propaganda and from education to semi-

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<sup>100</sup> Gliozzo, 233-234.

<sup>101</sup> *Proceedings of the Colored National Convention, held in Rochester, July 6<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> 1853*, 27; Gliozzo, 232.

judicial decisions—was the answer of the traditional leaders to the challenge of the emigrationists. Bell suggested that in the stay-at-homes attempt to stabilize the Black community they resorted to a type of Black Nationalism—by creating an informal national organization of “denationalized people” that blossomed (albeit, accidentally) into the idea of national independence.<sup>102</sup> The committees formed at the Rochester convention may have conveyed the impression of a Black Nationalistic movement like their emigrationists counterparts, but the direction of the convention was not to imply the formation of a separatist society for Blacks, but a demand for fair play and equal rights.<sup>103</sup>

For John Jones and other traditional Black leaders, the assault on the Black Nationalist movement did not end at the Rochester Convention. Three months after the Rochester convention, Black Illinoisans held their first ever conference to address the “forlorn condition” specifically facing Afro-Illinoisans. Jones was elected president of the convention and appointed chairman of the committee on colonization. He denounced Black emigration as an attempt to increase proslavery prejudice, to depress moral energies, and to unsettle all plans for improvement, and any further efforts at colonization would “prove fatal” to the hopes and aspirations of African Americans. The convention delegates continued the verbal onslaught:

“Resolved, That we regard all schemes of colonizing the free colored people of the United States to Africa, or any other foreign land, as most wicked attempts of Southern slaveholders and their Northern abettors to force us [from] our native homes, and by that means perpetuate slavery in this country.”<sup>104</sup>

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<sup>102</sup> *Proceedings... Rochester, New York*, 39

<sup>103</sup> Gliozzo, 232.

<sup>104</sup> *Proceedings of the First Convention of the Colored Citizens of the State of Illinois, Convened at the City of Chicago, Thursday, Friday, and Saturday, October 6th, 7th, and 8th, 1853*, 58; Gliozzo, 234; Bell, 155

“Elevating” the masses of Black people remained paramount to the conventioners. Afro-Illinoisans were advised to make “better occupational choices” including agriculture, business, and education. They recommended a “propriety of getting an interest in the soil, whenever it is in their power to do so, and to cultivate and improve the same, believing that this step will be one of the most powerful means of our elevation in this country.” Illinois delegates maintained that the “cruel and unnatural prejudice” that existed against free Blacks was “not against color, but condition.” The only way to alter this condition, they continued, was “by using economy, amassing riches, educating our children, and being temperate.” Similar to previous Black conventions, Illinois delegates urged Afro-Illinoisans to become property owners, build homes, and cultivate the soil, because it was the “surest means of making themselves and families independent and respectable.” They were also advised to form joint stock companies “whenever it can be done advantageously,” in an effort to gain wealth.<sup>105</sup>

The delegates also maintained that the demise of the Black Laws would ensure the racial elevation of Afro-Illinoisans. In a letter addressed to “the people of Illinois,” the delegates saved their most trenchant language and stated their case against the laws:

“We would particularly remind you of the late enactment of your legislature, which was an attempt to strike down at a single blow, the rights of all persons having African blood in their veins, who shall come into the state to seek a peaceful home, and an honorable employment. And yet you invite all others to come freely into the state and possess it, and they shall be protected by your Republican laws. But if any colored person shall come into the state, for the very same purpose which you commend as praiseworthy in others, your legislators have seen fit to condemn such colored persons as having committed a high crime against the state for which they shall be worse than death, namely, SLAVERY.

What! Is it possible that men, women, and children are to be doomed to life-long Slavery for the simple act of coming into the state of Illinois, peacefully to reside, and to gain an honest living by cultivating soil, or as the case may be?

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<sup>105</sup> *Proceedings... Chicago*, 60-61.

Can such monstrous injustice as this, be the will of the People? If so, would it not be more honorable in the Legislature of Illinois, to appoint a day upon which, every colored man, woman, and child should be murdered, and thus set the matters at rest? Do you not perceive that were this act carried into practical execution, (as all laws founded in justice should be) that there are no bounds to the cruelties which it would produce? Are we to be forever proscribed, harassed, annoyed, and persecuted in this way?"<sup>106</sup>

The address was the strongest and most poignant declaration for the rights of Afro-Illinoisans to date, and set a new precedent for a mandate for which Black leaders in Illinois would continue to follow. The compelling treatise was reprinted in the *Chicago Tribune*—providing delegates with an immense audience and a relatively favorable reaction.<sup>107</sup> Speaking from a Northern Illinois and abolitionist point of view, the *Tribune* exclaimed that the Black Laws made Illinoisans “barbarians.” The laws would be “totally disregarded,” in the North and anyone willing to attempt to enforce them should leave, “unless he is willing to live among people who shun and loathe him.”<sup>108</sup>

Despite the elegant appeal of Afro-Illinoisans and their allies to the immoral nature of the anti-black legislation, many white Illinoisans maintained that the laws were not enough to rid the state of “undesirables.” The *Belleville Advocate* of St. Clair County declared that the “Spartan mode of general massacre and extermination” offered a “more manlier and bolder means of getting rid of a degraded population” than legislation. “The ancient helots were hunted down and reduced to a manageable number by wholesale murder. Would this not be the only effectual prevention of the evil of a black population?” The editorial revealed that if the anti-immigration law were ineffective, some Illinois negrophobes were clearly contemplating the alternative of

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<sup>106</sup> *Proceedings... Chicago*, 65.

<sup>107</sup> “Address of the Colored State Convention to the People of the State of Illinois,” *Chicago Tribune*, October 14, 1853; see also, “The Colored Convention and Frederick Douglass” *Chicago Tribune*, October 11, 1853.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid*, October 14, 1853.

genocide.<sup>109</sup> Even as late as 1854, the issue of legalizing slavery remained alive. Dumas Van Deren, editor of the *Mattoon National Gazette*, wrote a proposal about the “advantages” of slavery in Illinois because the “novelty of free labor (was) a mere empty humbug.” Many Illinoisans had lived in the state long enough to test the comparative advantages that slaves and free systems present, and were prepared to “pronounce openly their candid preference in favor of slave labor in all agricultural business.”<sup>110</sup>

### *Conclusion*

The Illinois legislature sought to achieve a racially homogenous society through the legal exclusion of free Blacks, African colonization, or outright forcible expulsion. At the same time, they strove to maintain the system of racial subordination for African Americans already within the state that had been constructed in previous decades.<sup>111</sup> The Illinois legislature’s overarching goal was to placate the fears of white Illinoisans over the possibility that free Black people would migrate to the state and somehow undermine the labor of whites. Furthermore, free Blacks were viewed as a potentially dangerous challenge to the precarious racial hierarchy in labor during the pre-Civil War years that could possibly usurp the position of white Illinoisans. Afro-Illinoisans, such as John Jones, and H.O Wagoner challenged these racially exclusionary measures through a variety of protest campaigns in the face of overwhelming racial hostility. By utilizing their own expanding institutions, Afro-Illinoisans held mass meetings, conventions, and initiated a variety of programs, including a Manual School and Business Relations committee designed to improve

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<sup>109</sup> *The Advocate* (Belleville), March 4, 1853; Zucker, 315.

<sup>110</sup> “A Proposal to Introduce Slavery into Illinois—Its Advantages Discussed—Progress of the Slavery Cause,” *New York Times*, October 4, 1854; “Slavery in Illinois” *Provincial Freeman*, November 25, 1854.

<sup>111</sup> Zucker, 323.

the occupational opportunities for African Americans. While these programs, and the campaign to repeal of the Black Laws ultimately failed, they were successful in raising significant issues including the absurdity of anti-black legislation and the overall economic plight of Black Illinoisans. Pro-Southern and anti-black Illinois legislators emerged victorious during these initial battles, as they were able to pass the Black Laws, and the African American population remained small in comparison to their Midwestern neighbors. However, Afro-Illinoisans were no longer a silent minority within a sea of racial prejudice—they emerged during the mid-1850s as a militant force that refused to submit to the desired racial hegemony. Additionally, with the emergence of the Republican Party by 1854 and their “free labor and free soil” slogan, and the increasing possibility of war, many Illinois whites began to view Democrats, and their pro-Southern stance in a different light. The next chapter will display how Afro-Illinoisans continued to battle for better economic opportunities and equal rights in the context of the burgeoning controversy over Black labor. As the sectional controversy over slavery garnered more attention, Black leaders continued to hammer away at the logic of the state’s racist legislation. Adding even more tension was the possibility that four million Black slaves would be free to go and work where they chose. And while anti-black legislation was gradually losing its sway over the Illinois population (in part, because of Afro-Illinoisans’ efforts to be heard as well as the Republican Party’s ascension), white workingmen increasingly took matters in their own hands as they perceived that their own precarious position within the racial hierarchy was being threatened.

## CHAPTER 2

### FINDING THE “ARCHIMEDEAN LEVER”: AFRO-ILLINOISANS AND THE STRUGGLE FOR EQUALITY AND ECONOMIC LIBERATION, 1854-1865

By the mid-1850s, the confrontation between the North and South became increasingly volatile, and the likelihood that its resolution would only be determined through violent means seemed inevitable. As the certainty of war loomed, Afro-Illinoisans became even more resolute in their collective goal of economic empowerment. Expunging the state’s Black Laws, they maintained, was paramount to their collective survival, and the only way they would be able to thrive within the political economy. The militant attitude amongst Afro-Illinoisans during the pre-war years was a conducive breeding ground for the emergence of a young emigrationist, H. Ford Douglas. His unrelenting dedication to the destruction of the Illinois Black Laws and slavery, as well as his intelligence and innate oratory skills, catapulted him to the forefront of Black leadership in Illinois. The goal of this chapter is to display how Afro-Illinoisans redoubled their efforts to erase the Black Laws from the Illinois statutes. Undeterred by previous failures, Black leaders intensified their militancy as they sought to maintain pressure on state leaders who continued to insist on Black exclusion. This chapter will also explore the new relationship between Afro-Illinoisans and the Republican Party. While prominent Black leaders looked to capitalize on the Party of Lincoln, other leaders, more jaded about the sincerity of white politicians, were noticeably skeptical about the Republican agenda. To be sure, Republicans offered plenty of ammunition to cynical African Americans—while they were advocates for the abolishment of slavery, many of the less radical Republicans also advocated Black inferiority, and insisted that Black people could not live amongst European Americans. In fact, many Republicans, including Abraham Lincoln, favored plans for the removal of Black people from the United States.



As Afro-Illinoisans became more assertive and made more stringent demands for their rights, white Illinoisans expressed angst over the prospect of a civil war. The vision of a racially homogenous state was in jeopardy, and white workers became progressively nervous over the prospect of free Black people inundating Illinois with “unwanted” and “cheap” labor. However, there was more at stake than occupational and economic status for working class whites. Republicans, they maintained, advocated “negro equality,” and thus threatened their position within the racial hierarchical order. This chapter examines the reactions of the white working class during the years before the Civil War and the impact these reactions had on the Black population. The threat of any increase in the African American population during this period caused great consternation among many white Illinoisans who often connected any perception of Black advancement as an infringement on their collective status as workers. In particular, workplaces throughout Illinois devolved into racial battlegrounds in which white workers expressed dismay through violence, hate strikes, anti-Union dissention, and vigilantism. While white workers were primarily interested in establishing their own position within the hierarchy, they did not act alone in expressing aggressive behavior towards the Black “specter.” Illinois political leaders and newspaper editors exploited racial hatred among white laborers as the debate over slavery intensified. Democrats consistently hammered away at Republican’s reputation for being the party in favor of “negro equality;” while Republicans countered with claims of Democratic conspiracies to enslave all workers, and extolled the virtues of their “free labor” ideology.

At a time when the debate over the labor of Black people reached new and controversial heights, soon-to-be-ex-slaves were instrumental in dismantling the institution of slavery. In large part, Black slaves did not wait for Union soldiers to rescue them—many of them packed their

meager belongings and fled Southern plantations on their own accord. This chapter explores the process in which Black people took assertive actions to determine their own fate by joining Union forces, and forcing Lincoln to reconsider his policy on so-called contrabands. Thousands of Black refugees poured into Illinois during the war aware of the risk of being recaptured, but determined to locate new opportunities for free labor in Union camps in Illinois, Arkansas, Kentucky, and Tennessee. Furthermore, Black people, once behind Union lines, often sought employment opportunities, and encouraged military leaders to put them to work for wages. Meanwhile, free African Americans throughout Illinois continued to battle against laws designed to limit their rights as workers and citizens. Many African American men asserted their right to fight for their own freedom and volunteered to fight against Confederate forces in spite of the fact that they would not earn the same pay as white soldiers. Other African Americans defied state discriminatory laws by migrating to Illinois, despite the overwhelming prejudice levied against them, while others continued to fight against these laws through political and legal means.

### *The Illinois State Convention of 1856 and the Emergence of H. Ford Douglas*

The Black National conventions at Ohio and New York concluded that the precarious economic status of free Blacks was equated to the extreme limitations of their rights as citizens as well as the continuation of slavery in the South. In order to compensate for their lack of rights, working class African Americans were urged to forego Northern cities and reside in rural towns. Conventioneers maintained that a rural setting, agricultural pursuits, and the acquisition of property, would be a definite step toward independence and respectability. It would also allow Black workers to become self-sufficient producers of their own goods, while it simultaneously

allowed them to reshape their image in the minds of Northern whites. Urban areas were highly competitive enclaves where African American workers were gradually pushed aside or forced to compete with European Americans for viable labor. Furthermore, the stigma of slavery and race prejudice forced working class Black people to settle for menial labor regardless of their skill level. Instead of working as domestic servants or equally menial labor, working class African Americans would not only avoid the growing labor competition in Northern cities, they would also gain respectability by shunning so-called “nigger work.”<sup>1</sup>

At the state-level, Black conventions of the 1850s echoed the message of Black self-sufficiency and elevation for free Black workers. During the 1853 convention in Chicago, delegates urged Afro-Illinoisans to utilize the resources of the land, educate themselves, and save their money. Meeting again in 1856, in Alton, Illinois, Black leaders challenged the legitimacy of anti-black statutes such as taxation without the right to vote, legal discrimination that deprived them of the right to appear in testimony against whites, and the inability to send their children to public schools.<sup>2</sup> In their strongly worded “Declaration of Sentiment and Plan of Action,” Afro-Illinoisans expressed their collective impatience and hostility with the state’s unwillingness to grant them equal rights:

“We the colored citizens of Illinois...feel ourselves *deeply aggrieved* by reasons of the cruel prejudice we are compelled to suffer in this our “native land,” as dear to us as it is to white men—as blood bought inheritance of our ancestors; but still more, by reason of those odious enactments that now disgrace the statute books of this state, resting upon the moral, political and intellectual growth of the colored people like an incubus, paralyzing our energies, and destroying whatever of manhood there remains within us; do here in a most solemn manner, pledging watch one to the other, but forth this as our plan of action and declaration of sentiments, embodying the principles and purposes upon which we intend to act

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<sup>1</sup> Howard H. Bell, *A Survey of the Negro Convention Movement, 1830-1861*, (New York: Arno Press, 1969), 195-196.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, 187.

in the future: neither asking no giving quarter, spurning all compromises, appealing directly to the wisdom, justice and magnanimity of the good and true of Illinois for the justness of our cause.”<sup>3</sup>

A few Alton delegates were uncomfortable with the tone of the preamble, and insisted that milder language be used when asking for equal rights because, as one delegate stated, Blacks were “not in condition to demand them.” Certain strongly worded phrases should be stricken, the delegates insisted, because they “savored of braggadocio.” The Alton delegates were divided on the issue as others insisted that the austerity of the language was necessary. One delegate, who favored the direct language, wanted to “assert his manhood for once” in the face of slavery. He argued that it was best to let “white men know that we had rights, and to convince them, let us use the mildest means adequate to the end, which was free speech.” The debate continued to rage until the late hours “with great fury,” until John Jones demanded a vote on the matter. The preamble was narrowly approved and allowed to remain as written.<sup>4</sup>

One of the staunchest proponents of a strongly-worded preamble was a self-educated ex-slave from Virginia named H. Ford Douglas. His charismatic personality, intelligence and oratory brilliance quickly caught the attention of his peers at the 1854 National Emigration convention. Although he was only twenty-three years old during the Cleveland convention, Douglas impressively defended the convention’s objectives against former convention vice president, John Mercer Langston who was in opposition with the Emigration Movement. Ford Douglas, who was an advocate of the Black Emigration Movement, argued that African American ancestors remained in America without any noticeable improvement to their status. The degraded condition of African Americans demanded positive action, which did not permit

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<sup>3</sup> *Proceedings of the State Convention of Colored Citizens of the State of Illinois, Held in the City of Alton, November 13, 14, and 15<sup>th</sup>, 1856.*

<sup>4</sup> *ibid*, 71-72.

them to wait indefinitely for the nation to alter its opinion of them. For Ford Douglas, there was a definite contradicting nature of being Black in America:

“I can hate this government without being disloyal, because it has stricken down my manhood, and treated me as a saleable commodity. I can join a foreign enemy and fight against it, without being a traitor, because it treats me as an ALIEN and a STRANGER, and I am free to avow that should such a contingency arise I should not hesitate to take any advantage in order to procure indemnity for the future...”<sup>5</sup>

Although his rebuttal to Langston was well-received, and certainly enhanced his reputation as an up-and-coming emigrationist, Ford Douglas’ philosophy was evolving beyond simply developing a separate Black nation. Well-known Black nationalists, such as Martin R. Delany, were guided primarily by their desire to develop a separate nation in which they could demonstrate the capacity of Black people to successfully govern their own nation. Conversely, Ford Douglas’ philosophy (during the early 1850s) was still in its developmental stage, and he was best described as an antislavery emigrationist who was directed more by a displeasure with the United States as a bastion of slavery, as well as proving the particular abilities of African Americans. In propounding emigrationism more symbolically than substantially, he hoped that America would recognize the danger of a large unpredictable group within its midst and would grant them equality by first destroying slavery.<sup>6</sup> Essentially, for Ford Douglas and other antislavery emigrationists, Black organizations were principally protest vehicles whose utility was confined specifically to ameliorating the condition of Black people.

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<sup>5</sup> Speech of H. Ford Douglas: in reply to Mr. John Mercer Langston before the Emigration Convention, at Cleveland, Ohio. Delivered on the evening of the 27<sup>th</sup> of August, 1854, copied from Herbert Apatheker, *A Documentary History of the Negro People in the United States, vol 1: From the Colonial Times Through the Civil War*, (New York: Citadel Book Press, 1979), 366-367.

<sup>6</sup>*Proceedings of the National Emigration Convention of Colored People; Held at Cleveland, Ohio, August 24-26, 1854* (Pittsburgh, 1854); Floyd J. Miller, *The Search for a Black Nationality: Black Colonization and Emigration, 1787-1863*, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1975), 150-151; Robert L. Harris, Jr, “H. Ford Douglas: Afro-American Antislavery Emigrationist,” *The Journal of Negro History*, Vol 62, no. 3, (July 1977), 220-221.

Prior to his involvement with the Illinois State Convention, Ford Douglas moved to Chicago where he resided when he became proprietor of the *Provincial Freeman* in early 1856. A Canadian abolitionist newspaper, the *Freeman* was established by former slave Samuel R. Ward. The newspaper urged both antislavery and emigrationist principles, which were compatible with Ford Douglas' temperament as an antislavery emigrationist. To promote the newspaper, he toured throughout the Midwest, including Illinois, where he attended the Illinois State Convention of Radical Abolitionists in Joliet. Ford Douglas was often critical of some white abolitionists and argued that they used their activism as a "hobby" in order to accomplish their own selfish purposes. He also maintained that they tried to dominate the movement by not allowing African Americans to freely express themselves. Many whites, he charged, who sought to prove the intellectual equality of Blacks became less committed to antislavery once African Americans began advocating their own position.<sup>7</sup> For Ford Douglas, the bottom line was the abolishment of slavery and the overall improvement of Black people in the United States—how he arrived at this end was not particularly significant to him.

John Jones and the convention delegates were so impressed with the skills and commitment of Ford Douglas to the overall improvement of African Americans that they were willing to overlook his pro-emigrationist stance. Not only was he instrumental in writing the preamble for the convention, he also chaired several committees, including a committee to draft a constitution and by-laws for the Repeal Association whose major objective was to abolish the Black Laws and to achieve recognition for African Americans in Illinois as citizens. This committee employed agents to canvass the state, establish local auxiliaries, lecture, circulate petitions, and collect statistics on the wealth, education, mental and moral condition of Afro-

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<sup>7</sup> Harris, Jr., 221.

Illinoisans. Interestingly, he was not included on the Colonization committee, which, according to historian Robert L. Harris, Jr, could have been attributed to his emphasis on antislavery in his lectures for the *Provincial Freeman*, and by the fact that the Colonization committee was probably more concerned with condemning the American Colonization Society instead of giving a full hearing to emigrationism. Nevertheless, it was obvious that Ford Douglas was an invaluable delegate whose influence at the Illinois State Convention was apparent.<sup>8</sup>

On the final evening of the convention, a large crowd gathered at Liberty Hall to hear speeches from John Jones, William Johnson (who was elected president of the Alton convention), and H. Ford Douglas. Of the three speakers, only the Ford Douglas speech was printed for the convention's report, which referred to it as a "most brilliant effort," that was both "eloquent" and "elegant". In the speech, he argued that the antislavery doctrine which claimed freedom as national and slavery as sectional was destructive to American liberty.<sup>9</sup> The founders of America, he continued, were in opposition to the doctrine of slavery's constitutional legality:

"There is an axiom, progressively grand, of deeper political wisdom and of a more enlarged democracy, that teaches that Freedom should prevail everywhere and Slavery nowhere. This, and this only, is true anti-slavery. It is the saving hope of the Republic. Any other principle is political suicide. To advocate the sectional right of slavery would be to break up the throne of God and spit in the face of the Deity."<sup>10</sup>

Concerning the overall economic welfare of African Americans, Ford Douglas concluded his speech by arguing that racial prejudice incapacitated Blacks economically, socially, and morally. Blacks had to assert their manhood "in the right way." Slavery and bigotry would be ended, he continued, if financial security could be gained; it would be "the 'Archimedean lever' with

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<sup>8</sup> Harris, Jr., 222

<sup>9</sup> *Proceedings of the State Convention...Alton, Illinois, November 13<sup>th</sup>, 14<sup>th</sup>, and 15<sup>th</sup>, 1856*, 77; Harris, Jr., 222.

<sup>10</sup> *Proceedings of the State Convention...Alton, Illinois, November 13<sup>th</sup>, 14<sup>th</sup>, and 15<sup>th</sup>, 1856*, 78

which we may turn the wicked institution of this country upside down, and pour slavery into the pit below, its only congenial abiding place.”<sup>11</sup>

The Illinois State Convention at Alton, Illinois ended just as the 1853 convention in Chicago did—white state legislators virtually ignored the demands of Afro-Illinoisans and maintained the status quo. Most of the programs and plans laid out by the delegates never made it beyond the paper stage, mostly due to a lack of funding. Yet prominent Blacks remained hopeful that their protests were not unheard. Furthermore, their message of “elevating” African Americans through better occupations—especially via farming, and land ownership—may have gained some headway by the mid to late 1850s. Evidence suggested that Black farmers in Illinois, as well as those who made their living on someone else’s farmland, were usually the most prosperous and socially secure of Illinois’ Black population. Of course, there were enough exceptions, but instances of racial prejudice in antebellum Illinois occurred with less frequency for those who lived in rural farm towns. However, in more industrial areas throughout the state, Afro-Illinoisans were increasingly threatened with violence due to job competition from European Americans.<sup>12</sup>

### *Sticking to Their Rural Roots*

Writing for the *Pine and Palm* newspaper in 1861, African American abolitionist, journalist, and Illinois native, John Willis Menard described the largely rural conditions of the Black population residing in the southern-most counties in Illinois. “Throughout the southern part of Illinois,” he wrote, “colored people may be seen in squads, wholly farmers; some of them

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid, 79; Dennis F. Ricke, “Illinois Blacks through the Civil War: A Struggle for Equality,” (M.A. Thesis, Southern Illinois University, 1970), 161.

<sup>12</sup> Ricke, 162-163.



own large tracts of land.”<sup>13</sup> Antebellum Afro-Illinoisans were not flocking to urban areas; nor were they necessarily moving to locations where many other Blacks resided. As historian Jack Blocker noted, at least two thirds of the African American population had lived in rural areas on the eve of the Civil War. Although they were economically disadvantaged, held limited resources, and dealt with racial prejudice, a sizable number of Afro-Illinoisans were able to establish themselves as independent farmers, shopkeepers, and property-holders. Many African Americans were unable to purchase land because they could not afford it, and therefore they remained tied to the land by hiring themselves as farmhands. Regardless, African Americans that migrated before the Civil War often remained hopeful that through the possibility of purchasing farm land in northern locations like Illinois, they would be improving their quality of life.<sup>14</sup>

Southern African Americans remained largely tied to their agricultural roots, and therefore sought to purchase land in Midwestern locations. For example, Black families migrated to Gallatin County, Illinois because they could buy cheap government farmland, and they believed that their quality of life would be better than life in the South. According to United States census data, more than ninety percent of African Americans living in Gallatin engaged in farm labor (either as farmers on their own land, or as farmhands hired to work on some else’s property). Out of ninety-seven African American households in Gallatin in 1850, thirty-two were farms owned by Black families with an average size of one hundred and one acres. By 1870,

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<sup>13</sup> “The Colored People of Egypt, Ill.” *Pine and Palm*, October 12, 1861.

<sup>14</sup> Dennis Frank Ricke, “Illinois Blacks Through the Civil War: A Struggle for Equality,” (MA Thesis, Southern Illinois University, 1972), 140; Darrel Bingham, *On Jordan’s Banks: Emancipation and Its Aftermath in the Ohio River Valley*, (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2006), 40; Jack S. Blocker, *A Little More Freedom: African Americans Enter the Urban Midwest, 1860-1930* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2008), 35; United States Department of Agriculture, National Agriculture Statistic Service: [http://www.nass.usda.gov/Statistics\\_by\\_State/Illinois/Publications/County\\_Estimates/2012main.htm](http://www.nass.usda.gov/Statistics_by_State/Illinois/Publications/County_Estimates/2012main.htm); The district breakdown includes 9 total districts: Northwest, Northeast, West, Central, East, West Southwest, East Southeast, Southwest, Southeast. Charles N. Zucker, *The Free Negro Question: Race Relations in Antebellum Illinois, 1801-1860*, (PhD Dissertation, 1972), 324; Shirley J. Carlson, “The Black Community in the Rural North: Pulaski County, Illinois, 1860-1900,” (PhD Dissertation, Washington University, 1982), 7-8.

African Americans owned seventy four farms, with the average size of seventy eight acres. As more Black families migrated to Gallatin by 1860 and 1870, the percentage of farm workers leveled off to approximately fifty percent. Nevertheless, the fact that African Americans continued to move to Gallatin County during these decades (from 353 in 1850, to 612 in 1870) is a testament to their commitment to a rural setting.<sup>15</sup>

In comparison to white farmers in Gallatin, African Americans averaged slightly lower than whites in most farm-related items according to the agricultural report for 1850. Blacks owned fewer farm animals and grew considerably less crops than their white counterparts. However, Black farmers grew an average of almost five times as much tobacco as whites, which may have been a reflection of previous farming experiences in the slave states. Although Black farmers in Gallatin lagged behind white farmers, encouragingly, their lot improved somewhat from 1850 to 1870. Their total farm value increased thirty-seven percent during that time; from \$51,100 to \$69,830. The amount and value of this farmland ranged from as few as five acres to four hundred and twenty acres valued at \$7,000. The twenty largest landowners owned between one hundred and four hundred and twenty acres of land valued between \$400 and \$7,000. Out of this group, two of the farm owners—Sima Allen and Laura Barker—were women. They were both widows who were listed on the census as having dual occupations as farmers and housekeepers.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> 1850 and 1870 Federal Census Reports, Population, Gallatin, Hardin and Saline Counties; Federal Census Reports, Agriculture, Gallatin, Hardin, and Saline Counties; Jacqueline Y. Blackmore, "African Americans and Race Relations in Gallatin County, Illinois from the Eighteenth Century to 1870," (PhD Dissertation, Northern Illinois, 1996), 104; the numbers for the amount of Black farmers/farm-hands were compiled by Blackmore and are found on page 180, Table 4-1, and the total number of farms owned by Black families, along with the acreage also compiled by Blackmore in Table 4-6, page 195-196.

<sup>16</sup> Blackmore, 189-190, 200.

Approximately forty African Americans lived to the southwest of Gallatin, in Pulaski County. During the 1850s Pulaski County experienced its first large wave of migration. In that decade the population grew from 2,272 to nearly 4,000. Most migrants were American-born whites from Tennessee, Kentucky, Ohio, Indiana, Pennsylvania, or elsewhere in Illinois. This predominantly rural county had no towns with a population of 2,500 or more prior to the Civil War. Most of the 1860 Pulaski County Black population worked as “unspecified” laborers. However, by 1870, the population mushroomed to 1,487. Of the six hundred and fifty-five African Americans that listed an occupation on the 1870 census, four hundred and ninety were farmers or farm laborers (seventy four percent). Rather than remain tenant farmers and sharecroppers in the South, many African Americans moved to rural northern locations like Pulaski to purchase farmland. The relatively low cost of land along with favorable soil for the growth for familiar crops made Pulaski especially attractive to farmers. Some of this growth can be attributed to Black organizations in Illinois who (at least during the Civil War era) encouraged African Americans to forsake urban centers and purchase land as well as other real estate in rural areas and small towns. Rather than remain tenant farmers and sharecroppers in the South, many African Americans moved to rural locations in Illinois like Pulaski, to purchase farmland. Similar to cities in the South, the area appeared suited to familiar crops such as tobacco, cotton, sorghum and grain.<sup>17</sup>

African American farmers of Pulaski County displayed similar signs of prosperity. Historian Shirley J. Carlson displayed how Black farmers like Christopher Cross overcame enormous obstacles and flourished economically. Cross migrated from Kentucky after the Civil

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<sup>17</sup> United States Census Bureau, Population Schedules (1860, 1870), Pulaski County, Illinois; Shirley J. Carlson, “The Black Community in the Rural North: Pulaski County, Illinois, 1860-1900,” (PhD Dissertation, Washington University, 1982), 7-8, 15-16; also, see Carlson appendix for employment of African Americans in Pulaski, 140-144.

War, and settled in Pulaski County where he and his family became the first Black landowners in the village. By 1870 the Cross family was among the most prosperous African American families in the county. Their estate included \$1000 in real and \$400 in personal property. Within ten years, according to Carlson, the family claimed two hundred and forty four acres and one hundred and twenty acres of woodland and forest, seventy-five acres of meadow, pasture, orchards, and vineyards. The Cross farm was valued at \$2,850, including land, implements, and livestock.<sup>18</sup>

Pulaski County may have also been particularly attractive to Black migrants during the Civil War era because the county had a severe labor shortage, and therefore caused many employers to hire workers regardless of race. Although African Americans were largely in search of their own farm land, many simply could not afford it, and had to settle for work outside of agriculture. By 1860, Pulaski already contained dozens of small factories including fifteen sawmills, two shingle mills, two blacksmith shops, a stave factory, a shoemaking establishment, a tanning factory, a pottery, a railway repairing company, a steamship building company, a brickyard, a flour mill a gold pen manufacturing company, and a pork packing plant. Blacks often found employment in the new boarding houses and hotels, taverns, and restaurants which opened and the old ones that expanded to serve the growing population.<sup>19</sup>

According to Menard, conditions were especially bleak in locations where racial discrimination was strongest—which was generally wherever any significant number of Black people lived in Illinois. In his hometown, Kaskaskia, Illinois, Menard stated “nowhere on earth [was] negro prejudice more potent than at this place.” He described the town as a “gloomy abode

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<sup>18</sup> Shirley J. Carlson, “Black Migration to Pulaski County, 1860-1900,” *Illinois Historical Journal*, Vol. 80, No. 1 (Spring, 1987), 38.

<sup>19</sup> *ibid*, 15-16.

of the meanest bloodhounds that the infamous code of 1850 (the Fugitive Slave Law) has ever made.” In Kaskaskia’s earlier years there was an African American population of about three hundred people, but due to rampant flooding, the population dwindled to approximately one hundred people. The entire Black population owned approximately \$10,000 in real estate, and thirty four percent of all African Americans in the town worked either as farmers on the own land, or worked as farm laborers on someone else’s property.<sup>20</sup> As discussed in chapter one, during the antebellum era, African Americans living in the southern region of Illinois were in constant danger of being kidnapped and sold into slavery. There were “so many disadvantages” in the southern counties, remarked Menard, and Afro-Illinoisans “live by public sympathy rather than the protection of any law.” They were always on alert because “slavedom [was] only across the river,” and, “of course negro prejudice [was] a native barrier to the welfare of the colored man.”<sup>21</sup> However, despite their daily vulnerability to slavecatchers and a white community that was often less than enthusiastic about non-white neighbors, African Americans migrants continued to migrate to these rural locations during the Civil War era.

Yet not all Southern Illinois counties were bastions of racial prejudice during the Civil War era. Several small towns throughout Randolph County, located near the state’s western border, across from St. Louis, Missouri contained relatively large African American communities that lived in relative peace. For example, Menard noted that the rural town of Sparta had a strong anti-slavery sentiment and a comparatively peaceful coexistence with its

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<sup>20</sup> “The Colored People of Egypt, Ill,” *Pine and Palm*, October 12, 1861

<sup>21</sup> U.S. Bureau of the Census, Federal Population Census 1860; “The Colored People of Egypt, Ill.”

African American community. In fact, Sparta served as a prominent depot for the Underground Railroad, and well known as a safe-haven for fugitive slaves.<sup>22</sup>

“They would got to Sparta in pursuit of their property, but of course they never got one out of ten. Their continued visits to Sparta soon made the Abolitionists pour out their fire and brimstone, which led to a bloody contest with the proselytes of the (Fugitive Slave Law) of 1850. Happily, the Missourians were routed, some of them not feeling so well going home as when they started; for they were the unhappy recipients of Abolition powder and shot.”<sup>23</sup>

By 1860, there were two hundred and eight Black residents, half, were “fugitives from slavery.” Their chief occupation was farming and some of them are mechanics, teamsters, engineers and laborers. Of the twenty-one African American families in Sparta, fifteen owned their own homes and large tracts of timberland valued at approximately \$7,555. Among their occupations included one engineer, teamster, two clergymen, nine laborers, one washerwoman, one gardener, one fireman, one barber, and one wood sawyer.<sup>24</sup>

Black communities sometimes flourished economically when there was limited racial antagonism. For example, African American residents of Chester, Illinois, located seventy five miles south of St. Louis, reported few racial incidents and had a reputation for “intelligence and wealth” compared to “any other settlement of the same size in the western states,” according to Menard. They largely worked as a farming community, along with some mechanics, engineers, and laborers. Thirty-year old Isaac Gaston worked as an engineer and owned real estate worth \$2,400. John Becon and John Backus both worked as farmers and each owned real estate valued more than \$1,000. Other “leading men” of Chester, such as Charles Brooking, and Reverend W.T. Miller were considered by one correspondent as “industrious and respectable” citizens. The

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<sup>22</sup> “The Colored People of Egypt, Ill.”; Larry Gara, “The Underground Railroad in Illinois,” *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society*, Vol. 56, No. 3, Emancipation Centennial Issue (Autumn, 1963), 510

<sup>23</sup> “The Colored People of Egypt, Ill.”

<sup>24</sup> *1860 United States Census* ; Place: Sparta, Randolph, Illinois; Roll: M653\_221; Page: 826; Image: 384.

all-Black town of Brooklyn contained an “industrious and respectful” population that could be seen daily traveling to St. Louis with their products of wood, grain, and poultry to sell.<sup>25</sup>

While some African Americans managed to find a comparatively comfortable niche as farmers in the Southern region during the pre-Civil War years in comparison to white farmers, many Black farmers struggled economically. Part of the reason is attributed to the fact that most white Illinois farmers had the advantage of purchasing their farmland earlier than Black families. Of course, race played the major role in the failure of Afro-Illinoisans’ ability to maintain their farms. For example, in 1865, whites in Gallatin began purchasing large tracts of farmland formerly owned by African Americans. Some African Americans obtained large farm tracts during the 1850s and 1860s. However, through some nebulous legal dealings, Black families subsequently lost or sold off their property. In a few cases in Gallatin, Black families were probably squatters who may have never gained legal claim to the land where they lived and farmed. When they died their descendants could not inherit the land.<sup>26</sup>

In locations throughout Illinois, Black families steadily lost their farmland during the latter decades of the nineteenth century. Once independent farmers, with the ability for relative self-sufficiency, Black farmers, through a variety of circumstances, lost farm land and were forced to not only find other employment outside of agriculture, they were also forced to locate more urban/industrial locations in order to maintain steady employment. In reality, farming was becoming a less viable economic option during the latter decades of the nineteenth century. Furthermore, many farmers in Illinois were at the subsistence level, and what they were able to sell was primarily food products which were readily absorbed into the local market. White

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<sup>25</sup> *U.S. Bureau of the Census, Federal Population Census 1860*; “The Colored People of Egypt, Ill.” October 12, 1861; November 3, 1861.

<sup>26</sup> For more details on the loss of farm property in Gallatin, see Blackmore dissertation, 226-227.

farmers, then, had little reason to view their Black counterparts as any type of real economic threat, and therefore, generally did not oppose their economic advancement.<sup>27</sup> Opposition to the perception of Black economic advancement was decidedly more pronounced among whites living in more industrialized and urban settings. As more Afro-Illinoisans moved to Northern cities—due in part to the higher migration rates in the latter decades of the nineteenth century, and simply because Black people were finding it difficult to secure good farmland or viable employment in small towns—racial conflict increased substantially.

*“No Negro Must Remain!” Pre-Civil War White Working-Class Violence*

As the sectional crisis loomed, white Illinoisans became increasingly anxious about the political and social affairs surrounding the debates. The ascension of Abraham Lincoln and the Republican Party, an economic depression in 1857, the dramatic increase in the debate about slavery and “negro equality,” and the increasingly realistic possibility of a mass migration of ex-slaves into Illinois, all combined to make the future of Black people in America the primary issue in national politics. As these issues became more prominent, working class whites—above all groups—became the most anxious. In essence, the polarization of the debates forced Northern whites to question their own status as “free” laborers, along with their status within the racial hierarchical order in the years before the war.

While economic uncertainty often led to racial violence among working class white Illinoisans, they were not necessarily the primary instigators. According to historian Brian Kelly, the emphasis on the agency of the white working class in the social reconstruction of race

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<sup>27</sup> Carlson (dissertation), 34-35.



systematically underestimates the more impressive power of the dominant classes and their established institutions in determining the environment in which the relatively powerless maneuvered.<sup>28</sup> To be sure, the white working class of Illinois was not only inspired by the anti-black rhetoric of the political leaders of the North, and other leaders throughout the state, they operated with the tacit cooperation of these leaders. Anti-black newspaper editors (the vast majority were Democratic organs) were particularly guilty of fanning the flames of racial hatred during this era, as they consistently reported on “hordes” and the “oversupply” of the small Black population in the region. Abolitionist newspapers, such as Chicago’s *Western Citizen*, and to a lesser degree, many Republican newspapers tried to counteract anti-black rhetoric in Illinois. However, the vast majority of white Illinoisans during this period continued to oppose Black migration to the state. Hot-button issues added to the anxiety of the white working class in Illinois over their collective status as workers along with their place in the racial hierarchical order.

As the issues involving the sectional debate polarized, white supremacy increasingly provided a common ground upon which whites could successfully interact and as a way that they could protect what they perceived as a threat to their advantageous position within the racial hierarchy. White reaction to the perception of a looming economic threat resulted in a substantial increase in anti-black violence throughout Illinois during the Civil War era. Historian Joel Kovel explained how men had long preferred to identify themselves as members of social groups, rather than as individuals; to set up viable social groups, they had to be willing to exclude others from their exclusive group. In this case, the racial “Other” had almost always been differentiated

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<sup>28</sup> Bernard Mandel, *Labor, Free and Slave: Workingmen and the Anti-Slavery Movement in the United States*, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2007), xi-xli.

by Blackness.<sup>29</sup> To varying degrees, white Illinoisans exhibited greater anxiety on the verge of war as it became apparent that, for the first time in their history, Illinois would not necessarily support anti-black legislation. Despite attempts by Republicans to allay the fears of white Illinoisans, their rise and the ascension of Lincoln to the presidency created the perception that for the first time Black people would not only have allies in state government, but in the White House as well.

Increased anxiety and economic uncertainty among the white population in Illinois and the rest of the nation led to an increase in racially motivated violence. During the mid to late 1850s, these battles occurred wherever Afro-Illinoisans resided, and whites perceived any threat to their economic welfare. Cairo, Illinois, located in the southernmost region of the state, was illustrative of this violent dynamic towards its Black inhabitants. When the *Cairo Weekly and Delta* reported that the city was “almost entirely overrun with free niggers,” in actuality, the city’s Black population numbered no more than thirty inhabitants.<sup>30</sup> Cairo’s white citizens began to display more aggressive behavior towards the city’s non-white population during the early 1850s. Initially, they reserved a special disdain for the growing Irish population, due in part to their lack of education, poverty, and their work in low paying jobs. Cairo’s working class whites believed that Irish Americans posed a threat by flooding the labor market with an apparent endless supply of unskilled workers willing to work at low wages. Consequently, throughout the 1850s, so-called native whites in Southern Illinois exerted their power over Irish workers through violence and intimidation. However, as the threat of Civil War loomed, and the debate over

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<sup>29</sup> Joel Kovel, *White Racism: A Psychohistory*, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1970), 13-14.

<sup>30</sup> *Cairo Weekly and Daily Times*, October 8, 1856.

slavery became even more polarized, white Cairoites increasingly focused on intimidating African Americans.<sup>31</sup>

Cairo, Illinois experienced rapid economic expansion, accompanied by significant transformations in population, physical space, and society in the years prior to the Civil War. These changes were largely fueled by Illinois state legislatures' decision to make Cairo the southern terminus for the Illinois Central Railroad, a line that would ultimately link the city with larger centers such as Chicago and St. Louis. The railroad and the modest development it stimulated led to the transformation of Cairo in the 1850s from a quiet village into a vibrant river town. In the years before the Civil War, Cairo was filled with artisans, laborers, merchants, and a few small scale manufactories. Consequently, the Southern Illinois city began to experience the monumental economic and social changes that increasingly defined life in industrial society. This whirlpool of forces included technological innovation, the commercial development of the West, urbanization, immigration and internal migration, the growth and fragmentation of American culture and society, and the rise of racial, ethnic, and class conflict as defining features of American urban life.<sup>32</sup>

The social and economic status of African Americans in antebellum Cairo reflected the general marginalized condition of Black people throughout Illinois. According to the 1860 census, only forty-seven African Americans lived in the city, and the vast majority assumed a position at the bottom of Cairo's social and economic order as most Black males worked as unskilled laborers, porters, servant, cooks, waiters, and barbers. Black females were mainly

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<sup>31</sup> Christopher K. Hays, "Way Down in Egypt Land: Conflict and Community in Cairo, Illinois, 1850-1930" (PhD Dissertation, University of Missouri-Columbia, 1996), 87-92.

<sup>32</sup> John M. Lansden, *History of the City of Cairo, Illinois*. (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University, 1910); T.K. Kionka, *Key Command: Ulysses S. Grant's District of Cairo* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2006), 19-21; Hays, 42-43.

employed in their homes caring for family members and occasionally earning additional income for the family by washing other resident's clothes.<sup>33</sup> For example, George F. Fountain was a twenty-one year-old barber of mixed ancestry from Virginia, married to Mary Fountain, with three children. Anderson Mills was a thirty-five year-old hotel steward also from Virginia, married to Susan Mills, who was a thirty-three year old housekeeper from Kentucky. Harry Parker and George Williams were both thirty-five years old and worked as hotel servants.<sup>34</sup>

While the majority of the Black Cairoites toiled in menial jobs, a few managed to accumulate an impressive amount of wealth that brought a certain degree of security. James Renfrow, for example, was a laborer born in Illinois whose family accumulated over \$200 worth of property. The success of the Renfrows may have been attributed to the fact that his wife earned a supplemental income as a washerwoman. Tennessee native, George Allis worked as a day laborer while he and his family earned income generated by boarders, as well as money earned by other family members that worked outside the home. His son worked as a laborer and the family rented out a room to another laborer from Alabama. By employing a variety of income-earning strategies designed to supplement the principle male wage income earners, many of Cairo's African American population were able to enjoy a greater degree of financial security and relative physical comfort compared to that of the foreign immigrants that had recently migrated to the city.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Hays, 172.

<sup>34</sup> U.S. *Bureau of the Census, Federal Population Census 1860: Alexander county, Illinois* using "Heritage Quest Online" <http://www.heritagequestonline.com>; Hays, 58; for an excellent breakdown of the African American community in antebellum Cairo, Illinois, see chapter one of Kerry L. Pimblott, "Soul Power: The Black Church and the Black Power Movement in Cairo, Illinois, 1969-74," (PhD Dissertation, University of Illinois, 2012).

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

The industriousness of the Renfrow family and other hard-working African Americans living in Cairo was not enough to sway long-standing racial prejudices held by whites. In antebellum Illinois, when trouble occurred among Black Cairoites, it was often an indictment against the entire Black community—not just the perpetrators of the crime. For example, in 1854 two constables attempted to serve a court summons to an African American, Joseph Spencer, for trespassing. He managed an eatery on a wharf boat moored at the edge of Cairo, and was allegedly involved in some sort of illegal activity in connection with his restaurant. Apparently agitated over the charges, Spencer reluctantly arrived at the court house at his appointed time, and appeared increasingly agitated and nervous, according to an eyewitnesses. Suddenly, he pulled out a loaded gun, held it against a keg of gunpowder he had hidden away, and threatened to explode it if he was not cleared of all charges. The terrified judge agreed with his demand without standing trial. Yet the news of the incident quickly spread through the city as several men became incensed at his actions, and looked to drive him out of town.<sup>36</sup> Once they descended upon his place of business, they confronted him, and gave him an ultimatum to leave Cairo. Spencer again threatened to explode the gunpowder if he continued to be harassed. Realizing the futility of his predicament, Spencer finally surrendered his weapons, and retired to his own houseboat that was nearby to gather his belongings. Just as the mob congratulated themselves for their accomplishments, shots rang out from Spencer's boat. He was armed with a pair of shotguns, and he repeatedly fired on the men while inside the boat. The men returned fire, and eventually set fire to his boat and pushed it away from the wharf into the river. The flames eventually overwhelmed Spencer, and he dove overboard, never to resurface. Spencer's irrational

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<sup>36</sup> "Fracas at Cairo—Five Men Shot by a Negro," *Springfield Illinois Journal*, December 2, 1854; Hays, 97-99; *Alton Weekly Telegraph*, December 14, 1854; William H. Perrin, *History of Alexander, Union and Pulaski Counties, Illinois*, (Chicago: O.L. Baskin, 1883), 50-53.

behavior may have stemmed from a latent understanding that when it came to Illinois justice and African Americans, he would not be dealt with fairly in a court of law. Thus, when he was initially confronted by lawmen wielding weapons and threats, it is likely that Spencer was convinced that both his freedom and his life were in jeopardy.<sup>37</sup>

Three years later, the *Mound City Emporium* reported that a number of angry white citizens were enraged by “disrespectful behavior” by Cairo’s Black population. They attacked approximately twenty African Americans with the “intent of expelling them from Cairo.” This violent confrontation lasted for four days, as a large band of white men attempted to drive the entire Black population from the city. They were well organized, equipped with firearms, and made no attempt to disguise their racially-motivated intentions. The white terrorists initially intended to kidnap Blacks from Cairo, and sell them into slavery in neighboring Missouri. However, this scheme proved impossible due to the fierce resistance they encountered from the city’s Black residents, and the captives themselves. The kidnapping scheme was abandoned and the terrorists were resigned to merely intimidating the African Americans in an effort to expel them from Cairo.<sup>38</sup>

Newspapers outside of Cairo were critical of the violent tactics used against the city’s Black population. The *Quincy Daily Whig* remarked that citizens of Cairo were clearly “not abolitionist”, and they should have thought necessary to apologize for sustaining law, “when it had anything to do with the protection of niggers.” Furthermore, the *Whig* continued, it showed

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid. See Elmer Gertz, “The Black Laws of Illinois,” for proof of the Illinois efforts to minimize the black population; Hays, 97-100; Helen Harney and William E. Keller, eds, “The Negroes Two Hundred and Forty Years in Illinois—A Chronology,” *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society*, 56 (Autumn 1963), 438-443;

<sup>38</sup> “The Kidnapping and Shooting Affair at Cairo,” *Daily Quincy Whig*, August 5, 1857; *Cairo Weekly Times and Delta*, July 20, 1857; Hays, 104.

just “how far gone that region is in proslavery democracy.”<sup>39</sup> Following several violent nights, this battle reached its apex when white terrorists descended upon the household of a Black family located near the Methodist Church. They began throwing rocks and bricks at the home with the intent of driving the occupants outside in order to accost them. Instead, the terrorists received several gunshots, including one that connected and managed to shoot the entire lower jaw off of one of the assailants. The African American family, fearing they were outnumbered, managed to escape to safety.<sup>40</sup> With race relations in Cairo clearly in decline, the *Mound City Emporium* reported that race relations in the southern region seemed to be at “serious loggerheads.” The threat of violence continued to fester throughout Alexander County, and within a week, another attack had been perpetrated against portions of the Black population in Mound City. Rather than report on the devastating effects these attacks would have on the Black community in the region, the *Emporium* warned whites of the “eminent danger” they faced:

Negro war!—Come to the Rescue!

The citizens of Union and Perry townships are in great peril, and most earnestly call for aid. Property is at the mercy of an ignorant and merciless set of barbarous negroes, who have for years trampled with impunity upon the rights of many and all of our citizens, and often threatened and assaulted their persons, and of late attempted to kill.

The protective army will rendezvous on the lower confines of the negro settlement in Union township and remain steadily in arms till a force is assembled sufficient to remove every negro from the settlement—without violence if we can, but forcibly if we must...’

Come one! Come all! It may require a very heavy force.

Agents will be permitted to dispose of negro property, but no negro must remain!<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> “The Kidnapping and Shooting Affair at Cairo,” *Daily Quincy Whig*, August 5, 1857.

<sup>40</sup> *Cairo Weekly Times and Delta*, July 16, July 20, 1857.

<sup>41</sup> *Mound City Emporium*, August 6, 1857; Zucker, 321-322

For the editor of the *Emporium*, Armageddon was near—and white citizens in the surrounding area were advised to protect their rights from “barbarous negroes” who could upset the racial hierarchical order. As the war loomed, the specter of Black labor increased—and above all, the majority of white Illinoisans sought to maintain a racially homogenous state.<sup>42</sup> While white citizens exhibited anxiety throughout the state, and racial violence occurred in virtually every region of Illinois, Cairo citizens seemed to have an especial disdain for its Black inhabitants. Many white Cairoites were from the Upper South and were particularly sensitive about their own marginal social and economic status, and may have perceived even the smallest increase in the African American population as an economic and social threat. For Afro-Illinoisans, the message from Cairo’s white population was abundantly clear: Blacks were unwelcomed. Ironically, Cairo would become a sort of “safe haven” for ex-slaves during the Civil War, and Cairo’s white population would have to deal with an exceedingly grimmer “negro problem.”

The fear of an expanding Black population led to more violent confrontations as working class white Illinoisans, already anxious over the looming war, felt the need to exert more power to protect their own status by supplementing the Black Laws to keep African Americans out of Illinois. According to historian, James Loewen, the phenomenon of excluding African Americans from a particular town or county was prevalent throughout much of the United States beginning in the nineteenth century. He described “sundown towns” as any organized jurisdiction that for decades kept African Americans or other groups from living in it, and was thus all-white. Loewen’s compelling study focuses primarily on the turn of the twentieth century, during a period known as the Nadir, in which race relations in the United States were at their

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<sup>42</sup> Illinoisans made this clear during the 1862 vote on the “negro clause” in which they voted to maintain the Black Laws with a seventy percent majority.



worst, and the phenomenon of creating all-white towns and cities was more widespread. However, Cairo and other Illinois locations during the Civil War era did in fact practice ad hoc versions of racial exclusion.<sup>43</sup>

Anti-black attitudes were not limited to Cairo or the southern region of Illinois. Extreme rhetoric on both sides of the political spectrum prior to the Civil War pushed working class whites throughout the state to the brink of panic. When Democratic editor of the *Mattoon Gazette*, Dumas Van Deren, argued in 1857 that Illinois would benefit from becoming a slave state because the “best men of Kentucky, Virginia, Tennessee and even states further South would be here as soon as they could remove their families, and the prairies of Illinois would be made to smile as a lovely garden,” even the most racist Illinoisans had to question their own economic position in a slave state. Slave labor, Van Deren continued, would somehow be beneficial to Illinois’ white workers; free Blacks, on the other hand, “enjoying political and social privileges” would not work to the benefit of the state. When Illinois voted slave labor out of her limits “she voluntarily voted upon the white females of Illinois a life of unmitigated drudgery unsuited to the tastes and physical capacity of a large majority of them, and drove from our midst a people peculiarly adapted to such services, without benefitting them in the slightest degree.”<sup>44</sup>

Democrats and Republicans were in a battle over the support of the white laboring class in Illinois, and the parties traversed different paths in their attempts to secure support. While Illinois Democrats were unified in their anti-black message, at least some members, like Van Deren, were not only in favor of the extension of slavery in new territories, they also favored

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<sup>43</sup> James W. Loewen, *Sundown Towns: A Hidden Dimension of American Racism*, (Touchtone Books, 2005), 4.

<sup>44</sup> *Mattoon Gazette* (quoted in the *Illinois State Journal*, August 30, 1857; Mandel, 127.

legalizing slavery in Illinois. Significantly, no matter how much white Illinoisans exhibited racial hatred towards Blacks, the idea of making Illinois a slave state was not well-received. The Republican *Illinois State Journal* applauded the candor of the *Illinois Register* and “anxiously awaited” to see how the state would respond to such a proposal. “Every Democratic newspaper and speaker in the state,” noted the *Journal*, has “uniformly pursued a course from which it is absolutely impossible to draw the slightest idea of favoring slavery extension in any direction, much less in Illinois.”<sup>45</sup> For example, the *State Journal* explained that the Democratic *Illinois Register* was “on principle opposed to everything which does not ring of niggers and slavery,” and fought against “everything which does not tend to degrade free labor and place white industry on a level with that of human chattels.” The *State Journal* believed the *Register* and Illinois Democrats would extend slavery at any opportunity, and did not have the interests of the white workingman at heart: “Let one plea be made in behalf of free industry and laboring white men –and we see every little six by nine sheet in the south barking away against ‘small farmers and greasy mechanics,’ and calling for the passage of laws which will make slavery depend, not upon color, but upon condition.”<sup>46</sup> Most Democrats in Illinois understood that to be pro-Southern *and* pro-slavery was not in the best interest of the white laboring class, and Democrats were best served not to reveal their pro-slavery side, but rather, emphasize their anti-black sentiment instead. This also explains why Democrats emphasized rhetoric accusing Republicans of favoring “black equality” and amalgamation—they were fully aware of the disdain that most white Illinoisans had for African Americans, and they were wise not to accentuate their stance of the extension of slavery, or worse yet, legalizing slavery in Illinois.

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<sup>45</sup> “The Register and the Mattoon Gazette,” *Illinois State Journal*, August 30, 1857; “Negromania” August 10, 1857.

<sup>46</sup> “The White Man’s Party,” *Illinois State Journal*, September 29, 1857; Mandel, 127-128.

White Illinoisans were not alone in expressing their angst during the pre-Civil War years—Afro-Illinoisans continued to exhibit frustration over the issue of civil rights. Similar to the outrage expressed in 1850 at the Fugitive Slave Law, African Americans were confronted with yet another judicial landmark, as the Supreme Court’s 1857 decision in *Dred Scott v. Sandford* pushed the nation even closer to civil war. The Court’s majority held that both enslaved and free Black people had no standing in an American courtroom since they were in fact, not United States citizens. The decision declared unconstitutional that portion of the Missouri Compromise which prohibited slavery in all of the federal territories north and west of Missouri. In addition, the Court held that Congress had no power to ever regulate slavery in the territories, despite the fact that Congress had been doing so since the Articles of Confederation Congress passed the Northwest Ordinance in 1787, and the Congress under the United States Constitution reaffirmed the law. Finally, in a ruling that shocked and angered many Northerners, the Supreme Court held that free Blacks, even in Northern states where they could vote and hold office, could never be considered citizens of the United States or be protected by the United States Constitution.<sup>47</sup>

The evidence that the Dred Scott case was some type of logical pattern which could lead to the introduction of slavery into the free states was now overwhelming, and free African Americans reacted to the decision with predictable anguish. A group of prominent Afro-Illinoisans met at Clinton Hall, in Springfield, Illinois to denounce the decision. They argued that it was “designed to rob [African Americans] of the inherent rights of humanity, as well as of the soil upon which [African Americans] were born, and to countenance the tyrannical and odious

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<sup>47</sup> Paul Finkleman, “Scott V. Sanford: The Court’s Most Dreadful Case and How it Changed History,” *Chicago-Kent Law Review*, Vol 82, No 3, (December, 2006), 4.

doctrine that we ‘have no rights’ which the white man is bound to respect, and that one may be justly and lawfully reduced to slavery by another.” Delegates from that meeting also perceived that white advocates of the American Colonization movement were attempting to take advantage of the recent decision by encouraging free Blacks to emigrate to Liberia. They claimed that the underlying function of the Colonization Society was “calculated to excite prejudices” against free Black people and to take advantage of less-informed people to be induced to leave the United States. Illinois could benefit from the “industrious” labor of the Black worker, because the state need[ed] laborers to cultivate its fields and to perform various other services, and [free Black people] are both able and willing to work.” The Springfield delegates believed that it would be valuable for Illinois to maintain a willing Black labor force, and were perplexed at Northern white’s unwillingness to accept them as fit workers:

“If our labors are so valuable as slaves, will they be less so as freemen? Why should the northern states go to such trouble and expense to send us from the country, when the south is so bent upon the introduction of Africans, as to propose the abrogation of all laws, human and Divine, by which [slave trade] traffic is forbidden. We, therefore, most earnestly appeal to our white fellow men, if we may not call them fellow citizens, in the northern states, not to gratify the inhuman slave dealers of the south, by oppressing us or expelling us from their borders, so as to give countenance to those who would represent us as unworthy of the privileges and blessings of freemen.”<sup>48</sup>

White Northerners, on the cusp of the Civil War, were forced to deal with whether to expatriate free Blacks, or live amongst them. To be sure, this was a burning issue that, even during the war, leading Republicans grappled with. Certainly the irony was not lost on the free Northern Black population, who faced open discrimination and hostility on a regular basis—the very people who would be fighting in the war for their “liberty” were, at best, ambiguous about living among them. The irony could not have been lost on the slave South either, who, by their own distorted

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<sup>48</sup> *Springfield Daily State Journal*, February 18, 1858, p 2, col 2.

racialized logic, believed they actually treated Black people—both slave and free— better than their Northern counterparts. In their minds, Northerners were in no position to show them how to treat *their* Blacks—in the twisted logic of Southern paternalism, they were practically “family” that was clothed, fed, and always able to work.<sup>49</sup>

Continuing the discussion over the recent Supreme Court decision and other pertinent issues, a group of Black Chicagoans met at AME Church. Like their Springfield counterparts, they too were outraged over the decision. However, debates over colonization soon consumed the Chicago meeting. Longtime emigration advocate, H. Ford Douglas, maintained a dissenting view on the issue. Submitting two resolutions on the topic, Douglas, in his typically bold language, argued that Blacks would “no longer submit to the oppression of the Saxon, trusting for the restoration of our rights—while the legacy we transmit to our children are the fetters and chains their fathers wore—a crushed spirit and a broken manhood.” In light of the Dred Scott decision, he believed that emigration was the only means for the overthrow of slavery and the elevation of Black people. After the resolutions were soundly rejected, H. O. Wagoner offered new resolutions opposing emigration. Among several previously stated arguments against emigration, Wagoner also argued that Black people could “be more likely to promote the general welfare of both free and slave by uniting our industry, capital and skill [in the United States], and continue to labor and wait...”<sup>50</sup> Although Ford Douglas’ resolution was defeated, it is significant to note that his presence at this and previous meetings was necessary—Black political activists wanted to represent as many factions within their movement because, in spite of their differences (emigrationists vs. non-emigrationists, for example) they wanted to display a unified front. Thus,

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<sup>49</sup> For the best explanation of the illogical nature of paternalism and slavery, see Eugene Genovese, *Roll Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made*, (New York, First Vintage Books, 1976).

<sup>50</sup> “Meeting of the Colored Citizens,” *Chicago Tribune*, August 16, 1857.

they did not all agree on the process of Black liberation, but they did all agree that liberation was absolutely necessary.

Ford Douglas was not dismayed by the setback—he moved from Canada to Chicago in 1858 and continued to traverse Illinois on a speaking tour—often accompanied by *Provincial Freeman* editor, Mary Shadd, or Frederick Douglass. His commitment to end discrimination against Black people was unquestioned, as he traveled throughout Illinois for signatures on a petition to the legislature protesting the Black Laws—for which Abraham Lincoln refused to sign. As Ford Douglas’ frustration increased due to so-called anti-slavery politicians and their limited commitment to Black liberation, his own commitment to violent revolution as the best means to end slavery increased. After John Brown’s raid of Harpers Ferry in 1859, he continued to acknowledge the abolitionist desire to end slavery by moral means, however Ford Douglas indicated that he would “thank God if a Black John Brown emerged in the South.” Even if every slaveholder had to lose his life in ending slavery, he determined that it would be a “joyous occasion.” He further argued that antislavery activists were obliged to extirpate bondage even at the cost of each slaveholder’s life and the destruction of the American church and state. With praise for John Brown and his compatriots at Harpers Ferry, Ford Douglas urged others to continue their work until slavery no longer existed in the United States.<sup>51</sup>

Other Black leaders expressed similar sentiments towards the John Brown raid. In October 1859 a group, including H.O. Wagoner, met in Chicago and directed a letter of sympathy to their imprisoned hero:

*Dear Friend:* We certainly have great reasons, as well as intense desires, to assure you that we deeply sympathize with you and your beloved family. Not only do we sympathize in tears and prayers with *you* and *them*, but we *will* do so

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<sup>51</sup> Harris, 227.

in a more tangible form, by contributing material aid to help those of your family of whom you have spoken to our mutual friend, Mrs. L. Maria Child. How could we be so ungrateful as to do less for one who has suffered, bled, and now ready to die for the cause? “Greater love can no man have, than to lay down his life for the poor despised, and lowly.”

Your friends,

H.O.W., and others.<sup>52</sup>

Rumors of Southern secession in 1860 sealed Ford Douglas’ conviction that violence might be necessary to terminate bondage. Two weeks after Lincoln’s election as President, he wrote the *Chicago Daily Times and Herald*, welcoming secession on the grounds that there could be no real union between slavery and freedom. During his lectures throughout New England, he spoke more frequently about Brown and announced that he had more regard for the memory of the martyr than for “a hundred George Washington’s” who had achieved freedom for their own people, while riveting the chains of bondage more securely on Black people.<sup>53</sup> For white Illinoisans John Brown’s raid had devastating ramifications confirming their fears about the possibility of a violent revolution by those seeking to disrupt the racial status quo.

In a larger sense, if the Brown raid was meant to provoke a violent confrontation and liberate the slaves, he succeeded beyond his dreams. There is some evidence that Brown realized this—that he anticipated a martyrdom which would translate him from an alleged madman to saint in the eyes of many Northerners, while simultaneously provoking fear and rage in the South. During his swift trial by the state of Virginia for murder, treason and insurrection, Brown discouraged all schemes to cheat the hangman’s rope by forcible rescue or pleas of insanity. The raid reverberated throughout the country, as Southern leaders pointed to it as the final proof of

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<sup>52</sup> Carter G. Woodson, *The Mind of the Negro as Reflected in Letters Written*, (Washington, DC, 1926), 508; Rieke, 175-176.

<sup>53</sup> Harris, 227.

the North's violent intentions. Republican moderates hastily condemned Brown's raid, while others grieved at his execution and proclaimed him a martyr.<sup>54</sup> "There [was] not a Republican in the whole Union who, remarked the Springfield *Daily Journal*, if he had known of this wild and lawless movement of old Brown and his handful of followers before its culmination, would have given it the least countenance." The *Chicago Journal*, another Republican organ, noted that the Grand Old Party was "opposed to interfering with slavery or with slaves in the states where they lawfully exist." Significantly, the Republican press, while distancing itself away from the Brown affair, also distanced themselves away from African American leaders, including Frederick Douglass, who they accused of encouraging the raid. These Black leaders had "no fellowship with the Republican party, and the doughface organs that pretend otherwise, know full well," wrote the *Daily Journal*.<sup>55</sup> For Republicans, preserving the Union was the proclaimed goal, and any connection with the Brown raid, or any strong endorsement of Black liberation, was political suicide.

The continued growth in militancy among Afro-Illinois leaders, along with organization of the Republican Party in Illinois in 1856 combined to cause the "free negro question" to become the burning political issue. Although the long defunct Illinois Liberty Party had taken a relatively radical position on race during the early 1840s, both major political parties—the Whigs and Democrats—had traditionally upheld the racial hierarchical status quo. The rise of the Republican Party, however, threatened to destroy that consensus. Strong in Northern Illinois and devoted to the principle of free soil, the emerging political organization struck terror into the hearts of negrophobes. When the Republican challenger, Abraham Lincoln, and the Democratic

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<sup>54</sup> Stephen B. Oates, *To Purge This Land with Blood: A Biography of John Brown* (New York, 1970), 335.

<sup>55</sup> "The Harper's Ferry Affair," *Illinois Daily Journal*, October 24, 1859.



incumbent, Stephen A. Douglass confronted each other in a titanic struggle for the United States Senate in 1858, the question of free Black people and their place in Illinois, loomed as a major controversy between the candidates. During the first joint debate at Ottawa, August 21, 1858, it was Douglas who informed the audience that slavery was not the “only question” that arose in the controversy between him and Lincoln. “There is a far more important question to you,” he announced, “and that is, what shall be done with the free negro?”<sup>56</sup>

*“Shall Illinois be Africanized?” Black Refugees and the Civil War*

At the outset of the war there was considerable confusion as to the cause of the conflict: was it fought to maintain the Union? Or was the goal to simply contain, or end slavery? To varying degrees, all of these opinions flourished in Illinois at the outbreak of the Civil War. Yet no matter what opinion Illinoisans held, the most prominent question on their minds revolved around the fate of the ex-slaves. This issue would somehow affect all Americans, and the inevitability of that change forced divergent reactions from Illinoisans. While Afro-Illinoisans continued their efforts at eroding statewide racial restrictions, negrophobic whites increased their efforts to maintain the racial hierarchy through violence, anti-black rhetoric and legislation. Their determination to maintain a largely homogenous society may have encompassed all the racialized logic that was typical of the nineteenth century, including fear of miscegenation, rape, pauperism, etc. However, anti-black sentiment most often centered on the issue of labor: will they work? What type of labor will they perform? How will their presence affect white labor?<sup>57</sup> There may have been numerous reasons why white Midwesterners spurned Black immigration,

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<sup>56</sup> Zucker, 347-348

<sup>57</sup> Ricke, 214.

including the notion that they were indolent, shiftless, and incapable of surviving on their own. However, the common complaint among white Illinoisans was the fear that their own economic well-being would be harmed due to the presence of “cheap negro labor.”<sup>58</sup>

Questions about Black labor became most prominent when Black migrants (both free and slave) began to make their way to Illinois during the early portion of the war. The fear that the outbreak of war would lead to a massive influx of ex-slaves was not unfounded. Thousands of Black people migrated to northern locations, including Cairo, Illinois. The Southern Illinois city was one of the more sought-after destinations because of its central location that served as a bridge between the “free” North and the slave South. Consequently, between 1861 and 1871, thousands of Black people arrived in the city hoping to escape bondage and create new lives as free men and women. The military took responsibility for feeding and caring for the refugees, and utilized this valuable resource in the construction of fortifications as well as employing a large number of cooks, teamsters, medical orderlies, as well as personal servants. However, the number of Black refugees eventually grew too large for the military to adequately care for them.<sup>59</sup>

Of course, Cairo’s reputation for anti-black sentiment had been well-established by the outbreak of the Civil War. White Cairoites had a long history of aiding Southern slave catchers to detain Black escapees—in one instance, a refugee serving as a cook for the Twelfth Illinois Volunteers stationed in the city was arrested by the sheriff and ultimately returned to his owner in Missouri. Union troops operating in the Mississippi Valley had channeled hundreds of refugees and freedmen to the federal commander at Cairo. At the start of the war, pro-slavery

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<sup>58</sup> Bruce Tap, 103; Voegeli, 7-8

<sup>59</sup> Ricke, 214-215; Hays, 175.

leanings were so prevalent that there were discussions about whether Cairo would remain loyal to the Union. According to historian, T.K. Kionka, from February through March 1861, speculation concerning the possibility of creating a new state of “South Illinois” ran rampant, and proponents of the plan claimed that the people of the city regarded their political connection with Northern Illinois (especially Chicago) as “unnatural.” A *Chicago Tribune* correspondent in Cairo suggested that Southern rebels expected “to have the sympathy and assistance of a goodly portion of the people of the adjoining Illinois counties.” While the separatists eventually settled on a “neutral” stance during the war, letters continued to pour into the Illinois governor’s office insisting that the city be occupied immediately. The presence of Union soldiers and fear of Confederate invasion eventually overshadowed constitutional debates and sectional loyalties—with Federal soldiers camped at the edge of town, Cairo and its hinterlands eventually declared for the Union.<sup>60</sup>

Despite Cairo’s reputation, Black refugees arrived in great numbers from the South. In an effort to take control of the swelling number of refugees, the Union Army created a number of “contraband camps” throughout the South designed to provide care for escaped slaves. General Benjamin F. Butler initiated a plan in 1862 as a response to the flight of slaves from the plantations that required ex-slaves to continue to labor on the estates of loyal masters, where they would receive wages according to a fixed schedule. Although corporal punishment was prohibited, army provost marshals could discipline people for refusing to work. Legally, these workers maintained their status as slaves, but Butler’s plan inescapably suggested that the transition to free labor had begun. The northernmost of these camps was in Cairo, where the

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<sup>60</sup> T.K. Kionka, *Key Command: Ulysses S. Grant’s District of Cairo*, (Columbia 2006), 31-39, 41; Bruce Tap, “Race, Rhetoric, and Emancipation: The Election of 1862 in Illinois,” *Civil War History*, Vol 39, No 2, 103 (June 1993); V. Jacque Voegeli, *Free but Not Equal: The Midwest and the Negro During the Civil War*, 60

military transported hundreds of Black refugees. Once relocated to Illinois, refugees were placed in the care of military men, missionaries, and educators. In addition, the refugee camp at Cairo was merely one element of a grand, but abortive, liberal experiment designed to utilize the productive potential of these men and women by resettling them on farms and in communities located throughout the Midwest. Cairo, then, functioned as a Midwestern Ellis Island that funneled Black workers from the South to the North where their labor was reportedly in high demand. Hostility from white workers, however, was the undoing of this ambitious scheme, and the facility was eventually disbanded.<sup>61</sup> Predictably, the vast majority of white Cairoites expressed outrage over the presence of refugees in the city. While some complained bitterly over their presence, others were worried that refugees would make the city a permanent residence. According to one Cairo citizen, the city was being overrun by Black refugees “who seem to think that now they have more right here than white men.” Others observed that the woods surrounding the city were swelling with Black refugees.<sup>62</sup>

Conditions at the refugee camp were appalling because adequate steps to provide for even the most basic needs had not been met. The majority of refugees huddled together and camped outdoors along the Ohio River levee, exposed to the elements, and suffering from malnutrition and an assortment of illnesses. When prominent Afro-Illinoisans learned of the conditions of the refugees in Cairo during the early stages of the war, many of them funded efforts to assist the former slaves. In the fall of 1862, leading Black Chicagoans formed the Contraband Aid Society and pledged to “take charge” of the contrabands arriving from Cairo and

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<sup>61</sup> Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877*, (New York: Harper and Row, 1988), 54-55; Hays, 174-175; Louis S. Gerteis, *From Contraband to Freedman: Federal Policy Toward the Southern Blacks, 1861-1865* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1973); W.E.B. DuBois, *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860-1880*, (New York: The Free Press, 1992), 66-67; Paul D. Escott, *What Shall We Do With the Negro? Lincoln, White Racism, and Civil War America*, (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2009), 30.

<sup>62</sup> Voegeli, 60.

to assist them in locating both housing and employment. Over the course of the war, the organization assisted many former slaves in these endeavors, along with encouraging African American enlistment after the formation of the United States Colored Regiments. In one incident, the committee foiled a charlatans' attempt at renting out contraband for his own profits. After his plans were discovered by the committee, he offered to sell the refugees to the committee. Refusing his offer, the committee members informed the man they would not agree to receive the refugees on "any terms of taxation," except of the small amount of money they had received which would be used to defray the expenses of keeping and attending to those that might be ill or remain with them until they found homes. The man reluctantly agreed to these terms.<sup>63</sup> Despite philanthropic efforts by Chicago's growing Black population, and the liberal reputation of Chicagoans in politics and race relations, white citizens in northern counties offered stiff resistance to a growing Black presence during the war.

By the close of 1862, fifteen hundred former slaves at Cairo were sent to work as laborers—but not all of them worked in the countryside of Southern Illinois. Interest in Black workers increased substantially during the war-induced labor shortage in the state, as Northern interest in potential Black laborers increased as the state faced a severe wartime labor shortage.<sup>64</sup> As soon as it became known that there were refugees willing to work, the *Chicago Tribune* stated optimistically, "the farmers of Southern and Central Illinois made a grab for them, and picked them up as fast as they could be obtained." Workers of "every color and nationality will be in high demand...and "will be gladly accepted."<sup>65</sup> Each Black worker, according to the

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<sup>63</sup> "The Contrabands from Cairo," *Chicago Tribune*, October 9, 1862; Hays, 182-183; Sean Cadigan, "Becoming the Land of Lincoln: Emancipation and the Construction of Race, 1853-1892, (PhD Dissertation, Northern Illinois, 2011).

<sup>64</sup> 208-209.

<sup>65</sup> "Contraband Labor in Illinois," *Chicago Tribune*, October 8, 1862.

*Tribune* “is capable of gathering and husking corn, and preparing the ground for the winter wheat crop.” With many farm laborers at war, “to refuse the labor of these contraband for the time being, is little less than suicide...” The newspaper favored a “well-adjusted” apprenticeship system to train ex-slaves to cultivate cotton in the southern region of the state, because it would solve the labor shortage.<sup>66</sup> Even the Democratic *Chicago Times* acknowledged that Black labor could be useful, although they continued to put their familiar racist slant on the issue:

“We shall have the race in hundreds of thousands at our doors before the lapse of another twelve-month...what shall we do with these hundreds of thousands of black barbarians? Shall we make laborers of them in fields where their labor will be valuable, or shall we allow a sickly abolition sentimentality to make vagabonds of them?”<sup>67</sup>

Conversely, the Democratic *Illinois Register* believed Black laborers were not necessary for Illinois. “If cotton can be grown in this state,” the newspaper remarked, “it can be grown by white men, and if such a crop can be profitably raised, white men will grow.” Illinoisans would be better served to “go on with the production of hog and hominy” rather than allow Black laborers to cultivate Illinois farms. Other crops, such as tobacco, wheat, and corn, would continue to be cultivated in Illinois; if cotton could not be made profitable without “filling up that fine section of our state with a population of degraded laborers,” they concluded, “then it should reap the small profits on small farms instead.”<sup>68</sup> As Black refugees continued to enter Illinois during the war, the Democratic message became increasingly contradictory over the usefulness of Black labor—on one hand, it was degrading, and inefficient; on the other hand, it was exploitable (for profits) and therefore, valuable.

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid, “Cotton Culture in Illinois,” December 18, 1861; “The Only Safe Policy,” September 23, 1862.

<sup>67</sup> “Proposition of the Chicago Times to Convert Illinois into a Slave State,” Copied from the *Chicago Tribune*, December 31, 1861.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

Some Black refugees secured employment with local shopkeepers as teamsters on loading docks, as night watchmen, or as roustabouts and steamboat deckhands on the waterfront. These men labored for extremely low wages in these jobs and often received room and board for their services. In addition, both men and women found work with the Army Quartermaster's Department and in the camp hospital. Like other Black workers in Cairo, these men and women worked for wages far below the rate usually paid to white workers. For example, Black men worked with the quartermaster loading and hauling supplies for \$10 per month, which was significantly below the typical amount of \$30 per month paid to white laborers. Other Black refugees were resigned to begging for money from local residents on the streets, while small gangs of children scavenged dust bins and rubbish heaps for usable or saleable articles or stole food and other items from local vendors. Consequently, Black men and women had been swiftly integrated into the region's economy providing a valuable and inexpensive source of labor to local businessmen.<sup>69</sup> While it was clear that local white citizens were uneasy about the growing presence of refugees in the region, at least some white business owners were willing to hire Black workers simply because they could be paid less money.

The fears of working class whites were being realized—wages were being reduced due to the influx of refugees. Newspaper editors did much to incite white workers by reminding them about the burdens the new inhabitants placed on the city. They also suggested that the refugees would be better suited to work outside of Cairo. One observer reported that Irish workers were “raging intensely and fiercely” against the arrival of the refugees, and he believed they would “murder every man and woman...if they thought they dare do it.” If it was not for military

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<sup>69</sup> Hays, 187-188.

protection, “you might not be surprised to hear a mob here any day.”<sup>70</sup> The Knights of the Golden Circle, a secret society that attempted to disrupt the Northern war effort by urging the secession of Midwestern states into a Northwest Confederacy that would reunite with the South and create a nation without the New England states, threatened to shoot a Black man hired by a Cairo woman to work on a nearby Cairo farm. Undaunted by the organization’s threat, the woman threatened to shoot any of the Knights if they did not cease in harassing her or her worker.<sup>71</sup> Cairo leaders were undoubtedly effective in exciting the city’s white citizens about the growing presence of Black refugees in the city. Yet, working class anxiety in Illinois during the Civil War did not require a great deal of stimulation—their latent fear of Black labor was likely sufficient enough to cause violent reactions.

While Illinois Democrats did their best to ratchet up fear among working class white Illinoisans, Republicans tried desperately to convince Illinois whites that the refugees would not make Illinois a permanent residence. Black refugees, Republicans insisted, were only sent north by the military to prevent them from falling into the hands of the Confederacy. The majority of the farmers clamoring for help were in fact Democrats, suggested the *Chicago Tribune*, while Republican farmers of Northern Illinois, the newspaper continued, secured very few Black workers. Once the war was over, “our brave boys will come home to resume their former places in society, while the few contrabands in the North will skedaddle to work on the old plantations as free men and women.”<sup>72</sup> Cities and towns throughout Illinois were overwhelmingly opposed to the presence of additional Black people in their communities competing with white workers. Moreover, many Illinois residents reinforced these pronouncements by also demanding

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<sup>70</sup> “Butts and Pork-packers and Negroes” *Douglass’ Monthly*, November, 1862, copied from Mark Hubbard, ed. *Illinois’s War: The Civil War in Documents*, (Athens: Ohio State Press, 2013), 93-94.

<sup>71</sup> Kionka, 208; Tap, 104.

<sup>72</sup> “Contraband Labor in Illinois,” *Chicago Tribune*, October 8, 1862.



immediate and vigorous enforcement of the Black Laws. Although military leaders of the refugee camp initially received positive affirmations regarding the usage of Black workers throughout the state, they soon discovered few were willing to take refugees into their communities, farms, or businesses.

Resistance to the refugees was not limited to the southern and central regions of the state. Southern Illinoisans widely held that Chicago was an abolitionist “hot-bed” of anti-slavery agitation and a welcoming hub for migrating African Americans. Aside from this reputation, the city was not immune to racial violence and had several conflicts over the refugee issue. For example, Chicago had a potentially explosive situation as a group of white workers applied to the captain of a schooner to upload the ship’s cargo for \$45. A group of African American workers simultaneously applied for the same work, and supplanted the white workers by working for only \$13. The European American workers became irate over the matter, attacked the Black workers, and caused a riot. As violence escalated, policemen arrived and quelled the fighting, only to have it resume after they left the scene. City officials later returned to the violent affair and seized the vessel, and threatened to shoot any person that came aboard.<sup>73</sup> When General Tuttle, commander at Cairo, formally invited the Democratic mayor of Chicago in September 1862 to cooperate in securing employment for Black immigrants to the city, the mayor, with the approval of the city council, refused to act in violation of the state law because it would be a “great injustice of our laboring population.”<sup>74</sup> The Chicago mayor sent the following response:

Your proposition to send imported negroes to Chicago to work, would be in violation of the laws of this State and a great imposition to the laboring population. I cannot give it my sanction, by appointing a committee, as you propose or in any other way.”<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> “A Riot Among Laborers,” *Chicago Tribune*, August 10, 1862; Voegeli, 35; Cadagin, 125.

<sup>74</sup> “Meeting of the Common Council” *Chicago Tribune*, September 23, 1862; Cole, 335.

<sup>75</sup> *Chicago Tribune*, September 23, 1862

The idea that Black workers would threaten the white working class in Chicago was not limited to the city's politicians. In October 1862, a group of South-side meat packers pledged not to work for any packer who would "bring negro labor in competition with our labor." They accused the owners of conspiring to bring in Black workers simply to reduce the wages of the white workers. The workers pledged to do their best to drive the Black workers away from the packing houses. Commenting on the affair in his newspaper, the *Douglass Monthly*, Frederick Douglass warned that these workers would one day "be ashamed of the disgusting meanness of daily fanning the flame of prejudice and persecution against the humblest and least protected class of the community."<sup>76</sup>

Conflict in the northern portion of the state was not limited to Chicago either. Farmers in Ogle County, located in the Northwest district of Illinois, formed an organization resolved to oppose any further immigration of Black workers into the county. In March 1863, the *Chicago Tribune* reported that white men in Ottawa were "amusing themselves just now by maltreating the poor negroes who happen to be stopping in that city." These men combined in squads, and "hit every woolly head that presents itself." Military authorities arrested the superintendent of the Quincy Palmyra Railroad for refusing to carry Black refugees from Missouri to Illinois. In 1863, sixteen counties in Illinois passed a resolution that censured Governor Yates for failing to enforce the Black Law effectively.<sup>77</sup> In short, resistance to the presence of Black refugees was not limited to the lower regions of the state. Although African Americans may have been treated with more benevolence in the Northern counties of Illinois, it was not necessarily a referendum in favor of an influx of Black refugees from the South.

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<sup>76</sup> "Butts and Pork-packers and Negroes" *Douglass Monthly*, November 1862.

<sup>77</sup> Dennis F Rieke, "Illinois Blacks through the Civil War: A Struggle for Equality" (master's thesis, Southern Illinois University, 1972); "The Only Safe Policy" *Chicago Tribune*, September 23, 1862; "The Contrabands," March 31, 1863; *Chicago Times*, February 3, 1863, February 5, 1863.

*The 1862 Negro Clause*

White Illinoisans were given yet another opportunity to express whether they were willing allow African Americans to reside legally in the state. Since the beginning of the influx of Black refugees, Illinois Democrats skillfully exploited negrophobia by charging Republicans with attempts to “Africanize” the state. As Republicans attempted to remain non-partisan on vexing issues for the sake of wartime unity, Democrats pounded Republicans and the Lincoln administration on their handling of the “negro problem.” By hammering Republicans on these issues, Illinois Democrats won elections in the fall of 1861 for delegates to a state constitution convention. When they met in January 1862, the Democratic majority began drafting a constitution that was designed to allow them to regain control of the machinery of state government—including a reapportionment scheme that over-represented Democratic Southern Illinois. In addition, Democrats proposed an article that would prevent the federal government from interfering with the domestic institution of any state—an obvious reference to slavery. Finally, a new series of provisions was proposed that would prohibit Black migration into the state, deny them right to vote, testify in court, hold political office, and from intermarriage with whites.<sup>78</sup>

Although Illinois voters did not ratify the proposed constitution, they overwhelmingly approved the article that prohibited Black migration into the state by a seventy percent majority. Southern Illinois counties passed the 1862 Negro clause with ninety-seven percent of the vote, while counties in Central Illinois passed them with ninety percent, and northern counties with fifty-seven percent. The measure was barely defeated in “abolition hot-beds” such as Cook

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<sup>78</sup> *Journal of the Constitution Convention of the State of Illinois, Convened at Springfield, January 7, 1862*, (Springfield: Charles H. Lamphier, 1862,) 82; Tap, 104

(8,103 to 8027) and Henry counties (1778 to 1644); Gallatin, Hamilton and Williamson counties were among southern counties that almost unanimously voted for the clause.<sup>79</sup> The vote for the Negro Clause reiterated deep-seated racism throughout the state, and it would affect Republicans negatively in the upcoming congressional election.<sup>80</sup>

During the fall 1862 elections, Democrats connected President Lincoln's Preliminary Emancipation Proclamation with the resettlement of ex-slaves throughout the state to help farmers with their fall harvest. Lincoln was originally content to make the war strictly about preserving the Union, and instructed officers to return slaves to their masters. But the Confiscation Act of 1862 prohibited these returns, and as more and more freed slaves entered Union lines, Northern officers and politicians began to discuss their ability to work in support of Union forces. For the fee of \$10 per month, the law provided that Black workers perform various camp duties such as constructing entrenchments, driving horses, and cooking meals. The conflict developed into a struggle to destroy slavery, and Lincoln's issuance of the Proclamation was first announced in the fall of 1862, and enacted on January 1, 1863.<sup>81</sup> The anti-Republican *Chicago Times* asked: "Shall Illinois be Africanized?" and warned that ex-slaves would migrate north because of emancipation. The language of the preliminary proclamation not only invited Blacks to flee, the *Times* insisted, it also induced them to "run away from their masters and come [to Illinois]..."<sup>82</sup> The *Salem Advocate* reported that "perhaps tens of thousands [of refugees] are crowding upon the border free States and unless the people are prepared for a perfect inundation of this black element, disturbing all our social relations and threatening the complete overthrow

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<sup>79</sup> See page 242 in Ricke, Table 7-1, Vote on the Constitution and Article 18

<sup>80</sup> David Wallace Adams, "Illinois Soldiers and the Emancipation Proclamation," *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society*, Vol 67, No 4, (September, 1974), 410

<sup>81</sup> Drew E. VandeCreek, "African Americans, Race and Ethnicity in Illinois and the North during the Civil War", <http://dig.lib.niu.edu/civilwar/race.html>, accessed July 2012.

<sup>82</sup> "Shall Illinois be Africanized?" *Chicago Times*, October, 10, 1862.

of white labor, and the almost utter destitution of thousands of white laboring people, we should insist that the laws of our State should be observed and respected.”<sup>83</sup>

The notion that white working class Illinoisans would be effected by the importation of Black refugees was a successful rallying cry against the Republican plan. Democratic Congressional candidate, J.C. Allen, running on an anti-black platform in Illinois, lamented that a “greater curse” could not befall the people of Illinois than the “pouring into it of a flood of free negroes, who are without effort or provision for taking care of themselves.” Ex-slaves “have to be fed, or they will starve,” he continued, and every one of them you employ...drives a white laborer away.” The *Chicago Times* also warned that the policy would result in a “negro colony” and if work was scarce and wages low, immigration of Black workers would somehow hurt white workers because they would consume as much labor as they produced.<sup>84</sup>

Republicans were forced to commit a great deal of energy trying to convince nervous white Illinoisans that refugees would return south after the president’s proclamation took effect in the rebellious states. Ex-slaves and many free Northern Blacks, according to the optimistic *Tribune*, would return to the South because it was an “irresistible attraction.” Furthermore, the field work in the South was best suited for African American workers because they were the “only class who can do it advantageously and profitably.”<sup>85</sup> Even close advisers to the president warned him of an impending doom for Republicans in the upcoming election. David Davis, a close friend and confidant to the president, suggested that the plan to move “contraband” throughout the Midwest should take place after the election.<sup>86</sup> Despite efforts to convince

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<sup>83</sup> “Negroes or White Men?” *Salem Advocate*, October 2, 1862

<sup>84</sup> “Shall Negroes Come to Illinois?” *Chicago Times*, November 16, 1862; October 8, 1862, pg 2, col. 2.

<sup>85</sup> “The Contrabands of Cairo,” *Chicago Tribune*, September 23, 1862

<sup>86</sup> David Davis to Abraham Lincoln, October 14, 1862, Abraham Lincoln Papers, Manuscripts, Library of Congress, Washington, DC , Copied from Illinois’s War: *The Civil War Documents*, edited by Mark Hubbard, 96

Illinoisans of the efficacy of their grand plan for the refugees, Illinois Republicans lost nine of fourteen congressional seats, a number of state offices, and both houses of the legislature. With the help of an overzealous Democratic press, Illinois voters connected northward migration of free Blacks as the inevitable result of the Proclamation. Despite Republican efforts to portray Illinois Democrats as disloyal, the Black refugee issue caused Republicans to go down in defeat.<sup>87</sup>

Opponents of the military plan to disperse African American workers throughout Illinois often used the state's Black Laws and violence to repel Black immigrants. Refugees working near Carbondale, located in Southern Illinois, and a young Black woman in Edgar County were fined and imprisoned for illegally entering the state. A Union army lieutenant was tried in Woodford for the crime of bringing an African American man into the state, but the trial ended in a hung jury. The case was dropped when the officer promised to take the man with him when he returned to active duty. In May 1863, two armed men stopped three fugitive slaves, shot one, and ordered the other two back to Missouri. A white man in Southern Illinois employing several African American men was warned that his house would be burned if he did not discharge them. When he refused to comply, they destroyed his valuable timber. In April 1863, a gang of white men hunted down forty African Americans, and drove them out of Union county, and later that year, five more men were forced out of Mason County. While the *Chicago Tribune* complained about the mistreatment of African American workers by "copperhead" Democrats throughout Illinois, the *Quincy Daily Herald* was complaining about abolitionists giving the people "too much nigger," because they were not satisfied that the war "should be prosecuted for the white man, and the rights of the white man, but have persistently clamored for its prosecution for the

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<sup>87</sup> Tap, 103-104

interest of the inevitable negro.” Frightened white workers of Quincy held mass meetings denouncing African American emigration to the city, and resolved that they would attempt to resist competition from Black workers, first, by law, and then by the vote. “If these fail,” the workers concluded, “we will redress our wrongs in such manner as shall seem to us most expedient and practical.”<sup>88</sup> Although white Illinoisans increasingly supported many wartime measures in an effort to secure victory over the Confederacy, they often stopped short of welcoming former slaves to their state.

Southern papers were quick to point out the contradictions in a Northern state’s policy toward African Americans. The *New Orleans Daily Picayune* noted that results of the vote was “not more striking for its disregard of the northern interpretation of the declaration of independence and the constitution of the United States, than for the hypocrisy and inconsistency which it displays in a people who, whilst professing so much sympathy for the negroes of the south, and laboring so incessantly to obtain their freedom, so cruelly and barbarously shut their doors in the very faces of these ‘poor victims of southern avarice and oppression’—refusing them the poor privilege, of even abiding on the soil of living within the broad limits of their state.”<sup>89</sup>

### *Colonization*

Republican plans to encourage ex-slaves and the free Northern Black population to move into the Southern states was not their only solution to the “negro problem”. As the fear about the consequences of the war continued to loom—especially the possible emigration of four million

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<sup>88</sup> “The Negro Question in Illinois,” *Quincy Daily Herald*, November 1, 1862; Voegeli, 60, 88-89.

<sup>89</sup> “Negro Exclusion,” *The Daily Picayune*, July 9, 1862.

ex-slaves to the North—Lincoln did his best to assuage white trepidation. Part of the problem for the president was in the seemingly conflicting nature of his message about African Americans. Republicans were relatively unified on the issue of white labor—they all opposed the extension of slavery into new territories, and were thereby opposed to any potential “degradation” of white labor. However, the issue of free Black labor was a source of constant debate within the party. The most radical abolitionists in the GOP saw African Americans as “permanent Americans” who would make a special and valuable contribution to national life and character. While the more conservative members of the party opposed slavery, they believed emancipated Black people should be colonized to Africa or Latin America. Historian George Fredrickson noted this latter strain of “romantic racialist thinking” gained momentum in the 1850s as part of the growing segment of northern opinion that opposed slavery, but resisted the radical abolitionists demand that the Black population be accepted after emancipation as a permanent and participating element in American society. Significantly, this strain of supporters often envisioned an all-white America in the not-so-distant future. But most who cherished such a vision had no romantic expectation about a Black millennium in Africa; they were mainly, or even exclusively, concerned with the national “purification” and homogeneity that allegedly would result from the narrow localization or complete disappearance of an undesirable Black population.<sup>90</sup>

Lincoln’s stance on colonization was well known. He made his first extended remarks on the subject in 1852 before he ran for political office, and by 1858 he emerged as the public spokesman for the movement. Blacks would not only welcome the opportunity to depart for a place where they could fully enjoy their natural rights, Lincoln argued, but also that the majority

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<sup>90</sup> Frederickson, 130.



of them would eventually leave the country. For many white Americans, including Lincoln, colonization was part of a plan for ending slavery that represented a middle ground between abolitionist radicalism and the prospect of the United States existing forever half-slave and half-free. Historian Eric Foner noted that Lincoln's thoughts on colonization seemed suspended between a civic conception of American nationality, based on the universal principle of equality and a racial nationalism that saw Black people as not truly American. Finding it exceedingly difficult to envision the United States as a biracial society, Lincoln advocated sending Black people (free and slave) to their "own native land," because he maintained that they were not an intrinsic part of American society.<sup>91</sup>

On the surface, Lincoln maintained that whites would not be willing to live among a free Black population, and therefore, colonization was the best solution. While many conservative and moderate Republicans argued that Blacks would live in the South to be closer to their "natural habitat," Lincoln adhered to colonization as the best solution for ex-slaves. Leaders of the colonization movement within the Republican Party were convinced that physical differences between the races would lead to racial strife, which would only be exacerbated by freeing the slaves. Furthermore, since history and evidence indicated that white Americans would not adhere to any notion of equality in relation to African Americans—that emancipation be followed by removal of the freedman from the United States. Following this scheme, whites would profit from the departure of an "alien race", and Black people would escape from oppression.<sup>92</sup>

In an effort to persuade Black leaders about the virtues of colonization, Lincoln addressed a deputation of prominent African Americans on August 14, 1862. He alluded to both

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<sup>91</sup> Voegeli, 242-243; Eric Foner, *The Fiery Trial: Abraham Lincoln and American Slavery*, (New York: WW. Norton, 2010), 127-128.

<sup>92</sup> Voegeli, 242-243.

humanitarianism and racial apathy as factors nourishing the colonization movement. “I think your race suffer very greatly, many of them by living among us,” he said, “while ours suffer from your presence... it affords a reason at least why we should be separated.” He reminded his audience that freedom did not bring equality to African Americans; for “on this broad continent, not a single man of your race is made the equal of a single man of ours.” Even with the end of slavery, Lincoln maintained, “[blacks] are far removed from being placed on an equality with the white race” due to the persistence of white racism. Therefore, “it is better for us both to be separated.”<sup>93</sup> Many African Americans expressed outrage over the president’s comments, including Frederick Douglass, who was particularly incensed over Lincoln’s notion that Black people were the cause of the war. The real task of a statesmen was not to patronize Black people by deciding what was best for them, but to allow them to be free, according to Douglass.<sup>94</sup>

For Lincoln and other colonization advocates, the heart of the colonization issue was the preservation and protection of white labor. In his 1862 State of the Union address, given less than a month before he issued the Emancipation Proclamation, Lincoln continued to express his desire for the mass deportation of Black people: “I cannot make it better known than it already is that I strongly favor colonization.” Realizing the difficulty in actually shipping millions of African Americans, however, Lincoln not only left open the possibilities of keeping the Black population in the United States—he also tried to convince his audience that a Black labor presence would not negatively affect white workers. In regard to the inevitable emancipation of the slaves, the major question for Lincoln was whether white labor would be “displaced” by free Black labor. If Black workers were to remain slaves, he remarked, “they jostle no white laborers;

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<sup>93</sup> Roy P. Basler, ed., *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, vol 5, (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1953), 371-372.

<sup>94</sup> Eric Foner, *The Fiery Trial*, 225

if they leave their old places, they leave them open to white laborers. He maintained that by freeing the slaves, and allowing them to remain in the country, “would probably enhance the wages of white labor, and very surely, would not reduce them.”<sup>95</sup> Of course, by deporting ex-slaves, white workers would enhance their wages:

“Labor is like any other commodity in the market---increase the demand for it, and you increase the price of it. Reduce the supply of black labor, by colonizing the black laborer out of the country, and, by precisely so much, you increase the demand for, and wages of, white labor.”<sup>96</sup>

Colonization of ex-slaves and free Blacks, however, was not likely to occur. Lincoln had to somehow convince whites that newly freed Black workers would not move to Northern states and infringe upon white labor. African Americans, he argued, were already in many communities “without any apparent consciousness of evil from it.” Blacks would not migrate to the North, according to Lincoln, because “their old masters will give them wages at least until new laborers can be procured; and the freed men, in turn, will gladly give their labor for the wages, till new homes can be found for them, in congenial climes, and with people of their own blood and race.”<sup>97</sup> Even as Lincoln continued to advocate colonization efforts on the eve of the signing of the Emancipation Proclamation, he was forced to grapple with the increasingly apparent reality that these efforts were doomed to fail.

Perhaps the most obvious evidence that free Black people did not agree with Lincoln’s colonization plan was the fact that they simply were not leaving the United States. Some prominent African Americans continued to support the colonization movement. However, several factors contributed to the emigrationist’ inability to attract a larger following according to historian Floyd J. Miller. First, only a few African Americans possessed the material resources

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<sup>95</sup> *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, 535

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, 535-536.

necessary to emigrate, let alone succeed in another country. Second, large numbers of Blacks simply regarded themselves as “American” more than African. Finally, many African Americans believed that emigration was, in effect, an abandoning of their brethren still enslaved as well as symbolic endorsement of white colonizationists who viewed deportation as a means of ridding the nation of people they considered inherently inferior.<sup>98</sup> In addition, after Lincoln approved the use of Black soldiers in July 1862, many former leaders of the emigration movement, including Martin Delany and H. Ford Douglas, dedicated their energies at not only recruiting Black soldiers, but also fighting in the war.

Many prominent African Americans simply did not view the value of black and white labor in the same vein as Lincoln and the Republicans. While the president continued to extol the virtues of white labor, and discuss plans to “protect” it from the inevitable emancipation of the slaves, Black leaders believed the country would in fact suffer from the void of black labor. For example, Reverend M.T. Newsome of Quincy argued that colonization would be detrimental to the United States because it could not afford to lose the valuable labor produced by the Black worker. “In my opinion this policy is fraught with evil and mischief toward my race,” he exclaimed, “and will entail on it very disastrous consequences.” He conceded that the advocates of colonization were sincere in their proposed measures; that they had come to their conclusions from “honest convictions of their hearts that the greatest good will grow out of it, both to the white and colored races.” Newsome looked beyond the racial aspect, and viewed the problem from a financial perspective:

“...if out of the four million freed men and women there are not one million and a half of laborers taken from the country; those who hitherto have produced the cotton, sugar, tobacco, rice and hemp, forming so great a portion of the exports of the United states, which have brought a large revenue to the

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<sup>98</sup> Floyd J. Miller , *The Search for a Black Nationality: Black Emigration and Colonization, 1787-1863*, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1975), 268

Government, especially the three first named articles...if these freed people as laborers are removed from the country, how, and who are to fill their places? The white laborers cannot do it, for if the northern idea is correct, he can't endure the heat of the Southern sun, while the negro is by nature adapted to stand the scorching rays of the Southern tropical sun. here there is a loss of one billion, one hundred and twenty-five million dollars in ten years to the country that cannot be supplied by white labor. Where, then, in the name of high heaven is the great good to the white race resulting from the removal of the negro race?<sup>99</sup>

Conservative leaders, like Newsome, held in check any progress the emigration movement might have made due to their positions of authority within the Black community. Similarly, John Jones and Henry O. Wagoner vehemently rejected colonization, and their thoughts held substantial sway in Chicago and the rest of the state, and are partially responsible for the movement's failure.<sup>100</sup> Summing up the failure of colonization, the *Chicago Times* noted that the movement's success depended upon "the voluntary consent of the negroes to be colonized, which not one in a thousand will give—upon the willingness of the people to be taxed many hundreds of millions of dollars in support of colonization, which is not apparent—upon the procurement of lands for the colony, which is more than doubtful." In a tone of despair, and on the cusp of emancipation of four million slaves, the anti-Black and anti-Republican newspaper then wondered "what would be done with the negroes?"<sup>101</sup>

### *Fighting for Black Freedom: The Emancipation Proclamation*

In 1862, Illinois Governor Richard Yates, urged Lincoln to make a decisive shift in union strategy by issuing a proclamation to free the Southern slaves. "The Government should employ," he wrote, "every available means compatible with the rules of warfare to [subdue] the

<sup>99</sup> "A Colored Man's View on Colonization," *Quincy Daily Whig and Republican*, October 4, 1862.

<sup>100</sup> Ricke, 84-85

<sup>101</sup> "The Four Million Freed Negroes: What Shall Be Done With Them?" *Chicago Times*, October 28, 1862.

traitors.” Military leaders “should not be permitted to fritter away the sinews of our brave men in guarding the property of traitors, and in driving back into their hands loyal blacks, who offer us their labor, and seek shelter beneath the Federal flag.” The letter was widely reprinted across the North, and confirmed Yates’ reputation as a forceful war governor and a leader in Illinois for those who now accepted the use of federal power.<sup>102</sup> Lincoln was originally content to make the war strictly about preserving the Union, and instructed officers to return slaves to their masters. But the Confiscation Act of 1862 prohibited these returns, and as more and more freed slaves entered Union lines, Northern officers and politicians began to discuss their ability to work in support of Union forces. For the fee of \$10 per month, the law provided that Black workers perform various camp duties such as constructing entrenchments, driving horses, and cooking meals. The conflict developed into a struggle to destroy slavery, and Lincoln’s issuance of the Proclamation was first announced in the fall of 1862, and enacted on January 1, 1863. With the Proclamation, came the ability for Black men to form their own military regiments.<sup>103</sup>

Soon after the news of the Proclamation, H. Ford Douglas wrote to his long-time rival and friend, Frederick Douglass, to discuss the momentous event and his participation in the war as a soldier. With the excitement reserved only for someone who had just realized their life-long dream, he exclaimed: “the slaves are *free!* How can I write these precious words?” He explained that his enlistment in the Army allowed him to “be better prepared to play [his] part in the great drama of the Negro’s redemption.” No longer satisfied with only giving speeches and attending conventions, Ford Douglas wanted to be a part of the physical struggle to overthrow slavery: “I

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<sup>102</sup> Hubbard, ed., 88; Richard Yates to Abraham Lincoln, July 11, 1862, Yates Family Papers, Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library, Springfield, Illinois.

<sup>103</sup> Drew E. VandeCreek, “African Americans, Race and Ethnicity in Illinois and the North during the Civil War”, <http://dig.lib.niu.edu/civilwar/race.html>, accessed July 2012.

wanted its drill, its practical details for mere theory does not make a good soldier.” He also spoke proudly of the lessons he had learned since joining the Army—about the “brightest as well as its bloodiest phase,” without any regrets. Certain that a Black regiment commanded by Frederick Douglass would dispel any doubts about African American military skill, Ford Douglas prompted him to support the war with vigor by recruiting a unit and offering his services to the Union. Such a move, he reasoned, would also compel Lincoln to abandon his colonization scheme for the recently emancipated slaves. “This war will educate Mr. Lincoln out of his idea of the deportation of the Negro quite as fast as it has some of his other proslavery ideas with respect to employing them as soldiers,” wrote Ford Douglas.<sup>104</sup>

Afro-Illinoisans held celebrations throughout the state. In Chicago, John Jones celebrated along with other Black Chicagoans at African Methodist Episcopal Church and Witkowski Hall.<sup>105</sup> Several months later, Jones looked to take advantage of the excitement among African Americans in support of the war. He called a meeting at Quinn Chapel to consider relations sustained to the government and the obligations which rested upon them as African Americans. Jones devolved upon them “as colored men in giving their support to a government which had already recognized their manhood, their citizenship and was now calling upon them to take a stand in the federal army as soldiers in defending the liberties of a free, enlightened and great people.” The African American image, within the context of the war, was being judged—fairly or not. Jones remarked that their actions as soldiers would put them on record “as men or slaves,” and he was not desirous of being designated a slave. At the time of the meeting, Illinois had not yet officially accepted African Americans in the militia, but Jones was “determined to participate.” The committee members at the Quinn meeting resolved that Illinois must be “the

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<sup>104</sup> “Letter From H Ford Douglass,” *Douglass Monthly*, February 1863; Harris , 229

<sup>105</sup> “The Dawn of Liberty—The Colored Men’s Jubilee, *Chicago Tribune*, December 30, 1862.

banner state in this great work” of allowing African American males to fight in the war. Jones and the committee were also active in recruiting Black soldiers, as they made the following appeal:

“OUR COUNTRY AND DUTY. Colored men of Illinois! This appeal is to you! Give ear but for a moment. Our country...is now in the midst of civil war caused by the most infamous rebellion that ever distracted a people, or threatened a nations existence. This rebellion, infamous in itself, is rendered doubly so when it is remembered that the sole object is to establish the endless bondage of our race by a constitution which declares...that African slavery is and shall be the corner stone of the southern social system.”<sup>106</sup>

Not only did Afro-Illinoisans celebrate the Emancipation Proclamation with meetings, songs, and prayer, they also resolved to join the fight and encourage other African Americans to join the battle to end slavery. When H. Ford Douglas joined the war, he did so because he believed by fighting, there was a much greater opportunity to uproot slavery. While he had always committed to emigration as the best option for Black Americans, his commitment to the abolishment of slavery was paramount—and he would see this end by any means available. After Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation, Ford Douglas had no more use for emigration. In July 1862, he decided to fight slavery with “powder and steel” and enlisted in Company G, Ninety-Fifth Illinois Infantry. The only way he was able to gain entry into the army was by “passing” as a white man, since African Americans were not yet allowed to fight in the Civil War. While his regiment was stationed near Lake Providence, Louisiana, it witnessed the first official organization of Black troops for the Union Army. Several of its enlisted men became officers for the new units. Inspired by these events and perhaps recalling his own advice to Frederick Douglass, Ford Douglas wrote the famous abolitionist Congressman from Illinois, Owen Lovejoy about a possible transfer. He revealed that he had enlisted early but regretted that he had

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<sup>106</sup> “Our Country and Duty,” *Chicago Times*, October 2, 1863.



not waited until African Americans were openly mustered into the Union Army. Dissatisfied with his position, he requested Lovejoy's intercession for a shift to South Carolina, where he understood that Black regiments were being formed. Ford Douglass concluded that he could be a more effective soldier if he fought with Black soldiers because he believed he could be helpful in recruiting Black soldiers. In April 1863, he was granted the authority to raise an independent company of Black soldiers for use as scouts and similar service. By the end of the war, he was one of nearly eighty Black commissioned officers in the Union army.<sup>107</sup>

While Afro-Illinoisans hardly welcomed the news of the proclamation, the reception among white Illinoisans was drastically tempered. Generally, the Midwest's encounter with emancipation was compounded by national developments. The Democrats success in focusing resistance to relocation tapped not only into Midwestern racism but also growing apprehension about the changing role of the Federal government. The preliminary Emancipation Proclamation was but one of a series of developments that led whites to associate the Republican Party with an increasingly centralized, powerful Federal government whose policies were affecting daily life in unprecedented and unwelcome ways.<sup>108</sup>

Illinois was almost immediate in its official condemnation of the proclamation, as the state legislature denounced it as "unwarrantable in military as in civil law," and a "gigantic usurpation" that converted the war into the "crusade for the sudden, unconditional and violent liberation of slaves." The resolution went on to say that the freeing of Black people in bondage in the Confederate States was "a result which would not only be a total subversion of the Federal

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<sup>107</sup> Robert L. Harris, 229; Victor Hicken, "The Record of Illinois Negro Soldiers in the Civil War," *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society*, Vol 56, No 3 (1963); Edward A. Miller, Jr., *The Black Civil War Soldiers of Illinois: The Story of the Twenty-Ninth U.S. Colored Infantry*, (Columbia: South Carolina Press, 1998); Ricke, 280-281; Mark Hubbard, 98-99.

<sup>108</sup> Leslie A. Schwalm, "Overrun with Free Negroes: Emancipation and Wartime Migration in the Upper Midwest" *Civil War History*, Volume 50, Number 2,( June 2004), 161.

Union but a Revolution in the social organization of the Southern States, the immediate and remote, the present and far-reaching consequences of which to both races cannot be contemplated without the most dismal foreboding of horror and dismay.<sup>109</sup> One political leader wanted a guarantee that freed slaves would not migrate to Northern states, because white Midwesterners did not need a Black population since the European immigrant amply worked in menial jobs. African Americans already living in the Midwest, he noted, were “troublesome” and “thoroughly disliked,” and since they had no hope in attaining an elevated position, it was their own fault whites were committing violent acts against them. His long term solution was colonization or deportation, and if the North refused to absorb the excess Black population from the South, such a solution should then be enforced on the Southern states.<sup>110</sup> The *Illinois State Register* agreed that African Americans were not wanted based on the evidence of the voters. “Our people intend that they shall stay where they are,” wrote the *Register*. “The scheme now is, to not only open the northern states to a negro hegira, but to Africanize the south by a proclamation of citizenship.”<sup>111</sup>

White Illinoisans found other methods to vent their frustration over emancipation. Historian Wood Gray noted that military desertion in Illinois was substantial after the news of the Proclamation. In 1863, there were more than 2,000 men arrested between June and October, and by the end of the year eight hundred were reported to have been taken in four southern Illinois counties. The practice had become so widespread in Illinois that it threatened to dominate whole communities. It was most prevalent where disaffection with the war policy was the strongest, but there was hardly a township in which there were not some who would offer a

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<sup>109</sup> Dillard, 592-593.

<sup>110</sup> Frederickson, 134.

<sup>111</sup> “Negro Citizenship,” *Illinois State Register*, December 15, 1862.

hiding place, if necessary, and employment , if possible, to deserters. In the most favorable areas they were organized and armed against efforts to arrest them and were credited with increasing violence and provocativeness. For example, in Union County, also located in southern Illinois, four men in the provost marshal service were killed while making arrests.<sup>112</sup> Yet, white Illinoisans would not take out their frustrations on each other much longer. A steady stream of Black migrants from the South poured into Illinois during the 1860s, and Illinois whites enraged by Lincoln's wartime policies, soon redirected their angst against African Americans.

On September 24, 1863, the War Department finally authorized Illinois Governor Yates to raise one regiment infantry to consist of African Americans from his state. Yates responded slowly to the request, even though he was one of the first to advocate the use of Black soldiers. The first African Americans to serve from Illinois is difficult to determine since light-skinned Blacks had volunteered and served as soldiers in white regiments since the beginning of the war. In some cases it is likely that these men served in the army with the full knowledge of their comrades. For example, H. Ford Douglass was accepted without question (due to his light skin complexion) in the Ninety-fifth Illinois Volunteers, company G. He later became a captain of an Indiana company attached to the eighth Louisiana Colored Infantry. Other Illinois regiments in the South picked up Black slaves and sometimes secretly added them to the regiment muster rolls. One of these, the Twelfth Illinois, listed a number of "Unassigned Recruits of African Descent," who were added to the regiment in 1864 and served as teamsters and cooks. The Eleventh Illinois had on its muster roll a large number of so-called "under-cooks" who were undoubtedly African

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<sup>112</sup> Gray, 154-155

American men added to their rolls during its wanderings. Some of these men apparently transferred from regiment to regiment without difficulty—a further indication of the likelihood that they were Southern Blacks, only casually attached to the unit. Some Illinois regiments, however, assumed responsibility for these recruits and took them back to the state after the war and provided homes for them. In one case, an African American under-cook was the outstanding hero of the regiment and its most popular soldier. During the siege of Vicksburg this same heroic man could be constantly seen on the battlefield carrying coffee and food to men under fire in the advanced trenches. While former slaves were not immediately welcomed (officially) into the Army as fighting soldiers, they likely felt compelled to contribute to the war effort to emancipate themselves.<sup>113</sup>

The body of potential Black recruits was made up almost entirely of farm and city laborers, few of them with any promise of a future for themselves or their families. Black society, judging from the descriptions veterans recorded in their pension requests, did provide some mutual support and limited social activities, particularly in towns. An army enlistment was attractive to some, however, because it offered regular pay, not as a protection from prejudice or exploitation. It does not appear that patriotism, a desire to serve Illinois, or a wish to help other Blacks gain freedom, were important considerations. Illinois officially supplied 1,811 African American soldiers during the war, although this figure is probably understated since it does not include irregular recruits.<sup>114</sup>

When Lincoln issued the order to allow Black men to fight, the *Illinois State Register* accused the president of believing “the freed Blacks are better soldiers than these white heroes,

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<sup>113</sup> Hicken, 533-534.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*

who have never been equaled for valor in any age or country of the world.” The *Register* further complained that Republicans had not only pushed for “negro equality” but also the freedom of ex-slaves was “without limit,” while that of white people was “wholly extinguished.”<sup>115</sup> The *Register* and other Illinois Democrats may have desired a Union victory, but they were determined not to make war heroes out of African Americans.

The issue of pay for Black soldiers was a constant source of contention. The African American soldier with a rank of private was given only ten dollars a month, three of which was subtracted by the paymaster for the cost of clothing, while white soldiers of the same rank were given thirteen dollars and allowed to buy their own clothing. Though some African Americans received bounties of \$500 for volunteering, most were given bounties amounting to much less, sometimes as low as \$100—this, despite the fact that recruiting agents were authorized to pay far larger bounties. In fact, the recruiting agents attempted to take advantage of Black enlistees by giving him the lowest possible bounty and pocketing the difference allowed by the War Department for each recruit. The Reverend J.P. Campbell explained that the reason Black men had not been more readily enlisted as volunteers because the door had not “been fairly and sufficiently widely opened” for them. This was so because Congress had shown “a strong disposition not to equalize the pay of soldiers without distinction on account of color.”<sup>116</sup>

After the initial rush to enlist, there was in fact a substantial slowdown among African Americans. Many believed it was attributed to the lack of pay African American soldiers received in comparison to white soldiers. Joseph Stanley, an African American from Chicago

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<sup>115</sup> “Lo! The Poor Darkey,” *Illinois State Register*, February 4, 1863; Black Civil War Soldiers, 8-9; Hicken, 533-534.

<sup>116</sup> Hicken 535-536.

argued that more Black men would be willing to serve if the government would treat the soldiers equally:

“If our services are needed, enlist us as free men, with the same bounty and pay which you give white men. In this particular the Government has been remiss, and until Congress does what is right and just, colored men at the north cannot consent to assign themselves to a regulation which is degrading to their manhood, and which would be indignantly spurned by every white American.”<sup>117</sup>

Along with unequal pay, Afro-Illinoisans believed that it was hypocritical of the government to demand that Black men enlist when their status of citizenship was ambiguous. As long as the Black laws remained intact, African Americans remained reluctant to fight. Stanley continued:

“When you have answered the preservation on your statute books for those inhuman enactments by which needless insults are added to needless wrongs; when you can justify the hate, the bitter scorn, the falsehoods and reviling we have suffered in the state; when you have placed the status of the colored men on the same basis with Massachusetts and Rhode Island—then, and only then, will you see able bodied men of color ready to help fill up the quota of the state and uniting their destiny with all that pertains to her welfare. This is the kind of state pride which every colored man should possess who feels himself a man and a true American.”<sup>118</sup>

Surprisingly, leaders such as John Jones and H. Ford Douglas did not hold the state to such standards—even after all the battles they fought to end the scourge of the Black laws. Rather, they encouraged Afro-Illinoisans to enlist, and in the case of Douglas, they joined the fight themselves.

Yet, African Americans continued to press the government for equal pay, even if they supported the enlistment of Black men. Samuel Henry, a member of a delegation from the supervisory committee for recruiting African American troops, met with President Lincoln in 1864 to discuss an increase in pay. Lincoln, after the delegation presented their case to him,

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<sup>117</sup> “The Illinois Colored Regiment,” *The Daily Whig and Republican* (Quincy), November 20, 1863.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*

jokingly replied, “well gentlemen, you wish the pay of *cuffie* raised.” Henry, apparently offended by the derogatory term, sternly replied: “the term *cuffie* is not in our vernacular, what we want is that the wages of the American colored laborer be equalized with those of the American white laborer.” The president, impressed by Henry’s directness, stated, “I stand corrected, young man, but you know I am by birth a southerner and in our section that term is applied without any idea of an offensive nature. I will, however, at the earliest possible moment do all in my power to accede to your request.” Thirty days later the War Department issued a statement that all escaped slaves coming into the line of the army of the Potomac and employed as teamsters should be paid the same wages as white laborers in the service of the government.<sup>119</sup>

While John Jones was pleased with the presidential authorization for Black soldiers, he remained frustrated over the state’s unwillingness to expunge the Black Laws. In January 1864, the case of *Nelson v. the People* came before the Illinois Supreme court, which decided that the sale of a Black person did not reduce him to slavery. Meanwhile, Jones wrote an appeal for the repeal of the infamous laws in November 1864, which summarily explained the history of the laws and the effects upon Black Illinoisans and carefully laid out his argument as to why they should be stricken from Illinois.

“Now it may be said by our enemies, that we are not citizens, and therefore have no such rights as above mentioned. If being natives, and born on the soil, of parents belonging to no other nation or tribe, does not constitute a citizen in this country, under the theory and genius of our government, I am at a loss to know in what manner citizenship is acquired by birth.”

We, the colored people of Illinois, charge upon that enactment, and lay at the doors of those who enacted it, our present degraded condition in this great State. Every other nation, kindred and tongue have prospered and gained property, and are recognized as a part of the great commonwealth, with the exception of our

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<sup>119</sup> Illinois Historic Society, Springfield (SC 1324).

own: we have been treated as strangers in the land of our birth, and as enemies, by those who should have been our friends.<sup>120</sup>

Although the overall condition for African Americans had slightly improved by the end of the war, due largely to their own heroic efforts, their willingness to risk their lives in fleeing Southern plantations to join Union forces, and their persistent agitation against pro-slavery forces throughout Illinois and the rest of the nation, the Black laws remained an Illinois law until after the Civil War.

### *End of the War: Conclusion*

John Jones and H.O. Waggoner met along with three hundred Black Chicagoans at Quinn Chapel to celebrate the end of the war and Union victory and what it meant to their future as citizens and workers:

“the eventful period of warfare has terminated and peace is once again restored to bless the land of our nativity, and the minds of our countrymen are turned from the contemplation of the desolation occasioned by the sanguinary contest waged between freedom and slavery to the pursuits of agriculture , commerce, and general industry.”<sup>121</sup>

Their “Address to the Colored People of Illinois” acknowledged that they could not “remain indifferent spectators” when it came to their economic and social position in the state. Afro-Illinoisans could not “suppose that those whose sympathies were adverse to their obtaining the rights of which they had so long deprived them would relax their vigilance now that Black Illinoisans showed an appreciation for their position. Rather, their alertness would spur them on to “greater assiduity in their oppressions,” and “we but use the necessary preoccupation when we

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<sup>120</sup> John Jones, *The Black Laws of Illinois, and a Few Reasons Why they should be Repealed* (Chicago: Tribune Print and Job Office, 1864).

<sup>121</sup> “Colored Convention of Cook County,” *Chicago Republican*, August 23, 1865.



prepare for renewed activity in their ranks...to eradicate prejudice, the natural manliness of the race is called into requisition.”<sup>122</sup>

Jones and the committee members at Quinn were correct in their assessment of Illinoisans who’s “sympathies were adverse” to any perceived advancement of African Americans in the state. Indeed, the reality of a racially homogenous state may have evaporated with a Union victory, along with a Republican Party that appeared by war’s end to be politically invincible. Furthermore, the Democrats was severely weakened and bitterly divided on a plethora of issues, including treasonable wartime offenses that sent many leaders scurrying for cover. While these Republican-led accusations adversely affected Illinois Democrats and kept them on the defensive for years, they remained staunchly unified in their quest to keep Illinois racially homogenous.

Assertive and sometimes heroic actions by African Americans during the Civil War drastically improved their status as citizens and helped to alter their overall image. By boldly leaving Southern plantations and virtually destroying the Confederate economic backbone, ex-slaves played an essential role in freeing themselves and forced white Americans to reconsider their perception of Black people as docile, lazy, or lacking in courage. They also displayed that they were eagerly willing to work for wages without the threat of the lash. Furthermore, Black men not only demanded the opportunity to fight for their own liberation, they quickly earned the reputation as valiant soldiers who were more than capable fighters on the battlefield. However, Post-bellum jubilee over the end of the war and the revolutionary emancipation of four million

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<sup>122</sup> Ibid.

Black people would be relatively short-lived as African Americans faced new challenges as wage earners in a rapidly industrializing society.

While Afro-Illinoisans took assertive steps to improve their status as workers and citizens, working class whites, uncertain and anxious about their own status during the war, often resorted to violent measures in an effort to reestablish their dominance. In numerous cases before and during the war, the white laboring class in Illinois employed various tactics to remove African American workers due to their own racial and economic insecurities. To a lesser degree, racial violence had always been prevalent in Illinois. In the years leading up to the Civil War, however, white workers became increasingly violent as the specter of Black labor increased. Anti-black political leaders throughout the state, as well as newspaper editors and pundits were complicit in ratcheting up white anxiety through exaggerated reports and political rants about “uppity negroes” or “hordes” of African Americans stealing white labor. By the war’s end, a fearful reality set in for white Illinoisans—Black slaves were emancipated, and many were migrating to Illinois in spite of laws intended to prevent them from doing so. The next chapter will display how Illinois anti-black political leaders, organized labor, and the white working class waged a new war—a war against the Black worker, in which working class “consciousness” amounted to a new form of racial exclusivity that simultaneously elevated Illinois’ white workers, while ensuring the racial “other” remained on the bottom of the racial hierarchical order.

CHAPTER 3  
WAGING A NEW WAR AGAINST BLACK LABOR:  
REDEFINING THE WORKINGMAN IN POST-  
EMANCIPATION ILLINOIS

The Civil War ushered in a period of tremendous change for the vast majority of American workers and significantly altered their economic status. Workers were affected by massive wartime inflation, a general decline in real income, and labor shortages produced by the war. Recently freed slaves celebrated Emancipation, but the harsh realities of wage work within a nation that continued to question the viability of free Black labor, presented a number of new obstacles. Meanwhile Northern Black communities fought against racial barriers with a renewed spirit of patriotism and a restored faith in the larger American society. According to historian Eric Foner, the Civil War consolidated the national state while it identified that state through Emancipation, with the interests of humanity in general. While diverse groups and classes all found reasons to embrace massive changes brought on by the war, these very developments also galvanized a wartime opposition that reverberated in the postwar world. The enrichment of industrialists and bondholders appeared unfair to a vast majority of working class Americans who saw their real income devastated by inflation. The process of national state formation clashed with cherished traditions of local autonomy and cultural diversity. And even small improvements in the status of Northern Blacks, not to mention the vast changes implied by Emancipation, stirred vicious counterattacks from advocates of white supremacy.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988), 29-30.

This chapter outlines the limited post-Emancipation gains African Americans received and the ways disparate groups attempted to thwart those goals. Illinois Democrats led a vicious anti-black campaign immediately after the war to appeal to the racial sympathies of white workers who remained uneasy about Emancipation and other massive economic changes brought about by the war. Of course, to varying degrees, all white Northerners feared the prospect of emancipated ex-slaves emigrating from the South during the postwar period. However, unlike other Northern states with comparable populations and industrial growth, Illinois was able to stymie Black migration for decades because of a formidable political alliance that protected white workers from any substantial competition from Black workers. White Illinoisans, once insulated from a massive influx of Black labor through various anti-black legislation, not only faced a direct challenge to their status as workers within a vastly altered political economy, they also believed their advantageous position within the racial hierarchy was in jeopardy. Furthermore, the industrial-commercial revolution had a devastating effect on working class white Illinoisans and created whole new categories of workers displaced and disposed by economic forces. As a result, white Illinoisans could no longer depend on their white skin to protect them from the effects of economic restructuring. To stake their claim to superiority over African Americans, then, working class whites had to rely on new forms of self-definition other than their relative economic independence. Rather than risk the possibility that they would be in direct competition with Black workers during this turbulent period, they began to establish a distinction between “white” and “black” work, and they had to separate themselves as superior workers because they were white.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Jacqueline Jones, *American Work: Four Centuries of Black and White Labor* (New York: WW Norton, 1988), 275.

While white Illinois workers remained uncertain about their status after the war, African Americans also faced continued uncertainties about their own tenuous status as citizens. Newfound freedom for ex-slaves was an enormous achievement, yet northern African Americans continued to agitate for their civil and political rights. This chapter will also display how Black Illinoisans, through churches, newspapers, political clubs, and state conventions pressed for the repeal of the Black Laws, as well as the extension of Reconstruction policies to the state-level in order to ensure their own political and social security.<sup>3</sup> Americans viewed the economic world in political terms, and Black Illinois leaders understood that the vote was the best way they could protect their economic rights. Suffrage was an economic right as much as a political one, and many African Americans believed that disenfranchisement was the last obstacle for them to overcome in their ascension from slavery. Securing the right to vote, they maintained, was the most effective form of political and economic self-defense. The overall political status for Afro-Illinoisans improved substantially as they gained citizenship and the right to vote. However, their newfound political rights did not necessarily translate into economic or occupational gains during the post-Emancipation period. As white workers fought for improvements in their own political and occupational status, they systematically maintained a level of distance between them and Black workers through organized labor exclusion, intimidation, and periodic violence. Exclusionary practices by labor organizations and white workers largely relegated African Americans to unskilled and low-paying occupations.

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<sup>3</sup> Foner, *Reconstruction*, 470-471.

*Repealing the Black Laws and the Post-Emancipation Battle for Civil Rights*

In the wake of the Civil War, the overall political and social position of African Americans improved substantially due to both their own efforts and favorable Republican-led legislation for the advancement of Black civil rights. On both the national and local levels, African Americans fought for the end of state restrictions, citizenship and the right to vote through the Convention Movement, (Black Law) Repeal Associations, and political lobbying. The end of the war, along with the passage of the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth amendments established the legal foundation for African Americans to participate as full-fledged American citizens. However, these social and political improvements did not necessarily equate to substantial improvement in the collective economic condition of Black Illinoisans. An increase in violence and discrimination to distinguish the type of labor they were allowed to perform, along with de facto exclusion from most labor organizations, relegated African Americans to largely menial labor.<sup>4</sup>

The debates over Illinois' Black Laws coincided with the debates in Congress over the Thirteenth Amendment, and many Illinois legislators, including some moderate and conservative Republicans, were fearful that ex-slaves would find the state "too attractive" to resist. Other Illinois Republicans were able to reconcile supporting repeal of the Black Laws and the Thirteenth Amendment because they convinced themselves that freedpeople would not migrate to the state after the war. Republican Senator Joseph D. Ward of Cook County, for example, conditionally supported the measures, while maintaining a negative attitude towards African Americans. "Sambo and his wife," he quipped, would certainly choose "to take up their abode in

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<sup>4</sup> Sundiata K. Cha-Jua, *America's First Black Town: Brooklyn, Illinois, 1830-1915* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000), 77.

a climate more genial” than Illinois.<sup>5</sup> As historian Heather Cox Richardson noted, Northern Republicans, from their distant vantage point, could contrast their rosy image of the South as a “primitive paradise” with their own rapidly changing region.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, Republicans attempted to convince anxious Democrats and Republican whites that freedpeople would rather remain in the South because of a more suitable climate.

Republican support for freedpeople did not necessarily equate to support for the general advancement of all African Americans. In their vision of the future, Northern Republicans kept their sights on the South and the fate of recently freedpeople, largely ignoring Northern Black workers.<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, more alert African Americans in Illinois took advantage of the changes in sentiment towards ex-slaves and free Blacks during the immediate post war years through aggressive political action.<sup>8</sup> During the debates over the Black Laws, John Jones traveled to Springfield, Illinois to lobby for their repeal, and also addressed a large meeting at the Colored Baptist Church. He urged the church assembly to adopt a resolution calling for the repeal of the laws “in force against (African Americans) on account of our complexion.”<sup>9</sup> At the state legislature, Jones appealed to the economic interests of the legislators, most of whom were men of property. “Are we not to be found in all the industrial pursuits of life that other men are?” he asked. The laws had to be repealed, for the sake of (their) own interest...and I thank God the day has come when you will give us employment notwithstanding you are subjected to a fine of five

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<sup>5</sup> Roger D. Bridges, “Equality Deferred: Civil Rights for Illinois Blacks, 1865-1885,” *Journal of Illinois State Historical Society* 74 (Summer 1981), 86.

<sup>6</sup> Heather Cox Richardson, *The Death of Reconstruction: Race, Labor, and Politics in the Post-Civil War North, 1865-1901*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), 23-24.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid*, 38.

<sup>8</sup> Irving Dilliard, “Civil Liberties of Negroes in Illinois Since 1865,” *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society*, vol. 56, no 3, (Autumn 1963), 593-594.

<sup>9</sup> Bridges, 85.

hundred dollars for so doing.”<sup>10</sup> Although many Republicans undervalued the plight of Northern Blacks, activists like Jones worked tirelessly to illuminate pertinent issues affecting all Black people.

On January 24 1865, the Senate voted for the repeal of the Black Laws on a straight party vote of thirteen to ten, the House later concurred by a vote of forty-nine to thirty, and the bill was signed into law by Governor Richard Oglesby on February 7<sup>th</sup> 1865. John Dawson, the chairman of the Chicago Repeal Association, hailed the repeal as a “noble and glorious act of humanity as being in keeping with the principles upon which the Republican Party [stood].” Black Illinoisans, he continued will “look well to [Illinois’] interest, and labor for her commercial, mechanical and agricultural advancement.”<sup>11</sup> Demonstrations in honor of the occasion were held across the state. At Springfield, the celebration was accompanied by a sixty-one gun salute, and John Jones lit cannon symbolizing the victory.<sup>12</sup> The *Chicago Tribune* hailed the ratification as “one of the great victories of [the] war—a victory over its cause, over the evil which alone could have made this war on our part justifiable.”<sup>13</sup>

Noticeably missing from the celebration of the repeal of Illinois’ Black Laws was H. Ford Douglas. While performing his duties with the Tenth Louisiana *Corps d’ Afrique* in Port Hudson, Louisiana, Douglas contracted malaria. His condition deteriorated quickly, and his wife was summoned to take him to Chicago to recover. While he was home he regained some of his strength, and was soon recruiting for the Union Army—he recruited an independent battery of light artillery in Kansas that successfully fought in Missouri during the fall of 1864. Despite this

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<sup>10</sup> Charles A. Gliozzo, *John Jones and the Repeal of the Black Laws*, (Duluth: University of Minnesota, 1975), 7.

<sup>11</sup> “The Colored Citizens of Chicago on the Repeal of the Black Laws,” *Chicago Tribune*, February 8, 1865.

<sup>12</sup> Bridges, 87.

<sup>13</sup> “The Constitutional Amendment Passed,” *Chicago Tribune*, February 1, 1865.



notable achievement, Ford Douglas' condition deteriorated again, and he was eventually mustered out of service in July 1865. He died on November 11, 1865.<sup>14</sup>

Despite the repeal of the Black Laws, Illinois moved very slowly in providing civil rights protections for African Americans. Freedmen still could not send their children to common schools, sit on juries, hold office, or vote. The Illinois constitution was specifically limited to "every white male citizen, above the age of twenty one years." Illinois Republican legislators were sensitive to the national trends towards extending civil rights to African Americans in the reconstructed South, yet were reluctant to extend those rights in Illinois. At best, sympathetic Illinoisans would speak in abstract terms about the need for nationwide male suffrage.<sup>15</sup> Afro-Illinoisans were dissatisfied with the lack of alacrity expressed by Illinois lawmakers. In an effort to maintain pressure on Illinois legislators, Black leaders emphatically argued for the elective franchise and insisted that freedom would not be secure until that right was granted to Black men unconditionally. During the next several years, Afro-Illinoisans and Black people throughout the nation petitioned both state legislatures and national politicians for the right to the elective franchise. In August, 1865 three hundred African American men, including H.O. Waggoner and John Jones, met at Quinn Chapel in Chicago to discuss the "superior advantages" to be gained from the elective franchise. No longer satisfied with remaining "indifferent spectators," the committee condemned all efforts to "embarrass the colored man in securing that right by prescribing qualification for him which are exacted on none others." To eradicate the inevitable

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<sup>14</sup> Robert L. Harris, Jr., "H. Ford Douglas: Afro-American Antislavery Emigrationist," *The Journal of Negro History*, Vol. 62, No. 3, (July 1977), 230-231.

<sup>15</sup> Bridges, 87.

opposition they would receive on the issue, the “natural manliness of the race is called into requisition.”<sup>16</sup> In their “Address to the Colored People of Illinois” they asked:

“...shall Illinois be the last? The time has passed when the claims of the colored man, if pressed upon the government, would retard its progress toward the subjection of the rebellious states, or embarrass it in securing the sustenance of political parties in the north. ‘Military necessity’ no longer requires that we should abstain from calling upon the government—be it state or general—to recognize our pretensions to equal citizenship.”<sup>17</sup>

Jones and a delegation of leading African Americans, including Frederick Douglass, met with President Andrew Johnson and members of Congress in February 1866. Their purpose was to “ask for such legislation as will place the black citizens...on equal terms before the law with the white citizens, thus placing them in position to develop their manhood, and render safe the tried loyal Black men in the states lately in rebellion, and give them the means of protecting themselves from outrages which are heaped upon them because of their devotion to the Union.” Since African American men were “subjects of the government,” Douglass explained, “and subject to taxation to volunteer in the service of the country, subject to being drafted and subject to bear the burdens of the state makes it not improper that we should ask to share in the privileges of the condition.” President Johnson was not willing to adopt a policy which he believed “would only result in the sacrifice of his life and shedding of his blood.” The *Chicago Tribune*, who often criticized the president, noted that had he possessed the “finer instincts of a gentlemen and a true Democrat...he would have felt that ...he was talking with a gentlemen who...in many respects his superior.” Even during the interview, the *Tribune* continued, “the dignified, brief but appropriate words of the ex-slave contrast forcibly with the rambling,

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<sup>16</sup> “Colored Convention of Cook County,” *Chicago Republican*, August 23, 1865.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

ungrammatical, disconnected harangue of the president...”<sup>18</sup> The *Tribune* and the Black delegation understood that Johnson lacked the diplomatic skill-set of his predecessor—and since the delegation’s words appeared to fall upon deaf ears, they were forced to take more direct action if they were going to achieve equal status.

To shed more public light on the plight of Afro-Illinoisans, and to stress the need for the elective franchise, Black leaders called a third state convention to meet for three days in Galesburg, Illinois. Fifty-six delegates attended the meeting to address the “disabilities” impeding the progress of Black people in Illinois, and to “devise and set in motion effective agencies for the permanent removal of the same.”<sup>19</sup> While they continued to rely on the “genial action” of Congress and the people of Illinois, they believed it was necessary for African Americans to “take measures looking to the removal of such disabilities” that hindered Black Illinoisans. Similar to the Black Convention Movement of the 1850s, Illinois delegates also stressed the need for economic “elevation” of the Black masses through education. The committee on educational statistics presented an address emphasizing the significance of education “to virtue, intelligence, and to that usefulness which have made a people great, good, happy, and contented.” Illinois had been derelict in its provisions, they concluded, and encouraged pauperism, as well as charging African Americans with “having minds not susceptible of culture.” Furthermore, Afro-Illinoisans were taxed for the support of the public schools and yet “denied, by the laws of the state, the right of sending their children to said schools.”<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> “The President and the Negroes,” *Chicago Tribune*, February 9, 1866.

<sup>19</sup> Philip S. Foner and George E. Walker, eds., *Proceedings of the Black National and State Conventions, 1865-1900, Volume I*, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986), 246.

<sup>20</sup> *Proceedings of the Illinois State Convention of Colored Men, Assembled at Galesburg*, October 16<sup>th</sup>, 17<sup>th</sup>, and 18<sup>th</sup>, Chicago 1867, 5-6.

Two additional addresses were delivered—one to the people of Illinois and another to the people of the United States. In the former, the convention convincingly based their arguments on historical, legal, moral, and constitutional grounds. It affirmed the citizenship of Afro-Illinoisans, noting that the highest judicial tribunal in the nation, including the legislative and executive departments of the government, had determined they were citizens. In view of this position, the address found it “strange and anomalous” that African Americans were thus “disfranchised in the state of our residence without the commission of any crime by ourselves as a reason for our disfranchisement.”<sup>21</sup>

In a long but eloquent address directed to the people of the United States, the conventioners reiterated many of the ideas of the previous addresses, but went further by focusing on the Civil War and its implications on the future well-being of African Americans.

“But an unenfranchised class, dwelling where public sentiment sanctions such enactments, can, and doubtless will be...made the victims of local legislation, in ways and under circumstances not at all likely to be remedied by the power of the constitution, imperfectly or insincerely administered. The enfranchisement of this class eliminates this never-sufficiently-to-be-deprecated condition of things, by rendering catholic the benign operation of the organic law of liberty, where every man is made at once its subject and an interested sustainer of it.”<sup>22</sup>

The Galesburg delegates understood the difficulties of obtaining the franchise in Illinois—not only were they in a battle against public sentiment, but also a state legislation that did not want to overstep its bounds with its white constituents. Therefore, the difficult task of rallying Black Illinoisans was bestowed to John Jones, who was elected state agent. He urged African Americans to “wake up and go to work” by forming Suffrage Leagues throughout the state. “Suffrage will be granted in the southern states from necessity,” he wrote. “Not so in the North.

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<sup>21</sup> Foner and Walker, eds., 247.

<sup>22</sup> *Galesburg Proceedings*, 26.

It will be granted in the north only as we work for it; and now is the time to strike the blow and be free.”<sup>23</sup>

Jones’ efforts did not go unrewarded—during the next few years the overall sentiment towards Black suffrage gradually shifted. Many Republican politicians and newspaper editors throughout the state increasingly acknowledged the hypocrisy of forcing impartial suffrage on Southern states while denying them to African Americans in Illinois.<sup>24</sup> “The petitions which are reaching the legislature, remarked the *Chicago Tribune*, “praying an amendment to the constitution are urged with commendable zeal by Mr. John Jones...we hope the legislature will regard them.” The sections of the Constitution (that made a distinction based upon race) were “unquestionably opposed to the spirit of the age, and should be obliterated and the legislature should take the occasion to give the people the earliest possible opportunity not only to amend the constitution in these particulars, but in a variety of others that are also oppressive upon the people of the state generally.”<sup>25</sup> Illinois Governor John M. Palmer looked ahead to the day when Afro-Illinoisans could gain the right to vote, and believed that they would “soon be able to vote, and thus gain a significant hallmark of citizenship. “Suffrage is the most powerful and most valuable weapon of defense,” he continued, and “the rights that belong to other citizens [cannot] be much longer withheld from [Black Illinoisans]. If African Americans did not have the right to vote, he concluded, they were not able to fulfill these other duties as fully as other citizens.”<sup>26</sup>

In February 1869, Congress passed the Fifteenth Amendment, which granted African Americans the right to vote, and ratified by both houses on March 5<sup>th</sup>. The quick approval caught

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<sup>23</sup> “Colored Men of Illinois!” *Chicago Tribune*, January 6, 1867; Bridges, 90.

<sup>24</sup> Bridges, 90.

<sup>25</sup> “Impartial Suffrage in Illinois,” *Chicago Tribune*, January 17, 1867.

<sup>26</sup> Thomas Bahde, “Race and Justice in the Heartland: Three Nineteenth Century Lives,” PhD Dissertation, (University of Chicago, 2009), 160.

Illinois Democrats by surprise, and they roundly condemned the action by the General Assembly. Even a few Republicans voiced fears that the amendment was a serious infringement on state rights. Echoing the sentiments of the *Chicago Times*, the editor of the *Peoria Weekly Transcript* also believed the amendment would take the “negro question” out of American politics. After ratification of the amendments by the states, “the full measure of justice,” remarked the *Transcript*, “so far as the laws and the constitution can effect it, will have been done to the colored man...he can ask no further legislation in his favor.”<sup>27</sup>

There may have been concerted efforts to remove the “negro question” from Illinois politics after African Americans gained the elective franchise as politicians tried to focus on “more pressing” matters of the 1870s. Popular sentiment suggested that the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments were “finished products” of the humanitarian reform movement that improved the status of African Americans. However, the culture of popular racism encouraged by the campaign rhetoric of the Civil War era could not simply be redirected into other issues because racism was such a prominent framing device for the most significant matters throughout the century. After 1868, national Democrats may have softened their stance on African Americans, and Afro-Illinoisans did become more assertive in claiming their legal rights as citizens and workers. However, decades of anti-black politics made a lasting impact on the psyche of Illinois voters. The gains from Reconstruction were important, but the long term development for African Americans in the late nineteenth century Midwest was toward increased social segregation and economic marginalization. This engrained racial prejudice, imbibed from the very root of Democratic Party ideology for so long, remained a significant source of anti-

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<sup>27</sup> Bridges, 93

black rhetoric, mob violence, and everyday popular opinion, long after Democrats began courting Black voters.<sup>28</sup>

### *White Opposition to Black Advancement*

For many white Illinoisans, the smallest improvements in the status of Northern African Americans, as well as the vast changes implied by Emancipation, stirred ugly counterattacks during the postwar period. White Illinoisans were once insulated from the threat of a massive influx of Black labor because they were perennially protected by anti-black legislation. Emancipation and the overall improvement in the legal condition of Afro-Illinoisans amounted to, what white Illinoisans perceived, as a direct challenge to their position in the racial hierarchy. The industrial-commercial revolution vastly altered the political economy and produced a devastating effect on working-class white Illinoisans while it also created whole new categories of workers displaced and disposed by economic forces. As a result, they could no longer depend on their race to protect them from the effects of economic restructuring. To stake their claim of superiority over African Americans, then, white Illinoisans waged a virtual war against Black workers through a searing campaign of anti-black rhetoric, intimidation, violence and exclusion. Largely spurred by Illinois political leaders extolling the virtues of white supremacy and the rights of the “workingman,” working class whites rallied around the idea of their own supremacy as workers in comparison to Black workers.<sup>29</sup>

The once-potent Illinois Democratic Party was substantially weakened due to infighting and a general lack of cohesiveness in their political message. Illinois Republicans engaged in a

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<sup>28</sup> *Race and Justice*, 223-224; also see Forrest G. Wood, *Black Scare: The Racist Response to Emancipation and Reconstruction*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1970), 156-158.

<sup>29</sup> Jones, *American Work*, 275.

terrific onslaught against the fractured party and pounded them without mercy with charges of wartime obstruction. For example, in 1861, Illinois was the first state to ratify a proposed constitutional amendment that would have prohibited the federal government from abolishing slavery in the states where it already existed. The Democratic-led amendment was not ratified by the requisite number of states, it was, however, more damning evidence of the racial attitudes of Illinois lawmakers.<sup>30</sup> The absence of Northern victories by 1863 caused Union morale to dip to an all-time low, and subsequently led to the high tide in Democratic, anti-Union support (also known as “Copperheadism”). Democratic newspapers, led by the bombastic *Chicago Times*’ editor, Wilbur F. Storey, were notorious for their anti-war, anti-Lincoln, and anti-black positions. The *Times* was so violently critical of the Union’s wartime mission, that it was censored by President Lincoln “on account of the repeated expression of disloyal and incendiary sentiments.” The censorship only lasted a few days, but a by-product of the suppression was a sharp increase in the paper’s circulation, which was an indication of the *Times*’ popularity in Chicago.<sup>31</sup> By 1864, however, the improving prospect for a Union victory along with the embarrassment of many Illinois citizens at the obvious obstructionist tactics of Democrats made possible a Republican victory in both houses. The majority of the new members were therefore expected to be committed to the aims of the war set forth by Lincoln and the national government.<sup>32</sup>

Even as Illinois Democrats walked a more centrist line during the postwar period, white supremacy, expressed both explicitly and coded, within certain political and rhetorical formulas, continued to resonate with Democratic constituents. Internal problems aside, Democrats were united in their effort to keep Illinois free of Black people, and they believed the key to their

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<sup>30</sup> Henry C. Hubbart, “Pro-Southern Influences in the Free West 1840-1865,” *The Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, vol 20, no 1 (June, 1933), 61.

<sup>31</sup> Frank L. Klement, *The Copperheads in the Middle West*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960), 95-96.

<sup>32</sup> Bridges, 84.



political recovery revolved around protecting the white working-class from infringement on their rights as citizens and workers. Democratic politicians and their newspaper organs were instrumental in connecting Republican-led measures, such as the repeal of the Black Laws and the Thirteenth Amendment, with the demise of white working class rights. “The thickening black cloud,” remarked the *Illinois State Register*, loomed on the horizon for white Illinoisans, as petitions poured into the House and Senate seeking the repeal of the Black Laws. “The present generation” of Illinoisans believed their “ancestors were not only wrong, but also that the negro is better than the white man.” This might be the reasonable inference of an observer, the paper continued, “in view of the exclusive legislation which is proposed for the nigger.”<sup>33</sup> Democratic Representative Ambrose M. Miller of Logan County predicted the “funeral” of the Republicans because the repeal of the Black Laws would “forever sink them politically in this state,” which gave him “sufficient cause to rejoice.” The repeal would “remove all the barriers which [had] been placed in the way of the Black race.”<sup>34</sup> Miller not only argued against the repeal, but also called for an absolute prohibition on immigration of Blacks into the state due to what he perceived as a threat to white laborers in Illinois. An influx of African American workers “threatened the rights of laboring [white] men, especially those who were fighting to protect the Union.” Furthermore, he continued, the Black laws had been “ineffective” and new laws were needed to guarantee the prevention of the “baneful effects of race mixing...to maintain the dignity of white labor from the degrading effect of Black [labor]—to maintain the purity of the blood—[and] to adhere to the expressed will of the people.” The laws were a “dead letter” upon Illinois statute books, to many politicians, not only because there were not many instances in

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<sup>33</sup> “The Thickening Black Cloud,” *Illinois Register*, January 12, 1865.

<sup>34</sup> “Legislative Summary,” *Illinois State Journal*, January 5, 1865; Bridges, 84.

which they were actually enforced, but also because there was limited proof of the law preventing African Americans from migrating to Illinois.<sup>35</sup>

To add force behind their campaign against Black laborers in Illinois, the Democrats attacked the character of African American workers with often contradictory evidence. On one hand, they warned white workers that Black labor would usurp their economic interests by working for cheaper wages. On the other hand, Black workers were often associated with slaves and therefore were “lazy” and would not work unless forced to do so. For example, Miller and other Illinois Democrats argued against the repeal because African Americans would “flood” Illinois and “lead lives of idleness and crime” without any real attempt at “pursuing honest industry.”<sup>36</sup> The editor of the *Cairo Evening Bulletin* complained about a “thriftless and shiftless” group of Black workers who “utterly and almost insultingly refuse steady employment.” The men were “contented if they [had] clothing good enough to shield them from prosecutions for public indecency, and coarse food enough to keep off starvation.” According to the *Evening Bulletin*, the men refused the offer of a plantation owner from Mississippi to chop wood on his property, and attributed this “element” to the rise in crime within the city. Interestingly, the *Bulletin* did not speak with the Black workers about the issue, nor did the paper mention the possibility that the reason they may have turned down the “plantation work” was because it was simply undesirable work, did not pay enough, and for the ex-slaves, was perhaps too reminiscent of slave labor.<sup>37</sup>

As the debate over slavery became more polarized during the Civil War, Irish immigrants throughout Illinois, initially the victims of white persecution themselves, were also encouraged

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid; Bridges, 84.

<sup>36</sup> Bridges, 86.

<sup>37</sup> “Thriftless and Shiftless,” *Cairo Evening Bulletin*, March 12, 1869.

to oppose occupational advancement and civil rights for African Americans. The Irish American worker, according to historian David Roediger, won acceptance among the larger American population, and the Irish themselves insisted on their own “whiteness” and thus white supremacy. The success of the Irish in being recognized as white people resulted largely from the political power of the Irish and other immigrant workers. The imperative to define themselves as white came but from the particular “public and psychological wages” of whiteness offered to a desperate rural and often preindustrial Irish population coming to labor in industrializing American cities.<sup>38</sup> However, in Illinois, Democratic leaders were also a major force behind this process as they attempted to capitalize on the fast-growing Irish population, along with their contentious relationship with African Americans.<sup>39</sup> Chapter two traced the process in which native white workers in Illinois were not only influenced by these leaders, they were also openly encouraged as white workingmen to fight against perceived threats waged by Republican state legislators and African Americans.

Opposition to the increase in the African American population in Chicago was most pronounced among the white laboring classes. To be sure, the issue of social equality was a concern among this group, however the fear that Blacks would be used as weapons to depress

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<sup>38</sup> David R. Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the Working Class*, (New York, Verso Books, 1991), 137; see also Noel Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White*, (New York, Routledge Books, 1995)

<sup>39</sup> According to historian James R. Barrett, this relationship was not always contentious. Until the Civil War, Irish and African Americans lived and worked in close proximity in New York and willingly shared their space as well as some cultural interaction. But as the Irish became involved in racial assaults on African Americans, a distancing occurred. During the course of this shift in relations, Irish performers on the minstrel stage donned blackface, interpreting the Black character for a generation of audiences. This performance allowed Irish Americans to separate their own collective persona from that of African Americans and, in the process, earn a more secure place in the racial hierarchy.

Through Blackface minstrelsy, Irish Americans introduced recent immigrants to American understanding of race, on the vaudeville stage and even through church fund-raisers and settlement house programs. They transmitted the racist cultural form throughout immigrant communities. Minstrelsy’s continuing popularity well into the twentieth century indicates its potent value as a cultural form that allowed artists to transgress the color line even as they enacted racist values. See Barrett, *The Irish Way: Becoming American in the Multiethnic City*, (New York: Penguin Press, 2012), 159-160.

wages was paramount. Most bitter in their opposition were Irish Americans, who were scornfully referred to as “unwashed Dimmycrats” by Republican businessmen and artisans who controlled the city and professed to champion African Americans. From time to time during the twenty years preceding the Civil War, Irish American workingmen in Chicago rioted against fugitive slaves who secured employment as dockworkers, porters, canal bargemen and common laborers.<sup>40</sup> The *Chicago Tribune* believed there was a plot by Democrats and the Irish American working class to intimidate Northern Blacks as Northern Democratic newspapers during the Civil War printed stories about “disastrous competition” from Black workers. In turn, the *Tribune* referred to the Irish as the “most illogical people on the face of the earth,” because they, of all ethnic groups, should have had the “deepest interest” in the abolition of slavery.<sup>41</sup> The Irish fought valiantly, against the tyrannical British government, commented the *Tribune*, but in the United States, they were “the only people on the face of the earth who, as a class...protest against and vote against the removal of the shackles which the barbarism and the prejudices of the past have placed upon the persons, the minds, the will and the action of a portion of the American people.”<sup>42</sup> As one historian stated, Irish Americans, more than any other citizen and by any rational criteria, should have been the most sympathetic of all people toward African Americans. Both groups suffered at the hands of powerful opponents for hundreds of years and should have had a special interest in promoting freedom and justice for each other. From the time the Irish first set foot on American soil, they attached themselves to the most anti-black political and social leaders.<sup>43</sup> Thus, in an era in which white supremacy was openly accepted by the vast

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<sup>40</sup> St. Claire Drake and Horace R. Cayton, *Black Metropolis: A Study of Negro Life in a Northern City*, (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1970), 42-43.

<sup>41</sup> “Mobbing Negroes,” *Chicago Tribune*, July 15, 1864.

<sup>42</sup> “A Word with Irishmen,” *Chicago Tribune*, April 20, 1868.

<sup>43</sup> David J. Hellwig, “The Afro-American and the Immigrant, 1880-1930: A Study of Black Social Thought,” (PhD Dissertation, Syracuse University, 1973), 88-89.

majority of white Americans, even a widely persecuted group could be included within the matrix of white supremacy if they helped to maintain the status quo.

The variation in reporting about Irish Americans in the Democratic press revealed the malleability of race in the late nineteenth century. For instance, the Democratic *Chicago Times* described a July 1864 riot in Chicago between African Americans and Irish Americans as a movement of “white workers” who were disgruntled by the presence of Black workers. A mob of four or five hundred Irish Americans assaulted a dozen African American workers at a Chicago lumber yard. The Republican *Chicago Tribune* reported that a spokesperson for the Irish workers claimed that Black workers “took the places of white laborers who needed employment.” The Irish American workers waited on the foreman during the day and requested that he “discharge the negroes, as it was degrading to them to see blacks working upon an equality with themselves, and more so, while their brothers were out of employment.” The *Tribune* disagreed—work was not scarce in Chicago, and if the few Black people living in the city should “leave Chicago tomorrow it would not benefit the condition of the Irish a single dime.” Meanwhile, the foreman sent police to meet the attackers, where, according to the *Chicago Times*, they found one African American worker remaining “who was not at work, but looking for a situation, whom they gently and tenderly lifted out of the way, telling him to leave and never return.” The *Times* then reported that a spokesman addressed the audience from a make-shift stage. “This government,” the orator remarked, “was made for the white men and the laborers that built up the nation. Upon the shoulders of the poor white man now fell the burden of supporting a war waged for the avowed purpose of giving freedom to the black,” and it was, “a little more than right or justice demanded that the white man, in his addition to this burden, should be shoved out of place by the

black.”<sup>44</sup> Invoking familiar anti-black rhetoric about the harmful effects of Black labor, the speaker continued: “for a long number of years the people of this country have been taught to believe...that this was the white man’s country, and that negro labor should never be allowed to come into competition with the labor of white men...”<sup>45</sup> It is highly probable that Black workers “stealing” jobs from Irish immigrant workers would not have had the same effect on white Democratic readers of the *Chicago Times*. By lumping Irish Americans under a racialized “workingman” umbrella against unwanted Black labor, Democrats could possibly garner more anti-black sympathy from disgruntled working class whites.

The vitriol displayed by Irish Americans during the Civil War era was not one-sided however, as African Americans also viewed Irish Americans as harmful competitors, and often viewed them with contempt because the newcomers threatened their tenuous position in Northern society. Newly arriving Irish immigrants aggressively usurped menial jobs that, at one time, were largely “reserved” for the small African American population in the North. During the pre-war years, African Americans complained of being economically displaced, and Irish Americans were usually depicted as the culprit. Even more, was the tendency for Irish Americans to align themselves with Democratic and anti-black legislation to prevent any mass migration of African Americans into Northern cities. “Before an Irish laborer had a foothold on this soil, the blacks were the only laborers the South had for fifty years,” wrote one African American man who angrily responded to a racist editorial in the Catholic *Boston Pilot*. Also responding to the notion that African American workers were “unemployable”, the African American writer stated: “[are the Irish Americans] so grossly ignorant of the chart of the country

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<sup>44</sup> “Mobbing Negroes,” *Chicago Tribune*, July 15, 1864; “Serious Trouble on the Docks,” *Chicago Times*, July 14, 1864.

<sup>45</sup> “Serious Trouble on the Docks,” *Chicago Times*, July 14, 1864.

that has received him, and thousands like him, not for the benefit they would be to the country as a first cause, but to relieve them from the oppression which, if Irishmen are to be believed, they have groaned under for ten generations?"<sup>46</sup> Thus, a seemingly endless cycle of challenge and retribution emerged out of the earliest confrontations between the two groups. It was not until the end of the nineteenth century, when Irish Americans succeeded in removing themselves from direct competition with African American workers, did the bitter feelings of the mid-nineteenth century subside.<sup>47</sup>

### *Organized Labor Exclusion*

Almost as soon as the war was over, organized labor challenged the Republican's view of the nation's economy, and argued that there was an inherent struggle between labor and capital. Repeated strikes, agitation for an eight-hour workday, and the proliferation of worker's organizations directly, attacked the deeply held Republican belief in an organic society.<sup>48</sup> For workers during the postwar era, politics focused on anxieties of declining social mobility spurred by industrialization and hardening class stratification. The expansion of corporate wealth along with the potential for limited social mobility conflicted with traditional American ideas of social mobility and the goal of land ownership and economic independence that was the foundation of American republicanism. The emergence of the labor movement represented a return to

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<sup>46</sup> From the *Boston (Catholic Irish) Pilot*—reprinted in *The Liberator*, August 22, 1862; "Rights of White Labor over Black," *The Liberator*, September 5, 1862.

<sup>47</sup> Hellwig, 81-82.

<sup>48</sup> Richardson, *Death of Reconstruction: Race, Labor, and Politics in the Post-Civil War North, 1865-1901*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), 44.

“traditional” American republicanism, and refused to view limited social mobility and wage work as the permanent future of the American working class.

Despite the reality of increasing class conflict, most union leaders could not liberate themselves completely from the influence of free labor precepts. Instead of conceiving of themselves as spokesmen for a wage-earning class with interests inherently antagonistic to those of their employers, labor reformers viewed cooperation between capital and labor as a natural and desirable state of affairs and insisted that America must avoid the emergence of permanent class divisions. However, if labor leaders envisioned a broad extension of the Reconstruction principle of equal rights, its own conception of equality remained in many respects thoroughly conventional. Recently organized unions, composed mainly of artisans and skilled industrial workers, proved unwilling to expand their membership beyond the ranks of white men.<sup>49</sup>

Rapid industrialization in postwar Illinois along with the massive influx of European immigrants helped to create a volatile labor environment during the early 1870s. After the passage of the Fifteenth Amendment, Illinois Republicans focus remained largely in the South, while Illinois Democrats focused on the growing labor agitation, and securing the rights of white workers in the face of the expanding Black population. Even with the passage of the new amendments, white Northerners continued to question whether African Americans would be willing to work successfully as wage laborers, or be integrated into labor unions. The premise behind these questions lay in the foundation that ex-slaves could not make good workers. Most white Northerners believed African Americans were not only unmotivated to work without the threat of punishment, they were also inherently lazy. If they worked at all, what type of workers

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<sup>49</sup> Foner, *Reconstruction*, 478-479.



would the make? How would their presence affect white workers within the labor movement if they came to the North?

Antebellum U.S. politics and economics often turned on the relative merits of free versus slave labor. Such discussions easily devolved into considerations of the (dis)abilities of African American labor, in the fields and especially in manufacturing, versus the alleged superiority of “white” labor. Far from simply arraying the industrial North against the agrarian South, this issue saw capitalists in the two regions debate not only the relative merits of slavery and free labor but also the productivity of black versus white workers.<sup>50</sup> That Black slaves came under managerial eyes as both assets to be developed and workers to be driven, created tremendous tensions in which both the acknowledgment of African capacities and the most dehumanizing connections of slaves to the animal world occurred as two sides of the same coin. Beyond the fact that planters needed to regard Black slaves as valuable in order to validate their own fiscal decisions and social system, the realities of plantation life taught that slaves possessed the technical and managerial knowledge that made the plantation work. Because the proslavery argument relied on white supremacy, it could credit the genius of Africans so much. Notions of racial development through white management thus curiously combined a semi-awareness of African contributions to the making of the South with wholesale denials of those contributions.<sup>51</sup>

The legacy of slavery, coupled with decades of anti-black rhetoric debasing the character and work ethic of all African Americans guided discourse about the impact of Emancipation on the Northern white labor force. Illinois Democrats exuded enormous amounts of energy convincing white workers about the superiority of “white labor” in relation to Black workers.

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<sup>50</sup> David R. Roediger and Elizabeth D. Esch, *The Production of Difference: Race and the Management of Labor in US History*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 24.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid*, 42-43.

Democratic-owned newspapers led the attack against the Black image for white workingmen to read and absorb the “intellectually” racist musings of their local journalist. The *Chicago Times* suggested shipping freedpeople to western territories after the war because “in such a place their inferiority would not be placed in competition with the superiority of the Saxon.” White workers would “not have these free negroes scattered among them,” because they “could not compete in any department with our own native laborers and mechanics.”<sup>52</sup> Convincing white workers that their status was under siege served dual purposes for Illinois Democrats: it temporarily discouraged Black workers from migrating to Northern states, and more importantly, it provided Democrats with a stronger unified political message that potentially resonated with working class white Illinoisans.

Yet many Northern white workers during the Civil War period were becoming increasingly disgruntled with the major political parties because of the growing perception that these parties were primarily serving the interests of wealthy capitalists. As early as 1864, the *Tribune* incorrectly reported on a mass “[Democrat] copperhead gathering” of Chicago workingmen from a variety of trade organizations. In reality, the meeting was a precursor to the National Labor Union (NLU) that formed a few years later, but the error suggested that the Republican *Tribune* may not have been completely in tuned with the grievances of Northern white workers during the postwar years. The speakers at the Bryan Hall gathering in Chicago proposed the inauguration of a “new [political] party...whose watchword shall be ‘Labor.’” The country was “in revolution” remarked one speaker, and “the workingmen must take it in hand themselves, or they and their children were slaves for all time to come.” The only part that laboring Northern men played in the war was “to bear its burdens and shed their blood in the

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<sup>52</sup> “Freedmen—A Plan for their Relief,” *Chicago Times*, February 3, 1865.

ranks...” While the speakers were clearly disgruntled about the tenuous political position of the Northern white worker, their crass stance on ex-slaves was telling and foreshadowed their position for decades to come. One speaker remarked that while he no longer wanted Blacks to be enslaved, “he liked a nigger very much in his place.” He argued that Black workers were not as good as white workers because they were “not yet civilized.” However, he was willing to give them “a chance to prove [their] manhood and social status.” Although the process of racialization had not fully materialized during the time of this meeting, it was clear that European American workers felt threatened by the prospect of Black workers entering the wage labor sector.

In more traditional Democratic strongholds in the central and southern portions of Illinois, white workers clung to Democratic anti-black rhetoric as they continued to feel threatened by a growing African American presence. For example, Cairo’s Democrats exploited race by connecting the current Republican administration with any alleged advancement for African Americans. Although the city’s Republicans refused to take a firm stand on the issue of Black suffrage, Democrats warned, Republicans wanted to establish equality, or even superiority for African Americans in comparison to the white worker. Furthermore, white workers and their families would eventually be transformed into “white slaves” by Republicans so the government could bestow vast sums of money on African Americans.<sup>53</sup> The *Cairo Daily Democrat* published the following pledge in an effort to capitalize on the anxieties of white workers in the city:

“If the (Democratic Party of Cairo) today declares in favor of the workingmen of the republic, and with the president, is determined that the white laborer shall not be sacrificed and trampled in the dust in order to elevate to social and political equality with him, the negro, who, without intelligence, will be unable to withstand

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<sup>53</sup> Christopher K. Hays, “Way Down in Egypt Land: Conflict and Community in Cairo, Illinois, 1850-1930,” (PhD. Dissertation, University of Missouri-Columbia, 1996), 230.

the power of capital and will bring wages down to a price at which a white man cannot live and maintain his family.”<sup>54</sup>

The overall African American population in Illinois did not mushroom like many predicted after civil rights legislation. However, in Cairo the Black population skyrocketed during the war from forty-seven in 1860, to 1,849 by 1870. Former slaves were relatively easy targets for Democrats because they were the least likely to properly defend themselves because of their own tenuous position in a new society. As thousands of ex-slaves poured into the city during the war, white laborers feared that their occupations as well as their status might become associated with Black labor. White workers protested and used violence to convey their message of an unwillingness to work alongside or be associated with Black workers. In February 1866, Cairo’s angry ship carpenters and caulkers conducted a strike against employers in part because of the hiring of African American craftsmen and laborers. In the spring of 1867, seven African American employees of a local lumber mill were threatened and driven away by a mob of white employees.<sup>55</sup> White Illinoisans slowly accepted the reality that African Americans were becoming a permanent legal resident in the state, but white workers were not necessarily willing to accept them as equal “workingmen.”

As Black migrants located jobs in other parts of the state, white Illinoisans continued their assault against their labor by appealing to the patriotic sympathies of the public. For instance, in 1865, several white men attacked a group of Black teamsters in Springfield, Illinois. The fight did not amount to much, but the *Illinois State Register* took offense to how the story was initially reported by the Republican *Illinois State Journal*. According to the *Register*, the

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<sup>54</sup> “Gone to Seed,” *Cairo Daily Democrat*, October 3, 1865; Hays, 230.

<sup>55</sup> “Negroes to Put Down Irish Copperheads,” *Cairo Daily Democrat*, November 7, 1865; “The Labor Question in the South,” December 30, 1865; “Negro Outrage at Memphis,” January 10, 1866; February 8, 1866, p. 1; “Negro Troops Gone,” April 14, 1866.

altercation was between white soldiers and Black teamsters, “whom the abolitionists, in violation of our state constitution, have permitted to come to Illinois and settle here to compete with honest and poor white men, and underwork white laborers and degrade their avocations.” Not satisfied with accusing Black workingmen of stealing the jobs of white soldiers, the *Register* went out of their way to emasculate the workers. According to the *Register’s* account, the fight began, when the “thick-lipped and long heeled negroes” hurled an insult to the soldiers, and a soldier was struck by one of the “sweet scented cullered pussons.” To further invoke the patriotic wrath of Springfield’s whites, the *Register* declared that a soldier was “struck by one of these very niggers whom he (had) been fighting for four years to be free, and who the abolitionists would make his equal?”<sup>56</sup> The following day the *Register* dedicated another column to the confrontation with more details on the plight of the soldiers. One of the men attempted to return to his former occupation as a wood chopper, according to the newspaper, and he was turned away because his former employer hired African American workers since they would “labor for less money, and he had no chance of getting the job under the circumstances.” The *Register* proclaimed to the soldiers: “you who have been fighting the battles of your country, and return again to the scenes of your former labors, you can see what abolitionists have done by inviting negroes to immigrate to Illinois to compete with the poor and honest white laborer and will you vote for these men who have thus acted while you were in the field (?)”<sup>57</sup> For Illinois Democrats, the paramount objective was to expose Republican policies that allegedly favored African Americans. While this was far from reality, Illinois Democrats understood this plan would be the most effective method to rally whites against the powerful Republican machine.

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<sup>56</sup> “A Skirmish,” *Illinois State Register*, November 3, 1865.

<sup>57</sup> “A Soldiers Idea of the Abolitionists,” *Illinois State Register*, November 4, 1865; Race and Justice, 237.

Meanwhile, Republicans continued to focus on Reconstruction issues and the plight of African Americans in the South, while Northern Democrats continued to influence racial matters by shaping the image of African Americans as degraded workers. In Illinois, anti-black rhetoric was particularly effective in shaping the discourse of white workers who increasingly believed that Black emigration would adversely affect their own occupational aspirations. The emerging NLU also paid attention to the idea that African Americans could possibly migrate to Northern states and compete with white laborers. The resurgence of working class militancy after the war was capped by the formation of a new federation of labor organizations, covering workers in diverse crafts and industrial occupations. Led by William Sylvis, the NLU was founded in Baltimore in 1866, and focused national attention on the demands of workers. Unlike their predecessors, Sylvis' national union was larger and broader and marked a new stage in working class organization by emerging as a nationwide institution that linked wage workers together in a broad community of interest.<sup>58</sup>

While the initial focus of the NLU was the eight-hour movement, the issue of the Black worker was a subject that could not be avoided. Yet rampant racism among Northern workers caused organization leaders to consistently skirt the issue. During the 1867 convention a committee assigned to address the admission of African Americans into the union was delayed in order to avoid a split between the delegates. Subsequently, the committee concluded that there was no reason to debate the point further since their official policy did not actually bar African Americans from the union. The subject was "so involved" and there was such a variety of opinions among union members on the topic, that it was "inexpedient" to take action on the

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<sup>58</sup> Philip Foner, *History of the Labor Movement in the United States Vol. 2: From the Founding of the A. F. of L. to the Emergence of American Imperialism* (New York, International Publishers, 1975), 395.

subject. A resolution was then offered which would delay any further discussion on Black membership until the next session. Although this was their official policy, the reality of the NLU was that they operated as a national umbrella for numerous local labor unions that had their own rules and bylaws. In most of these “locals” African Americans were largely excluded through unwritten laws in the local’s constitution.<sup>59</sup>

Throughout the country nearly all unions barred African Americans from membership. The NLU either advocated the formation of segregated Black locals, or concluded that the whole question of Black labor created such a wide diversity of opinion among union members, that it defied resolution. These assemblies also ignored Reconstruction issues, aside from calling for the speedy reconciliation of the South to the Union and noting how much Northern employment depended on the revival of cotton production. Many labor leaders sympathized with President Andrew Johnson’s unpopular Reconstruction policies, while others feared that to endorse African American’s political and economic aspirations meant associating with Republicans. Even those who advocated the organization of Black labor expressed little interest in their plight. Thus, despite the parallels between African American’s quest for economic autonomy and its own hostility to “wage slavery”, the Northern labor movement failed to identify its aspirations and interests with those of the former slaves.<sup>60</sup>

The ramifications for excluding African Americans from the NLU were clear: Black workers outside of union control could be used by employers as leverage to lower the wages of white union workers. Progressive union newspapers understood the inherent danger of these ramifications and strongly criticized white workers for allowing their racial prejudice against

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<sup>59</sup> Charles H. Wesley, *Negro Labor in the United States, 1850-1925: A Study in American Economic History*, (New York: Russell books, 1967), 159.

<sup>60</sup> Foner, *Reconstruction*, 479-480.

Black workers to potentially undermine their own economic cause. If they were unwilling to work with African Americans and exclude them from unions, argued the *Boston Daily Evening Voice*, Black workers would “be obliged, in self-defense, to underbid the white.” The newspaper specifically criticized members of the NLU who were “under the influence of the silliest and wickedest of all prejudices” that prevented them from accepting African American workers.<sup>61</sup> “Shall we make them our friends, or shall capital be allowed to turn them as an engine against us?” asked the *Voice*. “The systematic organization and consolidation of labor must henceforth become the watchword of the true reformer.” To accomplish this, “the cooperation of the African race in America must be secured.”<sup>62</sup> Chicago’s *Workingman’s Advocate* saw the larger ramifications for the labor movement, and suggested that the support of African Americans, and “only through the grossest culpability and mismanagement that they can be driven into the ranks of their oppressors.”<sup>63</sup> Thus, at least during the early stages of the American labor movement, many labor union spokespersons advocated at least a modicum of a bi-racial movement. Of course, this did not necessarily indicate a particular affinity towards the Black worker during the Civil War period; nor did it mean that union spokespersons were overly concerned about the plight of recently freedpeople. It did, however, indicate that union spokespersons understood that any significant fissure within the working class American population would be exploited by industrial ownership, and could severely hamper the movement.

Historian Philip Foner noted that one of the major defects of the NLU’s conventions in the late 1860s was their failure to take any position on organizing African American workers. The failure to properly address the manner was part of the general lack of understanding of the

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<sup>61</sup> “The Labor Congress,” *Boston Daily Evening Voice*, August 27, 1867

<sup>62</sup> John R. Commons, et. al, *A Documentary History of American Industrial Society*, Vol 9 , (Cleveland: Arthur H. Clark Company, 1910), 157-60.

<sup>63</sup> “The Fifteenth Amendment,” *Workingman’s Advocate*, May 7, 1870.



special problems facing African Americans in the post Emancipation period. Furthermore, by condemning all existing political parties, the NLU seemingly dismissed one of the most significant political issue facing the Black worker—the relation of the Republican Party to their struggle for land and political rights.<sup>64</sup> During the fourth annual convention of the NLU in 1870, a major conflict over the political resolution which declared that the major political parties were dominated by “non-producers” who drew their wealth from the exploitation of workingmen. The resolution urged African American workers to abandon the Republican Party and unite with white workers under the Labor Reform party. Black delegates at the convention displayed little confidence in white workers’ willingness to reward their political support with justice on the economic front. Black delegates were more interested in eliminating the barriers against their right to work rather than the issues taken up by the Labor reform party. This was the last convention of the NLU which African Americans bothered to attend.<sup>65</sup>

### *Response to Labor Union Exclusion*

Political issues significant to white workers did not necessarily hold the same weight for African American workers during the postwar period. For example, African Americans were interested in education, the Freedman’s Bureau, equal rights, and the occupation of western lands. While African Americans resented the bitter attacks on the Republican Party by labor union members, working class whites resented the alleged “pro-black” stance of the Republicans. These apparent differences in philosophy, along with continued racial exclusions, led many

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<sup>64</sup> Phillip S. Foner, *Organized Labor and the Black Worker, 1619-1973*, (New York: International Publishers, 1976), 375.

<sup>65</sup> Phillip S. Foner and Ronald Lewis, eds., *The Black Worker During the Era of the National Labor Union*, Volume 2, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1978), 82.

Black leaders to call for the formation of separate organizations.<sup>66</sup> Black leaders tended to minimize the acceptance of the philosophy that called for a need to fight for the rights of workers. While many leaders took an initial interest in fostering trade unionism among Black workers, they ultimately favored views that promoted the virtues of capitalism.

African American workers were forced to organize their own unions under the umbrella of the NLU because the organization was too weak to force local unions to comply with its official stance of inclusion. This occurred for two reasons according to historian Charles Wesley: first, there was the attitude of the unions and of the workingmen, and second, there were differences of political views, and the influence of ambitious African American politicians.<sup>67</sup> “It is unfortunate,” stated African labor leader, Isaac Myers, “that the colored boy is not permitted to enter the workshops of the northern cities to learn a trade.” He believed that the only hope for the black worker was “to put his labor in the market to be controlled by selfish and unscrupulous spectators, who will dare do any deed to advance their own ends.”<sup>68</sup>

Myers, who became the first president of the Colored National Labor Union (CNLU), led the charge for African Americans to form their own organization because they found the NLU to be insensitive to the special needs of the Black worker. As a workingman who had his livelihood violently stripped from him by white competitors, and as a loyal Republican who remained suspicious of both the Democratic Party and all calls for the Labor Reform Party, he soon realized the interests of the men he represented were not necessarily the same as those of the whites who dominated the NLU.<sup>69</sup> Although the NLU was the first American union to admit

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<sup>66</sup> Wesley, 168-169.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> “The National Convention of the Colored Men of the Republic,” *Christian Recorder*, November 28, 1868.

<sup>69</sup> Jones, *American Work*, 295.

African American representatives to its conventions, the NLU was simply too slow on the issue of Black membership.<sup>70</sup> Wesley argued that the leading cause for the formation of separate national organizations for African Americans was the attitude of labor organizations and whites, and not the idea that Black workers chose to organize separately from whites. They were compelled, as they had been on many occasions, by force of circumstances, to unite in order to protect themselves against those who would suppress them.<sup>71</sup>

Myers called the December 1869 meeting of the formation of the CNLU in which two hundred and fourteen delegates from eighteen states (Illinois was not yet one of them). African American leaders throughout the United States reached the conclusion that equal employment opportunities and better pay could be achieved only through independent organization. The massive response of the Black workers to unionize in such a short period of time underscored the magnitude of the perceived need for an organization to further their special concerns. For the first time African Americans representing a wide variety of trades, occupations and professions discussed the conditions of Black labor in the United States and made recommendations for improvements. Unlike the NLU, the CNLU would include all workers and not only skilled mechanics.<sup>72</sup>

As African American men struggled to gain access to apprenticeships in the skilled trades and unions, Black women found it even more difficult to move away from menial labor. Myers and the CNLU established a special women's committee headed by African American abolitionist, Mary Ann Shadd Cary. Typical of mid-nineteenth century Black leaders, she also

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<sup>70</sup> Phillip Foner and Ronald Lewis, *The Black Worker to 1869, Volume 1*, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1978), 2.

<sup>71</sup> Wesley, 168; Sumner E. Matison, "The Labor Movement and the Negro During Reconstruction," *The Journal of Negro History*, Vol 33, No 4, (October 1948),453-454.

<sup>72</sup> Phillip Foner, *Black Worker*, 36.

worked as a teacher, Union army recruiting officer, journalist for the *Provincial Freedmen*, outspoken women's rights advocate, and was the first Black female lawyer in the United States. Like her male counterparts of the Black Convention Movement, Cary and her committee members called for Black women to aspire for "respectable" labor. They called on African American women to seek out "profitable and health-inspiring employment," jobs in "market-gardening, small fruit and berry culture, shop and storekeeping, upholstering, telegraphing, and insurance and other agencies."<sup>73</sup>

Ultimately, the NLU was only a delegate organization composed of representatives of member labor groups and it had no real authority to enforce policy on the affiliated bodies. It had only the power of example and of moral suasion. As significant as the NLU was, their example was far from enough to win for the general acceptance of African American workers in the trade unions of the country. With few exceptions, the national unions did not measure up to the position adopted by the NLU. Some of them officially ignored the question of admitting Black workers; others refused to take a stand against racism within their own locals; and still others openly excluded African Americans by constitutional provision.<sup>74</sup>

Although race was the primary reason whites excluded Black workers from craft unions, political ideological differences during the postwar period, also played a significant role. Political party affiliation, however, was second only to race in deciding whether African Americans could be members under the NLU umbrella. As far as African Americans were concerned, the Republican Party emancipated them, granted them citizenship and the right to vote. Political equality and equal citizenship, noted historians Sterling Spero and Abram Harris,

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<sup>73</sup> Jones, *American Work*, 295

<sup>74</sup> Matison, 448-449.

were the “touchstone of freedom and advancement” to Black leaders. Leaders like Frederick Douglass based the advancement of African Americans “almost wholly upon the attainment of political rights,” and that his and other black leaders’ influence “was so great among the masses...that their counsel prevailed against the judgment that the franchise without labor organization would “be of little benefit.”<sup>75</sup> Since the Republican Party was the political party that advocated the elective franchise for African Americans, and subsequently passed the Fifteenth Amendment, the vast majority of Black people felt both compelled and grateful to continue to support the Republicans.

Afro-Illinoisans saw significant improvement in the political and civil rights during the post-Emancipation period, yet their collective economic gains were minimal. An increase in violence and discrimination to distinguish the type of labor Black Illinoisans were allowed to perform, along with de facto exclusion from most labor organizations, relegated African Americans to menial labor. New Black migrants from Southern states may have arrived in Illinois with less skills than their white counterparts, but due to the increased rigidity in the type of labor Blacks were allowed to perform, many unskilled African Americans would not receive the same opportunities as unskilled whites. As African American men became tied to lesser paying menial jobs, African American women were to take jobs outside of the home.

### *Political and Occupational Position of Black Illinoisans*

After the ratification of the Fifteenth Amendment in 1870, Black Illinoisans were accorded full civil rights and were better equipped to protect themselves against continuing

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<sup>75</sup> Sterling D. Spero and Abram L. Harris, *The Black Worker: The Negro and the Labor Movement* (New York: Atheneum, 1968), 34.

discrimination and violence. However, newly gained political rights did not allow Afro-Illinoisans to gain equal access to employment opportunities or end racial violence. To circumvent occupational discrimination, Black Illinoisans not only relied on the vote, they also depended on strong Black community institutions such as churches, lodges and clubs for support. They also challenged white imposed social and economic limitations through participation in electoral politics and community institutions in an effort to maintain their rights of citizenship and attain formal political power.<sup>76</sup>

The first major test of the newly acquired rights for Black Illinoisans came in the education system. State Superintendent of Schools noted that separate schools did exist in counties where there was a sizeable Black population. In some counties where the African American population was small, Black children were kept out of the graded classrooms and instead lumped into a single, ungraded room often with inferior teachers and poor instruction. In some areas, African American children were simply turned away, sometimes by white parents, and more often by school trustees. The superintendent declared such tactics illegal, and called on the general assembly for redress against this type of exclusion. In 1872, the General Assembly passed the “equal education law”, which was designed to secure for all children the right and opportunity to an equal education in the common schools. The superintendent’s survey also showed that most school officials, especially those in Central and Southern Illinois believed that the races would be best served by separate schools. The general assembly attempted to remedy the situation in 1874 with “An Act to protect colored children in their rights to attend public

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<sup>76</sup> Cha-Jua , 80; Charles L. Lumpkins, “Black East St. Louis: Politics and Economy in a Border City, 1860-1945,” (PhD Dissertation, Penn State University, 2006), 36-38

schools.” The law forbade school directors or trustees from excluding children on account of race, which was punishable by a fine of \$5 to \$100.<sup>77</sup>

A few Afro-Illinoisans procured political positions as a result of the electoral franchise. As early as April 1870, Governor Palmer appointed John Jones a notary public. The next month, Illinois Congressman Ebon C. Ingersoll recommended that William L. Barnes of Peoria for office of Revenue Storekeeper. In 1871, Jones became the first African American to be elected to office at the county level when he was elected to a one year term on the Cook County board. Jones ran on a bi-partisan ticket put together by *Chicago Tribune* publisher, Joseph Medill, in the immediate aftermath of the 1871 Chicago Fire. He was re-elected to a three year term in 1872, running as a Republican candidate. During that election campaign, Jones and one hundred and eleven of Black Chicagoans signed an address in support of Ulysses S. Grant for president in the upcoming election.<sup>78</sup> In 1873, Governor John L. Beveridge gave a prestigious appointment of Trustee of the Illinois Industrial University to John J. Bird of Cairo, and three years later Bird was elected Cairo police magistrate.<sup>79</sup>

African Americans in the border region of the state encompassing Southern Illinois towns, including East St. Louis, Alton and Brooklyn, maintained their rights of citizenship as they struggled to overcome racial subordination and job discrimination. They increasingly relocated to areas with larger African American populations. The Black majority population in Brooklyn, Illinois, historically excluded from the political process, undoubtedly craved the opportunity for majority rule with a state that had recently barred them. Black citizenship

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<sup>77</sup> Bridges 97.

<sup>78</sup> Bridges, 97; David A. Joens, “John W.E. Thomas: A Political Biography of Illinois’ First African American State Legislator,” (PhD Dissertation, Southern Illinois University, 2009), 19; Watkins, 504-505; Dillard, 594.

<sup>79</sup> Bridges, 98.

empowered Afro-Illinoisans, and may have initiated the drive to incorporate Brooklyn, Illinois as a village under the state's incorporation act, which allowed an unincorporated community with at least one hundred people who lived in an area of two square miles or less and at least one mile from any other municipality to hold an incorporation election. In July 1873, three years after African Americans obtained the elective franchise, the village of Brooklyn voted to incorporate. While it was not clear whether there was a racial dimension to the move to gain self-government, it did occur three years after African Americans gained the franchise. Although their future was promising because it shared the metro-east region's strategic advantage of being located along the Mississippi River and it was across from St. Louis. However, their bid at economic development failed because it did not attract a major industrial plant due to race and racism and the lack of an industrial base circumscribed the town's development.<sup>80</sup>

As Afro-Illinoisans experienced a surge in racial violence during the Reconstruction period, they increasingly used their mobility as a form a self-defense. Within five years after the Civil War, according to historian Jacqueline Jones, it became apparent that Black men would retain the right to vote only to the extent that local white politicians and their constituents would allow them to vote. Also, aside from the few who were self-employed in modest ways, African American workers would find jobs only to the extent that they did not deprive whites in the same locale of their advantages in the realm of gainful employment. For these reasons, the key to the future well-being of African American workers was their ability to move from place to place—not the shifting sharecropper's narrow boundaries—but to regions of the country where (they could hope) a high demand for labor would render racial ideologies counterproductive and irrelevant for employers and workers alike. Therefore, the African American workers who chose

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<sup>80</sup> Cha Jua 77-84.



to move in search of political and economic rights reinvigorated a most distinctive American value—the value of taking a risk by leaving, unfettered by the chains of slavery or by the taunts of a mob.<sup>81</sup>

In Illinois, African Americans were moving out of regions where the Ku Klux Klan were allowed to proliferate. Significantly, none of the seven counties identified as “Klan territory” in Southern Illinois had a Black population with a percentage over five percent, and three of the seven had one percent or less.<sup>82</sup> African American migrants during the Civil War often made their first stop in southern counties like Pulaski or Alexander where labor was plentiful but menial, or they could remain close to their farming roots. For example, in Pulaski County eighty-one percent of the rural African American males worked as tenant farmers, sharecroppers or farmers without farms. Their incomes were often at or barely above the subsistence level, most owned no real property, and usually operated small farms with twenty acres or less. Only thirteen African American families were independent farmers in 1870, while a few had sizable estates. Samuel Warfield and Jackson Johnson each owned farms worth \$2,000 each, while Mary Porter’s farm was valued at \$1,000. Warfield was also a brick mason, and in 1870 his farm included forty improved and sixty wooded acres. While owning \$600 in personal property, he also employed the equivalent of one full time laborer at the cost of \$200 for a year’s wages. These exceptions aside, the majority of rural African Americans in Pulaski were in the lower social economic stratum with fifteen percent of adult Black men earning a maximum of \$200 per

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<sup>81</sup> Jones, *American Work*, 297.

<sup>82</sup> Edgar F. Raines, jr. “The Ku Klux Klan in Illinois, 1867-1875,” *Illinois Historical Journal*, Vol 78, No 1, (Spring 1985), 27; Raines identified the following counties in which Klan activities operated: Franklin (0), Williamson (1), Jackson (5), Saline (2), Johnson (0), Union (1), and Pope (4). He also noted that these counties tended to be the most racially homogenous counties in the southern region, as well as containing the highest percentage of whites born in slave states. For more details, see Table 1 “nativity and race in southern Illinois, 1870 and 1880” on page 25.

year as farm laborers. Due to unemployment for part of the year, many of these farm laborers earned one half to three fourths as much.<sup>83</sup>

In contrast to Pulaski County's large farming and rural community, Alexander County's largest city, Cairo, contained hundreds of small-scale industries, firms and retail establishments following the Civil War. Those firms included barrel factories, breweries, grain mills, lumber mills, a cottonseed-oil establishment, potteries, brickyards, box and tool manufactures, the Singer Sewing Machine Corporation's new cabinet works, as well as dozens of such smaller businesses. Although white workers in Cairo were often faced with a challenging economic environment, it was considerably less intimidating than the difficulties Black men and women faced during post-Emancipation. Indeed, large numbers of white workers remained low-paid unskilled laborers following the Civil War. Yet there were a significant percentage of whites fortunate enough to experience some degree of upward mobility. Conversely, the post-Emancipation experience for African Americans in Cairo was a consistent uphill economic and social battle as they occupied the underclass vacuum recently vacated by the Irish working poor.<sup>84</sup>

The majority of Black men were excluded from better paying skilled and semi-skilled occupations that Cairo's expanding economy increasingly made available. Thus, they were compelled to seek employment as low paid common laborers even though they were employed at some of the same businesses as white workers. African Americans employed at the Singer Cabinet company in Cairo were employed as janitors or on the loading docks moving freight and lumber, white workers were usually higher paid workers in more skilled positions. Black men also labored in the lumber industry, in brickyards, on the waterfront, and as steamboat

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<sup>83</sup> Shirley Carlson, "The Black Community in the Rural North: Pulaski County, Illinois, 1860-1900," (PhD Dissertation, Washington University, 1982), 28-31.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

deckhands, all occupation that were viewed by the majority of whites as too low paying, exhausting, or dangerous for white men. The back-breaking “negro work” may have been exceedingly difficult and low paying, but in Cairo, these jobs existed in abundance in economically stable periods <sup>85</sup>

Black Illinoisans were making more informed decisions about where they could safely work and live—for example, the Black population in Chicago increased from 958 in 1860 to 3,691 in 1870. Ex-slaves arriving in Chicago from southern plantations and farms, were accustomed to working and performing difficult labor. However, Black migrants seeking employment with fair compensation soon encountered obstacles in the competitive environment where many white workers continued to fight for unfair advantages to maintain a monopoly in higher skilled and better compensated employment. <sup>86</sup>

Table 3.1 Illinois Counties with the Highest African American Population in 1870

Counties	1870 Population (1860 Population)	% of Illinois African Americans
Cook	3,858 (1,007)	13.4
Pulaski	2,394 (39)	8.3
Alexander	2,296 (55)	8.0
Madison	2,214 (502)	7.7
Adams	1,567 (179)	5.4
Sangamon	1,166 (331)	4.1

<sup>85</sup> Christopher K. Hays, “The African American Struggle for Equality and Justice in Cairo, Illinois, 1865-1900,” *Illinois Historical Journal*, Vol. 90, No. 4 (Winter, 1997), 265-267.

<sup>86</sup> Christopher Reed, *Black Chicago's First Century, 1833-1900*, Vol. 1, (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2005), 138-139.

Table 3.1 (cont.)

Counties	1870 Population (1860 Population)	% of Illinois African Americans
St. Clair	1,297 (525)	4.5
<b>Total</b>	<b>14,792</b>	<b>51.4</b>

Total Illinois African American population: 28,762

Consistent relegation to unskilled and low paying jobs for African American men in Illinois forced many African American women to enter the workforce during the post-Emancipation period. Nationally, 49.5 percent of African American women of all ages and marital statuses were in the labor force, compared to only 16.5 percent of white women. The disparity between Black and white women was a clear indication that white families did not require outside labor from women because they were securing better paid employment in comparison to Black families. Working women in the Black community was not a recent phenomenon, however, as women and children were accustomed to working in agricultural pursuits under slavery. Yet numerous Black artisans, particularly in southern cities, refused to allow their wives to work and many white women from poor families held no jobs because they were too proud to work. In reality, the harsh requirements of slavery which forced African American women and children to work had removed the stigma of labor. When faced with the economic realities of making a living, Black women found little difficulty in going to work.<sup>87</sup>

<sup>87</sup> William H. Harris, *The Harder We Run: Black Workers Since the Civil War*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 22-23.

Table 3.2 Leading Occupations of Illinois African American Workers in 1870<sup>88</sup>

Occupation	Total	% of Black Workers
(Unspecified) Laborer	1,061	27.4
Farmer	619	16.0
Domestic Servant	438	11.3
Waiter	342	8.8
Farm laborer	290	7.4
Mill worker	131	3.4
Porter/RR Worker	203	5.2
Washerwomen	130	3.4
Cook	129	3.3
Barber	109	2.8
Coachmen	75	1.9
Teamster	70	1.8
Deckhand/Steamboat men/rivermen	53	1.3
Bell boy	37	0.9
Blacksmith, carpenter, janitor	21	0.5
Whitewasher, Brick mason	15	0.3
Total <sup>89</sup>	3,872	

Afro-Illinois women followed the national trend of other Black women—they too found it necessary to work outside the home in order to supplement their husband’s wages. Several

<sup>88</sup> All data collected from Illinois counties with the most African Americans in 1870, see table 3.1

<sup>89</sup> *U.S. Bureau of the Census, Federal Population Census 1870*, compiled by Alonzo Ward using “Heritage Quest Online” <http://www.heritagequestonline.com>; Also included in the totals are the following occupations with the amount of workers in parenthesis :clergymen (12); hostler (10); watchman (7); woodsawyer (7); clairvoyant (5); drayman (5); shoemaker (4); store clerk (3); seamstress (3); physician (3); painter (3); hairdresser (3); teacher (2); tailor (2); steward (2); paper hanger (2) machinist (2); livery (1); gardener (2); dentist (1); engineer (1); foundry man (1); cigar maker (1); bartender (1); nurse (1); restaurant keeper (1); upholster (1); merchant (1).

menial occupational outlets in Illinois for Black women appeared during the late 1860s when affluent whites' desire for the services of African Americans increased. Wealthy white women were choosing to avoid the drudgery of washing and ironing their own clothes, and increasingly hired African American women to do the work for them.<sup>90</sup> However, this was not the case in less affluent counties in the southern region of the state. In Madison, Alexander, and Pulaski counties, less than seven percent of African American women were listed as working outside the home.<sup>91</sup> By contrast, in more affluent counties, such as Adams, Sangamon, and Cook counties, Black women worked approximately thirty-one, thirteen, and sixteen percent respectively. In Quincy, Illinois, the county seat of Adams County, had more than one hundred and ten African American women in the workforce, and only two women worked in a skilled profession (teacher, nurse). Approximately seventy-six African American women in Chicago worked as “washerwomen.” The work was physically demanding, but it represented an opportunity for survival in an even more hostile, exploitative work environment in which native born white as well as European immigrant women moved up to other types of domestic service work. The physical demands were obvious, and the difficulty surpassed that of other forms of service work. Their hands told part of the story; their backs, arms shoulders, and muscles relayed the other.

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<sup>90</sup> Reed, 194.

<sup>91</sup> According to historian Jacqueline Jones, there were several reasons why it is difficult to state exactly the number of urban freedwomen gainfully employed in 1870, though estimates for different cities have ranged from 50 to 70 percent. Census data, probably the best single source, reveal a person's reported occupation, but not necessarily her employment status at the time of the interview. The categories of cook, servant, and laundress were fairly flexible, and a woman might have worked in one capacity or another at different times of the year, or in all three simultaneously. The extent of seasonal work was not recorded; some women probably went out in the countryside during the late summer and early fall months to earn wages picking cotton. Occupational data on rural African American women was difficult to impossible to obtain since census enumerators often listed women as “at home,” or “keeping house.” In many cases, these women may have worked outside the home as “housekeepers,” but the enumerators often did not distinguish between the two. In Madison, for example, there were more than 100 African American women listed as “keeping house.” those listed by the census taker as “at home” or “keeping house” might have been taking in some money by keeping boarders or selling garden produce even though they were not listed as part of the urban work force. See Jacqueline Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work, and the Family From Slavery to the Present*, (New York: Basic Books, 2010), 74.

Whether Black women depended on a cart or their backs and shoulders to handle the bundle of a typical week's laundry, they maneuvered themselves along city streets to begin the arduous process necessary to complete their tasks.<sup>92</sup> According to Christopher K. Hays, washerwomen and domestic servants maintained an exhausting ritual that rarely varied significantly. They rose at an early hour each morning, sent their families on their way, walked to their employer's residence, and began their daily routine of cooking, washing, and cleaning, and returned home in the evening where other responsibilities in their own home demanded their attention. By 1880, seventy percent of all African American domestics resided not in their white employer's home, but with their own families. That arrangement allowed domestic workers to retain some measure of privacy and personal freedom. The remaining thirty percent apparently had little choice but to lodge with their employers.<sup>93</sup> In the midst of such a challenging environment, African American women continued to bring dignity to themselves as they sought a modicum of economic self-sufficiency. As menial as this labor was, it provided basic sustenance for Black families.<sup>94</sup>

Black men were also affected by the increase in services for affluent white Illinoisans. By the late 1860s, they were being recruited to work as porters aboard the luxury trains of George Pullman. By 1870 there were one hundred and ten African American men in Chicago that listed their occupation as porter. Pullman was quite specific in the type of African American men that would work on his trains. They mostly came from the South, and were usually former slaves because Pullman believed that these men would be used to being in close proximity with wealthy

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<sup>92</sup> Reed, 196-197; Tera Hunter, *To 'Joy My Freedom: Southern Black Women's Lives and Labors after the Civil War*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 2-4.

<sup>93</sup> Hays, *Way Down in Egypt Land (diss)*, 271; Hunter, 2-4.

<sup>94</sup> St. Clair Drake and Horace R. Cayton, *Black Metropolis: A Study of Negro Life in a Northern City*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 249-250; Reed, 196-197.

whites.<sup>95</sup> He wanted a certain type of African American male worker that would make his affluent white clientele feel comfortable. Hoping to utilize long-standing racial stereotypes, Pullman recruited men from the Deep South with dark skin and the ability to deliver obedience bordering on obsequiousness. Former slaves, he believed, would be the best at anticipating and catering to the passengers every caprice. Former slaves were also desirable because they had the right amount of obedience and were less likely to make trouble, either as employees or with the customers. His most compelling motivation for hiring African Americans had to do with his conviction that for passengers to truly feel comfortable on his sleepers, they had to see the porter as someone safe. Ideally it would be a man that could be seen, but not noticed—as if he did not exist. Ideally, Pullman envisioned an environment where there was never any danger of his Black, obedient workers being mistaken for a passenger. In the words of one porter, the Pullman Company wanted the “blackest man with the whitest teeth.”<sup>96</sup>

Like most menial labor, however, working as a Pullman porter was physically demanding. The typical Pullman porter’s work schedule was especially grueling, and it was common for them to work one hundred hours per week on train runs. Long periods of standing and stooping, strenuous to the limbs in the extreme, took a toll on the men over time. They received poor wages, and had to depend on the public’s willingness to tip to supplement his inadequate wage base. The chances of promotion were not good, however part of the attraction of the job within the Chicago Black community was the fact that their wages usually exceeded the waiter or porter in a private hotel.<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> Bessie Louise Pierce, *A History of Chicago: From Town to City*, vol 2, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007); Reed 194.

<sup>96</sup> Larry Tye, *Rising from the Rails: Pullman Porters and the Making of the Black Middle Class*, (New York: Owl Books, 2004), 22-25.

<sup>97</sup> Reed, 196.



During the early years of the Pullman Company, most of the Black workers were former slaves who cautiously tested their liberties and sized up the constraints. To these workers it seemed unrealistic to challenge the expected demeanor, therefore, the image of the ubiquitous, sometimes overly courteous “George”, with his obligatory smile, grew and soon dominated this new service by the end of the century.<sup>98</sup> African American men monopolized these jobs, and it allowed these men, who once worked in overalls, plowed fields and picked cotton, to work in bow ties and starched pants. A job on the train meant nothing less than a chance to escape both Reconstructionists and Southern white intimidation, and their own well-meaning parents whose experience as slaves blinded them to what the world (particularly in the North) might have to offer. Most of the men cherished the position and made it a career, and many passed the occupation down to the next generation. Over the next several decades and for generations into the future, porters would be typified by men with the attitudes and personality traits not only associated with slavery, but also linked to the “New Negroes” who took on this work challenge because it was simply the best work available under the condition of the day. That an individual emerged who would advance far beyond his employer’s and society’s initial expectations would account for the emergence of prospective leaders in the Black community in the field of law, finance, and government.<sup>99</sup>

African American men also dominated service work in the restaurant industry during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The ranks of African American male waiters in Chicago began to grow as the city emerged as a rail, convention, and hotel center which fueled the rapid expansion of large, fancy eateries. According to the 1870 census, three hundred and

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<sup>98</sup>; Richard R Wright “The Industrial Condition of Negroes in Chicago,” (Bachelor’s thesis, University of Chicago, 1901), 25; Reed, 195-196.

<sup>99</sup> Tye, 28; Reed, 196.

four African American men from the First through Third wards worked as servers in the growing industry. To properly understand the significance of this occupation and industry, Illinois had a total of three hundred and forty two African American waiters, and eighty nine percent worked in Chicago. Similar to the logic of George Pullman, the owners of many of these restaurants were anxious to secure the skills of hospitality and service nurtured in the South. The continuation of migrating former slaves from the South ensured the owners that a large pool of talent was available at low wages. But any expectation on the part of management that these workers would remain servile began to evaporate almost immediately during the 1870s. Unlike the counterparts in the porter industry, Black waiters in Chicago conducted scattered walkouts that erupted over depression era pay reduction that drove the average wages of \$27-\$30 per month down to \$18-20. Poor treatment by obnoxious white headwaiters, as well as the length and timing of employees dinner hour, triggered numerous walkouts.<sup>100</sup>

During the same period, African American men dominated the barbering industry. Although Black men were gradually excluded from skilled work, barbering remained a relatively open industry for them during the post Emancipation period. The skilled profession of barbering during the late nineteenth century (although relatively well-paying) remained a service-oriented occupation that had not quite gained the notoriety it would later garner by the early twentieth century. In Illinois counties with the highest concentration of African Americans, there were one hundred and nine African American professional barbers in 1870, including seventy nine in Cook County. In larger cities like Chicago, some successful African American barbers who served a white clientele, came in for a measure of criticism for their willingness to defer to the

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<sup>100</sup> Perry R. Duis, *Challenging Chicago: Coping with Everyday Life, 1837-1920*, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998), 263.

racial prejudices of their white customers. One African American barber explained that he “dare not shave one of his own race, for fear of losing the custom of the whites.” The Black neighbors of these barbers envied them their jobs but resented the sacrifice of moral conviction that those jobs seemed to entail. “A colored man who refuses to shave a colored man because he is colored,” remarked one Black barber, “is much worse than a white man who refuses to eat, drink, ride, walk, or be educated with a colored man because he is colored, for the former is a party de facto to riveting chains around his own neck and the necks of his much injured race.” African American barbers, therefore, were forced to choose between making a living and maintaining their own self-respect were representative of the many Black workers who had to seek out work anywhere they could find it. In turn, the irregular, ill-paid labor of the vast majority of northern Blacks adversely affected the social fabric of their communities, all too often severing families and destabilizing neighborhoods.<sup>101</sup> By the mid-1870s, even these choices were becoming limited as the *Chicago Tribune* explained how Chicago’s Black barbers were “being pushed to the wall” by white barbers surfacing on the city’s South side. Most of the shops in this city were once owned and run by African Americans, the Tribune observed, “who until that time monopolized the business all over the country.” After the Civil War, however, white barbers appeared and “speedily found favor with the better class of customers, owing to their superior skill and neatness.”<sup>102</sup>

Gains in civil rights for Afro-Illinoisans by the immediate Post-Emancipation period did not necessarily amount to an improvement in their collective occupational status. Of course, former

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<sup>101</sup> Jones, 285.

<sup>102</sup> “The Barber,” *Chicago Tribune*, December 10, 1876.

slaves that migrated north to locate better employment were likely to substantially improve their economic status. However, many Afro-Illinoisan workers incurred new racially motivated exclusion from employment they formerly had access to. As Afro-Illinoisans enjoyed their “legal” citizenship, right to vote, and other civil liberties in the years after the Civil War, working class white Illinoisans located methods to protect themselves from what they perceived as a threat to their economic status.

### *Conclusion*

The Republican Party’s commitment to the elimination of race-based restrictions in federal law resulted in significant legislation: the Thirteenth Amendment (1865); the Civil Rights Act of 1866; and the Fourteenth (1868) and Fifteenth Amendments (1870). These revolutionary measures along with massive changes to the political economy intensified the economic fears of Northern white workers. The Emancipation of Southern slaves along with enormous alterations to the American work structure incited Northern white supremacy advocates to oppose even the smallest measures to aid African Americans. In particular, the anti-black rhetoric and physical terror by local politicians and vigilante terrorists resonated with many Illinois workers who faced a rapidly industrializing state which drastically altered their economic status. Their once cherished Black Laws were eliminated, and the specter confronted Illinoisans during a period of abject economic susceptibility. Desperate and fearful of the possibility of losing long-held racial and economic advantages, advocates of white supremacy in Illinois waged a virtual war against the Black worker in an effort to secure their position within the economy. In reality, however, these provisions would serve as the basis of a revolution, yet they had no real impact on the social division of labor at the time.

After Emancipation, white skin was no longer an indication of a “free worker” and therefore, white Illinoisans and other Northern workers had to rely on new forms of self-definition to distinguish themselves from Black workers. Northern and Southern principles of Black labor deployment converged; as free people, African Americans would be confined to menial labor, and gradually stripped of their status as tradesmen, craftsmen, and entrepreneurs with white customers. By the 1870s, they could only brace themselves for a fresh new wave of foreign immigration, a wave that would confirm the major theme of antebellum northern labor relations which always put the interest of white workers ahead of Black workers.<sup>103</sup>

Yet by the mid-1870s, the African Americans population in Illinois was also expanding, and white Illinoisans could no longer dismiss Black workers as a temporary nuisance in the way of their economic progress. But rather than welcome the expanding (and increasingly urban) African American workforce into the labor unions during the most tumultuous period in labor history, white workers continued to exclude the Black laborer. The next chapter will examine the lasting effects of exclusionary measures on the Illinois Black community , and how these measures by the labor movement created the “enemy of labor”—transforming the Black specter into labor’s boogeyman.

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<sup>103</sup> Jones, 296.

CHAPTER 4  
FROM SPECTER TO BOOGEYMAN: AFRICAN AMERICAN  
LABOR IN POST-RECONSTRUCTION ILLINOIS  
AND THE CREATION OF THE 'ENEMY OF LABOR,' 1875-1893

The idea of a permanent African American presence in Illinois was a reality by the mid-1870s, and white Illinoisans could no longer dismiss Black people as a mere “specter” on the horizon that would impede their precarious occupational status. By eliminating the Black Laws, gaining citizenship, the right to vote, and the freedom to hold political office, Afro-Illinoisans were not only in position to live and function as hard-working citizens, they were seen as a legitimate threat to white racial hegemony in Illinois. In addition to these fears, anxiety levels of white workers reached an all-time high during this period due to economic depressions that led to severe wage cuts and massive layoffs. Increasingly frustrated white workers expressed outrage against capital through countless labor strikes. As a result, Northern employers grew frustrated with white labor agitation and began to actively recruited Black workers throughout Illinois and the Midwest as possible replacement workers. Thus, for a brief period, in many Northern industrial ownership circles, Black workers were desired workers in comparison to the disaffected white and immigrant laborer.

However, by the last decade of the nineteenth century, any possibility that Black workers would replace white and European immigrant workers had completely evaporated. This chapter will examine the gradual erosion of the status of Black workers in Illinois (in the eyes of Northern employers) and how that erosion in status by the last decade of the nineteenth century led to the notion that African Americans not only lacked the proper capacity to function as viable workers (at least, in comparison to whites and immigrants), but were also the antithesis of an

American citizen. Simply stated, racism was the primary cause in the degradation of Black workers that transformed them from being viable workers in a free labor economy, to being regarded as the “boogeymen” of the labor movement—i.e., the “enemy of labor” in the form of strikebreakers, undesirable and lazy workers with poor work ethics, etc.<sup>1</sup>

This chapter will also display how the process of racialization in labor and the labor movement ushered in a low point for the Afro-Illinois worker. Beginning with early agitation of white and immigrant workers in Illinois, this chapter will show how Northern industrialists and Republicans initially lauded African Americans as “good workers” within the free labor economy during the early labor struggles between capital and labor during the 1870s. Yet Afro-Illinoisans did not necessarily follow the desired pattern within the larger narrative. Black Illinoisans not only fought for better wages and treatment from employers, they formed and joined labor unions and proved to be just as boisterous as other labor unions during the same period. By the late 1880s the labor movement gradually moved away from progressive, all-inclusive labor unions such as the Knights of Labor. The Knights proved to have many flaws, but they were among a few major labor organizations that openly accepted African American men and women during a period when biracial unionism was waning. Craft unions, which catered primarily to skilled and predominantly white labor, dominated the labor movement by the end of the decade. Although their constitutions did not allow for racial exclusion, unions like the American Federation of Labor did not control individual local unions under their umbrella.

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<sup>1</sup> As I have displayed in previous chapters, racism was not a purely southern phenomenon—it existed throughout Northern states as well. Yet during the post-Reconstruction years, mainstream Americans were growing weary of the Civil War, and the notion of reconciliation between the North and South became increasingly popular. More specifically, the idea of reconciling on the issue of African Americans (which was always at the center of the debate), was finally being resolved. Gradually, southern state governments were allowed to control their black populations as they saw fit, while the federal government acquiesced.

Individual locals voted on who they would allow as members, and white workers increasingly voted to exclude African Americans. The idea that the Black worker was somehow inferior had always been a part of the racist lexicon in America. By the end of the nineteenth century, however, that racist ideology of the degraded Black worker was now firmly entrenched within mainstream thought.

*Braidwood, Illinois and the "Revolution in Labor"*

In March 1875, a *Chicago Tribune* correspondent reported that a miners strike in Brazil, Indiana continued with conditions worsening and the "breach between labor and capital widen[ing]." The year-long labor dispute found the striking miners "dogged and sullen," and was taking a dreadful toll on the men and their families. Many of Brazil's merchants initially supported the strike, but they increasingly feared violence would ensue as the striking miners became more vigilant and defiant. One merchant stated that he had witnessed other strikes, but none of them had "men so determined not to yield," and he believed it would be necessary to bring in the military to prevent an outbreak in violence. The *Tribune* correspondent predicted that a "revolution in labor" was imminent because the desperate mine operators were willing to hire African American workers to take the place of the striking miners. The mine operators were "confident that, if negro labor [was] adopted unanimously, it [would] completely and effectively crush strikes, which [had] become so frequent and arrogant of late as to make any dependence on white labor impracticable." African American workers, according to the correspondent, were more dependable than white laborers, and they would not become "turbulent at trifles, and for



many other reasons that are apparent.” As a result, some Midwestern mine operators had already made arrangements to fill their mines with Black workers, and “others will follow suit.”<sup>2</sup>

The idea to utilize Black workers to replace white labor was not an entirely novel ideal—according to the *Tribune*, during the immediate post-Civil War years, Northern Republicans maintained that ex-slaves would not only make “better and more efficient” workers as free laborers, they would in fact make better workers than whites. To be sure, the Republican *Tribune*’s comparison of ex-slaves, in the aftermath of the Civil War, was directed towards working class Southern whites, whom the paper referred to as “lazy, idle and loafing.”<sup>3</sup> However, as historian Heather Cox Richardson suggested, Northern whites and the steady influx of European immigrants after the war were increasingly seen as disaffected workers because of their connection to labor organizations. These groups, according to Northern industrialists and Republicans, held ties with communism and were incongruous with Republican free labor ideology.<sup>4</sup>

Economist Warren Whatley suggested that Northern employers had several reasons to favor Southern African American workers over Northern European Americans. First, Southern wages were lower than Northern wages and African American workers were relegated to the lowest rungs of the Southern job hierarchy, and thereby, more willing to take relatively higher paying Northern jobs; second, transportation improvements in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries reduced the cost of getting Southerners to the sites of Northern labor conflicts; third, unemployment, lower wages, and exclusion from unions combined to create a

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<sup>2</sup> “Coal Troubles,” *Chicago Tribune*, March 1, 1875.

<sup>3</sup> “Will the Negroes Work?” *Chicago Tribune*, April 27, 1866.

<sup>4</sup> Heather Cox Richardson, *The Death of Reconstruction: Race, Labor, and Politics in the Post-Civil War North, 1865-1901*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), 8.

reserve of African American workers who were likely to view strikebreaking as an employment opportunity; fourth, by importing Black labor from the Southern region, there was less chance that the workers would be familiar with a particular labor dispute anywhere in the Northern states; and fifth, because of racism, white Northern workers were less likely to fraternize with African American workers, and a violent reaction was more of a possibility.

The notion that Black workers would replace European American workers gained in popularity during the late 1870s. Yet, many industrial owners remained skeptical of this new dynamic. General Superintendent and co-owner of the Chicago Wilmington and Vermillion Coal Company (CW&V) in Braidwood, Illinois, Alanson Sweet was convinced that employing African American workers during labor conflicts would destroy Northern unions. However, convincing the other CW&V mine owners would not be easy. Bituminous coal mining became increasingly important in Central and Northern Illinois after the Civil War, and its rapid development caused great changes in the economic and social life of that region. Entrepreneurs of all kinds rushed into the area as railroad corporations poured capital into the coal industry, and mine operators recruited thousands of European immigrant and white workers to dig for the wealth that lay buried there. These were predominantly European American workers, however there is evidence of the existence of a few African American miners in Braidwood prior to the 1877 dispute.<sup>5</sup>

During the initial stages of a labor dispute in 1877, Alanson Sweet attempted to convince CW&V co-owners of the virtues of using African American strikebreakers over white and

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<sup>5</sup> Herbert G. Gutman, "The Braidwood Lockout of 1874," *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society*, Vol. 53, No. 1 (Spring, 1960), 5.

European immigrants. He was voted down by the other mine owners, and they elected to use European American workers from Chicago as they had done in a previous labor conflict. Like the previous conflict, the plan backfired as striking Braidwood miners met with and convinced the replacement workers they were in the throes of a labor dispute and should leave immediately. Either by intimidation or solidarity with the Braidwood workers, the vast majority of the strikebreakers left with little incident. In the 1874 dispute, this action resulted in a victory for the Braidwood miners, as the mine owners acquiesced to their demands for higher wages. In the 1877 dispute, however, the mine owners immediately fired the remaining strikebreakers for incompetence and because they were, once again, fraternizing with the Braidwood miners. In a letter written to one of the co-owners, Sweet explained that he wanted to utilize Black workers when the 1877 strike first began. With the mines filled with African American laborers, he continued, “the company will not be burdened with the expense of another strike for many years.”<sup>6</sup> Finally, the other co-owners relinquished and agreed to recruit approximately three hundred Black miners from Kentucky and West Virginia.

Black workers had a long history in the coal mining industry in the United States. According to historian Ronald Lewis, coal mining was an established Black occupation in the Deep South, but in the Northern fields, miners were traditionally white. The major reason for this division was due to the fact that the vast majority of African Americans remained in the South, and that demographic pattern only began to break down when Midwestern mine operators started importing African American workers to disrupt the labor strikes of Northern European American workers. During the post-Reconstruction period, a spirit of militant unionism spread through the

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<sup>6</sup> Alanson Sweet, Chicago, June 28 and July 2, 1877, to C. Woodman, (Woodman Mss, Wisconsin State Historical society) copied from Herbert Gutman, *Power and Culture: Essays on the American Working Class*. (The New Press, 1992), 176.

Northern fields that encouraged class unity among white miners to counter the rapidly expanding concentration of power in the hands of fewer and larger (and wealthier) coal companies. Coal miners were affected by this increasing corporate power more dramatically than most other workers because they usually lived in relatively small, isolated, single-industry towns, where company influence was forceful and direct. Moreover, the seasonal nature of coal mining, its inherent dangers, and the seemingly endless cycle of destructive competition and wage reduction, all produced an occupation fraught with insecurity and anxiety. The general economic depression which engulfed the nation during the 1870s and 1890s only worsened already tenuous economic conditions, and the insecurity of the coal miners must have been particularly acute at the very time that African American workers were imported.<sup>7</sup>

Despite the aggressive tactics utilized to recruit African Americans, they did not simply wait for Northern industrialists to offer them employment opportunities. Many Southern African Americans took advantage of their newfound freedom to relocate to a place with less discrimination and a better work environment. The earliest and best known of these organized movements was founded in Tennessee in 1869 when four hundred African Americans left the state due to economic and political conditions. In 1873, Benjamin “Pap” Singleton, a fugitive slave from Tennessee who had escaped to Canada, returned to lead three hundred African Americans to Kansas to start an all-Black colony. Already seventy years old when he began the exodus, Singleton spent the remainder of his life organizing colonies and relief for Black settlers in various northern states.<sup>8</sup> One migratory stream—the Exodus of 1879—led Black Southerners

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<sup>7</sup> Ronald L. Lewis, *Black Coal Miners in America: Race, Class, and Community Conflict, 1780-1980*, (Kentucky: University Press of Kentucky, 1987), 79-80.

<sup>8</sup> Foner, Philip Sheldon, and Ronald L. Lewis, eds. *The Black Worker: The Black worker during the Era of the Knights of Labor*. Vol. 3. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1984), 304.

to Kansas to attain farmland. An unknown number of these migrants never reached their destination and settled in towns and cities en route to Kansas.<sup>9</sup> For example, in 1876, a migrant agent left fifty African American migrants stranded in East St. Louis, Illinois presumably because the agent was either unscrupulous, or the migrants ran out of money and were unable to continue their journey.<sup>10</sup> According to Singleton's testimony, he brought 82,000 African Americans from the South to Illinois, Missouri, Kansas and other states.<sup>11</sup>

The African American miners that arrived in Braidwood in 1877 were likely heavily recruited by agents who failed to inform the workers of the possibility of any labor conflict. Initially there were no immediate signs that violence would ensue. However, the presence of the newcomers was not a welcome sight for the community. The nation was in the throes of a massive railroad strike in which wage cuts touched off a nation-wide riot that shut down most of the nation's railroads. The *Chicago Times* reported that the arrival of African American workers and the news of the national railroad strike created an "anxious mood" among the Braidwood miners, and "it would take but very little to cause an outbreak in this place."<sup>12</sup> While the Braidwood miners were clearly disturbed by the presence of the African American miners, it is significant that they made no initial attempt to meet with the Black miners to persuade them to leave their labor dispute as they had done with European American strikebreakers. Alanson Sweet's assumption that the Braidwood miners would not fraternize with the African American strikebreakers would prove to be correct.

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<sup>9</sup> On postbellum Black migrants to Kansas, Oklahoma, and small Black towns throughout the United States, see Nell Irvin Painter, *Exodusters: Black Migration to Kansas After Reconstruction*, (Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 1976).

<sup>10</sup> Charles L. Lumpkins, "Black East St. Louis: Politics and Economy in a Border City, 1860-1945," (PhD Dissertation, Penn State University, 2006), 44.

<sup>11</sup> "A New Exodus," *St. Louis Dispatch*, June 20, 1884.

<sup>12</sup> Gutman, 176.

Trouble soon began after the African American workers received their first wages from the company. According to the *Chicago Times*, “two squads of the Eureka [mines] colored black legs marched down Main Street.” They went as far as the post office, and forced the striking miners to “clear the sidewalk in order to allow them to pass; as soon as they arrived at the post office they returned, with beaming countenance, and everything on the way had to be cleared.” The Black workers allegedly came “into contact with a good many men, who [were] in the habit of congregating [at a local tavern], and in order to get through...the old miners had to either step into the street or be crowded off the sidewalk.” According to the *Wilmington Advocate*, some of the striking miners got out of the way, while some were “pushed off,” and a fight ensued, and two African Americans were arrested. An angered white mob gathered around the African American barracks, but was quickly dispersed when the sheriff and his deputies arrived. No further incidents were reported that night.<sup>13</sup> Several days later problems escalated further as the town sheriff and sixteen other men narrowly escaped being shot by striking miners. The Braidwood mayor, a former coal miner, informed the sheriff that his posse “would not be tolerated there under any circumstances, and that their lives would be in peril if they did not at once depart.” Meanwhile, the strikers informed the African American workers that they had to leave Braidwood, “peaceably or forcibly.” According to the *Advocate*, the Black men “accepted the terms, and [had] been leaving in squads hourly.” Making matters worse for the African American miners, the townspeople stole their commissary wagon filled with food to feed the men and their families. The *Chicago Times* reported that the African American miners left on

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<sup>13</sup> “Negro Miners Leaving,” *Chicago Times*, July 26, 1877; *Wilmington Advocate*, July 20, 1877; Gutman, 175-176.

foot (because the railways were shut down) along with the Pinkerton security guards, and camped on the prairie near Wilmington, Illinois.<sup>14</sup>

During the national strike, the *Chicago Tribune* took a particularly harsh stance against “communist” labor agitation during union activity, as well as a staunchly pro-Republican free labor ideological stance. They took an equally severe stance against the Braidwood miners, who they referred to as “savages,” and suggested that mob violence was the fault of “communists and Irish miners.” Particularly incensed by the treatment of the African American miners, the *Tribune* exclaimed: “the colored men, who have a right to work and earn a living as they...should be accorded the same punishment that is meted out to savages.”<sup>15</sup> The *Tribune* called for the Braidwood miners to end the violence “or receive their quietus at the point of the bayonet and the mouth of the cannon.” The town was “in the hands of the strikers, who had starved out the blacks and Pinkertons and forced the sheriff to succumb to the inevitable and surrender the city to [the mayor] to avoid a riot and the murder of many Black men.” Braidwood strikers took the arms given to Black miners, and forced many to leave town, according to *Tribune* accounts. Illinois Governor Shelby Cullom issued an order to restore the Black miners to

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<sup>14</sup> Gutman, 177-178; *Wilmington Advocate*, July 27, 1877; the depictions of the African American workers throughout these events depended on several factors, but the newspapers’ labor orientation and prejudices were significant. It is unclear what specific role the operators played in the drama: some newspapers portrayed African Americans as victims and other witnesses pointed out that when Black miners were forced to leave the operators did not have to issue them pay. One miner reported that it was “a touching sight to see these poor negroes driven forth, without any means at their command to reach their far away homes, and a great deal of sympathy was expressed by all the old miners as they saw them going forth with all their worldly goods.” The truth of the actual events are difficult to determine. Yet the ease with which African Americans joined the mining workforce and the miners’ union suggests that the miners report was probably the more accurate account and the newspapers’ sensationalism played to middle class fear of labor unrest and the overturning of traditional hierarchies. Nevertheless, African American workers in Braidwood feared for their lives or they would not have left in the first place.

<sup>15</sup> “Off for Braidwood,” *Chicago Tribune*, July 29, 1877.

their jobs under the protection of the state militia, and if the strikers resisted, “the troops [would] make short work of them.”<sup>16</sup>

The fighting subsided the next day with the help of 1,250 Illinois state militia at Braidwood. The CW&V owners understood that an escalation in violence could possibly lead to such measures—and these measures would ensure that the Black workers would be protected and allowed to work in the mines. Three hundred African American miners, under the protection of the state militia, were escorted from Dwight, Illinois (where they temporarily moved after the initial conflict) back to work. The Braidwood miners, according to the *Chicago Inter Ocean*, were not allowed to congregate or talk “except in moderate tones.” While the striking miners initially appeared to be on their best behavior as the state militia lingered around the mines, some miners openly taunted the troops and bragged about getting revenge against the African American miners as soon as the troops left town. One woman, in support of the striking miners exclaimed boldly: “We will fix [the African American miners] when we have the opportunity.”<sup>17</sup> Taking these threats seriously, and the fact that many of the Braidwood miners were armed with rifles, the CW&V ordered the militia officers to train the African American miners in combat preparation. After their training was complete, the miners were supplied with a sizeable arsenal, and the *Joliet Weekly Sun* predicted that “should trouble occur there will be no necessity for white troops.”<sup>18</sup> Convinced that order could be maintained, and the African American miners

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<sup>16</sup> During the initial phases of the “Great Railroad Strike” several Chicago daily newspapers blamed the riots on communism and other nebulous factors, instead of railroad magnates who colluded to reduce the wages of workers throughout the nation. For example, the *Chicago Times* wrote: “the railroad strikers have reiterated their abhorrence of lawless acts, and declared their determination to unite with citizens for the defense of the law and the protection of property against riot...it is distinctly repudiated by them. It is an insurrection by thieves, highwaymen, pickpockets, assassins, and whiskey-crazed communists. It is entitled to precisely the consideration which should be awarded to a crowd of mad dogs. It has all the frenzy of the mad dog. It has all the respect for life, property, and law which mad dogs have.” “They Should Be Perfectly Understood,” *Chicago Times*, July 25, 1877; “Off for Braidwood,” *Chicago Tribune*, July 29, 1877; Gutman, 187.

<sup>17</sup> “General Ducat’s Forces—The Rioters Rooted Out,” *Chicago Inter Ocean*, July 30, 1877.

<sup>18</sup> *Wilmington Advocate*, August 24, 1877, Gutman, 189-190.



would be allowed to remain in the mine shafts, the state militia left Braidwood several weeks later. Although relative peace did prevail after the departure of the state militia, the strike continued another four months. The Braidwood strike of 1877 was the longest strike in United States' history(to that date), and took an enormous toll on the lives of the strikers and their families. With winter approaching in November 1877, the defeated miners finally gave in, and ended the strike. The owner's desire to destroy the miner's union was successful, and the company refused to hire the union leaders as well. Feeling victimized by the CW&V owners, many miners complained bitterly about working alongside the African American strikebreakers who they believed had done "all they possibly could to assist capital to crush labor."<sup>19</sup> For the CW&V owners, the reaction of the Braidwood miners to the importation of African Americans into the mines was the crucial element in their victory. If white and immigrant miners did not react violently, the owners would not have brought in the state militia to see that their mines and their replacement workers were protected.

Racial friction continued to run high after the strike, and many townspeople believed that a race riot was inevitable because the Braidwood miners refused to fully accept the African American presence in the coal mines.<sup>20</sup> Understanding this resentment, Black miners blamed white miners for their difficulties in maintaining steady work in the mines. Moses Gordon, an African American miner among those imported from Virginia, observed that "[African Americans] could no more get work here until the year 1877 than they could fly." He suggested that any effort to keep Black labor out of the Braidwood mines was not necessarily the fault of

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<sup>19</sup> Gutman, 188-189, 193.

<sup>20</sup> Lewis, 83.

the mine owners, but the workers themselves who would “come out on strike before they would allow the negro to earn his daily bread.”<sup>21</sup>

“Every nationality on the face of the globe can come here and go to work wherever there is work to be had, except for the colored man, and in nine cases out of ten the miners are to blame for it. A house divided against itself cannot stand. If the laboring class fights capital for their rights, they have enough to do without fighting against six millions of people that have got to earn their bread by the sweat of their brow.”<sup>22</sup>

Gordon represented African American workers who likely would not have been allowed to work in the Braidwood mines unless they were brought in as strikebreakers. Yet he also represented the many African American workers who, finally given the opportunity to prove themselves as viable workers, would also support workers’ rights and their right to unionize. Gordon himself found it ironic that white men fought for the liberation of the slaves, yet once liberated, did not allow them to earn a fair living.<sup>23</sup>

Many Black workers stayed during the immediate years following the 1877 strike even though race relations remained strained. Half of the seven hundred miners in Braidwood were African American, and by 1880, seven hundred and three African Americans lived in Will County, compared to only two hundred and forty two in 1870. They also established a Colored Odd Fellows lodge and the First Baptist Church in 1878, led by Pastor Reverend T.C. Fleming, who was a former miner recruited by CW&V during the 1877 strike.<sup>24</sup> Although Black workers established themselves as good workers in Braidwood, European American workers showed

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<sup>21</sup> *National Labor Tribune*, June 15 1879; July 29, 1878; Gutman, 201-203.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> Modesto Joseph Donna, *The Braidwood Story*. (Braidwood, Ill.: Braidwood History Bureau, 1957), 18; August Maue, *History of Will County, Illinois*. Vol. 1, (Topeka: Historical Publishing Company, 1928), 346.

little interest in establishing solidarity with the African American workers. For example, some whites in Braidwood prepared for an all-out race war by accumulating large caches of weapons and forming a military league which openly practiced military maneuvers. As precarious as life seemed for African Americans in Braidwood since they first arrived, they could expect little protection from local authorities, who largely sided with the white miners. The unsettled nature of the workplace and the community caused many African Americans to leave during the 1880s.<sup>25</sup>

The key component to the Braidwood strike of 1877 was the violent and racist reaction of the white miners to the importation of African American strikebreakers. A clear racial component had developed in relation to strikebreaking during the post-Reconstruction period that had severe implications for labor conflicts in Illinois for the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. However, as the CW&V mine operators and other Northern industrialists demonstrated, European American labor was often utilized for strikebreaking. Initially, Northern employers looked south for strikebreakers when they could not find an adequate supply of them in Northern states. Native white Northerners considered recently arrived immigrants from Europe as threatening to their unions as African Americans. The race of the strikebreakers, as the CW&V mine operators later discovered, did make a difference, in part, due to the racist tendencies of white workers. Non-black strikebreakers could be peacefully coerced into leaving a labor dispute, or even recruited to join the labor union. Due to increasing racism, as well as tightened boundaries based upon race that dictated black and white labor, Northern employers began to utilize African Americans more often to break strikes—Black workers could either be retained as replacements, or their presence would be disruptive enough to break the will of the

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<sup>25</sup> Lewis, 83.

strikers, and thus, destroy their union. When African Americans were imported into these conflicts, there was a greater possibility for violence among the workers, which often meant that a police or military power would intervene to protect the interests of the employer. State interventions to protect the social peace almost always strengthened the employer's position because it was their property and their strikebreakers that needed protection.<sup>26</sup>

In recognition of the widening gulf between African Americans and European Americans, Northern employers took advantage of deteriorating race relations simply because they were protecting their own economic interests. From the time of the CW&V victory against the Braidwood miners, until the end of the nineteenth century, African American strikebreakers were involved in twenty-three labor conflicts throughout the Midwest. Illinois led the region, by far, with fifteen conflicts involving Black strikebreakers.<sup>27</sup> For instance, workers left the Armour Meatpacking company in the summer of 1886, and three hundred African American workers under National Guard protection, were brought in to replace the strikers.<sup>28</sup> That same year, miners at Grape Creek, Illinois went on strike, and again Black workers were imported into the conflict. Significantly, the striking miners were predominantly white and members of the National Federation of Miners and Mine Laborers; those who did not strike belonged to the Knights of Labor, and likely had Black miners within their ranks. An African American minister commented at the Springfield district conference of the African Methodist church: "It is not our fight. It is the white man's fight, and when Greek meets Greek then comes the tug of war. Let the fur fly." The mine operators brought in African American workers from Tennessee and

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<sup>26</sup> Warren C. Whatley, "African American Strikebreaking from the Civil War to the New Deal," *Social Science History*, Vol 17, no 4 (Winter, 1993), 541-542.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid*, 530-536.

<sup>28</sup> *Chicago Evening Journal*, November 20, 1886; Keiser, 318-319.

Kentucky to replace the striking miners, and deputy sheriffs were assigned to protect them. The conflict dragged out and defeated the strikers, as the mine operators brought in five to fifteen Black workers every other day. Similar patterns occurred throughout Illinois coal mines and other industries in Lemon and Joliet, Illinois during the same year. While African American workers remained a relatively small percentage of the nation's strikebreakers, by the late 1880s, Black workers were used in more high-profile labor disputes, and therefore their reputation among working class European Americans, as the enemy of labor grew.<sup>29</sup>

Strikebreaking served as a viable form of working class activism for African Americans as they sought to collectively strengthen their economic position during the labor upheaval of post-Reconstruction America. Some of Illinois's most important coal mining towns followed the practice of racial exclusion. These employment opportunities in Illinois and other Northern coal mining towns not only allowed Black workers to gain entry into desirable industrial positions, it also represented chances for low paid Southern African Americans to earn higher wages. Their decisions to become strikebreakers were often informed choices, rationalized by a complex and changing worldview that balanced their experiences as industrial workers, farmers, and African Americans. Indeed, these Black men were neither willing tools nor ignorant serfs—rather, they were poor and ambitious men who were often recruited by coal company agents, sometimes under false pretenses. During the nineteenth century, African Americans were never the only workers to break strikes in Illinois or any other Northern state. Moreover, they were never the most used strikebreakers. However, African Americans were usually the most *visible* strikebreakers because of American racism, and therefore, they were almost always the easiest

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<sup>29</sup> Keiser, 318.

targets for white working class rage during the tumultuous labor disputes of the late nineteenth century.

### *Black Unionism in Illinois*

Although Illinois and other Midwestern employers actively recruited Southern Black workers to take the places of disaffected white workers, they did not necessarily take the same view of the Afro-Illinoisan worker. Some Black workers in Illinois did in fact work as strikebreakers during this period. However, Black Illinoisans had already gained a reputation as labor agitators that would fight for their rights for fair wages and equal treatment. Illinois employers understood that African American workers were no more attached to strikebreaking than any other race or ethnicity, and therefore, usually looked to Southern states for workers that would be both underpaid and less informed about Northern labor conflicts. Thus, Afro-Illinoisans, during last decades of the nineteenth century, remained committed to unionism in spite of the increasingly exclusionary measures, the relatively small population was often at the vanguard of the Illinois labor movement.

As Southern Black workers were imported into the Braidwood conflict during the summer of 1877, more than one hundred and fifty African American longshoremen from Illinois disputed against recent wage cuts. Inspired by the national strike during that summer, African American workers for the Mississippi Valley Transportation Company (MVTC) organized their own all-Black union and voted to arrange a citywide general strike against all Cairo employees. The influence of Black longshoremen contradicted conventional beliefs that African Americans were at the mercy of white workers and employers. On the contrary, Black longshoremen likely played a more important role than they did in any other labor union. Despite the clout of Black

workers, waterfront work reflected racial fragmentation, and many ports became the sites of racial conflict.<sup>30</sup>

As soon as MVTC managers were notified of the longshoremen's plans, they immediately procured strikebreakers. The following evening the striking waterfront workers assembled on the Ohio levee and confronted the strikebreakers while they were loading coal onto the E.M. Norton towboat, and demanded that they stop working. When the men refused, they were driven from the work site with a barrage of stones. After the last of the strikebreakers left, the African American strikers posted guards to ensure that none would be able to return to the worksite. The incident took place in a matter of minutes, and created quite a scene that drew the attention of several policemen and the mayor of Cairo, but were unable to quell the disturbance.<sup>31</sup>

Racial animosity undoubtedly played a significant role in how the strikers were portrayed in public discourse. When Afro-Illinoisans protested over unfair wage cuts or went on strikes, they were depicted as "troublemakers" and their labor agitation was often depicted as disorderly labor conduct. The *Cairo Evening Bulletin* observed that African American waterfront workers had a right to strike for higher wages, but they had "no right to prevent others from working who [were] willing...to work for the old wages." According to the *Bulletin*, by forcing the strikebreakers off the jobsite, the African American workers were committing a "grave offense for which they can be severely punished." Although strikebreaking was seen as deplorable in

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<sup>30</sup> "The Strikers," *Cairo Evening Bulletin*, July 31, 1877; Christopher K. Hays, "The African American Struggle for Equality and Justice in Cairo, Illinois, 1865-1900," *Illinois Historical Journal*, vol 90 (Winter, 1997), 269-270; Ernest Obadele-Starks, *Black Unionism in the Industrial South*, (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2000) 37; see also Eric Arnesen, *Waterfront Workers of New Orleans: Race, Class and Politics 1863-1923*; Sterling D. Spero and Abram L. Harris, "The Negro Longshoreman, 1870-1930," in August Meier, John H. Bracey, and Elliot Rudwick, eds. , *Black Workers and Organized Labor*, (Belmont: Wadsworth Publishing, 1971), 94.

<sup>31</sup> "River News," *Cairo Evening Bulletin*, August 4, 1877; Hays, 269-270.

white working class communities, when Black workers fought to protect their workplace, the *Bulletin* contended they should be “taught a lesson that [would] last them for all time to come.”<sup>32</sup> Unlike the Braidwood community, which embraced and supported striking miners in their community, African American workers in Cairo were viewed with contempt and considered perpetual outsiders.

The threat of dismissal or arrest failed to intimidate Cairo’s Black waterfront workers. Instead, these events set in motion a cycle of Illinois African American labor activism that was sustained throughout the remainder of the 1870s and well into the 1880s. For example, in 1883 and 1884, African American dock laborers were angered over recent wage cuts, longer hours, and unacceptable working conditions. They successfully organized in defense of their own interests and conducted six major strikes against their employers. Half of the strikes were successful, and forced their employers to incur heavy losses by interfering with the shipment of valuable cargo. Moreover, the strikers often strengthened their position by driving away other laborers who had been engaged to replace them. At a time when white workers in the city were largely accommodating the poor working conditions and wage cuts dealt out by their employers, Black laborers seized the moment to participate in a sustained, highly organized example of working class self-activity.<sup>33</sup>

Black waiters from Chicago developed a similar reputation for labor activism during the late decades of the nineteenth century. Restaurant and hotel workers of all races and ethnicities were moving toward union organization beginning in the 1870s. Yet, European American workers followed nation-wide discriminatory trends in labor by largely excluding Black workers

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<sup>32</sup> “Another Strike,” *Cairo Evening Bulletin*, August 3, 1877.

<sup>33</sup> Hays, 270.



from union membership. Black waiters responded by not only unionizing themselves into separate unions or joining progressive bi-racial unions, they also established a firm pattern of agitation against continued racial discrimination in the workplace.<sup>34</sup>

Racial discrimination, job security, inadequate wages, and the overall image of waiters were significant motivational factors that pushed them toward unionization during the late nineteenth century. For example, employers routinely reduced staffs during “slack times” without notice, or waiters were being forced to work seven-day weeks. Many others worked only part-time shifts at a pay level far below that of regular employees. This unpredictability made it difficult for them to enjoy stable family lives.<sup>35</sup> Newspapers routinely published unflattering articles about rude “biscuit pushers” that provided inadequate service. While European American waiters suffered from stigmas associated with serving food, they were often portrayed as transient workers who aspired to, one day, work in “respectable jobs.” Conversely, Black men were allegedly suited for such work because of their supposed servile demeanor as slaves.<sup>36</sup> Similar to the racist hiring practice of railcar magnate, George Pullman, restaurant owners believed African American men would appease their white clientele because of the idea that they possessed a docile nature as well as an aptitude for serving white people. “Colored men are the best waiters,” said the owner of a Chicago restaurant, because “they are waiters by nature, and are peculiarly adapted to servitude.” Black waiters were also preferred over European Americans because they allegedly lacked ambition for better employment. “No matter how incapable a

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<sup>34</sup> Christopher Reed, *Black Chicago's First Century, Volume 1, 1833-1900*, (Columbia : University of Missouri Press, 2005), 250-251; Sidney H. Kessler, “The Organization of Negroes in the Knights of Labor, *The Journal of Negro History*, vol 37, no 3, (July 1952)

<sup>35</sup> Perry R. Duis, *Challenging Chicago: Coping with Everyday Life, 1837-1920*, (Urbana: University of Illinois, 2006), 265.

<sup>36</sup> Sean P. Cadigan, “Becoming the Land of Lincoln: Emancipation and the Construction of Race, 1853-1892,” (PhD Dissertation, Northern Illinois University, 2011), 292; Reed, *Chicago's First Century*, 251; Duis, 264.

white man may be for any other occupation he always considers that he is above being a waiter, is never content, does not take proper interest in his work, and is generally looking for a higher position.” While Euro-American waiters were “ambitious,” Black waiters were “content” with their position—especially if the job was an upscale establishment.<sup>37</sup>

Any expectation that African American waiters in Chicago would remain servile soon evaporated as they often retaliated in their battle for self-respect by developing various coded languages that gave a particular restaurant a unique character among semi-public places. Similar to other service-oriented occupations, waiters communicated through the use of slang and other signals. On the surface, this pattern often involved staccato monosyllabic words that could clearly convey orders over the din in a loud restaurant during the busiest periods, or words and gestures were used to communicate unflattering comments about customers or disliked head waiters.<sup>38</sup> During the 1870s Black waiters throughout Chicago also retaliated against employers by conducting scattered walkouts over depression-era pay reductions that drove the average of \$27 to \$30 per month down to \$18 to \$20. They also used their limited labor power by conducting walk-out and sit-down strikes during lunch-time and evening rush hours in some of Chicago’s busiest restaurants during the early 1870s. At Chicago’s Palmer House, waiters walked out because their new manager tried to enforce harsh rules on the workers. He informed the workers that they would be required to arrive at the hotel earlier than before, and they would no longer be allowed to consume uneaten food leftover by patrons. The waiters protested vigorously and walked out.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> “Colored Waiter,” *Chicago Tribune*, November 4, 1883

<sup>38</sup> Duis, 264.

<sup>39</sup> “The Last Strike,” *Chicago Tribune*, February 20, 1875; Duis, *Challenging Chicago*, 262-263.

Since employers had a seemingly endless pool of former slaves to fill their hotels and restaurants, wages could be kept artificially low, and therefore, they could take advantage of relatively inexpensive labor. Employers generally preferred Black workers because they could be paid less, and they were “better suited” to solicit customers for additional money in lieu of fair wages. The growing practice of “tipping” was a major source of contention among African American waiters in particular. Owners encouraged the novel practice, and argued that it transformed the servers into quasi-entrepreneurs whose incomes depended on how they worked, rather than on a standard wage.<sup>40</sup> As a result of substandard wages, Black waiters developed a reputation as greedy hucksters who only worked expeditiously if they received additional money. “The hotel waiter,” wrote one correspondent “is a man whose business is to make you wait for your meals unless you give him half a dollar to encourage him in making a fast record.”<sup>41</sup> Of course, in reality, tips were a substitute for decent wages that restaurant owners did not have to pay, and they assumed that the quest for gratuities would create a competition among the waiting staff that would help undermine any organization efforts.

Although Social Darwinian ideas of racial inferiority were forming during the late nineteenth century, these ideas had not fully matured and therefore were not applied to all aspects of American life. By the early twentieth century, however, the notion of Black inferiority was firmly entrenched within the fabric of mainstream society, and the racialization of labor was *fait accompli*. Since the process of racialization was still in its developmental stage during this earlier period, it was not unusual to see African Americans in supervisory positions in the workforce. For example, Black waiters were often promoted to headwaiter positions in

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<sup>40</sup> Duis , 264.

<sup>41</sup> “The Hotel Waiter,” *Rock Island Argus*, August 18, 1882; Duis, 264.

Chicago's most luxurious hotels and restaurants. Although Black headwaiters usually supervised other African American waiters, white headwaiters were often put in charge of all-black staffs. On many occasions, this bi-racial dynamic failed and led to frequent walkouts by all-black staffs. While Black headwaiters were preferred among Black waiters, all headwaiters, regardless of race, were "bosses" and often commanded with an iron fist that could break the spirit of any wait-staff. Besides supervising the wait-staff, the headwaiter recognized and greeted distinguished patrons, resolved grievances among customers, and ensured a smooth operation of waiters under his control. Many headwaiters who had years of experience in famous eateries, were often held in the highest regard within the Black community, and regarded themselves as superior to common servers.<sup>42</sup>

The mutability of race and class during the later decades of the nineteenth century caused European Americans to become increasingly uncomfortable with the presence of Black "authority" in American society. An article originally published in the *New York World*, and reprinted in the *Chicago Tribune* and the *Cairo Citizen*, was illustrative of the growing sentiment against African Americans in supervisory roles. The author's intention was not only to mock the headwaiter, whose "majestic" presence caused white customers to "cringe and gasp before its awful solemnity," but also to expose salient class issues associated with a servant (a Black one at that) intimidating his prominent white clientele. "Mark how the city clerk on vacation snickers in his sleeve as he sees his employer creep humbly to the seat assigned him by the dark potentate without daring to utter an objection, although opposite sits the man he swindled on a big bill of

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<sup>42</sup> Estelle Scott, *Occupational Changes Among Negroes in Chicago*, (Chicago: Works Progress Administration, 1939); Wright; Duis 265-266; Christopher Reed, *All the World is Here!: The Black Presence at White City* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), 64; Christopher Reed, *Knock at the Door of Opportunity: Black Migration to Chicago, 1900-1919* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois, 2014); Cadigan (dissertation), 293-294.

goods last winter,” he wrote. For the writer, the racial order is not only in flux, it is in complete disarray. No matter how significant white patrons were in the *real* world—within the domain of the restaurant, everyone was at the behest of the “black tyrant.”<sup>43</sup>

African American headwaiters also incurred the wrath of their Black subordinates. As Black waiters moved closer to organized labor and more antagonistic towards management, they also became more critical of African American headwaiters, and often challenged their efficacy. “Anyone can be a headwaiter...the town is full of headwaiters,” said an African American waiter speaking at a labor meeting. “What are they doing? Today you are headwaiter, tomorrow you are back on the side, and next day you are on the docks.”<sup>44</sup> Since Black headwaiters were management, they often had the most to gain from labor’s output of energy in the workplace. When a Black headwaiter challenged a strike called by the Colored Waiters’ Alliance against three hotels he was aware of the fact that his position carried a level of security that waiters could only envy in an owner-dominated workplace.<sup>45</sup>

Eager to form their own labor unions, the Knights of Labor (KOL) provided the waiters with the type of progressive unionization that many Black labor leaders desired. First joining the KOL in 1886 when J. Ross Fitzgerald, a New York organizer of the Knights came to Chicago and created the William Lloyd Garrison Colored Waiters local assembly 8286, Black Chicagoans located an avenue to protect themselves from low wages and discrimination. Courting Black waiters with picnics and other celebrations, more than four hundred African American waiters and porters joined the union.<sup>46</sup> The union “braced up the colored waiters considerably” and gave

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<sup>43</sup> “The Hotel Head Waiter,” *Chicago Tribune*, October 10, 1885; *Cairo Citizen*, November 12, 1885.

<sup>44</sup> “Colored Waiters Organizing,” *Chicago Tribune*, May 12, 1888.

<sup>45</sup> Reed, *All the World is Here*, 64.

<sup>46</sup> Duis, 266-267.

them “confidence with themselves,” according to the *Chicago Times*.<sup>47</sup> The KOL was originally a secret labor organization founded in 1869 by a handful of garment cutters in Philadelphia.

Uriah Stephens and Terrence Powderly were the organizations earliest leaders and professed to unify all workers, regardless of skill level, into one organization, including African Americans and women. Their acceptance of Black workers into the KOL, according to historian Sidney H. Kessler, had as much to do with fear of black and white labor competition as the good will of its leaders. More than any other union during this period, Kessler continued, the Black members of the KOL contributed greatly to the entire labor movement by their leadership in the fight against racial discrimination, both within and outside the organization.<sup>48</sup>

As early as 1877, the KOL established as many as seven locals in Illinois welcoming African American men and women, while presenting biracial unionism in industrial and skilled craft occupations interested in building a moral society based on cooperation rather than capitalist competition.<sup>49</sup> During the 1877 strike in East St. Louis, trade unionists and their supporters during the 1877 strike sought to improve the political climate and working and living conditions in an atmosphere of interracial cooperation among working class people in East St. Louis. White labor leaders recruited African American as well as European American workers to found labor unions and campaign to elect labor candidates for city offices. Labor organizers’ message of equality among all workers resonated with Black East. St. Louisans. For example, Black residents voted in the municipal election of 1878 for a white politician who promised

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<sup>47</sup> “Colored Picnickers,” *Chicago Tribune*, August 2, 1884; “The Colored Waiters,” *Chicago Tribune*, August 23, 1888; *Chicago Times*, August 22, 1888; Duis, 266-267.

<sup>48</sup> Sidney H. Kessler, “The Organization of Negroes in the Knights of Labor,” *The Journal of Negro History*, vol 37, no 3, (July 1952), 248-250, 276.

<sup>49</sup> Charles Wesley, *Negro Labor in the United States, 1850–1925*, (New York: Russell and Russell, 1967), 254-255; Harris, 26-27; Spero and Harris, 40 ;Kessler, 252; Jonathan Garlock., ed., *Guide to the Local Assemblies of the Knights of Labor*, (Westport, Greenwood Press, 1982); Charles Lumpkins, *American Pogrom: The East St. Louis Race Riot and Black Politics* (Columbus: Ohio University Press, 2008).

African American workers city jobs and “equal privileges with the white laborers”. The city’s labor activists allied with the KOL, whose leaders insisted that race was of no consequence in economic questions facing workers.<sup>50</sup>

In accordance with the policy of the KOL, African American women either joined assemblies with men, or formed their own organizations.<sup>51</sup> In Illinois they also sought union protection as they entered the workforce in increasing numbers during the post reconstruction period to supplement the meager incomes of their husbands, or to help support their struggling families. Compared to European immigrants, African Americans migrating from the South found themselves at a disadvantage in the work force, despite their favorable levels of education attainment. The existence of the organization demonstrated that their daily struggles ultimately led to collective action, and it testified to their refusal to submit to victimization.<sup>52</sup> As historian Tera Hunter noted, although the work of African American women stood on the periphery of the economy, their work was essential within a given community. Hunter argued that the numerous strikes by domestic workers in the South in the post war years were a testament to the importance of Black women’s work because they reflected the impetus, substance, and structure of resistance that would emerge in later battles in the workforce.<sup>53</sup>

As Black men faced increasing marginalization in the Illinois workplace during the post-Reconstruction period, the role of Afro-Illinoisian women continued to expand in order to

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<sup>50</sup> Charles Lumpkins, *American Pogrom: The East St. Louis Race Riot and Black Politics*, (Ohio University Press, 2008); Lumpkins, (PhD, dissertation), 48

<sup>51</sup> For a listing of Knights of labor assemblies in Illinois, see Jonathan Garlock, comp., *Guide to the Local Assemblies of the Knights of Labor* (Westport, Conn: Greenwood, 1982).

<sup>52</sup> Hays, “The Africa America Struggle for Equality and Justice,” 272-273.

<sup>53</sup> Tera Hunter, *To ‘Joy My Freedom: Southern Black Women’s Lives and Labors after the Civil War, 74-75*; For a complete description of African American women domestic workers see Elizabeth Clark-Lewis, *Living In, Living Out: African American Domesticity in Washington, D.C., 1910-1940* (Washington: Smithsonian Institute Press, 1994).

supplement male income. African American women in Illinois began entering the wage earning workforce in greater numbers than in previous decades. Black women in the racially restrictive work scene of Chicago faced reinforced levels of discrimination. As women, they encountered the glass ceiling, and as African American women, they faced conditions of work more restrictive and less remunerative than men. Even more devastating was the idea that Black women rarely had an opportunity to advance to the top of their profession. Women who worked in homes or hotels labored as scrub girls who could advance to head housekeepers. Competition existed within households with white workers, particularly Swedish girls, which always relegated Black workers to the lowest rung. Black women often worked as cooks and wages were always low. Some workers earned only twelve to twenty dollars per month, plus lodging and meals, and with just one half day off every week. Meanwhile the economic plight of washerwomen remained static.<sup>54</sup>

Due to the scarcity of industrial labor for women, and because they were often compelled to work in order to supplement the incomes of their husbands, many African American women took “informal” jobs. For example, Black Chicagoans often peddled hot foods on busy street corners, prepared medicinal tinctures at home, midwifery, laundering clothes, and ran policy shops at home. Each of these economic undertakings represented a strategy by which African American city-dwellers earned money outside of the normal wage economy. Although some women continued “informal” work, many women increased their presence in paid employment. By the last decades of the nineteenth century, Black women in Illinois were increasingly hired as cooks, glass factory workers, janitors, laundry workers, sack makers, seamstresses, and laborers, including one as a railroad laborer and one as a stockyard worker. Some labored in meatpacking

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<sup>54</sup> Reed, *Black Chicago's First Century, Volume 1, 1833-1900*, 255.



and odd factory jobs. Most African American women in search of wages had no choice but to toil as domestic service workers and laundresses.<sup>55</sup>

Throughout Illinois during the latter part of the nineteenth century, Black women gradually replaced European American women as domestic workers. For example, by 1880, in Cairo, all African American women over the age of sixteen, who reported their occupation to the Cairo census enumerator, were employed as domestic servants. In the same year, seventy percent of all Black domestic workers resided with their own families, which allowed them some measure of privacy and personal freedom. Historian Elizabeth Clark-Lewis suggested that Black women found live-in work to be even more degrading and reminiscent of slavery than domestic service because they were denied little privacy, and on call twenty four hours a day.<sup>56</sup> African American women often established their own preferences within domestic labor, but these sometimes clashed with the expectation of employers. Domestic workers who spent most of their workday in white workplaces fought to gain concessions from employers to mitigate the impositions of wage labor. Usually the most important concession to Black domestic workers was to distance themselves physically from their employers. The remaining thirty percent may have had little choice but to live with their employers—especially for newcomers with no family in Cairo or members of a household that were unable to support them. A few domestic servants resided with their own families in small cottages located directly to the rear of their employer's

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<sup>55</sup> *Population Schedules . . . 1850, Illinois; Population Schedules . . . 1860, Illinois; Population Schedules . . . 1870, Illinois; Population Schedules . . . 1880, Illinois.* All tabulations are by the author; Cynthia M. Blair, "Vicious Commerce: African American Women's Sex Work and the Transformation of Urban Space in Chicago, 1850-1915," (PhD Dissertation, Harvard University, 1999), 182; Lumpkins, (PhD, dissertation), 55-56.

<sup>56</sup> Clark-Lewis 168-169.

residence, often in transformed outbuildings, which allowed household workers a degree of independence and privacy while keeping them conveniently nearby.<sup>57</sup>

The demands of African American women in their workplace caused relations with white employers to sour by the late 1870s. Some European American women among the middle and upper strata of Cairo's society gathered to discuss such issues in the privacy of their homes as well as within the more public forum of their clubs and associations in an effort to find a solution. Other women placed less blame on African American domestic workers than on inexperienced white employers, who for the first time could afford to hire domestic help. For example, a white employer, writing under the pseudonym "A. Sufferer" in the *Cairo Evening Bulletin*, complained that there was "something radically wrong" in the way employers managed the domestic workers, as well as their overall lack of quality. While she conceded there were some good workers who earned their wages and deserved respect, she maintained that the majority were "grossly overpaid" and "utterly worthless." The writer was particularly displeased with the African American domestic workers, because she believed they did not work as hard as non-black domestics, and were ignorant of their duties as any servant [was] of hers."<sup>58</sup> A. Sufferer's observation, represented the view of the employer, and thus represented a perspective desirous of control—worker docility, higher productivity, and lower wages. As workers, Black women domestic servants wanted the opposite. To be sure, their defiance was not happenstance. An African American domestic worker explained:

"I have lived in the best families in this town since I have been here, and I have had some good places and some awfully mean ones. I think it could tell a story of grievances, as well as my betters if I tried. Some mistresses are a long sight meaner than a girl could be; and the very meanest woman I have ever lived with

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<sup>57</sup> 1880 *Alexander County Population Schedules*; Hays, 271; Hunter, 52-23.

<sup>58</sup> "Our Hired Help," *Cairo Evening Bulletin*, January 19, 1879.

in the town were the ones that had the greatest lot of helps. When I am asked to work for a woman and she begins telling me what trifling girls she has had I am just sure that there is something the matter besides the girls. I always find there is too.”<sup>59</sup>

Although many of the demands of Black domestic workers clashed with the expectation of employers, it was significant for them to establish some measure of dignity and control over their work environment. They utilized a variety of strategies, including abruptly leaving without notice, absenteeism, and refusing to work for families who had a history of abusing their workers or those who refused to supply them with recommendations. By organizing their own chapter of the KOL, Black domestic workers refused to submit to victimization. Furthermore, the existence of the KOL demonstrates that the daily struggles waged by individual workers ultimately led to collective action.<sup>60</sup>

During one of the most tumultuous periods in labor history, Afro-Illinoisans were rarely passive actors—whether they were fighting for higher wages, or conducting impromptu walkouts over unfair treatment from racist supervisors—Afro-Illinoisans were as vocal and committed to gaining their own labor rights as any group during the late nineteenth century. Moreover, Black Illinoisans continued to fight for inclusion within a labor movement that was increasingly excluding them—they remained committed to worker’s rights through unionization, and often formed their own labor unions, or joined progressive and bi-racial unions such as the KOL. Yet despite their impressive record on the side of labor agitation, the idea that Black workers were antipathetic to the labor movement persisted in the minds of working class white Illinoisans.

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<sup>59</sup> “One of the Help has a Say,” *Cairo Bulletin*, January 30, 1879.

<sup>60</sup> Hunter 52; Hays, 273.

*“Labor is the Leaven We Need”: Afro-Illinois Political Leaders and the Black Worker*

Afro-Illinoisans continued to operate on the periphery of the labor movement through forced exclusionary measures in the workplace and labor unions. As a result, many Black political leaders in Illinois, starting in the mid-1870s, viewed the plight of Black workers through the lens of race, and therefore worked for a civil rights bill believing that it would create racial equality and better occupational opportunities. John Jones remained at the forefront of Black political and social activism in Illinois and was among the most vocal leaders that advocated a civil rights bill. In 1874 he addressed the civil rights issue before a local workingman’s association and argued that a civil rights bill would protect African Americans from limited political representation, increased discrimination in the school system, workplace, and public facilities. He also praised Afro-Illinoisans for their steadfast work habits and their political progress since the Civil War. Although racial prejudice in America was “rapidly fading away,” civil rights “must not be withheld from us any longer; they are essential to our complete freedom.”<sup>61</sup> Jones and other Afro-Illinoisans worked tirelessly for five years campaigning for the bill until it became a law on March 1, 1875.<sup>62</sup>

The Civil Rights Act of 1875 was first introduced by one of the leaders of the “Radical Republicans,” Senator Charles Sumner of Massachusetts in 1870. It was the culmination of the various federal laws that were passed to counteract the post-Civil War Black Codes in the Southern states. The preamble of the law stated that Congress deemed it essential to a just government that “we recognize the equality of all men before the law, and hold it is the duty of government in all its dealings with the people to mete out equal and exact justice to all...and that

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<sup>61</sup> Reed, *Chicago’s First Century*, 184-185.

<sup>62</sup> “John Jones on the Colored Race,” *Chicago Tribune*, January 2, 1874; John Hope Franklin, “The Enforcement of the Civil Rights Act of 1875,” *Prologue*, Vol. 6, (Winter 1974), 226.

it is the appropriate object of legislation to enact great fundamental principles into law.” The act also provided that all persons within the jurisdiction of the United States be entitled to the “full and equal enjoyment of the accommodations, facilities, and privileges of inns, public conveyances on land or water, theaters, and other places of public amusement; subject only to the conditions and limitations established by law, and applicable alike to citizens of every race and color, regardless of any previous condition of servitude.” Persons found guilty of violating the act—by denying to any citizen the enjoyment of the accommodations it described or by aiding or inciting such denial—would, for every offense, “forfeit and pay the sum of five hundred dollars to the person aggrieved thereby, to be recovered in any action of debt, which full costs; and shall also, for every such offense, be deemed guilty of a misdemeanor, and, upon conviction thereof, shall be fined not less than five hundred nor more than one thousand dollars, or shall be imprisoned not less than thirty days nor more than one year.”<sup>63</sup>

Black waiters in Chicago were among the most active proponents of the civil rights bill. Eager to test the new bill’s boundaries, five off-duty waiters from the Tremont hotel entered the St. Elmo restaurant in Chicago, they were promptly informed that “it was against the rules of the house and the orders of the proprietor to serve any of their race in the regular dining rooms.” Ironically, an African American waiter offered the men a seat in the basement where cooks and waiters normally ate their meals while on break. The men were insulted by the offer, and immediately left for another restaurant where they were seated and served without any incident. When the St. Elmo proprietor was asked why they were refused normal service, he replied that he was “not in the habit of entertaining guests of color, and didn’t see the necessity of beginning at this late day.” The *Chicago Tribune* noted that few restaurant owners wanted to comply with

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<sup>63</sup> Franklin, 226.

the civil rights bill because it would injure their businesses. Many owners claimed that they did not object to accommodating African Americans, but thought they should at least have the right to accommodate them as they saw fit. According to the *Tribune*, restaurant owners would serve Black patrons at tables “set aside for them” and they would “spare no pains to make their accommodations as mean as possible.” An owner of one of Chicago’s more prominent establishments told the *Tribune* that African American patrons would be allowed in his restaurant on the condition that he had “any tough beef, rancid butter, or stale bread.” Significantly, the same owner had recently fired his African American employees, and many of them proposed to take their revenge against him through the civil rights bill.<sup>64</sup>

The new law was subjected to endless scrutiny and debate. Its supporters argued that the bill was necessary to protect the rights of all citizens against class and racial discrimination, and that it provided a federal guarantee of the rights that citizens were supposed to enjoy on the basis of common law. On the other hand, Democratic opponents called the law unconstitutional and an attempt to legislate social equality and an unenforceable and unmitigated evil.<sup>65</sup> Moderate and conservative Illinois Republicans also opposed the bill by arguing it would revive racial prejudice towards African Americans and have the effect of uniting whites against Republicans. According to the Republican *Chicago Tribune*, since African Americans were freedpeople with the right to vote, they had a “fair and equal start in the race of life.” The *Tribune*, like many Illinois Republicans argued that African Americans were now equal before the law and the courts, and therefore no longer needed protection from the government.<sup>66</sup> When Jones and other

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<sup>64</sup> “Civil Rights,” *Chicago Inter Ocean*, March 13, 1875; “Civil Rights and Wrongs,” *Chicago Tribune*, March 13, 1875.

<sup>65</sup> Franklin, 226-227.

<sup>66</sup> “The Civil Wrongs Bill,” *Chicago Tribune*, May 31, 1874; “The Civil Rights Bill,” November 3, 1874.

African American leaders insisted that the civil rights bill was necessary, the Republican newspaper suggested that African Americans should “stop playing baby” since white Americans had “done nobly in outgrowing the old prejudices against them.” It was time that African Americans “outgrew his dependence upon the government” since the nation had given them their freedom and equality before the law.<sup>67</sup>

“He is now a man. Let him work out his own salvation. Why should he appeal to congress because he cannot use a particular bathroom, or sleep in a particular bed, or be buried within a particular enclosure? The prejudice against foreigners has been as strong in parts of America as that against negroes, but the former have not appealed to the government to try the hopeless task of putting down the prejudice by law. They have lived it down themselves. Let the negro do likewise.”<sup>68</sup>

While Jones and other leading Afro-Illinoisans questioned the overall commitment of the Republican Party to African Americans, Illinois Republicans increasingly viewed the actions and demands of Northern African Americans with suspicion and insisted that there was no further need for assistance. Failing to comprehend the weight of racism, Republicans insisted that African Americans comport themselves in a similar fashion to European immigrants, whom they argued overcame racial and ethnic intolerance. Of course, the ethnic discrimination experienced by immigrants was fleeting since they were, over time, incorporated into mainstream American society, and subsequently accepted as “white” Americans. Conversely, Black Americans would not be afforded any such luxury at any time. Ironically, one of the main requirements for European immigrant acceptance into mainstream culture was the acceptance of white supremacy and Black inferiority.

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<sup>67</sup> “The Nigger School,” *Chicago Tribune*, June 8, 1874

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*

As Northern Republicans criticized the civil rights law and the Afro-Illinoisans who demanded it, they had a considerably different view of Southern Blacks. Republicans clung tenaciously to the idea that the American economy rested on the small farmer, explained historian Heather Richardson, and they championed ex-slaves who tried to buy their own land and who seemed to be following the traditional American avenue to economic success. At the height of the emigration movement in the late 1870s, to many Republicans, the Exodusters represented the quintessential “good worker” that was trying to improve their economic situation through their own efforts.<sup>69</sup> “They come not as paupers or beggars,” wrote the *Chicago Tribune*, “but as able-bodied laborers, seeking by hard industry to secure permanent homes; and who could object?”<sup>70</sup> The *New York Times* insisted that leaders of the migration were receiving many requests from Midwestern farmers for Black workers from the South. The arrival of Black workers and their families, the *Times* concluded, was a “necessity,” and was “solving the labor question for the rural districts.”<sup>71</sup>

In response to the demands of rural Northerners, Exodusters leader, Pap Singleton organized several migration groups to both Indiana and Illinois. In 1880, he delivered several speeches on the conditions of Black Southerners, and notified Illinois and Indiana officials that unless these conditions were improved, and a Republican president elected, a “great migration” across the Ohio River might be expected. According to Singleton, the Republicans won the election because “several thousand failed to vote” when he threatened to import 250,000 African Americans into the Midwest region. As incredulous as the story appeared, it did at least indicate

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<sup>69</sup> Heather Cox Richardson, *The Death to Reconstruction: Race, Labor and Politics in Post-Civil War North, 1865-1901*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), 156.

<sup>70</sup> “Negroes Come North,” *Chicago Tribune*, December 27, 1880.

<sup>71</sup> “Blacks in the West,” *New York Times*, January 3, 1880.



that neither Republicans or Democrats of Indiana and Illinois would welcome a large contingent of Black people.<sup>72</sup> In July, 1880, Singleton addressed a gathering of African Americans in Decatur, Illinois. He announced that he would form colonies up to 13,000 Southern Blacks to migrate to Indiana and various points throughout Illinois. Many Democrats charged Republicans of inducing the mass migration to the Midwest, yet Black leaders insisted that they were responsible. Black people, insisted Reverend John H. Clay, “stood at the wheel and guided the affair,” and the only assistance given by European Americans were monetary donations. Furthermore, the charge that the movement was driven by Republicans was “quite as absurd as to argue that [D]emocratic opposition to their coming is keeping them away.”<sup>73</sup>

While Northern Democrats insisted that Republicans were responsible for inciting the migration of Southern Blacks, moderate and conservative Republicans argued that the passage of the civil rights bill would set off a wave of revenge against Southern African Americans. The reality had more to do with the gradual abandonment of Reconstruction in the South. The compromise between Republicans and Democrats over the disputed 1876 presidential election, in which Republicans were handed the presidency in exchange for the end of military protection in the South, represented the end of protection for Southern Blacks. To withdraw the military protection of Southern African Americans, without first recognizing one or the other of the belligerents, wrote the *Chicago Inter-Ocean*, “would be impolitic, cruel, and cowardly.” Furthermore, the cause of the Exodus lay in the conditions of financial, political, and social distress in which Southern African Americans found themselves, after more than a decade of freedom; and the conviction that their former slaveowners and their Confederate allies now

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<sup>72</sup> Fleming, 74-75.

<sup>73</sup> “Blacks in the West,” *New York Times*, January 3, 1880.

controlled every Southern state, opposed the advancement of Blacks, and did not give sufficient evidence of good desire toward them to insure their present and future welfare.<sup>74</sup>

If Southern Blacks emigrated in mass numbers to Northern states, however, many Republicans were convinced that the Exodusters would not only make good workers within a rapidly industrializing free labor society, they could also replace “disaffected” European immigrants and white workers. The *Chicago Tribune* warned Irish Chicagoans that Black men and women could take their jobs if the Irish continued to support the Democratic Party. “Had it ever occurred to (the Irish),” asked a *Tribune* editorial writer, “that if a mass of colored families came to Chicago—being driven out of the South by Confederate persecution and intolerance—these colored people would necessarily become competitors against them for the labor of the city?” Southern Blacks were no longer willing to endure abuse and oppression, and were packing their belongings to head to Illinois and other Northern states. “Hundreds of thousands of others were almost determined to go, but were waiting and watching for the result of the elections.” African Americans would “seek change” and “crowd into the cities and towns of the North.” Furthermore, they would “monopolize the work of loading and unloading stone, lumber, and coal vessels...in short they will put into Chicago alone 100,000 of their race, seeking the kinds of labor now performed by white men. They would put themselves in direct competition with all branches of Irish labor—male and female.<sup>75</sup> Republicans made every effort to politicize the mass migration of Southern Blacks—the Exodusters embodied the free labor ideology, while Northern Blacks and the Irish made for convenient foils.

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<sup>74</sup> “Shall the Troops Be Withdrawn,” *Chicago Inter Ocean*, March 21, 1877.

<sup>75</sup> “Irish Voting for a ‘Change’ for the Negroes to the North,” *Chicago Tribune*, October 10, 1880.

Yet even some prominent African Americans were unconvinced that migration was the best solution for Southern Blacks. Frederick Douglass, whose public pronouncements had been gradually falling farther out of line with the drift of postwar Northern Black opinion, believed that Blacks were better suited for the South because their economic plight was “exceptional and transient.” The movement was “ill-timed” and the government should have a larger role in the protection of Southern African Americans. The Exodus controversy was another step toward Douglass’ estrangement from Black Americans. Although he continued to receive the best hearing among whites on pertinent issues concerning Black Americans, his public lack of support for the Exodusters did not endear him to African Americans.<sup>76</sup> In contrast to Douglass, many Black leaders approved of the idea that African Americans were willing to move from locations where they were underappreciated. One of the most vocal advocates of the Exodusters, Howard University professor, Richard Greener, argued that African Americans and industrial corporations would both benefit from the mass migration. “Railway corporations, mining companies, and the great farmers of the west are demanding all the labor available,” he argued. With a “little judicious aid” African Americans would be induced to leave the South, “thereby benefitting themselves,” and “ameliorating the condition of those who remain.” For Greener, Black Southerners stood in the way of their own advancement by remaining in the South. They could earn more money in the North “even if confined to humble employments, than he can at the South.”<sup>77</sup>

While most prominent Afro-Illinoisans generally supported the Exodusters, the *Chicago Inter-Ocean* reported that there was a “small split” within their ranks. There were a “handful of

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<sup>76</sup> Painter, 250.

<sup>77</sup> R.T. Greener, “The Emigration of Colored Citizens From the Southern States,” *Journal of Social Science, Containing the Proceedings of the American Association*, (May 1880), 11-22.

malcontents” that debated the merits of the migration, and would “have nothing to do with the business.” These dissenters were so insignificant, according to the *Inter Ocean*, that they “deserve no notice” because their opposition was lost in the full volume of votes that declared an organization be formed to aid the Exodusters. In May 1879, Black Chicagoans held a series of meetings in various churches throughout the city to take steps to organize a relief effort for the Southern refugees. The Chicago Exodus Aid Society elected a complete set of officers, including newspaper editor of the *Conservator*, the first African American newspaper in Chicago, F.L. Barnett and John W.E. Thomas, who was an Alabama-born school teacher, and was the first African American elected to the Illinois House of Representatives in 1876. These men were entrusted with collecting funds and donations and distributing them to refugees that migrated to St. Louis and Illinois.<sup>78</sup>

During the height of the of the migration movement, the Illinois Republican press presented the Exodusters as industrious people who were willing to leave the South to locate better economic opportunities and their freedom. While they held the Exodusters in a positive light, Republicans viewed Afro-Illinoisans with increasing skepticism due to their growing demands for social and political equality. Many Black leaders became disenchanted with Republicans because they believed the GOP was becoming increasingly conservative on civil rights issues during the late 1870s. Prominent Blacks such as John T Bird, editor of the first African American newspaper in Illinois, attacked the quality of education offered by Illinois Republicans in segregated schools in Cairo, Illinois. Other Black political leaders questioned the commitment of Illinois Republicans because they were continuously denied state and political appointments. For example, in July 1878, a group of Black Illinoisans visited Governor Shelby

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<sup>78</sup> “The Negro Exodus,” *Chicago Inter Ocean*, May 2, 1879; “The Negro Exodus,” May 3, 1879.

Cullom in an attempt to have an African American named a commissioner for the Southern Illinois Penitentiary at Chester, Illinois. When he denied their request, many Afro-Illinoisans threatened to bolt the party.<sup>79</sup>

Increasingly frustrated over what many Afro-Illinoisans perceived as a lack of respect and commitment from the GOP over their plight, prominent Blacks organized the first of several statewide conventions. These conventions were intended to provide Afro-Illinoisans with a forum to arrive at common solutions for their economic, social, and political issues.<sup>80</sup> The two-day convention, held in Springfield, included Black political leaders throughout the state, and represented a step toward collective action as delegates voiced their opinions on employment, education and racial discrimination. They encouraged Black Illinoisans to unite and form their own organizations to promote their interests, and denounced the hiring of incompetent teachers for Black schools and established permanent committees to carry forth the business of the convention.<sup>81</sup>

The most divisive issue among the delegates (as well as the issue that garnered the most attention in the Illinois press) was whether to remain loyal to the Republican Party or seek an independent political course. Lawyers John G. Jones (no relation to John Jones) and Ferdinand Barnett, and lawyer and son-in-law of the recently departed John Jones, Lloyd Wheeler, led the “anti-Republican” or “mugwumps.” They argued that African American loyalty had been taken for granted, and if the Black community showed more political independence, it could reap

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<sup>79</sup> Roger D. Bridges, *Equality Deferred: Civil Rights for Illinois Blacks, 1865-1885*, *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society* (1981), 99.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid*, 100.

<sup>81</sup> “Illinois Negro Convention,” *Chicago Times*, July 19, 1880; July 22, 1880; David Joens, *From Slave to State Legislator: John W.E. Thomas, Illinois’ First African American Lawmaker*, (Carbondale, Southern Illinois University Press, 2012), 83-84; Bridges, 100.

rewards and respect from all parties. On the other hand, Republican loyalists, led by John W.E. Thomas and James H. Magee, who was appointed to the Republican State Central Committee, believed that African Americans could only progress within the Republican Party and viewed the Democrats in Illinois as the allies of the discriminatory Southern Democrats.<sup>82</sup> Delegates originally drafted a proposal to create an African American Central Committee, which consisted of a representative from each of the state's nineteen congressional districts and four at large delegates. This committee served as an African American counterpart to the Republican's committee, which had no Black members. However, the idea was seen by many delegates as potentially hostile to the Republicans and the proposal was made less political and given a different name. Instead, Black delegates agreed to the creation of nonpartisan committees for monitoring and advancing the interests of African Americans in Illinois.<sup>83</sup>

In their official address to the Republicans, the conventioners stated plainly that they were grateful for the political deeds of the Republicans and agreed to remain loyal to the party:

“In presenting our claims to the Republican party we avow that we have no hostile feelings toward it, but on the contrary, affirm that we entertain the highest and purest sentiments of gratitude toward it for the noble and patriotic stand it has taken in the cause of human rights. While this be true, we are of opinion that its end will not have been accomplished until it places the negro in this state and in all the states alike in a higher sphere of useful and honored citizenship.”<sup>84</sup>

Although the convention delegates scaled back the anti-Republican language in the proposal, and adopted a resolution that affirmed allegiance to the Republicans, the *Chicago Tribune* was highly critical of the convention. The Republican mouthpiece lambasted the conventioners for their

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<sup>82</sup> Joens, 85-86.

<sup>83</sup> Joens, 84; Bridges, 100.

<sup>84</sup> “Illinois Negro Convention,” *Chicago Times*, July 19, 1880.

“ingratitude” towards the political party that “delivered them out of bondage” and “assured the freedom of their race for all time to come...” Since Republicans had appointed African Americans to some political positions, the *Tribune* editor argued, it “was sufficient to show that there was no prejudice against them...on account of their race.”<sup>85</sup> In short, the *Tribune* not only disregarded the fact that convention delegates overwhelmingly approved to keep their alliance with the Republicans, they also ignored the entirety of the convention which included other pertinent issues, such as Black education and employment.

While Black Illinoisans may have overemphasized the need for political appointments, their assessment of the 1880s version of the Republican Party, and their fear that the party that “delivered them out of bondage,” was not an exaggeration. Many of the Radical Republicans during this period were either voted out of office, retired, or deceased. Moderate and conservative politicians that took their place in office had a less sympathetic view of African Americans, and abandoned African Americans in the South, and any further possibility that Reconstruction could continue. Since Republicans believed they had provided African Americans with all the assistance they needed to succeed, the civil rights bill was unnecessary legislation and unconstitutional. When the Supreme Court finally overturned the much-maligned civil rights law in 1883, it confirmed the suspicions of many African Americans. The Republican-dominated Supreme Court declared the federal civil rights act unconstitutional in an eight to one decision because it sought to “regulate individuals, not states.” Most Black leaders expressed outrage over the ruling and threatened to vote against any Republican “who has not shown a disposition while in office to act honorably and fairly toward colored applicants for political preferment.” Frederick Douglass said the decision set African Americans back twenty

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<sup>85</sup> “The Colored Voters in Illinois,” *Chicago Tribune*, July 23, 1883.

years; it “remanded them substantially to the condition they were at the close of the war.”<sup>86</sup> The *Cleveland Gazette* called it a “shameful decision” that will close “hundreds of hotels, places of amusement and other public places here in the North to our people.”<sup>87</sup> While Illinois Democrats predictably saw the decision as vindication, Republican’s ranged from outrage to adulation. The *Chicago Evening Journal* called the decision “a long step backwards from an advanced position that had been taken by the country in the recognition of human rights.” The *Chicago Inter-Ocean* believed the bill “overextended its reach and protected social rather than civil rights.” Similarly, the *Chicago Tribune* maintained their initial stance, insisting that the there was nothing in that decision which could by any possibility justify the wail of memorial” from African Americans. Despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary, the *Tribune* argued that the decision placed the civil rights of African Americans “on a level with the white man.”<sup>88</sup>

The Supreme Court decision had a multi-layered effect on Black political leaders in Illinois. First, it galvanized the independent and anti-Republican factions within the leadership. Former Alabama legislator, Reverend Smith of Bloomington, Illinois believed the decision “sounded the death knell” of the Republican Party, and he did not believe African Americans would ever concentrate their vote on any single Republican candidate. John J. Bird from Cairo argued that the “more intelligent” African Americans would “leave the Republican party.” Even stalwart Republicans such as W.E. Thomas maintained that the decision would be “injurious to the Republicans.”<sup>89</sup> Secondly, there was a growing legion of Black leaders in Illinois who were not only critical of the allegiance between African Americans and Republicans, they also wanted

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<sup>86</sup> *Chicago Times*, October 17, 1883.

<sup>87</sup> “The Civil Rights Bill,” *Cleveland Gazette*, October 20, 1883.

<sup>88</sup> “A Word to the Colored Men,” *Chicago Tribune*, October 18, 1883; *Chicago Evening Journal*, October 16, 1883; “Civil Rights,” *Chicago Inter-Ocean*, October 17, 1883; Bridges, 102.

<sup>89</sup> Bridges 102.



Black leaders to concentrate on issues other than politics. For example, Ferdinand L. Barnett urged Afro-Illinoisans to shift their focus from politics to “more pertinent issues” such as Black employment and education. “Labor is the leaven we need...to talk about elevating the ‘mental, moral, and political status’ of the race is to usurp the place of the corner politician and leave the dignitary with his occupation gone.” Urging Afro-Illinoisans to shift their focus from politics, Barnett connected improved education with better employment. “We have had politics enough...we are being continually reminded...that our progress is not measured by the number of janitorships we hold, but the number of acres we till and the amount on the debit side of our bank account.”<sup>90</sup> Reverend Smith of Bloomington, Illinois, echoed Barnett’s sentiment, and further argued that African American labor and the plight of the Black working class was the most pressing matter. Smith, along with Chicago lawyer and son-in-law of John Jones, Lloyd Wheeler, attempted to steer Black leaders towards education and labor issues. “We cannot longer afford to make political place the beginning and end of every aspiration,” stated Wheeler. African Americans needed to pursue knowledge of and employment in the mechanical and mercantile world, as well as a need for larger avenues of employment for young African Americans. Furthermore, Blacks also needed to attend manual training schools, and Afro-Illinoisans needed to formulate a plan to utilize all efforts to obtain recognition from all “kindred organizations” because African Americans must become more involved in “the material interests if they would succeed.”<sup>91</sup>

Lastly, the decision had the effect of spurring African American political leaders into action on a new, state civil rights bill. The effort by Afro-Illinoisans to craft state-level

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<sup>90</sup> “The Colored Convention,” *Chicago Tribune*, September 13, 1883.

<sup>91</sup> “Illinois Colored Men,” *Chicago Times*, October 17, 1885; Bridges, 103.

legislation enforcing civil rights grew out of, and built upon, an established history of political activism in the state. Prior to an Afro-Illinois political convention in 1885, Representative John W.E. Thomas, who had been reelected to the Illinois House, introduced a new bill, and with little opposition, the Illinois House Judiciary recommended its passage. Following an overwhelming House victory, the bill languished in the Republican Senate. Illinois Blacks were disturbed over the Senate's inaction, and some predicted that the failure to pass the bill would send Afro-Illinoisans out of the GOP. Finally, on June 3, the bill passed and was signed into law by Illinois Governor Olgesby a week later. The law stated in part, "if any colored man is refused shelter, food, or a ticket to a play on account of his color, he may sue the offender and recover from \$25 to \$500 according to the amount of injury to feelings...or there may be a criminal prosecution...if convicted, to be punished by fine or imprisonment." <sup>92</sup>

The relative ease by which the Illinois state civil rights bill of 1885 passed through Congress was a testament to African American political leaders maintaining pressure on Republicans for political appointments. However, the passage of the bill was not necessarily a recognition of their right to such guarantees, but of the political realities of the state. The introduction of the bill coincided with the 1884 state elections, and both Illinois Democrats and Republicans desperately wanted the African American vote. The breakdown of the vote in the legislature reflected this reality. While many Democratic legislators skipped the vote altogether, all of the Democrats representing districts in East St. Louis, Springfield, and Chicago—areas with a substantial African American population—voted in favor of the bill. In the end, the measure passed by a vote of eighty-three to nineteen, with not a single Republican voting against

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<sup>92</sup> "Must Be Accommodated," *Chicago Tribune*, June 5, 1885; Irving Dillard, "Civil Liberties of Negroes Since 1865," *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society*, Vol 41, No 3 (Autumn 1963), 594.

the measure.<sup>93</sup> As historian Roger D. Bridges stated, there was more than a little truth to the charge that the Illinois Republican party was interested primarily in Black votes and only secondarily in protecting their civil rights or fostering political advancement. Illinois political leaders demonstrated by their actions the wisdom of the Radical Republicans who insisted that suffrage and access to the courts were essential if African Americans were to become full-fledged citizens. It was only when Afro-Illinoisans began to flirt with the Democratic Party that either party moved realistically towards political rights and equality. Political participation at all levels was the only guarantee to full enjoyment of civil and economic rights.<sup>94</sup>

### *Jim Crowism and Labor's Boogeyman*

Meetings celebrating the civil rights bill were held in various African American communities throughout Illinois. At Olivet Baptist Church in Chicago, Black leaders met to ratify the bill and rejoiced over its passage. John G. Jones, Lloyd G. Wheeler, and Frederick L. Barnett were present, and expressed their gratitude to Representative J.W.E Thomas for sponsoring the bill. A resolutions committee submitted a report that declared that the “long-delayed act of justice met with the hearty approval of the colored people...” Conversely, news of the Civil Rights bill outside of the Black community was met with mixed reactions. The few Illinois newspapers that dedicated space to the bill were, at best, lukewarm to its passage. The *Quincy Daily Whig* simply stated that the bill was “in the interest of the negro and attempts to place them on the same footing as the whites,” while the *Chicago Tribune* continued to question the bill’s necessity: Why should African Americans “fret themselves about riding in palace cars

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<sup>93</sup> Cadigan, 277-278.

<sup>94</sup> Bridges, 108.

and dining in fashionable restaurants when they are unable to pay for such privileges?” Although African Americans were making some economic strides, “their experience since slavery has led them to attach too much importance to laws and constitutional provisions as means for their elevation, and they need to learn that statutes can do nothing more than secure every man an equal chance.” Civil Rights bills, they concluded, would “be in vain” unless African Americans “fight the battle with poverty.”<sup>95</sup> While some Afro-Illinoisans expressed similar sentiments, they also maintained the necessity of civil rights legislation to eradicate increasing racial inequities.

Legal historian, Elizabeth Dale maintained that the 1880s marked a “transitional period” in Illinois, and Jim Crow segregation was not as pronounced as it would be during the early twentieth century.<sup>96</sup> However, there was considerable evidence that anti-black sentiment was on the rise in Illinois and the rest of the nation during this period. As one Black Chicagoan observed, the civil rights bill was necessary because Chicago was “getting to be as bad as a Southern city...restaurants which we used to frequent until a few weeks ago have begun to exclude us.”<sup>97</sup> Some managers in Chicago simply refused to acknowledge that they discriminated against Black patrons, while others defiantly railed against the bill, and claimed that they would never admit Black customers. One restaurant manager in Chicago explained that prior to the Civil Rights Act, he refused to admit African Americans into his establishment. When the law goes into effect he explained that he would “have to feed the darkies, perhaps we’d sell out if we got a good chance.” Another manager also admitted that he discriminated against Blacks, and would continue to do so because it would be bad for business. “If they

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<sup>95</sup> “Advice to Colored Men,” *Chicago Tribune*, August 19, 1885; Cadagin, 279.

<sup>96</sup> Elizabeth Dale, “Social Equality Does Not Exist among themselves Nor Among Us: Baylies vs. Curry and Civil Rights in Chicago, 1888,” *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 102, No. 2 (Apr., 1997), 313.

<sup>97</sup> “They Ratify,” *Chicago Tribune*, June 19, 1885.

insisted on having something,” he explained “perhaps they could be accommodated in a side room. But we can’t ask our patrons to sit down at the table with negroes, because many of them...would object.” Furthermore, many of his waiters were European Americans, and “they draw the line as sharply as anyone, and would leave if they were compelled to do it.”<sup>98</sup> Whether many of the owners agreed with the new law or not, the consensus among them was that they would conduct business as usual regardless of what the new law ordered them to do.

Reactions from non-Black Illinoisans offer a revealing insight towards the gradual acceptance of racial segregation in the coming years that would affect every aspect of Black life. Proprietors at Chicago’s high-end establishments, for example, admitted that they discriminated against “low class” patrons, regardless of race. “It makes no difference with us whether such a bill has been passed or not,” explained a manager at the Palmer House. “If a decent, respectable, and clean colored man comes to us and asks for accommodations we always give them to him.” A proprietor of another downtown hotel argued that the bill gave African American patrons an “advantage over whites” since they exercised the right to exclude anyone for disorderliness. “If the bill says nothing as to what we shall do in case a colored man should present himself in such condition, I presume the law is that we shall have no right to refuse him under such condition.”<sup>99</sup> The problem with this logic, argued the *Western Appeal*, was that European Americans of the late nineteenth century were putting “all colored people on a level...that of the lowest.” The *Appeal* acknowledged that there were some African Americans that were “naturally very low,” but most were not. Whenever a Black person committed a crime, they lamented, “the white press seldom puts itself to the trouble to learn the proper names of the alleged criminals, but

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<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

<sup>99</sup> “Must Be Accommodated,” *Chicago Tribune*, June 5, 1885.

stigmatizes the whole race by referring to them as ‘niggers’ ‘negroes’...or something of the sort.” Furthermore, “when a colored person is the wrong doer all the colored people in the town, city or vicinity are stigmatized.”<sup>100</sup> By the last decade of the nineteenth century, mainstream Americans assumed the vast majority of African Americans were innately inferior beings—any deviation from this widely accepted notion was often the exception to the perceived norm.

Lloyd Wheeler and Reverend Smith were among a few Black leaders in Illinois who openly acknowledged the social and political backlash against Afro-Illinoisans. To alleviate the negative reaction, they continued to push for a shift away from politics, and focus on other pertinent issues affecting Afro-Illinoisans. With the ratification of the Civil Rights law in hand, Wheeler and Smith maintained that the most important issues among Afro-Illinoisans were educational and economic. They called for a state convention in October 1885 that focused on the issue of segregation in southern Illinois schools, and increasing discrimination in labor unions and employment. <sup>101</sup> “Our people are wage workers,” said Wheeler in an address to convention delegates, “and should be deeply interested in all that points to the question.” He argued that Afro-Illinoisans could achieve better employment if they “united their energies in that direction.” Wheeler further advised Afro-Illinoisans to patronize stores that employed Black men and women. “Instead of supporting such a man upon the agreement that they will take a colored man in the office with them as a reward for our fealty, let him take a colored man within the precincts of his private establishment, and allow that man there to win such distinction as his merit and intelligence warrant.”<sup>102</sup> Wheeler and other delegates of the convention displayed their

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<sup>100</sup> *Western Appeal*, July 9, 1887, pg 1, col. 2; July 16, 1887, pg. 1, col. 1.

<sup>101</sup> Joens, 118.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*

commitment to Black patronage when they condemned Austin Perry, a Mattoon Black man, for not allowing other Blacks into his place of business.<sup>103</sup>

Like the conventions during the early 1880s, mainstream Republican newspapers criticized prominent Black Illinoisans as disaffected “office-seekers” who sought patronage jobs and other handouts. Meanwhile, convention delegates established the Committee on Trade and Labor to work with other labor organizations for the hiring of Black workers. Reverend Smith warned white workers and employers that there were negative ramifications for all Americans if they continued to exclude Black workers from respectable employment.<sup>104</sup> He remarked during the 1885 convention:

“Shut our young men out of the factories and throw them into brothels and club rooms, and you dwarf their manhood and ruin their morals. It is as a plant transplanted, a rose turned into a thorn. You keep a man from rising from the position of a menial or serf, keep him always in temptation and adverse circumstances. In short, you can’t grow a good citizen keeping him in the worst position in society. The interests of the colored people today are not with any political party, but with the great laboring masses of the country. If we would only form an alliance with them, the door of every factory would open as if touched by a magician’s wand.”<sup>105</sup>

Smith’s appeal for unity among working class Illinoisans was hardly an “office-seeking” ploy—he understood the danger of division in the workforce along racial lines. African Americans may have had interest in politics—but Smith believed that the right to vote did not necessarily equate to viable employment.

Afro-Illinoisans responded positively to the message of unity among the laboring masses. By the mid-1880s, more African Americans joined the KOL and had become more active in the

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<sup>103</sup> “Chicago,” *Cleveland Gazette*, October 24, 1885.

<sup>104</sup> Joens, 121.

<sup>105</sup> Brian Dolinar, ed., *Negro in Illinois: the WPA Papers*, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2013), 106.

labor struggle. For example, in May 1887, two hundred African American waiters struck in observation of the first anniversary of the May Day, and won an increase of \$1.25 per week. The restaurant and hotel proprietors tried to separate the united hands of Black and white workers by attempting to replace white waiters with African American strikebreakers, but this was foiled by the Black workers themselves.<sup>106</sup> During a rally a year later Black waiters demanded improvements to their condition, as well as the need to become more educated about their rights and the labor movement. “The day was not far distant,” predicted one African American KOL member, “when, by organization, waiters would receive proper remuneration for their services.”<sup>107</sup>

Some African American commentators stuck to the Republican “free labor” message and argued that Black workers should disassociate themselves from “lawless” labor organizations like the KOL. Anti-union ideas became more prominent after the Chicago Haymarket Square Massacre in 1886 in which eleven people were killed after a bomb was tossed in a crowd of workers who held a rally in favor of the eight hour work day. Although the KOL and other unions quickly condemned the bombing, many people associated the violence with unions and labor agitation in general.<sup>108</sup> The AME Church *Review* saw some merit with the Knights, but stopped short of a complete endorsement. “Colored men,” they explained, “should not identify themselves with any organization that seeks the accomplishment of its purposes through a resort of lawlessness and violence.” Furthermore, African Americans should maintain their reputation of being law-abiding people, and the rights of the laboring people to which they were entitled

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<sup>106</sup> Kessler, 34.

<sup>107</sup> “Waiters Want More Pay,” *Chicago Inter Ocean*, May 12, 1888.

<sup>108</sup> Kessler, *The Organization of Negroes in the Knights of Labor*, 276.



could be maintained without violating the law.<sup>109</sup> Other influential journals were either equivocal or hostile toward Black participation in labor unions. The *Christian Recorder*, organ of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, recognized that the Knights aimed to protect African American workers against discrimination by white labor. However, they also suggested that Black workers remain neutral in the labor struggles in which the KOL were engaged.<sup>110</sup> The editor of the *Recorder* urged Black leaders to instruct the masses to be patient and eschew “the folly and danger of cooperating with labor malcontents in their fight against capital.”<sup>111</sup> Many Black leaders remained bound to Republican conservative ideology, and the “radicalism” of labor agitation was outside the perimeters of the “naturally” harmonious relationship between capital and labor.

While many African American leaders remained tied to Republican ideology, a few expressed economic doctrines of a more radical tinge, and were more inclined toward economic solidarity among the laboring classes than toward economic solidarity within the African American community. The *Washington Bee* called the KOL “one of the most worthy and liberty-loving organizations in the country.”<sup>112</sup> Editor of the *New York Freeman*, T. Thomas Fortune, also expressed sympathy with trade unionism and radical economic ideologies and praised the KOL for enlisting the support of all nationalities.<sup>113</sup> “The revolution is upon us,” he insisted, “and since we are largely of the laboring population it is very natural that we should take sides

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<sup>109</sup> “A Colored Man on Socialism,” *Daily Inter Ocean*, July 14, 1886; The *AME Church Review*, III (October 1886): 165-167, from Philip Foner *The Black Worker: A Documentary history from Colonial Times to the Present*, 41.

<sup>110</sup> August Meier and Elliot Rudwick, “Attitudes of Negro Leaders toward the American Labor Movement From the Civil War to World War One,” in Julius Jacobson, ed. *The Negro and the American Labor Movement*, (Garden City, 1968), 34.

<sup>111</sup> “Labor Outlook for Colored Men,” *Christian Recorder*, July 19, 1894.

<sup>112</sup> “South Washington News,” *Washington Bee*, February 27, 1886; Kessler, 273.

<sup>113</sup> Meier and Rudwick, 32-33.

with the laboring forces in their fight for a juster distribution of the results of labor.”<sup>114</sup> Fortune would later organize the National Afro-American League to fight for the protection of Black voting, the end of lynching, equalized school funding, and equal rights to transportation and public accommodation.<sup>115</sup> The *Cleveland Gazette* remarked, “there is not an intelligent colored or white man who is not aware... of the grand possibilities of the organization of colored laborers of the south as the Knights of Labor.”<sup>116</sup> As the influence and the reputation of the KOL grew among African Americans, many Black workers and leaders viewed biracial unionization and cooperation with working class whites as the most viable solution to their economic plight.

Many Black Illinoisans heeded the conventioneer’s call for biracial unionism and demanded a stronger presence within labor unions. KOL member, W.E. Turner argued that more Blacks should join the union because it was “high time the negro race in America was asserting itself, and not looking for legislation through any party that now exists.” Turner maintained that rather than a “race problem” within the unions, the problem for laboring men and women was an issue of wages. “We have been bamboozled long enough with that old cry of race problem...let all colored men and women join the Order of the Knights of Labor where as men and women we will get some semblance of justice and recognition.”<sup>117</sup> African American lawyer and labor advocate, Frederick L. Magee of Galesburg, Illinois echoed the call for a stronger presence in labor unions. However, he placed the onus of limited access of viable jobs on employers. “While it is to be admitted that the negro as a race can gain much through being elected or appointed to office and proving himself proficient therein...the thing he most needs, aside from the full

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<sup>114</sup> “Labor Upheavals,” *New York Freeman*, March 20, 1886.

<sup>115</sup> Richardson, 211; Emma Lou Thornbrough, “The National Afro-American League, 1887-1908,” *Journal of Southern History*, 27 (November 1961), 494-512.

<sup>116</sup> “Colored Knights of Labor,” *Cleveland Gazette*, July 17, 1886.

<sup>117</sup> *Journal of the Knights of Labor*, March 5, 1891; Kessler, *Blacks and the KOL*, 274-275.

enjoyment of all his rights and immunities, is not office or political fame, but rather the free access to all the avenues of labor—a chance to prove himself a peer of the white man without being required to stand the test of an expert. Magee argued that many African Americans were forced to the “lowest positions of servitude” because of their race. When African Americans are allowed to work alongside European Americans, “more is required of [the Black worker], he receives lower pay, and he has not the same chance of advancement.”<sup>118</sup>

Although racial distinctions during the late 1880s were significant, they did not keep African Americans from working with, or, for whites. However, as the decade went on, and the idea of segregating Blacks became more appealing within mainstream America, Black people found it increasingly difficult to obtain employment at white-owned businesses. One of the more sensational stories during this period occurred in 1888 when the body of a fourteen-year old European American girl named Maggie Gaughan was discovered in a closet located at Greene’s Boot Factory in Chicago. Gaughan, who worked at the factory, had been missing all day and apparently been hacked to death sometime before work started that morning. Zephyr Davis, a seventeen-year old African American, who was the factory foreman, was under suspicion immediately. He was away on an errand when the body was found, and when he did not return to work, suspicion became certainty. Davis was caught in Park Forest, Illinois and swiftly indicted, tried, and sentenced to death in March.<sup>119</sup>

For Black Chicagoans, the swift justice meted out to Davis meant more than avenging a heinous crime committed against an innocent girl. Perceptive Afro-Illinoisans correctly assumed that Davis’ crime, as well as his occupational authority as a foremen in charge of white workers,

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<sup>118</sup> “What the Negro Needs—A Colored Man’s View,” *Chicago Tribune*, December 8, 1888.

<sup>119</sup> Elizabeth Dale, *Rule of Justice: The People of Chicago versus Zephyr Davis*. (Columbus: Ohio State University, 2001), 1.

would not be viewed as an isolated case. While many African Americans expressed regret over the crime, they railed against the conclusion drawn by the verdict of the county coroner and his deputy, who found that “the system pursued by said Greene Brothers of employing negroes and whites, male and female promiscuously, is against the public morals, and should be stopped.”<sup>120</sup> Black and white boys and girls had mingled together in the public schools of Chicago for many years, explained one African American writer. A single case, he continued, could not be shown where the public morals had been corrupted by African Americans and whites working together.

“The atrocious murderer is as repulsive to the black man as he is to the white, and he hopes with his white brother for a severe and speedy punishment. Black and white join hand in hand and demand the full extent of the law, but while doing so let us say judge men not by the color of their skin, but by their deeds—then justice will be done to all.”<sup>121</sup>

If the situation had been reversed, argued the *Cleveland Gazette*, and Davis had been a white foreman, and the victim an African American girl, would Kent have found the circumstance “pernicious to public morals” to mix black and white labor?

“But now the very fact that a white girl has met her death at the hands of a colored man, in an establishment where white and colored are employed together, is sufficient evidence for Mr. Kent, that all white girls will meet a similar fate if this ‘dangerous system’ is continued. The whole race is held responsible for one man’s crime. We denounce the conclusion of the verdict as an insulting and calumnious insinuation on the responsible colored citizens, and should be resented from every quarter without hesitation. The time may yet come when coroner Kent will seek a favor at the hands of a

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<sup>120</sup> According to Elizabeth Dale, the struggle over the verdict’s message, and the underlying premise that the coroner’s inquest might serve as a platform from which messages could be sent to the public at large, was consistent with general practice in the late nineteenth century Chicago. Procedurally, a coroner’s jury was called after any sudden death. It was supposed to consist of six people, known as bystanders, called from the vicinity in which the death occurred, on the theory that they would have knowledge of the circumstances of the crime. As the Supreme Court of Illinois explained, the coroner’s jury had two functions. It was to determine how anyone who died suddenly came to do so, and, in the process, it was to make an inquiry into “all things which occasioned” the death, Dale, *Rule of Justice*, 37: “A Blaze of Indignation,” *Chicago Tribune*, March 7, 1888; “Chicago,” *Western Appeal*, March 10, 1888.

<sup>121</sup> “Zephyr Davis Brutal Murder,” *Chicago Inter-Ocean*, March 3, 1888.

colored person, and if he does he should then be reminded that it would be 'pernicious to public morals.'"<sup>122</sup>

Leading Black Chicagoans responded by holding a meeting at Bethesda Baptist Church to express outrage, and to formulate a proper response to the conclusion. Lawyers Frederick L. Magee, Lloyd Wheeler, and John G. Jones, all spoke at the heavily attended meeting. Jones explained that the coroner's racialized conclusion was "uncalled for either in law or reason," and called for their immediate resignation. In his usual rambunctious manner, John G. "indignation" Jones threatened to "tar and feather" the jury and the coroners unless they apologized for their remarks. T. H. Magee, the lawyer for Davis, found Jones's threats offensive and insisted that the coroners be "handled with gloves" because the purpose of this meeting was to "uphold law and order and equal rights." Resolutions were adopted censuring the coroner and his deputy and denouncing the insult as a "vicious, slanderous and unwarranted attack upon a law-abiding class of citizens." They further resolved that the coroners had both showed themselves to be "bitter enemies of the Colored race," and unworthy of the Black vote.<sup>123</sup> *New York Age* newspaper editor, Thomas T. Fortune remarked that African Americans in Chicago were to be "congratulated upon losing no time in expressing their manly resentment and endeavoring to protect themselves from unjust aspersions." There was "too much of this disposition exhibited to hold a whole race responsible for the crimes of its individual members."<sup>124</sup> Protests from African Americans became increasingly ineffective against the rising tide of turn-of-the-century American racism. By the start of the twentieth century, Black Americans in Illinois and the rest

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<sup>122</sup> "Kent's Verdict," *Cleveland Gazette*, March 10, 1888.

<sup>123</sup> "Result of Convention," *Chicago Tribune*, September 9, 1888.

<sup>124</sup> *New York Age*, March 17, 1888, pg 2, col. 2.

of the country would find it virtually impossible to locate supervisory positions within biracial workplaces.

Deputy Coroner Kent dismissed the African American community's reaction as "nothing more or less than an abortive attempt to stir up race prejudice." The jury had specific reference to the practice introduced by the Greene Brothers, he continued, and it was "absurd to blind one's eyes" to their error in judgment. He claimed to have no ill will against African Americans, but there was "an imputation that the 'promiscuous' mingling of such labor is pernicious."<sup>125</sup> Like the Black miners of Braidwood, Chicago African American leaders attempted to use their political power to affect the election of candidates that did not act in their best interests. During the Republican Convention in 1888 the African American delegates protested against the re-nomination of Coroner Hertz. They assailed him in a vicious manner and vowed they would not vote for him. Although they succeeded in blocking a unanimous vote for his reelection, Hertz regained his seat during the next election.<sup>126</sup>

While Black Illinoisans attempted to salvage their reputations after the heinous murder, one of the few major labor organizations that advocated Black membership was fighting for its survival. The reputation of the KOL was in jeopardy after the Haymarket Affair, and support for the union began to noticeably wane during the late 1880s. As the KOL began to decline in popularity and effectiveness, many of Chicago's Black waiters, who were among the staunchest supporters of the union, began to explore other avenues. By the end of 1888, some dissident African American waiters seceded from the Garrison local to create a separate waiters union with white waiters. In January 1889, a group of German workers in the service industry formed an

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<sup>125</sup> Ibid.

<sup>126</sup> "Zephyr Davis' Brutal Murder," *Chicago Inter Ocean*, March 3, 1888; "Result of the Convention," *Chicago Tribune*, September 9, 1888.

interracial alliance of eight independent unions, called the Culinary Alliance. The leader of the new organization, W.C. Pomeroy, sought to end racial division among service industry workers, and had already gained a reputation for organizing waiters in St. Louis.<sup>127</sup>

The Alliance's initial plan to action was not to hold a general strike. Instead, the union would serve an ultimatum to a few restaurants at a time—pay the waiters at the desired wage scale, or they would walk out. The first major test for the Alliance came against Kinsley's Elegant Eatery in May 1890. At a prearranged signal, the African American waiters marched through the dinner hour crowd to the street, and left customers fuming about long waits and the inept emergency replacements who spilled coffee and confused food orders. Chaos ensued as several regular customers strolled into the kitchen and cooked their own meals.<sup>128</sup> Restaurant workers may not have earned the best wages, but they could exercise some power by organizing and walking out of a restaurant at the busiest time and wreak havoc. Being a waiter may not have been the most skilled occupation, but when an experienced staff left during the busiest time, their worth and skills were quickly apparent to everyone.

The waiters and their affiliation with the Culinary Alliance received strong support in the African American community. Well attended meetings were often held at Quinn Chapel for union members, potential union members, and interested on-lookers from the Black community. Even the Fisk Jubilee singers lent their support when they made a special trip from Tennessee to lend musical support during a meeting. High praise of the organization and the efforts of the waiters came from a variety of Black leaders and newspapers. Summing up the enormity of the waiter's labor actions, one leader replied: "this is not only a waiters struggle, but one in which

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<sup>127</sup> Sidney Kessler, "The Negro and Labor Strikes," *The Midwest Journal*, Vol VI, (Summer 1954), 34; "The Waiters Will Win," *Chicago Times*, May 7, 1890; Duis, 267; Reed, 244.

<sup>128</sup> "The Waiters Will Win," *Chicago Times*, May 7, 1890; Duis, 267.

the entire colored people of Chicago should be in sympathy with.”<sup>129</sup> The *Cleveland Gazette*

wrote:

“The first time that the white man has recognized that he has anything in common with the colored brother. The limited sphere in which the Afro-American has been compelled to work, has confined him almost exclusively to the choice of being a waiter or barber, unless he has had the advantage of a collegiate education, in which case he becomes a minister or lawyer. This limited sphere of action has crowded the avenues of employment and compelled the Afro American to work for wages not near as good as the white brother gets.”<sup>130</sup>

Not all Black Chicagoans saw the virtue in a biracial union however. W.W. Rodley, the city’s only African American caterer, vehemently opposed Pomeroy and the Alliance. “Look out for that wolf,” he warned in a pamphlet circulated among union men. “I have spoken to more than fifty intelligent colored men,” he continued, “and they are of the same opinion, and the Black man is in danger, and your president knows it. He explained that he wanted African American waiters to garner the highest wages they could, and was not opposed to unionization. However, he opposed biracial unions because he believed African Americans could not “look after their own interests when pitted against the white man and in this union they will settle to the bottom while the white waiters will form the crust of the alliance pie.” He concluded that since Blacks had a monopoly as waiters, because it was “all they can do,” he did not want them “thrown out of it” because of unionization.<sup>131</sup> Perhaps foreseeing what lie ahead for the Black worker and biracial unionization, Rodley’s warning was not without merit. White union leaders recognized

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<sup>129</sup> “Culinary Alliance,” *Cleveland Gazette*, May 31, 1890; “Waiters Win,” *The Appeal*, May 10, 1890; Duis, 267-268.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>131</sup> “Culinary Alliance,” *Cleveland Gazette*, May 31, 1890; *Chicago Daily News*, May 26, 1890.



that they needed Black waiters, but as Rodley suggested, they did not necessarily have their best interest at heart.

Although there was some evidence that Rodley may have been motivated against biracial unions in an effort to suppress worker's wages, his argument that Black waiters would "settle at the bottom" of the economic ladder proved accurate.<sup>132</sup> By the end of May, the strike began to stall. It was clear that the owners were successfully importing strikebreakers by meeting inbound trains at suburban stops. In exchange for not joining a union, newcomers were promised wages higher than union scale. One by one, the union crews found themselves on the street. Most distressing of all, proprietors played off white workers against blacks. The weakened Culinary Alliance tried to exude confidence by staging a massive walkout that included private downtown clubs, but they were thwarted by a determined and vocal opposition. By early June, the strike fervor began to wane. After the club effort, the union tried to organize hotel dining rooms, which also proved disastrous.<sup>133</sup>

Biracial unionization with the waiters ultimately failed in Chicago as employers pitted white waiters against Black waiters. After a series of defeats, the disintegration of Black involvement with the Culinary Alliance culminated with European American and African American waiters employing different and separate organizing strategies. White waiters accused their Black co-workers of using the civil rights public accommodation statutes to garner more jobs and further damaged any chance that biracial unionism would continue.<sup>134</sup> As racial tensions

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<sup>132</sup> "Won't Hire Union Waiters," *Chicago Inter Ocean*, May 19, 1890.

<sup>133</sup> Duis, 267-268; During a meeting involving waiters from the Charles Sumner Association of Colored Waiters, and several other white unions in which the object was the formation of a central organization that could limit strife between the waiters, W.C. Pomeroy was present and his name was greeted with hisses. Several times men called for Pomeroy, but continued hisses, along with cries to "throw him out" persisted, and the ex-labor leader declined to speak. "'Tips' Will be Bullish," *Chicago Inter-Ocean*, January 30, 1891.

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.*

became more acute within biracial unions, Black members of the KOL demanded that union leaders openly denounce racial discrimination in the United States. They also requested that the KOL appoint an African American to lecture on the virtues of the organization, since there was “no color line in the Order.”<sup>135</sup> Yet demands from Black workers seemed to only widen the racial chasm as the KOL reportedly suggested that the only solution to racial strife was to deport African Americans to Africa. The union dismissed the story as “pure fake” and a scheme concocted by the press because the organization was “not palatable to the moneyed classes and the partisan press.”<sup>136</sup> Despite the denial, the press played up the story and African Americans expressed dismay over the comments. “The Knights of Labor have nerve in trying to push us out of the United States,” said one African American worker. The Chicago Colored Women’s Club stated, “if this country is too small for the Knights of Labor and the Negro, then let the Knights leave.”<sup>137</sup> The apparent fabrication by the press may have hardly mattered—by the 1890s, KOL membership in Chicago had dwindled to approximately three hundred workers.<sup>138</sup> Any chance at biracial unionism was apparently gone, as suggested by the Virginia Bureau of Labor:

“As between the Black and white races, there is no community of interest in labor organization. For a short time some Negro laborers were connected with the Knights of Labor.”<sup>139</sup>

African Americans had good reasons to believe that the KOL wanted them out of the country. The dramatic rise in physical attacks, lynchings, anti-Black legislation, and the destruction of the Black image during the final decade of the nineteenth century provided ample evidence that

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<sup>135</sup> *Proceedings, General Assembly, Knights of Labor*, 1893, 34, copied from Foner, Philip Sheldon, and Ronald L. Lewis, eds. *The Black Worker: The Black worker during the era of the Knights of Labor*. Vol. 3. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1984), 281.

<sup>136</sup> “Place to Begin Reform,” *Journal of the Knights of Labor*, May 8, 1894.

<sup>137</sup> “Opinion of the Chicago Colored Women’s Club,” *Chicago Inter Ocean*, March 13, 1894.

<sup>138</sup> “Knights of Labor—the Rise and Fall of this Once Powerful Order,” *Chicago inter Ocean*, December 24, 1893.

<sup>139</sup> Epitaph,” *Virginia Bureau of Labor, Annual Report* (Richmond, 1899).

European Americans wanted separation from African Americans. The Supreme Court confirmed this position in 1896 with the *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision which legalized Jim Crow segregation. Furthermore, the idea of Black inferiority was readily digested by a mainstream society eager to justify economic and political subjugation of darker “Others” overseas and domestically.

The decline in the KOL and subsequent growth of the American Federation of Labor (AFL) marked the triumph of craft individualism over industrial brotherhood and of business unionism over equalitarianism. The ideology of the nineteenth century unionism reflected the structural and functional transformation of the labor movement. The new outlook in trade unionism further ostracized African American workers already on the fringes of the labor movement. First, African American workers were almost entirely engaged in unskilled labor or agricultural work. Regardless of race, the workers in these occupations received very little attention from the skilled craft unions, and therefore, many workers, regardless of race, were excluded. However, for African American workers, mainstream “scientific” thought during the last decade of the nineteenth century edged even closer to the notion that they were inferior to European Americans in virtually every aspect of life. On one hand, some white workers may have been excluded from these jobs because they simply lacked the experience and skill necessary to perform the labor. On the other hand, it became etched in American thought that the vast majority of Black workers lacked the racial temperament to perform skilled mechanical work, and therefore were regularly rejected as apprentices in skilled labor.<sup>140</sup>

The notion that African Americans would make ideal workers within a free labor society in Illinois and other Northern states was a forgotten thought by the 1890s. The racial order in the

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<sup>140</sup> Spero and Harris, 55-56.

United States during Reconstruction was in disarray, and for a brief moment, Northern employers and politicians viewed African Americans as potential replacements to troublesome European American workers. Yet post-Civil War experiments in egalitarianism were no match for the strength of race and American racism in determining the economic order of peoples. As historian Rayford Logan summarized in the *Betrayal of the Negro*:

“the simultaneous ‘failure’ of the Reconstruction experiment to make ex-slaves and poor freedmen the equals of other American citizens, the emergence of Social Darwinism, and the Scramble for Africa facilitated the acceptance, by the northern mind, of the concept of the Negro’s inherent inferiority. The conquest, at the end of the century, of territories inhabited by dark races placed the capstone upon that concept at the time when northerners were content with the apparent solution of the race problem in the South.”<sup>141</sup>

### *Conclusion*

Afro-Illinoisans managed to eke out an existence in the face of growing racial hostility during the last decades of the nineteenth century. Although they were never a real threat to usurp employment from European American workers during this period, there was a brief moment when employers entertained (and sometimes acted upon) the idea that African American workers were not only good workers, but they were not as troublesome as whites. Yet Black Illinoisans did not follow the prescribed pattern—they did join labor unions, and they fought vociferously for better treatment and wages. In a utopian (egalitarian) society, Black workers in Illinois would have been lauded as the vanguard of the labor movement in their collective struggle against capital.

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<sup>141</sup> Rayford Logan, *The Betrayal of the Negro: From Rutherford B. Hayes to Woodrow Wilson*, (New York: Da Capo Books, 1997), 174.

However, in a society steeped in white supremacist thought and a commitment to (a variety of means in order to enforce it) racial violence, the logic of the “natural order” would only allow African Americans to remain on the outside of the Labor Movement, and invariably fixed at the bottom of the economic ladder. The next two chapters will explore the lives of Black Illinoisans in the years just prior to the Great Migration; the fifth chapter will examine their economic and occupational position, and the final chapter will explore their continuing battle to gain acceptance in the Labor Movement, while they simultaneously battled against the rising acceptance of an inferior and segregated status. During this period, African Americans were confronted with even larger employment obstacles, as their position within the racial hierarchy during the end of the nineteenth century would be firmly cemented at the bottom of the economic ladder.

CHAPTER 5  
OCCUPATIONAL STATUS,  
LOCATION AND THE EMERGENCE OF CLASS  
DISTINCTION AMONG AFRO-ILLINOISANS, 1890-1910

Although the pattern of economic marginalization of Afro-Illinoisans continued during the decades bracketing the beginning of the twentieth century, there were several factors that distinguished these decades from previous years. First, despite their best collective efforts, Afro-Illinoisans encountered growing exclusion from labor unions. Previously, Black workers could at least form their own unions, or join more progressive unions that at least allowed some modicum of biracial unionism. The ascension of the American Federation of Labor (AFL) during the late 1880s allowed for not only racial discrimination, but also craft discrimination—the vast majority of African American workers were semi-skilled and unskilled, and therefore ignored by the emerging craft unions that sought specialized skilled workers. Second, more African Americans were moving from the South in an effort to escape oppressive poverty and locate better employment opportunities. As more Black people migrated to Illinois—particularly to large urban environments—a more apparent class distinction emerged among African American wage laborers. Third, Afro-Illinoisans gradually moved from rural locations within the state to more industrialized cities for employment opportunities and in an effort to escape increasing discrimination. Finally, during the last decade of the nineteenth century, mainstream pseudo-scientific thought purported Black inferiority in virtually every aspect of African American life. Through a series of Supreme Court decisions, including *Plessy v. Ferguson* in 1896, systematic disenfranchisement, and mounting anti-black terrorism throughout the entire United States, African Americans encountered the nadir of race relations. Already relegated to the bottom rung

of the economic ladder in the decades before the Great Migration, African Americans were forced to combat against a unified racial ideological stance that asserted their innate inferiority and second-class citizenship.<sup>1</sup>

This chapter will explore the occupational position and location of Afro-Illinoisans during the decades prior to the Great Migration. By focusing on the most populous African American locations during the first decade of the twentieth century, this chapter will display the type of work Afro-Illinoisans performed, and where they moved within the state to locate employment. Significantly, during the years prior to the Great Migration, a distinct professional class emerges within Black communities throughout Illinois. Unlike their white counterparts, the Black professional class (while representing an “elite” economic group) is not wealthy; rather, they are distinguished by their occupations and the status such employment wields within their segregated Black communities. This predominantly urban group distinguished themselves as an elite class among Afro-Illinoisans as skilled artisans or “professional” occupations such as educators, doctors, lawyers, businessmen and women. Further, the emerging Black elite in Illinois were often politically active and among the most active advocates fighting against anti-Black discrimination. As historian James R. Grossman explained, Black Chicago (like other urban African American communities) was severely truncated at the top; the class structure rested less on wealth or contemporary white definitions of occupational status than on notions of “refinement” and “respectability” maintained by the upper and middle classes.

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<sup>1</sup> James R. Grossman, *Land of Hope: Chicago, Black Southerners, and the Great Migration*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 128-129.

Table 5.1 African Americans Artisans in Illinois, 1890

<b>MALES</b>			
miners	556	machinists	27
barbers/hairdresser	762	marble and stone cutters/masons	110
engineers and firemen (stationary)	243	painters	79
boatmen, canalmen, pilots & sailors	73	plumbers	16
steam railroad employees	243	printers	29
street railway employees	3	saw and planing mill employees	85
telegraph and telephone operators	4	boot and shoemakers	35
apprentices	22	brickmason, potters, etc	69
bakers	17	butchers	32
blacksmiths and wheelwrights	103	cabinet maker and upholsterers	15
carpenters and joiners	128	tailors	20
coopers	19	tinners and tinware makers	8
harness, saddle, trunk makers	9	tobacco and cigar factory operatives	54
iron and steel workers	67	wood worker	26
<b>FEMALES</b>			
telegraph and telephone operators	1	printers	5
apprentices	2	tailorersses	2
cotton and other textile mill operatives	6	tobacco and cigar factory operatives	2
dressmakers, milliners , seamstresses	329		

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Source: W.E.B. DuBois, *The Negro Artisan: Report of A Social Study Made Under the Direction of Atlanta University; Together With the Proceedings of the Seventh Conference for the Study of the Negro Problems, Held At Atlanta University On May 27th, 1902.* (Atlanta, Ga.: Atlanta University Press, 1902), 124.

According to activist and scholar, W.E.B. DuBois, in his study, *The Negro Artisan: A Social Study*, Afro-Illinoisans were slowly gaining in the above trades due in part to restrictions on apprenticeships for Black workers. Located throughout Illinois' industrial centers, these skilled Black workers represented the burgeoning middle class. Although the numbers of

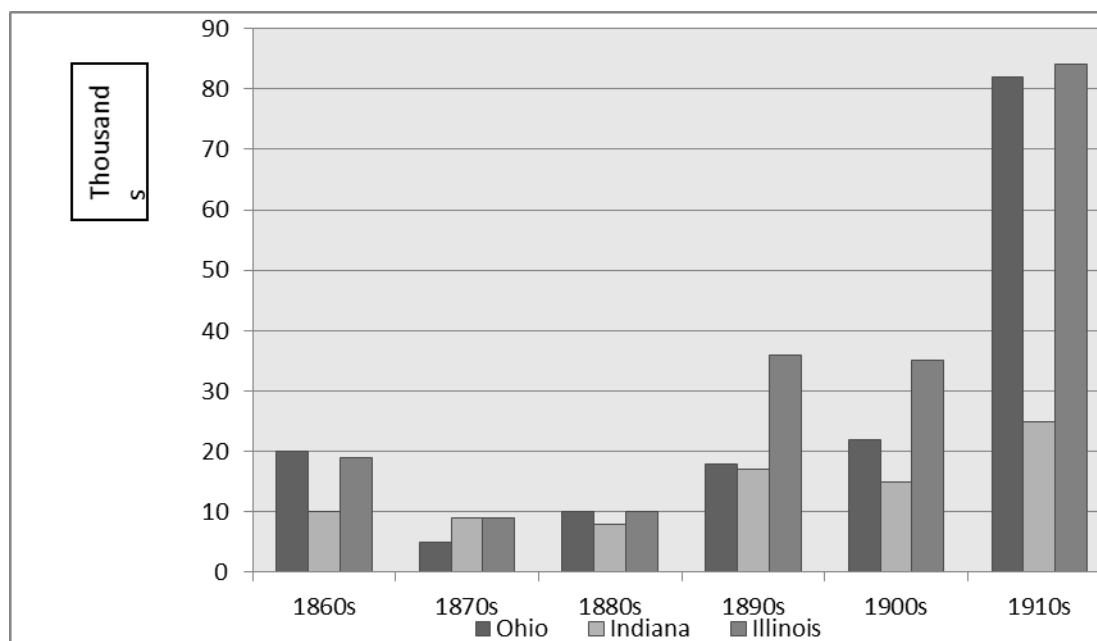


African Americans moving to Illinois pale in comparison to the mass migration of Southern Blacks during World War I, the pre-Great Migration movement of African Americans was substantial. During the 1890s, the tide of African American migration to the Lower Midwest (Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois), which had been at ebb for more than two decades, began to rise. Between 1890 and 1910 Ohio received an estimated gross migration of approximately forty three thousand African American migrants; Indiana received about thirty thousand. In both cases, the amount of Black migrants during this period at least equaled the total of the previous three decades. Illinois dramatically exceeded the numbers of the other Midwestern states. Illinois did, in fact, have the smallest proportion of African American in 1890. Yet in the next twenty years Illinois attracted about sixty-seven thousand migrants. From 1890 to 1910 the African American population rose from 57,028 to 109,049, and the urban population jumped from 34,076 in 1870 to 85,538 by 1910.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Jack Blocker, *A Little More Freedom: African Americans Enter the Urban Midwest, 1860-1930* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2008), 152; Thirteenth Census of the United States (1910) 477.

Figure 5.1 Estimated Gross Black Migration into Lower Midwest, 1860-1910



Source: Jack S. Blocker, *A Little More Freedom: African Americans Enter the Urban Midwest, 1860-1930* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2008), (figure, 7.1), 151.

During the two decades bracketing the turn of the twentieth century, African Americans flowed into the Lower Midwest to escape oppressive economic conditions and to locate better employment. Larger numbers moving into the region from the South distinguished this period from the post-Civil War years. The region's pull reached deeper into the South, beyond the Border States that had provided most of its previous migrants. Within Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois, too, African Americans were on the move, forsaking their rural neighborhoods for urban destinations. Throughout the Midwest, interstate and intrastate migration streams converged upon metropolitan centers, bypassing or abandoning the small and midsize towns that had attracted the bulk of mobile African Americans during the years before 1890. This metropolitan shift foreshadowed a similar change in direction that would occur in Illinois. The percentage of Afro-Illinoisans living in locations with populations of 100,000 rose from 25 percent in 1890 to

40.4 percent by 1910.<sup>3</sup> Part of this continuing trend to move from small towns can be explained by the fact that African Americans were simply moving to larger locations for employment opportunities. Another explanation could be attributed to what historian James Loewen referred to as the advent of “sundown” towns in Illinois and other Northern states by the turn of the century. He argued that during this period, white Northerners, who may have once been sympathetic to the plight of ex-slaves, now viewed African Americans as part of the problem of socially and economically difficult times. Once welcomed in smaller locations throughout Illinois, by the last decade of the nineteenth century “troublesome” African Americans were demonized, and through a variety of means (mostly extra-legal), Black populations left for urban environments where they were likely to find supportive Black communities.<sup>4</sup>

### *Farming*

African Americans did not completely abandon their desire for farm labor in Illinois at the turn of the century. In Pulaski County, located in the southernmost portion of Illinois, two thirds of all African Americans resided in rural areas. Most rural Black men were farm laborers, sharecroppers, tenant farmers, and independent farmers. According to the 1900 census, there were a total of one hundred and eighty-three Black-owned farms in Pulaski (37% of all Black farms in the state), and three hundred and forty-eight farm laborers. At least fifty-four percent of the African American farmers in Pulaski County owned at least a part of the land which they worked. While this was significantly less than the percentage for white farmers who owned their land (68%), it was a dramatic increase over the 2.65 percent of African American farmers who

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<sup>3</sup> Jack S. Blocker, *A Little More Freedom: African Americans Enter the Urban Midwest, 1860-1930* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2008), (appendix A: Table A.8), 231.

<sup>4</sup> James W. Loewen, *Sundown Towns: A Hidden Dimension of American Racism*, (Touchstone Books, 2005), 47-48.

owned land in 1870. Further, the rate in which African Americans became independent farmers between 1870 and 1900 was greater than the rate of Pulaski whites.<sup>5</sup>

In other farming counties throughout southern Illinois there was a steady decline in both the African American population and farming. In Gallatin County, African Americans in 1870 owned seventy-four farms; by 1880 Blacks owned only thirty farms. According to the U.S. Census, in 1910 only fifteen African Americans owned farms in Gallatin. While African Americans may have desired to continue to own farm land, the reality for Black migrants during this period in which anti-black violence and discrimination was on the rise, may have suggested that they were better off in urban environments where they could locate work and live amongst a relatively large African American population. Gallatin had 675 African Americans in 1880; by 1910 it decreased to 606—not a remarkable difference in population numbers, but considering the fact that Illinois' Black population increased from 46,368 in 1880 to 109,049 in 1910 shows that new Black migrants were bypassing the rural county. A similar decline in farming occurred in other Southern counties. In Massac County, located at the southernmost point in the state, Black farm ownership dropped from one hundred and thirty-nine farms in 1880 to seventy-six by 1910. However, the number of African Americans living in the county actually increased from 1,703 in 1880 to 2,584 in 1910. Similar to Gallatin Blacks, Massac County African Americans may have been subjected to rise in property confiscation through nebulous transactions, thus explaining the dramatic decrease in farm ownership over a relatively short period.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> University of Virginia Library Historical Census Browser Geospatial and Statistical Data Center: <http://mapserver.lib.virginia.edu/> accessed (May 2015); Shirley J. Carlson, "The Black Community in the Rural North: Pulaski County, Illinois, 1860-1900," (PhD Dissertation, Washington University, 1982), 29-32.

<sup>6</sup> Ancestry.com. 1880 and 1910 United States Federal Census [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations Inc, 2006; University of Virginia Library Historical Census Browser Geospatial and Statistical Data Center: <http://mapserver.lib.virginia.edu/> accessed (May 2015); Jacqueline Y. Blackmore, "African Americans and Race Relations in Gallatin County, Illinois from the Eighteenth Century to 1870, (PhD Dissertation, Northern Illinois, 1996).

*Cairo, Illinois*

African Americans migrating to Midwestern cities after the First World War tended to move to the largest urban areas like Chicago, Detroit, and Cleveland. However, in the years prior to the Great Migration, Black families moving to Illinois often moved to smaller urban areas such as Cairo, East St. Louis, and Springfield. Blocker suggested that Black migrants were moving to these smaller urban locations during the late nineteenth century because of the industrial opportunities. Afro-Illinoisans may have also avoided larger urban centers due to the overwhelming economic competition they would face from European immigrants who often vied for similarly skilled employment. Smaller urban areas also tended to offer African Americans better opportunities for home ownership. Significantly, Blacks gradually left these smaller locations in favor of Chicago and other large urban areas after the turn of the twentieth century because of racial violence. Chicago could not offer housing opportunities for African Americans like housing available in smaller locations, but there were many more employment opportunities, as well as a vibrant African American community that could perhaps offer more protection against racial violence.<sup>7</sup>

New Black migrants may have bypassed smaller locations in Illinois, but many of them relocated to places like Cairo (usually from rural areas) because an urban setting simply offered more occupational opportunities. The vast majority of Black workers in Cairo were unskilled laborers: 435 “laborers”, 144 domestic servants; eighty-seven percent were unskilled laborers, and only twenty-six African Americans owned their own farm. A reporter from the State Capital, an African American newspaper located in Springfield, glowingly remarked about conditions for African Americans in Cairo in 1892: “the people of that city are moving forward rapidly...a

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<sup>7</sup> Blocker, 81.

large number of them are property owners and they are all taking advantage of the educational facilities.”<sup>8</sup> Writing in 1898 for the African American newspaper, the *Illinois Record*, former Cairo alderman, Jacob Amos, had a contrasting opinion on the conditions and treatment of African Americans in Cairo. He was particularly critical of the city’s fire department and their racially discriminatory hiring practices. Black men in Cairo could volunteer to help the fire department when extra hands were necessary to put out a large fire, “yet they [were] not capable of receiving wages as a member of the fire department.”<sup>9</sup> Amos also noted that there were only seven Black hostlers, and believed it would be a “very important step and noble effort” to continue to report on the “grave and growing danger” concerning Cairo Blacks and industry. The city’s clergymen, he continued, knew little about the condition among African Americans in Cairo because “too many of them are in the shadows of politics for themselves in their congregation.” In almost every branch of skilled labor, organized labor dominated with constitutions that called for white males only, and they are gaining legislation that would disenfranchise African American labor. “Ten years ago we had two colored hostlers and five men running north of Cairo, five colored men had charge of stationary steam plants. Today not a colored man runs out of Cairo north; only one employed as engineer and his job is an unsolicited one; there are hundreds of such cases in this end of the state, conclusively proving that the intention of these organizations is to shut the colored man out.”<sup>10</sup>

The 1900 Illinois census for Cairo supports Amos’ assertions of racial discrimination in labor—of the 1,217 African American workers in the city, only one hundred and fifty-eight were skilled workers. When the city government called for the labor of more than two hundred men to

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<sup>8</sup> “A Visit in Egypt”, *The State Capital* (Springfield, IL), September 17, 1892.

<sup>9</sup> “Cairo News,” *Illinois Record*, January 8, 1898.

<sup>10</sup> “Ex-Alderman Jacob Amos of Cairo Writes on the Industrial Situation,” *Illinois Record*, December 11, 1897.

begin work on the riverfront, African Americans that applied were rejected because white workers refused to work with them. “Choose which is the greater evil,” commented Amos, “the American negro would be better off if he was absolutely disfranchised from voting and be permitted to work...”<sup>11</sup> Booker T. Washington was widely criticized by Black leaders for making such a conciliatory suggestion in during his speech at the 1895 Atlanta Exposition. However, as Black workers increasingly found themselves systematically excluded from employment, many working class African Americans had to consider that such a plan might be a viable option.

Table 5.2 Leading African American Occupations in 1900—Cairo, Illinois

Occupation	
Laborer	435
Washerwoman	162
Domestic servant	144
Cooks	69
Teamster	58
Deckhand	35
RR worker	35
Waiter	27
Mill worker	32
Porter	26
Firemen	18
Barbers	11
Seamstress	15
Farmer/farm laborer	12
Carpenter	9

Source: Ancestry.com. 1900 United States Federal Census [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations Inc, 2006, accessed March, 2013; tabulations by author.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

By the last decade of the nineteenth century, Social Darwinist ideas of Black inferiority were becoming firmly entrenched within the fabric of mainstream thought. African American workers were systematically excluded from most employment that required a particular skill or training because employers believed these workers were largely unfit to perform difficult occupations. To be sure, their collective inability to achieve higher levels of employment were not necessarily attributed to any lack of skill on their part. In fact, when given the rare opportunity, there were some exceptions to the increasingly rigid color line established in labor by the turn of the twentieth century. In his study on the industrialization of Milwaukee African Americans historian Joe W. Trotter, Jr. posited that during World War I industrialists called upon Black workers to fill the labor needs of wartime economic expansion. As the process of proletarianization occurred, Black Milwaukeeans gradually left menial and domestic jobs for better skilled industrial work. Although proletarianization likely occurred for Blacks in larger urban centers during World War I, there is evidence that this process occurred prior to the war in smaller industrial locations throughout Illinois.<sup>12</sup>

*St. Clair County—Brooklyn and East St. Louis, Illinois*

Some Afro-Illinoisans ascended to semi-skilled and skilled occupational levels during this period. For example, in St. Clair County, located in the Southeastern district, African Americans experienced proletarianization a generation before most Blacks and were able to

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<sup>12</sup> For a full explanation of Trotter's proletarianization thesis, see part 2 "Process and Significance of Proletarianization, 1915-1932," in Joe William Trotter, Jr., *Black Milwaukee: The Making of an Industrial Proletariat, 1915-1945*, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1985). In chapter one, Trotter explains how the pre-Great Migration period set the foundations for proletarianization for African Americans in Milwaukee. During this same period, proletarianization was occurring in smaller industrialized locations throughout the Midwest that did not have a high concentration of European immigration.



procure better paying occupations. Workers in Brooklyn, Illinois capitalized on employment opportunities in the Metro East which developed a tradition of incorporating African Americans into the region's emerging industrial economy. Due mostly to racially discriminatory policies, African American workers in the region were largely relegated to the hardest and dirtiest work. Nevertheless, the concentration of Black workers even in the lowest strata of the industrial proletariat represented an advancement over employment in the southern plantation economy and domestic and personal service. The existence of the all-Black town minimized the intrusions of the rights of white labor because white workers only had to work with African Americans, and not live with them. Therefore, residing in Brooklyn offered Blacks greater security and a chance for self-determination and self-development.<sup>13</sup>

Table 5.3 Leading African American Occupations in 1900 and 1910—Brooklyn, Illinois

Occupation/Skill Level	1900	1910
Professional Persons	9	9
Farmer	19	--
Proprietors, managers, and officials	5	25
Clerical workers	2	3
Skilled workers/foremen	68	57
Semi-skilled workers	11	10
Farm laborers	6	--
Unskilled laborers	132	496
Personal and domestic servants	12	4

Source: Sundiata K. Cha-Jua, *America's First Black Town: Brooklyn, Illinois, 1830-1915* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000), (table 13), 155.

<sup>13</sup> Sundiata K. Cha-Jua, *America's First Black Town: Brooklyn, Illinois, 1830-1915* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000), 151, 155.

From 1900 to 1910, the amount of Brooklyn's African American unskilled workers rose more than 260 percent, while less than one percent of all African Americans worked as domestic servants. Conversely, mid-sized Cairo African American residents experienced greater racial discrimination in the workforce, and considerably more Blacks were forced to take domestic service jobs. At the Singer Cabinet facility in Cairo, African American workers were compelled to seek lower paying employment such as janitors or work on the loading docks moving freight and lumber. Black men also labored in the lumber industry, in brickyards, on the waterfront, and as steamboat deckhands, all occupations that were generally viewed by the majority of Cairo whites as too low paying, exhausting, or dangerous for white men. Nevertheless, these low paying jobs, similar to Brooklyn African Americans, offered Cairo's Black population better economic opportunities than they experienced in the south.<sup>14</sup>

In 1910, for the first time, a large number of Black women in Brooklyn listed an occupation, but their labor participation rate was well below that of Black men, which was consistent with the national trend. Moreover, unlike Black men, women were not finding new kinds of employment. They remained frozen in the traditional job categories of laundress, cook, and waitress (and this was true for the other counties examined). Nationally, few Black women were employed outside the repressive confines of domestic service, except in agriculture.<sup>15</sup>

Table 5.4 Organizational Structure of African American Women—Brooklyn, Illinois 1910

Occupation	Percentage	
Laundress	61	51.60

<sup>14</sup> Christopher K. Hays, "Way Down in Egypt Land: Conflict and Community in Cairo, Illinois, 1850-1930," (PhD. Dissertation, University of Missouri-Columbia, 1996), 267.

<sup>15</sup> Cha-Jua, 159-160.

*Table 5.4 (cont.)*

Cook	25	21.20
Laborer	8	6.77
Waitress/dishwasher	7	6.00
Proprietor	7	6.00
Domestic servant	4	3.34
Educator	3	2.50
Clerk/sales	2	1.70
Seamstress	1	0.85

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Source: Sundiata K. Cha-Jua, *America's First Black Town: Brooklyn, Illinois, 1830-1915* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000), (table 14), 160.

A similar pattern of Black proletarianization occurred in neighboring East St. Louis during the latter decades of the nineteenth century. Also located in St. Clair County, East St. Louis launched a massive industrialization program and became a magnet for African American migrants. The city already contained a relatively large Black population prior to the start of the twentieth century and served as a center for African American political action and culture. By the 1890s, African Americans began gaining a foothold in East St. Louis' industrial economy, primarily in meatpacking, iron and steel founding, railroading and glass, and building materials manufacturing. Mostly Black men obtained employment as common laborers, yet a few secured jobs as skilled workers such as butchers in meatpacking plants. In all, they worked a variety of occupations—industrial as well as non-industrial—laboring as brick masons, butchers, carpenters , cooks, coopers, foundry men, gardeners, hod carriers, janitors, machinists, painters, porters in hotels and other non-industrial workplaces, railroad car repairers, railroad foremen or

gang bosses, servants, stationary firemen, teamsters, wagon drivers or express men, waiters and whitewashers.<sup>16</sup>

Entry into industrial work did not prevent employers from racial discrimination in hiring practices or job placement. At Illinois Central Railroad, Black workers could only perform the most dangerous work because their chief manager was a former slaveowner who believed Blacks were unfit for skilled labor. In the packing houses, employers relegated Black men and women to work in hog processing rather than the far more lucrative and steady work in the cattle department. Eighty percent of those assigned to hog killing at Armour & Company were African American men. Black women frequently worked as low paid pork-trimmers while the men performed the most odious jobs in meatpacking fertilizer departments. Other East St. Louis companies rarely hired Black workers. Gordon Crook and Elijah Smith were among the only twelve African American workers, all in menial positions, at Aluminum Ore in the years prior to the World War I. Yet despite the clear anti-black bias, African American workers in East St. Louis were in a better economic position than their southern counterpart, who were like living at or below subsistence.<sup>17</sup>

Table 5.5 Leading Occupations East St. Louis—1910

Occupations

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Laborer	1102
Washerwoman	251
Railroad workers	246
Domestic workers	102
Porter	96

<sup>16</sup> Ancestry.com. *1910 United States Federal Census* [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations Inc, 2006; Charles L. Lumpkins, “Black East St. Louis: Politics and Economy in a Border City, 1860-1945,” (PhD Dissertation, Penn State University, 2006),52-53; Charles Lumpkins, *American Pogrom: The East St. Louis Race Riot and Black Politics*, (Ohio University Press, 2008).

<sup>17</sup> Lumpkins (Dissertation), 87-88.

*Table 5.5 (cont.)*

## Occupations

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Cook	84
Teamster	80
Driver	55
Janitor	45
Butcher	45
Factory worker (glass)	40
Stockyard/packer	34
Hod carrier	35

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Source: Ancestry.com. *1910 United States Federal Census* [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations Inc, 2006, accessed December 2015; tabulations by author.

By the first decade of the twentieth century, Black workers of East St. Louis were firmly entrenched in the industrial workforce. Although southern Blacks increasingly viewed East St. Louis as an attractive option, Black workers in the city continued to encounter employers who preferred non-Black labor. Most African Americans obtained common laborer jobs because they worked in a labor market where managers, structuring anti-black racism into the workplace, left the most unskilled, dangerous or least remunerative positions for Black men and women. Yet a significant percentage of Black workers continued to secure industrial work—albeit in mainly unskilled and menial positions. According to the 1910 United States census, the vast majority of African Americans working in East St. Louis were employed as “laborers.” Because of improvements made in the 1910 census form that at least indicated where Black men were laboring, we know that many “laborers” worked in the city’s steel plant, railroad, or glass factory. African American men continued to gain employment as railroad workers. Again, many of these men were employed as “common” laborers who worked for railroad companies. However, African American workers in East St. Louis were not entirely excluded from skilled

positions—there were 5 Black railroad conductors; 12 men listed their occupations as “foremen” (several worked in factories, while others did not specify where they worked), 45 African American butchers, and 13 carpenters.<sup>18</sup>

### *Springfield, Illinois*

Springfield contained a viable industrial workforce with a relatively diverse economy by the last decade of the nineteenth century. It was the state capital, which attracted a good deal of business in the hospitality industry, and the coal mining industry were all major employers. Springfield’s status as state capital assured a large number of positions in personal service jobs catering to tourists and other transient visitors who needed to be housed, fed, and entertained. The city also contained the Illinois Watch Company factory, as well as several foundries. However, unlike the industrial growth experienced in East St. Louis and Chicago, Springfield was not an industrial city. Its central location away from major commercial ports hindered it from becoming anything more than a political farm town.<sup>19</sup>

Due to the limitations of the capital city’s industrial growth, there were relatively few European immigrants moving to the city who might compete for industrial jobs. Therefore, African American workers held a virtual monopoly on personal service employment and unskilled labor. Although African American barbers continued to lose ground to white and immigrant competition in other northern cities, most of Springfield’s Black barbers continued to serve white clients. Many African Americans found work ranging from headwaiter to busboys in

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<sup>18</sup> Ancestry.com. *1910 United States Federal Census* [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations Inc, 2006; Lumpkins, *American Pogrom*, 54-55.

<sup>19</sup> Anthony M. Landis, “They Refused to Stay in Their Place: African American Organized Resistance During the Springfield, Illinois Race Riot of 1908,” (Master’s Thesis, Southern Illinois University at Edwardsville, 2002), 2.

the city's best hotels such as St. Nicolas, the Illinois, and the Leland. Nearly one out of every twenty African American men worked in one of these three hotels by 1907. While Springfield's African American workers made some inroads in the coalmining industry, they continued to face exclusion from higher paying jobs. As safer, more "skilled" industrial labor became available, white workers steadily abandoned dangerous and dirty, unskilled labor in Springfield. Since there was not as much immigrant competition, however, these low paying, unskilled jobs were left mostly for Black workers. Whites in Springfield held a monopoly on manufacturing and transportation jobs, while African Americans worked backbreaking labor in the city's brickyards. The largest industrial employer in Springfield, the Illinois Watch Company, out of the hundreds of workers employed, only one African American was employed as a janitor. In transportation, apart from drivers and teamsters, African Americans worked as railroad porters, and one worked as a railroad boilerwasher. Neither of the city's streetcar companies hired African Americans in any capacity. What is striking about Springfield is that such thorough exclusion took place in a community in which only small numbers of foreign born whites might have competed for manufacturing and transportation employment. The color line in the city's occupations was clearly the product of the prejudices of a predominantly native white population. Native whites had a virtual monopoly on industrial and transportation employment and were increasingly less attracted to the dirty and extremely dangerous work of mining coal, which, by the turn of the century, was attracting both recent immigrants and Blacks.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Roberta Senecal, *The Sociogenesis of a Race Riot: Springfield, Illinois, in 1908*, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1990), 63.

Table 5.6 Leading African American Occupations—Springfield, Illinois 1900

Occupation	
Barber/hairdresser	33
Brickmason	18
Carpenter	5
Coalminer'	94
Cook	37
Domestic servant	119
Hod carrier	16
Hostler	17
Janitor	35
Physician	2
Policeman	2
Porter	34
Seamstress	8
Teacher	5
Waiter	37
Washerwoman	50

Source: Population Schedules of the *Twelfth Census of the United States*, 1900, Illinois, Sangamon County, roll 343; figures compiled by author.

Not all of Springfield's Black population was relegated to menial labor. Even before the Civil War several African Americans accumulated wealth through property or business ownership. An African American upper class emerged more fully in the latter decades of the nineteenth century through professions such as doctors, lawyers, and government officials. The small size of this elite group, however, was inclusive of the city's Black middle class, which consisted of semi-professionals, skilled artisans, service industry employees, educators and some laborers.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Landis, (Master's Thesis), 65.



Table 5.7 Black Artisans in Springfield, 1900

## Occupations

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Baker	1
Barber	27
Blacksmith	2
Bookkeeper	1
Brick mason	18
Butcher	1
Carpenter	5
Clerk	5
Fireman	2
Mill worker	1
Minister	7
Musician	1
News reporter	1
Nurse	2
Photographer	1
Physician	2
Policeman	2
Postal worker	1
Printer	2
Railroad worker	1
Seamstress	8
Stone cutter	2
Tailor	1
Teacher	5

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Source: Ancestry.com. *1900 United States Federal Census* [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations Inc, 2006, accessed May 2013 by author.

*Chicago, Illinois*

By 1890, Cook County already held the state's largest African American community with 14,910 Black residents. In fact, over the next twenty years the Black population tripled in size, giving Chicago the largest share increase of any Illinois urban place. For many African Americans, the attraction of Chicago was due to its large Black settlement created by migrations during the post-reconstruction era which formed the necessary base for migration chains that

channeled new interstate migrations to Chicago. Furthermore, the city's burgeoning community life enticed African Americans to Chicago during a period when its share of overall urban growth in Illinois was falling—a result of suburbanization in the metropolitan area as well as rapid urban growth elsewhere in the state. Lastly, Chicago's industries, which by 1890 had already employed nearly three quarters of the state's manufacturing workers, created jobs far more rapidly during the twentieth century's first decade than any other urban location.<sup>22</sup>

In a city basking in the reflected glory of its industrial might, the exclusion of African Americans from the manufacturing sector relegated them to an economic venue of circumscribed opportunity and limited expectations.<sup>23</sup> By 1890, African Americans were still regarded as the group designed to be servants to the ruling classes. African Americans represented only 1.3 percent of the Chicago population; 1.9 percent of the male gainful workers, and 2.2 percent of the female workers, yet they supplied 37.7 percent of all males in the servant classes, and 4.3 of all females. Specifically, Black men during this period had acquired the traditional right to be waiters in hotels, restaurants, and on the railroads. They were regarded as the “rightful holders” of positions as butlers and coachmen for the wealthy, and African American “footmen”, who were attendants who ran beside or behind the carriages of aristocrats, were common occupations.<sup>24</sup>

Several factors combined to prevent African Americans from entering industrial and trade occupations during the early 1900s. First, most employers were simply disposed against

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<sup>22</sup> Blocker, 176-179.

<sup>23</sup> Christopher Reed, *Knock at the Door of Opportunity: Black Migration to Chicago, 1900-1919*, (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University, 2014), 63.

<sup>24</sup> Estelle Scott, *Occupational Changes among Negroes in Chicago*, (Chicago: Works Progress Administration, 1939), 39-41.

hiring African Americans so long as an adequate supply of white labor existed and immigration from Europe remained open. Often employers feared that white workers would object to working with African Americans, and many believed that Black workers were less efficient. Moreover, newspaper accounts of criminal behavior by African Americans was often exaggerated, and likely added to the idea that Blacks were hyper-aggressive or prone to deviant behavior, and therefore not only difficult to work with, but also untrustworthy. Secondly, many African Americans with skills had acquired them in the South and were often unable to meet northern standards. When Black workers attempted to acquire “updated” skills, they were usually denied opportunities in apprentice programs because of racial restrictions. Finally, the refusal of most trade unions to admit Black workers on an equal basis kept African Americans out of many trades. As displayed earlier, some unions completely excluded African Americans through clauses in their constitutions, while others admitted African Americans only to segregate them in separate and often subordinate locals.<sup>25</sup>

Although service industry jobs were relatively low-paying occupations with minimal advancement opportunities, they were often highly regarded within the Black community because of contact with wealthy whites. Conversely, unskilled laborers enjoyed no such favored position because they did not have the opportunity to acquire the polish and manners of the upper class whites, and much of the unskilled labor carried no regular employment. Unskilled jobs were done on a day-laboring basis, and sometimes on an hourly wage, and thus the economic as

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<sup>25</sup> Richard R. Wright, Jr., “The Industrial Condition of Negroes in Chicago,” unpublished B.D. thesis, University of Chicago Divinity School, 1901; Allan H. Spear, *Black Chicago: The Making of a Negro Ghetto, 1890-1920*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967), 34-35.

well as social position of the unskilled worker was lower than that of waiters, butlers, and chauffeurs.<sup>26</sup>

Despite the status of the servant class positions, these jobs must be considered in conjunction with unskilled labor because both groups represent persons of no particular skill and of low earning power. The disproportionately large number of African Americans who worked as domestic servants and unskilled laborers in 1890 indicate a very low income level for most of the Black population in Chicago. There were 1099 Black unskilled laborers, or 12.2 percent of the gainful workers. Add to this the 53.7 percent in the servant classes and we have 65.9 percent of all Black workers in unskilled occupations. Males fared somewhat better than females. The total percentage of Black males in unskilled jobs was 62.7 percent of which 15.4 were laborers and 47.3 percent in the servant classes. With females, 77.9 percent were unskilled; 77.1 were servants, and .8 of 1 percent laborers.<sup>27</sup>

Table 5.8 Unskilled Laborers by Nativity—Chicago, 1890

	Native whites	Foreign-born whites	African Americans
Total	18,120	51,167	1,099
Laborers, Draymen, hackmen, Teamsters	11,181 6,939	43,490 7,331	850 234

Source: Estelle Scott, *Occupational Changes Among Negroes in Chicago*, (Chicago: Works Progress Administration, 1939), 42.

<sup>26</sup> Scott, 41-42.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

Table 5.9 African American Domestic Servants—Chicago, 1890

Females	1500 <sup>28</sup>
Males	3323

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Source: Estelle Scott, *Occupational Changes Among Negroes in Chicago*, (Chicago: Works Progress Administration, 1939) (from tables 26 and 44).

The scope of Black labor in Chicago was changing—yet new migrants at the turn of the twentieth century continued to have difficulty securing anything but domestic labor. As new Black migrants arrived, and white demand for Black domestics continued, the percentage of Black workers in the domestic class rose each decade starting in 1890. In addition, there were skilled craftsmen who were virtually forced into the service-sector because they could not obtain employment within their fields. These men formed the backbone of the skilled classes in the South, but because of the exclusionary hiring practices of Chicago and other northern cities, they found it difficult to enter their trades, and often drifted into the ranks of the servant-sector. By 1910, there were 14,548 African American servants—an increase of 64 percent over the number a decade earlier. During the same period the total number of servants in Chicago increased only 4 percent.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Female servants composed of “domestic servants” and “laundresses.”

<sup>29</sup> Scott, 122.

Table 5.10 Percentages of African Americans Employed as Servants by year (1890-1910)

Year	Percentages
1890	11
1900	15
1910	20

Source: Estelle Scott , *Occupational Changes Among Negroes in Chicago*, (Chicago: Works Progress Administration, 1939), (statistics from table 48 and 69), 77, 121.

What appeared to be a homogenous community within Black Chicago was in actuality a community divided along class lines. Professional-led occupations include the following: lawyers, doctors, engineers, teachers/professors, and musicians/artists. This group dominated the highest rungs of the economic ladder, with business owners close behind. Signs of their emergence began as early as the last decade of the nineteenth century and dominated Black Chicago's leadership and resisted attempts to organize alternative institutions catering to Blacks. Largely composed of "old settlers," this group was mainly opposed to racial segregation, and also feared that its impact would affect their social lives and institutional relationships by forcing their social life inward toward the Black community. Furthermore, Chicago's Black upper class disdained association with newer migrants who, they often believed, lacked refinement and accepted segregation. Sociologist E. Franklin Frazier noted that the old settlers of Chicago's Black community were initially appalled by the earliest "new" migrants to arrive from the South

prior to World War I. When the larger “horde” of Black migrants arrived during the war, many of the established Black Chicagoans fled to the periphery of the Black Belt.<sup>30</sup>

Table 5.11 Black Professional Workers, 1890-1910

Year	total	(% of Black workers)
1890	104	(1.2)
1900	775	(4.3)
1910	962	(3.3)

Source: Estelle Scott, *Occupational Changes Among Negroes in Chicago*, (Chicago: Works Progress Administration, 1939) (statistics from tables 15, 36 and 62), 27, 63, 114.

### *Losing “Negro Jobs”*

By the end of the nineteenth century African American Chicagoans began to lose their grip on the service occupations. Industries that had traditionally employed African Americans and had largely been noted as “negro jobs” were being taken by white and immigrant workers. In their adherence to Booker T. Washington and his accommodationist philosophy, the *Chicago Tribune* argued that African American workers were to blame, and referred to them as “foolish” because they fought for their rights as workers during the numerous strikes in the restaurant industry in the 1890s. Rather than defend themselves against nebulous employers who inevitably underpaid and overworked them, or fired them without just cause, African American workers, according to the *Tribune*, should be “steady, trustworthy, faithful workers who [did] not

<sup>30</sup> St. Clair Drake and Horace R. Cayton, *Black Metropolis: A Study of Negro Life in a Northern City*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1945), 66-67; Grossman, 129; E. Franklin Frazier, *The Negro Family in the United States*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1940), 393-394; Davarian L. Baldwin, *Chicago’s New Negroes: Modernity, The Great Migration, and Black Urban Life*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2009), 28.

repudiate arbitration awards and violate agreements they [had] entered into.” When white workers fought against employers they were expressing their “manliness” as workingmen against the ferocious capitalist. However, when Black workers expressed the same resolve, they were “foolish” workers who were “seduced into it by white employees.” Race prejudice, of course, was the major factor in the replacement of Black workers in trades they traditionally held. Yet, it scarcely made any difference whether Black workers agitated or not—when white workers demanded the jobs of African American workers, they almost always got them. When white workers sought jobs in trades dominated by African Americans, they were usually able to force Black workers to leave. For example, in the late nineteenth century many African Americans worked as barbers and coachmen, but by the early twentieth century, whites had replaced most of them in these capacities. Thus, in the years just prior to the Great Migration, African American workers were largely left with occupations discarded by white workers that were generally low-paying jobs that carried the stigma of servility, and offered few opportunities for advancement.<sup>31</sup>

Even the long tradition of the Black waiter was threatened, as proprietors found it “no longer fashionable in the North to employ negro waiters at hotels and colored coachmen in northern cities.”<sup>32</sup> In the most expensive Chicago hotels and restaurants, African American waiters were slowly replaced by European American workers during the early twentieth century. “It is a notorious fact,” wrote one contemporary observer, “that in all the large centers of population the positions of coachmen, waiters and barbers are being filled by white men.”

“The stronghold of the Negro hitherto has been his ability to do crude work along lines where the white man did not care to compete; but he has not been able to stand the onward march of skilled labor and machinery. As the population increases and as the pressure upon the several vocations becomes stronger, this

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<sup>31</sup> “Foolish Colored Men,” *Chicago Tribune*, August 25, 1903; Allan H. Spear, *Black Chicago: The Making of a Negro Ghetto*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967), 31-34.

<sup>32</sup> “The Negro North and South,” *The Weekly Banner*, January 10, 1889.



industrial intolerance will bear more and more hardly upon the Negro. He must beware lest he be eliminated from the industrial equation by exclusion.”<sup>33</sup>

Black workers were also being replaced in occupations that they did not dominate. For example, African American firemen of the formally all-Black fire station were slowly replaced by European Americans during the first decade of the twentieth century. The loss of occupations in the Northern cities for Black workers took on an “intensity of meaning peculiar to Chicago,” wrote the *New York Age*. African American workers in Chicago had “lost about every occupation that was regarded as peculiarly their own,” because whites desired these jobs, and “were strong enough to displace the unorganized, thoughtless and easy-going occupants of them.”<sup>34</sup>

“When the hordes of Greeks, Italians, swedes and other foreign folks began to pour into Chicago, the demand of the Negroes place began. One occupation after another that the colored people thought was theirs forever by a sort of divine right fell into the hands of these foreign invaders. This loss was not so much due to prejudices against color, as to the ability of these foreigners to increase the importance of the places sought and captured.”<sup>35</sup>

The writer optimistically concluded, however, that Black workers maintained enough “pluck” and “versatility” that allowed them to be employed in a greater variety of occupations such as teamsters, porters, expressmen, and foremen. Others were employed as building operators, hodcarriers, coachmen, and watchmen. By the turn of the twentieth century, thousands of African American workers in Chicago were employed as postal workers and in the stockyards “where they do all grades of work from that of the common laborer to the highest priced positions for skilled work. “Experience in Chicago,” he concluded, “shows that the Negro is not going to be worse off by being forced out of grooves which were fixed for him in the days of

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<sup>33</sup> Kelly Miller, “The City Negro: Industrial Status,” from *The Black Worker, From 1900 to 1919, Vol 5*, eds., Philip S. Foner and Ronald L. Lewis, 11-12.

<sup>34</sup> “Menial Jobs Lost, We Go Higher,” *New York Age*, June 15, 1905.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

servitude and by the limitations of prejudice...”<sup>36</sup> While Black workers were gradually replaced in unskilled occupations they previously secured, they slowly made progress in securing labor in fields that traditionally barred them. Many of these jobs were unskilled and menial, they were often industrial occupations where there was some opportunity for promotion.

Other contemporary observers also predicted relatively optimistic forecasts for African American workers in Chicago and other northern cities. Newspaper editor, Richard R. Wright, suggested that the African American domestic servant of the early 1900s is an “improvement” over the servant of previous decades because they are more efficient and required to perform more tasks. He argued that the efficiency standard in other unskilled occupations had done much to raise the degree of respect given much unskilled work among African Americans, as in the case of waiters in hotels, janitors of large buildings, butlers, stewards and many kinds of ‘day labor.’ Although they have had difficulty finding work as a skilled laborer, Wright continued, African American unskilled workers were a “welcomed guest” in northern cities. Special employment agencies were opened in an effort to induce southern Blacks to fill jobs on the sewers, filter plants, subways, railroads, etc.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> R.R. Wright, Jr, “The Negro in Unskilled Labor,” *Annals of the American Academy of Political Social Science*, Vol. 49, (September 1913), 22-24.

Table 5.12 Black Worker's skill level, 1890-1910

Year	Skilled	Semi-skilled	Unskilled
1890	214 (2.4)	725 (8.1)	5,922 (65.9)
1900	646 (3.6)	1,695 (9.5)	13,282 (74.1)
1910	1123 (4.1)	3,442 (12.6)	18,571 (68.1)

Source: Estelle Scott, *Occupational Changes Among Negroes in Chicago*, (Chicago: Works Progress Administration, 1939) (statistics from tables 15, 36, and 61).

Each decade, Black Chicagoans continued to gain more skilled and semi-skilled workers in both real numbers and in percentages. Unskilled Black labor rose from 65.9 in 1890 to 74.1 percent by 1900. And there was a substantial increase in real numbers for the unskilled Black worker—from 5,922 to 13,282. The number of Black unskilled labor rose again by the next decade, yet the percentage of these workers in this category dropped from 74.1 to 68.1. Although they were apparently losing jobs that required less skill (“negro jobs”) they were consistently gaining ground in the semi-skilled and skilled job categories.<sup>38</sup>

In recognition of the decrease of African American workers in positions they had dominated, Black leaders offered advice on methods of maintaining their positions. However, leaders were not immune to the stereotypes commonly applied to African Americans at the turn of the century. When the *Broad Ax*, an African American newspaper based in Chicago, reported that Black head waiters had met in Chicago to devise a plan to circumvent their lost ground within the industry, the newspaper suggested the waiters needed to be “more tidy and neat in appearance, more up-to-date, and attentive to business.”<sup>39</sup> Another African American newspaper,

<sup>38</sup> Scott, 27, 59, 113.

<sup>39</sup> *Broad Ax*, September 23, 1899, pg. 1.

the *Illinois Record*, suggested that if Black waiters improve their hygiene and obtain better etiquette, it would improve their standing in the industry.

“he should see that their shoes are polished, their hair combed and their faces and finger nails well cleaned and trained...it is his duty to see to it that his dining department are kept in accordance with the sanitary laws of nature, in order to preserve health.”<sup>40</sup>

While at a speaking engagement at Quinn Chapel in 1900, Booker T. Washington also suggested that African American waiters were losing ground to white workers because of their “unreliability and inattention to their duties.” Many hotels in Chicago, said Washington, “have dismissed colored waiters and substituted white help, for no other reason than the colored men failed to keep themselves neat, clean and tidy and were not up-to-date, the same as the white waiters...”<sup>41</sup> Like their white counterparts, there must have been some Black workers who were unfit or simply bad workers. Yet it was also clear by the early twentieth century that African American workers were often unfairly dismissed on the flimsiest excuses.

There was a noticeable decrease in the proportion of African American workers in some service industries by 1910. The proportion of barbers decreased to twenty-two percent, while there were decidedly more butchers in the stockyards from 1900 to 1910. African American workers in Chicago by 1910 continued to increase their representation as domestic servants, they formed a very small percentage of workers in the higher social economic classes. The predominance of low income occupations among Black Chicagoans made it necessary for more than one member of the family to be a wage earner. Thus, African American women continued to supplement the relatively meager incomes of their husbands. The large percentage of

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<sup>40</sup> “Colored Waiters—Head Waiter’s Duty,” *Illinois Record*, February 11, 1899.

<sup>41</sup> “Booker T. Washington at the Men’s Sunday Club,” *Broad Ax*, January 27, 1900.

laundresses outside of laundries and of seamstresses attests to the extent at which Black women did part time work at home to supplement family income. Of the African American women gainfully employed, ten percent were seamstresses or dressmakers and twenty-four percent were laundresses. Black women were not engaged to any appreciable degree in factory sewing; therefore, it can be assumed that most of the seamstresses worked at home while still caring for their families. Laundresses did their work either at home, in between household duties, or worked at the homes of their employers a few days a week. With sixty-nine percent of the working men engaged in unskilled labor or domestic service, it was inevitable that large numbers of women would have to work to make necessities of life available to their families. By 1910 the percentage of African American women workers increased from 2 percent in 1890 to thirty-two percent.<sup>42</sup>

Between 1900 and 1910, African Americans entered the servant classes far in excess of their proportion of the population: sixty-eight percent of all Black workers were classified as “unskilled.” Comparatively, there was only twenty-eight percent and nine percent of Chicagoans with foreign-born parentage and native white respectively. The continuous trickle of migrants from the South brought a large number of domestic servants to Chicago—in 1900, African Americans had been fifteen percent of the servant classes; in 1910 they were twenty percent. In addition, there were the skilled craftsmen who became domestic servants after reaching the city. These men had formed the backbone of the skilled classes in the South, but upon reaching Chicago, found it nearly impossible to enter their trades, and eventually drifted into the ranks of the servants. By 1910, there were 14,548 African Americans in the servant classes. This represented an increase of sixty-four percent over the previous decade. During the same period

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<sup>42</sup> Scott, 111-112; 134-135; 172.

the total number of servants in Chicago had increased only four percent. While fifty-nine percent of all Black servants were men in Chicago, only thirty-three percent of servants were men among native whites, and twenty-nine percent among white immigrants.<sup>43</sup>

### *Conclusion*

By the early twentieth century, on the cusp of the Great Migration, African American workers in Illinois were largely relegated to menial and domestic service labor. In many cases, Black workers lacked sufficient work experience because of their rural and non-industrial background, and therefore, had difficulty competing with the skill level of Northern European workers. Furthermore, significant technological advances in the workplace by the end of the nineteenth century also kept many African American workers at a distinct disadvantage. Race, however, was the pivotal factor that impeded Black advancement in the workplace and the labor movement in Illinois during this period. Although the African American population remained relatively small throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, their effect on working class whites and the labor movement was immense due to anxiety over Black labor. This was not a new phenomenon—working class white Illinoisans held long-standing fears since the Civil War that Black labor was “degraded” and “cheap,” and would somehow economically undercut their own labor. During the immediate post-Reconstruction period, the color line in labor, and society in general, were not fully formed. African American workers were therefore able to gain some membership in unions and find employment in occupations that would later be deemed “white” jobs. However, in the context of turn of the century race relations, African Americans encountered increasingly profound limitations on the type of labor available for them.

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<sup>43</sup> Scott, 113, 122.

The overall status of African Americans suffered substantially, and subsequently affected every aspect of their lives, including labor.

Working class violence against African Americans was a major factor in the contribution to the limitations on their labor. Of course, Black people were already leaving the South due to white terrorism during post-Reconstruction. However, Northern racial violence also became more prevalent during this period—Illinois had at least twenty-two lynchings between 1891 and 1914—including eight in central Illinois between 1893 and 1908; numerous confrontations between African American and European American workers—including Braidwood (1877), Spring Valley (1895), Chicago Stockyards (1894 and 1904), Pana/Virden (1898); and three major race riots: Springfield (1908), East St. Louis (1917), and Chicago (1919).<sup>44</sup> The rising frequency of racialized labor conflicts coincided with Victorian Age beliefs in white supremacy and Black inferiority. Employers, eager to weaken labor unions, exploited racial tensions by exclusively employing Black strikebreakers in predominantly white labor conflicts. African American workers, often desperate and in need of employment due to increasing discrimination in both labor unions and industrial jobs, eagerly took on the challenge as revenge against white workers and because it may have been their only way of getting hired in industrial work. Further exacerbating their desperation, African Americans during the early twentieth century were gradually replaced in desirable jobs by white and immigrant workers; stricter racial guidelines (written and unwritten) appeared in union constitutions; and employers—fearful of losing valued white labor—often refused to hire African American workers for fear that white workers would leave. Black workers, left with few alternatives, either turned to lower-paying, unskilled jobs, or

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<sup>44</sup> Sundiata K. Cha-Jua, “A Warlike Demonstration’: Legalism, Armed Resistance, and Black Political Mobilization in Decatur, Illinois, 1894-1898, *The Journal of Negro History*, Vol. 83, No. 1 (Winter, 1998), 53.

they worked as strikebreakers throughout Illinois—leading to some of the most violent labor conflicts in the country.



## CHAPTER 6

### BEFORE THE FLOOD: AFRICAN AMERICAN WORKERS IN ILLINOIS PRIOR TO THE GREAT MIGRATION, 1890-1910

Afro-Illinoisans were carving out a niche as workers within the rapidly industrializing state by the last decade of the nineteenth century. Yet they continued to struggle to gain a foothold in labor above the level of unskilled and semi-skilled worker. The small, but expanding Black population was hampered by an increasingly rigid racialization of labor that virtually guaranteed their place at the bottom of the economic ladder. With African American marginalization in labor intensifying at the close of the century, and further racial exclusion from skilled and semiskilled jobs, Black workers increasingly turned to alternative measures to locate work. In particular, strikebreaking became a viable option for Black workers as predominantly white labor unions continued to invoke white supremacy over worker solidarity. However, as Warren Whatley pointed out, not all strikebreakers were Black—in fact, the vast majority of strikebreaking throughout the United States in done by European Americans. Nevertheless, African Americans remained an easy target for a nation steeped in the twisted logic of white supremacy at the turn of the century. For white workers, in an age of superior and inferior races, the African American was not only regarded as the “enemy of labor,” he was, deservedly, a second-class citizen, and his position at the bottom of the racial hierarchy was solidified. Ironically, when African American workers were allowed membership in “progressive” labor unions during the latter decades of the nineteenth century, they not only displayed a keen awareness and devotion to worker’s rights, but in many cases their labor activism was at the forefront of the labor movement. Black labor activism, however, was no match for turn of the

century racism—the continued destruction of the Black image as a worker and American citizen helped to widen the gap between Black and European American workers.<sup>1</sup>

This chapter examines the societal parameters affecting African American labor in Illinois during the years prior to the mass migration of Black people to Chicago and other industrialized locations throughout the state. It also explores the strategies they employed to combat the increasingly racialized barriers utilized in the workplace and within labor unions to limit their numbers. I contend that Afro-Illinoisans largely rejected the conciliatory philosophy of Tuskegee president, Booker T. Washington that called for Black submissiveness and outdated industrial training in the South that would supposedly win the respect of white Americans. Rather, Afro-Illinoisans brazenly battled against the acceptance and normalization anti-black discrimination in the labor movement. African Americans were gradually leaving the South and their rural roots in pursuit of industrial occupations in larger cities during the years prior to the Great Migration. While some African Americans abandoned their Southern farms, and moved to Southern urban locations, many Northern African Americans (against the advice of Washington) also left smaller locations for urban areas with better employment opportunities. Largely excluded from skilled and semi-skilled positions in their new urban setting, African Americans found themselves in direct and often violent competition with newer European immigrants who vied for similar unskilled labor. Through a variety of forums and self-defense tactics, including the print media, indignation meetings, strikebreaking, Afro-Illinoisans, regardless of social class

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<sup>1</sup> Charles L. Lumpkins, *American Pogrom: The East St. Louis Race Riot and Black Politics*, (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2008), 56; Rayford Logan, *The Betrayal of the Negro: From Rutherford B. Hayes to Woodrow Wilson*, (New York: Da Capo Books, 1997); Warren C. Whatley, “African American Strikebreaking from the Civil War to the New Deal,” *Social Science History*, Vol 17, no 4 (Winter, 1993); Sterling D. Spero and Abram L. Harris, *The Black Worker: The Negro and the Labor Movement*, (New York: Atheneum books 3<sup>rd</sup> edition, 1968); William H. Harris, *The Harder We Run: Black Workers Since the Civil War*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982).

and gender, forged various strategies to reverse the descent into what became known as the nadir of race relations in the post-Reconstruction United States.<sup>2</sup>

Similar to the previous chapter, this chapter will also focus on locations with relatively large Black populations, or simply Illinois locations where African American worked in the last and first decades of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, respectively. African Americans flowed into the Lower Midwest during the pre-Great Migration years (albeit, in smaller numbers) to locate better employment and to escape oppressive economic conditions in the South. Rather than settle in small Illinois towns with limited industrial occupations and increasingly unwelcoming white populations, African American migrants were seeking out larger urban locations with viable industrial centers and supportive Black communities. More than any time since Emancipation, African Americans at the turn of the century were forced to defend themselves against a growing tide of anti-black sentiment. By examining pivotal (and usually confrontational) moments during this period in which Afro-Illinoisans resisted against racist discrimination in the labor force, this chapter will display how they offered fierce resistance, through various means, against the normalization of white supremacy.<sup>3</sup>

### *The Black Worker in the 'White City'*

In the midst of heightened industrial turmoil, and a major economic depression in 1893, Chicago hosted the World's Columbian Exposition. The fair was held to commemorate the 400<sup>th</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> For Booker T. Washington's philosophy on African American labor and education, see Booker T. Washington, *Up From Slavery*, (New York: Doubleday, Page & Co., 1901); for Washington's speech at the Atlanta Exposition in 1895, see Louis R. Harlan and Raymond W. Smock, eds., *The Booker T. Washington Papers*, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1972); Louis R. Harlan, *Booker T. Washington: The Wizard of Tuskegee, 1901-1915*, (Oxford University Press, 1986).

<sup>3</sup> Jack S. Blocker, *A Little More Freedom: African Americans Enter the Urban Midwest, 1860-1930* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2008), 176-179.

anniversary of Columbus's landfall in the New World and was designed to advance the causes of American nationalism, imperialism, and consumerism. Drawing inspiration from the great international expositions that had been sweeping Europe since London's Crystal Palace Exhibition in 1851 and from those that had been held in the United States beginning with the 1876 Philadelphia Centennial Exhibition, the World's Columbian Exposition put the world on display with a view toward trumpeting America's own national progress toward utopia. Some twenty million Americans visited the 1893 fair, dividing their time between the main exhibition buildings, the so-called White City and the Midway Plaisance, the fair's amusement strip topped off with George Farris's enormous wheel revolving 280 feet above the fairgrounds.<sup>4</sup>

Aside from being a national showcase for American progress, the World's Columbian Exposition also attracted thousands of potential workers seeking employment during the severe economic depression of 1893. The fair became a magnet for the unemployed, and was not only the largest employers of the city during the early 1890s, it was also one of the largest of the country. As many as sixteen thousand workers at any one time and approximately twenty five thousand over the course of construction. The scale of the enterprise necessitated such an enormous workforce due to the five-hundred thousand square feet of brick paving, seventy miles of sewer plumbing, and four hundred and fifteen miles of electrical wiring. The fair designers were building a "city", and only had two years in which to do it. Furthermore, running the

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<sup>4</sup> Robert Rydell, ed., *The Reason Why the Colored American is not in the World Columbian Exposition*, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999), xi-xii; Robert Rydell, *All the World's A Fair: Visions of Empire at American International Expositions, 1876-1916*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984); Christopher Reed, *All the World is Here: The Black Presence at White City*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), 63.

Exposition required a substantial workforce, as thousands of men were hired to work on the fairgrounds during the summer of 1893.<sup>5</sup>

African Americans were among the thousands of workers flocking to the fair desperately seeking employment, and any notion that fair designers would ignore the racial hierarchy that acknowledged their prescribed position at the bottom of the economic ladder were quickly dashed. One of the more sought-after positions at the fair was the Columbian Guard—a quasi-military escort police and fire protective unit. Of the two thousand openings in the guard, no African American workers were hired for the position as fair officials rejected Black applicants due to “physical defects.” Ferdinand L. Barnett remarked that the guards who were eventually hired for the prestigious position were not only all European Americans, they “clearly failed to meet the printed requirements, and a number of them could scarcely speak English.” Black men were being excluded due to an alleged physical defect, although they appeared to be physically able to pass the rigorous examination. In effect, their only “defect” that prevented them from being hired to this elite fairground position was the color of their skin.<sup>6</sup>

Barnett recounted the experience of William J. Crawford, an African American man who applied and was rejected for the Guard. The medical examiner deliberately falsified Crawford’s record and rejected him on the ground that his chest measurement was not the proper size. The physician maintained that Crawford was rejected “not on account of color,” but because his chest was not the required thirty-six inches. Crawford, suspicious of the physician’s measurement, saw another doctor who re-measured his chest and found it be thirty-six inches, which made him

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<sup>5</sup> David Silkenat, “Workers in the White City: Working Class Culture at the World’s Columbian Exposition of 1893,” *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society*, Vol. 104, No 4 (Winter, 2011), 268.

<sup>6</sup> *Why there are no Colored People at the World Columbian Exposition*, 78-79; Silkenat, 268; Reed, 63.

eligible for the guard position.<sup>7</sup> In a dignified, yet pointed letter to the fair's officials, Crawford appealed the decision:

I appeal to your honorable board for a reopening of my application for appointment as a Columbian Guard on the following grounds:

I am satisfied that my application was rejected solely on account of my color. I have been especially convinced that it is a case of mean and unjust discrimination against me, because after leaving the World's Fair Grounds...I went to no less eminent physician than Dr. S.N. Davis of this city, and requested him to give me a careful and impartial examination as to my chest...It will be seen that the finding of Dr. Davis' examination is in direct contradiction to the alleged measurement of the medical examiner at the World's Fair Grounds...

A further reason for this appeal to you is to call your attention to the fact that it is the settled policy on the part of the authorities in charge to make it impossible for any American Negro, however well qualified, to become a member of the force of Columbian Guards. It is a significant fact that every colored applicant, thus far, has been rejected for causes more or less trivial, or, as in my case, false...

It is believed by many of our people that this fixed policy of discrimination against us, is without the sanction and knowledge of the Board of Control, and I have no means of redress from the injustice done me, as above set forth, I have determined to lay the matter before you, hoping that my appeal will be justly considered, and that I will be given a chance to win the position for which I have made due application, if I am qualified therefor.<sup>8</sup>

Impressively, Crawford refused to accept the decision even after not receiving a response to his initial appeal to the commandant of the guard. He later appealed to the exposition president, Harlow Higinbotham, to which he also failed to receive a reply. In the end, Crawford never got an answer to his appeal, and no African American was employed as a member of the Columbian Guard.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> *Why there are no Colored People at the World Columbian Exposition*, 78-79; Silkenat, 268; Christopher Reed, *Black Chicago's First Century, Volume 1, 1833-1900*, 74.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> Silkenat, 276; Reed, 74.

The racial standard for hiring practices was actually set prior to the fair's opening. Two years before the 1893 opening of the World Columbian Exposition, the Knights of Labor and four other labor organizations met to discuss control of labor on the fairgrounds in anticipation of groundbreaking. African American and other nonwhite workers flocked to the fair for employment, yet despite the KOL's reputation as a progressive union that embraced racial inclusivity in employment, the matter of colorblind hiring was never mentioned during the initial labor meetings. Instead, issues more familiar to white workers, such as the eight hour day, employment of native born Americans, and the creation of a minimum wage to allay the invasion of low-priced nonunion labor, dominated the meetings. While African American workers comprised of at least ten percent of the KOL membership, and developed a reputation as fierce labor advocates within the organization, the union failed to properly represent them during these meetings.<sup>10</sup>

By maintaining the status quo in racial hiring practices of the late nineteenth century, fair designer's version of a utopian society continued to relegate Black men and women to servile positions in American society. In the White City, Black workers were primarily hired in menial low-paying jobs. "Only two colored people could be found, remarked Barnett, "whose occupations were of a higher grade than that of janitor, laborer and porter, and these two only clerkships."<sup>11</sup> There were numerous opportunities for African Americans to secure menial, low-paying labor jobs on the fairgrounds and the surrounding areas, however. The predominantly Black janitorial staff of one hundred and forty men, for example, provided light clean up during

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<sup>10</sup> David Silkenat, "Workers in the White City: Working Class Culture at the World's Columbian Exposition of 1893," *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society*, Vol. 104, No 4 (Winter, 2011) , 268; Christopher Reed, *Black Chicago's First Century, Volume 1, 1833-1900*, 62, 356; Elliot M. Rudwick and August Meier, "Black Man in the 'White City': Negroes and the Columbian Exposition, 1893," *Phylon*, Vol 26, No 4 (4<sup>th</sup> quarter, 1965), 354.

<sup>11</sup> *The Reason Why the Colored American is not in the World Columbian Exposition: The Afro-American's Contribution to the Literature*, 67, 80.

the day on the fairgrounds, as well as guarding the stations and service building. Downtown Chicago also provided many service-oriented jobs—twenty-seven cafes and restaurants made plans to serve eight thousand customers with a needed workforce of one thousand waiters and cooks.<sup>12</sup> Black workers in menial positions, which were made readily available to African Americans, reinforced ideas of racial superiority to millions of European American fairgoers. It also reminded them that American “progress” was neatly wrapped into a racialized framework that verified the inferior status of all-nonwhite people.

Employment at the fairgrounds for African Americans was not the only source of second-class treatment, however. Chicago fair officials carefully designed the Exposition to symbolize the ascendancy of the United States among the world powers and reflected the self-confidence and optimism of America in an age which its citizens believed to be the most advanced in history.<sup>13</sup> In fact, all of the fairs held in the late nineteenth century, in various forms, were designed to display a reunified and stronger country after the Civil War under the grandiose banner of nationalism. Thus, celebrating American progress and national unification came at an economic and social cost to African Americans—one of the tenets of American progress at the turn of the twentieth century was the further suppression of African American civil rights and relegation to second-class citizenship. As historian Robert Rydell suggested, world’s fairs throughout the country in the late nineteenth century were used to interpenetrate and popularize evolutionary ideas about race and progress in America. The dangerous mixture of pseudo-science and racism were readily accepted by Americans as a result of widespread economic concerns, and as the experiment of Southern Reconstruction came to an end. These evolutionary

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<sup>12</sup> Reed, 73.

<sup>13</sup> Robert Rydell, John E. Findling, and Kimberly D. Pelle, *Fair America: World’s Fairs in the United States*, (Smithsonian Institute, 2000), 18-19.



theories had to be disseminated from academic circles to the level of popular consumption; the world's fairs provided a partial, but crucial explanation. Scientific racism emphasized classification of cultural groups and stressed the diversity of racial types along with an evolutionary hierarchy that tended to blur class distinctions among whites while it invited them to appraise the relative capabilities of different groups of nonwhites for emulating the American model of progress.<sup>14</sup>

European American workers at the fair must have believed that they too were fulfilling acceptable tenets of white supremacy when they attempted to lynch an African American man for the "crime" of defending himself. By the 1890s, lynching was more than a violent phenomenon utilized only in the South to terrorize African Americans into maintaining their place within the racial hierarchy. In Illinois, between 1891 and 1914, at least twenty-two lynchings occurred in the state of the Great Emancipator. On April 17, 1893, William Broda, an African American worker at the fair, was nearly lynched by an angry mob of white co-workers. After a long day of working at the fair, Broda and Patrick Coleman, a European American worker at the fair, accidentally bumped into each other on an overcrowded trolley car carrying fair workers. Tensions may have already been high on the tightly-packed car as a fight quickly ensued between Coleman and Broda. Both men were immediately ejected from the car by the conductor. Broda, who likely felt threatened by the fact that he was the only African American on the trolley, and fighting a white man, pulled out a knife and slashed Coleman. The enraged all-white crowd of workers immediately rushed Broda as chants of "lynch the nigger!" rang out with the mob surging around the man. Although the mob managed to get a rope around Broda's

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<sup>14</sup> Robert Rydell, *All the World's A Fair: Visions of Empire at American International Expositions, 1876-1916*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 5.

neck, with the help of a police officer, he managed to struggle to safety inside a drug store.<sup>15</sup>

While Broda managed to escape with minor injuries that day, he, William Crawford, and other African Americans received a valuable lesson about their precarious position in the White City—they may be allowed to exist within the parameters of white supremacy, but they could only exist in a predetermined position at the bottom of the American racial hierarchy.

### *Shaping and Reinforcing the Servile Black Image*

Shaping the Black image was a crucial element within the White City, and fair designers made sure that the few exhibits that featured African Americans fit neatly within the parameters of the desired racial order of the Progressive era. African Americans were initially excited over the prospect of the fair—it would be an excellent opportunity to show the world the progress Black people had made since Emancipation. Fair designers had no such interest, as they appointed no African Americans to the Exposition commission to determine what exhibits would be at the fair. Perceptive African Americans were convinced that the fair would seal their fate as second class citizens. From their perspective, the exclusionary and derogatory policies of the exposition management functioned as the cultural counterparts to the assaults occurring on Black people throughout the country by white terrorists determined to maintain the racial status quo. Since the close of political Reconstruction, these ritualistic acts of murder and physical mutilation had become public spectacles often witnessed by entire communities of whites. Faced with an exponential increase in this violence against African American men, who were often accused, without evidence, of raping white women, some African Americans began to wonder if

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<sup>15</sup> “Rope Around His Neck,” *Chicago Tribune*, April 18, 1893; Silkenat 282.

the strategy of simply refusing to send exhibits to the Chicago fair sent a sufficiently strong message about the absence of social justice in the United States. If the real menace posed by the exposition lay in its capacity to bestow ideological legitimacy on white supremacists' attitudes underpinning the terrorism that had become a way of life in the South, then a stronger response was in order.<sup>16</sup>

Instead of displaying images of Black Americans that would have exhibited their many talents in the arts, business, or overall condition since Emancipation, fair designers dwelled on past servile caricatures that harkened back to antebellum times. Black men and women dressed as former slaves, sold miniature cotton bales as souvenirs at the fair, and in the "Louisiana Building" an antebellum creole kitchen showcased Black cooks and waiters. The R.T. Davis Milling Company, a prominent Midwestern flour milling firm, persuaded Nancy Green, a fifty-seven-year-old former slave and long-time servant for a Chicago judge, to become a living advertisement at the fair for the company's self-rising Aunt Jemima Pancake Mix. Green agreed to play the role of a stereotypical mammy, which had long been a staple of blackface minstrel shows before becoming a corporate trademark. As Aunt Jemima, Green wore a red bandanna and flipped pancakes outside the company's exhibit booth while telling stories of her "glory days" in the South. Her performance was instantly successful, won a medal for her employer, and was exactly the kind of role exposition directors imagined for Black people in the White City. Although Green freely played the role, as well as gaining notoriety as an early icon of America's emerging culture of mass consumption, she was not entirely free to shape her own identity. As historian Maurice Manring wrote, Aunt Jemima was a "slave in a box," serving as the perfect

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<sup>16</sup> Robert Rydell, *The Reason Why the Colored American is not in the World Columbian Exposition: The Afro-American's Contribution to the Literature*, xx.

emblem of a fair that made the promise of easier living for whites in America's future contingent on African Americans remaining in a subordinate position in American society. The "reunified" nation (once divided due to the Civil War) apparently agreed with fair officials—as the fair exhibits displaying Black people in these antebellum-like roles proved to be among the most popular attractions for fairgoers.<sup>17</sup>

Even contemporary representations of African Americans at the fair showed them in menial occupations. Fairgoers witnessed a servile and contented Pullman porter in a sharp blue uniform display the famous George Pullman railroad cars at the imposing Transportation Building. The porter happily provided regular status reports on the number of visitors inspecting the cars, the number of important dignitaries who viewed the cars with a prospect of adding them to their railroads or personal travel accouterments, and the efficiency of his retinue of porters, who kept the exhibit cars spotless. Porters on the actual trains worked just as hard as the crew on the stationary exhibit, yet the prospect of decent wages never materialized for any of them, a feature all too typical for all employees of the Pullman Company.<sup>18</sup> Along with low pay, Pullman porters had virtually no chance at advancement. Typically, older porters that worked for the company for decades likely never saw a raise in their wages during their tenure.<sup>19</sup>

Largely seen as disposable and cheap labor that was easily replaceable, African American porters incurred ridiculous fines for union activity or breaking one of numerous Pullman rules.

For example, when passengers stole small items such as brushes or combs, porters were forced to

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<sup>17</sup> Anna R. Paddon and Sally Turner, "African Americans and the World's Columbian Exposition," *Illinois Historic Journal*, Vol 88, No 1 (Spring, 1995), 29; Maurice Manning, *Slave in a Box: The Strange Career of Aunt Jemima*, (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1998) ; see also, Marilyn Kern-Foxworth, *Aunt Jemima, Uncle Ben, and Rastus: Blacks in Advertising, Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow*, (Greenwood Press, 1994); Rydell, xixw.

<sup>18</sup> Reed, *All the World Is Here!* , 69-70.

<sup>19</sup> Richard Robert Wright, "The Industrial Condition of Negroes in Chicago," (PhD Diss. University of Chicago, Department of Sociology., 1901), 25-26.

pay for them. Incidents of theft by passengers happened so frequently, wrote the *New York Times*, “the porter frequently finds that aside from his tips he is actually paying the company for the privilege of working.”<sup>20</sup> Fed up with low wages and unfair fines, Black Pullman porters threatened to strike in the early 1890s. A Chicago Pullman official boasted that even if they could not immediately replace the porters, “the cars would run out just the same and neither the traveling public nor the company would be inconvenienced a particle” because they were the “most insignificant part of our system, which was the “principle reason they are so poorly paid.” If white workers were employed as porters, he reasoned, there would be a chance to do away with the “tipping evil” because white workers did not have the “same predilection for gratuitie [sic] that the negro has.” White workers would not beg for tips, the official ironically concluded, because the company would pay them wages that would be “beneficial in many respects.”<sup>21</sup> Of course, white workers were rarely hired for these positions because they would, in fact, demand higher wages, better working conditions, and inevitably strike once they were not received due to the fact that they would have relatively little trouble finding other employment. At the height of white supremacist thought in America, African American workers never incurred any such luxury—Black workers in the service industry were not paid poorly because they were “insignificant”—George Pullman chose Black laborers over whites because he wanted to project a particular image of a “happy negro” who was willing to serve a white clientele aboard his trains. Furthermore, African American Pullman porters received low wages not only because they were Black, and could be paid low wages, but also because they could scarcely find employment anywhere else due to the increasingly rigid color line drawn in the labor industry.

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<sup>20</sup> “Spies on Pullman Cars,” *New York Times*, February 6, 1886.

<sup>21</sup> “Proposed Porters Strike,” *Western Appeal*, July 19, 1890.

Thus, the “tipping evil” was absolutely essential for African American workers in the service industry because it was likely the most viable way for them to supplement their meager income.

Second class treatment and the alienation of African Americans during the Nadir was by no means limited to the workplace. In society at large, Jim Crow regulations tightened in every facet of American life. Historian Daryl Michael Scott argued that the image of African Americans, between 1880 and 1920, was dominated by racial conservatives who were committed to excluding Black Americans from mainstream society and were willing to use the state toward that end. Scott noted that these conservative racists (what historian George M. Fredrickson referred to as the accommodationist racist) believed in the “natural” inferiority of Blacks, but also believed that they could possibly be assimilated into American society over time after they “evolved.” Before their evolution, however, Blacks had to be segregated from mainstream society or they could do irreparable damage to white civilization.<sup>22</sup> Three years before the Supreme Court handed down the landmark *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision that legalized separate-but-equal facilities, fair designers, who undoubtedly subscribed to racial segregation, scheduled a “special day” set aside for African American artists, musicians, and speakers. Many African American leaders took umbrage with the idea that positive images of Black people were excluded from the fair, and called for a boycott of not only of “negro day,” but the entire fair itself. About three hundred African American men and women gathered at Memorial Art Palace in Chicago for an annual conference of the Colored Men’s National Protective Association to discuss the status and future progress of African Americans. The meeting quickly evolved into a

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<sup>22</sup> Daryl Michael Scott, *Contempt and Pity: Social Policy and the Image of the Damaged Black Psyche, 1880-1996*, (Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina, 1997), 11-12; for a full explanation of accommodationist racism, see George M. Fredrickson, *The Black Image in the White Mind: The Debate on Afro-American Character and Destiny, 1817-1914*, (New York: Harper Books, 1971), 283-319.

debate over their reaction to the exposition, as the majority of the members, including, the anti-lynching crusader and journalist, Ida B. Wells, agreed that the best action taken would be to boycott the fair. “We earnestly recommend,” the members wrote, “to the colored people throughout the country that no attention be paid by them to the setting apart of that day, and that they refrain from making any demonstration on August 25<sup>th</sup> but that, on the contrary, they all do all they can to discourage it.” Wells was particularly offended by the fair officials attempt to coerce African Americans with watermelons.<sup>23</sup>

“The self-respect of the race is sold for a mess of pottage and the spectacle of the class of our people which will come on that excursion roaming around the grounds munching watermelons will do more to lower the race in the estimation of the world than anything else. The sight of the horde that would be attracted there by the dazzling prospect of plenty of free watermelons to eat will give our enemies all the illustration they wish as excuse for not treating the Afro-American with the equality of other citizens.”<sup>24</sup>

The resolution sparked a lively debate among the committee members, as some members, including Frederick Douglass, did not agree with the association’s decision. He expressed disappointment over the fair manager’s discrimination, but believed that the day could be best used for African Americans to display their progress to the world. Other members also disagreed with the resolution; nevertheless it was approved by an overwhelming majority.<sup>25</sup>

Although Douglass and Wells disagreed over the issue of attending the fair, they respected each other’s work, and were determined to expose the systematic exclusion of African Americans from the fair, as well as the second-class treatment of Black workers. Along with educator Irvine Garland Penn, businessman Frederic Loudin, and Ferdinand L. Barnett, Douglass

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<sup>23</sup> “Asked To Stay Away,” *Chicago Inter Ocean*, June 28, 1893.

<sup>24</sup> “To Tole with Watermelons,” *Cleveland Gazette*, July 29, 1893.

<sup>25</sup> “No Nigger Day,” *Indianapolis Freedman*, March 18, 1893; February 25, 1893; “World’s Fair Appeal,” *Washington Bee*, April 15, 1893.

and Wells published the polemic, *The Reason Why the Colored American is not in the World's Columbian Exposition*. The pamphlet not only revealed the details in Black exclusion, it also displayed African American progress and achievements since Emancipation. Wells explained that the pamphlet was “intended as a calm, dignified statement of the Afro-American’s side of the story, from the beginning to the present day; a recital of the obstacles which have hampered him; a sketch of what he has done in twenty five years with all his persecution, and a statement of the fruitless efforts he made for representation at the world’s fair.” It was the “race’s duty” to explain to the world Black people had been “studiously kept out of representation in any official capacity and given menial places” at the fair. The pamphlet was especially necessary, she continued, because “the foreigner, knowing nothing about the kind of prejudice prevailing in this country, will be told all manner of things to the Afro-American’s discredit as a race by the white American.”<sup>26</sup> Although the title of the pamphlet gave the impression that it was entirely a polemic that documented the official racism of decisions by fair officials and the exclusion of African Americans from the fair, only the final chapter details the slights and discrimination.<sup>27</sup>

The pamphlet received mixed reviews within the African American community. Some argued that it had the unintended effect of exacerbating divisions among Blacks about how best to respond to the racism of the fair officials. Furthermore, they were embarrassed about having their absence from the exposition called to international attention. While others wondered if the pamphlet would backfire and erode what little support remained among whites for African American rights.<sup>28</sup> Two influential African American newspapers, the *Indianapolis Freeman* and

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<sup>26</sup> “Miss Ida B. Wells,” *Cleveland Gazette*, July 22, 1893.

<sup>27</sup> Anna R. Paddon and Sally Turner, “African Americans and the World Columbian Exposition,” *Illinois Historical Journal*, Vol 88, No 1, (Spring 1995), 20.

<sup>28</sup> Robert W. Rydell, ed. *The Reason Why the Colored American is Not in the World's Columbian Exposition*, (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1999), xiii-xv.



the *Cleveland Gazette*, supported the pamphlet and printed several letters from Wells in her efforts to raise funds for the printing of the pamphlet. For these newspapers, the Colored Folk's Day was a "farce" that showed the fair managers and the country that African Americans could "not be sold for a mess of pottage, even by members of our own race, and that we can resent insults, etc, as well as other classes."<sup>29</sup>

Douglass disagreed with those that wanted to boycott the fair. He believed that it was in his best interest to attend the special day (called "Jubilee Day") in order to inform the white Northern public about what the African American population thought about their position in the fair and American society. Giving a speech at the fair, he told a large crowd: "[the southern states] were your enemies; they fought to trample in the dust the grandest republic the world can ever have. Why in the name of bare justice are [African Americans] not treated with as much consideration as were your foes?" Douglass also acknowledged that African Americans were not well represented at the fair: "...with the same shallow prejudice which keeps us in the lowering rank in your estimation, this exposition denied mere recognition to eight millions and one-tenth of its own people."<sup>30</sup> Interestingly, Douglass either failed to understand or he feigned ignorance about how the World Columbian Exposition was meant to serve as a sort of a special event celebrating the healing old wounds between the North and the South. The designers of the fair envisioned a nation that was reconciled after more than twenty five years of "irreconcilable differences;" a nation that was now destined to move forward with a grandiose plan of imperializing backwards nations in order to fulfil the promise of the "white man's burden." As far as Black people were concerned, reconciliation connoted an agreement between sectional

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<sup>29</sup> "The Watermelons Absent," *Cleveland Gazette*, August 26, 1893.

<sup>30</sup> "Douglass' Truths," *Cleveland Gazette*, September 16, 1893.

factions that were once at odds over their “negro problem.” There was no coincidence that the Imperial Age and the nadir in race relations appeared at the exact same time in American history; the North, more than ever, acquiesced to the “Southern way” of handling African Americans. There remained some differences in the Southern treatment of African Americans that Northerners did not openly approve of. However, the notion that Black Americans were not a part of mainstream society—that they must remain segregated from the dominant society until they evolve from their biologically inferior selves—was an idea that Northerners and Southerners, as well as Democrats and Republicans, could all agree upon.

Despite the controversy within the Black community over whether to attend the fair, Douglass’ Jubilee Day speech was, nevertheless, well-received among African Americans. Initially in support of the boycott, Wells softened her position after reading the newspaper accounts of Douglass’s speech. She recalled being “so swelled with pride over his mastery presentation of our case that I went straight out to the fair and begged his pardon for presuming in my youth and inexperience to criticize him for an effort which had done more to bring our cause to the attention of the American people than anything else which had happened during the fair.” Douglass and Wells mended fences but had little time to reflect on what had transpired. In less than a week they, along with Booker T. Washington, were scheduled to participate in the international Labor Congress. As Douglass and Wells saw it, this event, which attracted labor leaders and social reformers from around the world, presented yet another opportunity for them to press their case for social justice.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Rydell, *The Reason Why*, xxxiii.

*The Congress on Labor*

In recognition of the desperate economic conditions for workers in Chicago and the rest of the nation during the early 1890's, fair designers sponsored several programs dedicated to the overall progress of Americans. One such program was the Congress on Labor, which focused on the international labor question and the precarious relationship between capital and labor.<sup>32</sup> The week-long meeting, which opened on August 28, 1893, was attended by social reformers and national labor leaders, including the leading single tax advocate, Henry George, Samuel Gompers of the AFL, Terrence Powderly of the KOL, and Eugene V. Debs of the newly organized American Railway Union. The congress also invited African American leaders, including Douglass, Wells, and the young and relatively unknown president of the Tuskegee Institute, Booker T. Washington, to discuss issues surrounding African American labor in the South. Although Wells and Douglass believed this event presented another opportunity for them to press their case for social justice, they did not anticipate how it would help propel Washington to national prominence.<sup>33</sup>

Washington was the first to present his remarks on the topic of Black workers in the south. In his essay, entitled "Progress of Negroes and Free Laborers," he argued that Southern African American and European American workers had similar rights in relation to skilled labor, and the southern Black mechanic had a better chance to succeed in the South than the North. He also described the evils of the mortgage system, which he maintained was another form of slavery, and could not exist but for the "ignorance of the negro." "Intelligent labor," he continued, was the only remedy to ignorant labor of the South. The mortgage system affected

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<sup>32</sup> Dennis B. Downey, "The Congress on Labor at the 1893 World Columbian Exposition," *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society*, Vol. 76, No. 2 (Summer 1983), 131.

<sup>33</sup> Reed, *All the World is Here*, 129; Downey, 13; Rydell, xxxiii.

African Americans both industrially and morally. Foreshadowing his famous Atlanta Compromise speech of 1895, Washington suggested that African Americans needed the respect of Southern whites, and would not gain civil rights until they collectively learned viable trades. When that was accomplished, he maintained, “we are to find the solution of all these problems in the south, and on this line they are slowly but surely being solved.” Conciliation, not agitation, was the gist of Washington’s message, and with it he threatened to undermine the agenda of both Wells and Douglass.<sup>34</sup>

Washington’s presentation at the Labor Congress was generally well-received by the mainstream press. In relation to African American labor, progressive era racial ideology ignored racial exclusion as a systemic issue and placed the blame on Black workers for not educating themselves properly to reach the advanced status of white workers. Instead of “preaching discontent,” the *Chicago Inter Ocean* wrote in a thinly-veiled message to other African American leaders, “[Washington] encourages them to get something that the white man wants or respects if they would have the white man recognize them as his equals.” Although Douglass and Wells provided a well-articulated rebuttal that advocated political and civil rights for African Americans, it was virtually ignored by the press.<sup>35</sup>

Never one to back down from a debate, the fiery Wells questioned the validity of Washington’s assertions by maintaining that southern African Americans would never be allowed to get out of debt, because their former masters traded on their credulity and ignorance. “Southern white men did not want to lose the colored population so long as the latter would consent to remain laborers, for the negro today was the greatest wealth producing factor in the

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<sup>34</sup> Louis R. Harlan and Raymond W. Smock, eds., *The Booker T. Washington Papers, Vol III*, , 365-366; Rydell, xxxvii; “The Practical Question,” *Chicago Inter-Ocean*, September 3, 1893.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid; Reed, *All the World Is Here*, 129.

south.” Wells also made some of the union representatives uncomfortable by charging them with complicity in the exclusion of African American workers from labor unions. She insisted that they cease from complaining “when these same negroes accepted the offer and did the work which they would not do. Labor must of necessity be a great federation reaching to every class if it would control the price of labor.”<sup>36</sup> White union leaders vehemently denied drawing the color line in their unions. Southern representative of the American Federation of Labor, George E. McNeil, declared the labor movement “knew of no color” and said labor unions of the world were “open to the Black man.” Claims of egalitarianism aside, African American workers continued to face increasingly difficult obstacles when they attempted to join the larger labor unions. To be sure, racial discriminatory practices had been a part of most labor unions since the earliest days of the labor movement in the United States. However, by the turn of the century, racial exclusion in labor and labor organizations were more rigid than ever, and the idea that African Americans did not belong in particular “white” occupations or labor organizations was becoming a well-established “fact” within American society by the end of the nineteenth century.<sup>37</sup>

Washington’s appeal in Chicago can be attributed to the idea that he was willing to accept the prescribed second-class position of African Americans, as long as he was able to maintain “industrial training,” which would, over time garner the respect of European Americans. Ironically, all the energy invested by Wells and Douglass at the World’s Columbian Exposition actually served to advance the cause of Washington’s accommodationist program.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>36</sup>; “Progress of Colored Brothers,” *Chicago Tribune*, September 3, 1893; “The Practical Question,” *Chicago Inter-Ocean*, September 3, 1893; Rydell, xxxvii.

<sup>37</sup> Downy, 13.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

His presentation at the labor congress came to the attention of a group of Atlanta business and political leaders who envisioned organizing a world's fair in their city in 1895. After learning of Washington's address, Atlanta's civic leaders invited him to help sell their plans for a fair to the U.S. Congress. In return, they agreed to allow Washington to deliver an opening-day speech at the fair and to permit African Americans to organize a separate "Negro Building" for their exhibits.

### *Black Resistance to Labor Exclusion*

In the context of heightened racial exclusion and violence against African Americans throughout the United States, Booker T. Washington urged African Americans to accept segregation and disfranchisement in exchange for opportunities to harness their collective industrial skills. His most famous articulation of his vision for the Black worker was at the Atlanta Exposition in 1895 where he carved out a defined place for African Americans during a time when their exclusion from industrial labor and labor unions had become largely accepted. In his 1895 address, Washington argued that the best avenue for economic success for African Americans was to remain in the South where they should "put brains and skill into the common occupations of life." Since the masses of Black people live "by the productions of our hands," he continued, they should concentrate on labor skills, such as agriculture, domestic service, and mechanical industry. Instead of pursuing civil and political rights, African Americans should secure their constitutional rights through the gradual and indirect process of first becoming successful business men in order to gain the respect of white Americans.<sup>39</sup> Considering the

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<sup>39</sup> Deirdre Mullane, ed., *Crossing the Danger Water: Three Hundred Years of African American Writing* (New York: Anchor Books, 1993), 354-355; August Meier and Rudwick, *Attitudes of Negro Leaders*, 39-40.

widely held notion of the inferiority of African Americans during the Progressive era, it is hardly surprising that white America lauded Washington's message.

Washington initially garnered strong support among African Americans for his achievements at Tuskegee Institute and message of accommodation at the 1895 Atlanta Exposition. However, criticism increasingly mounted among Black intellectuals against Washington by the end of the nineteenth century as labor and overall conditions continued to deteriorate. The *Washington Bee* chided Washington for his anti-protest philosophy: "If accepted as the greatest speech ever delivered by a negro, then it was a standing rebuke to the sturdy manhood; the eloquent protest against outrage and the life work of the immortal Frederick Douglass, and a refutation of the exposures of barbarism and wholesale murder of negroes, echoed through two continents by Ida B. Wells."<sup>40</sup> Among his harshest and articulate critics was burgeoning scholar and activist, W.E.B. DuBois, who derisively referred to the speech as the "The Atlanta Compromise," and argued that Washington faced a "triple paradox." First, while Washington strove to make African Americans into business men and property owners, but it was "utterly impossible" to achieve this without the right of suffrage; second, Washington insisted on thrift and self-respect, but also insisted on "silent submission to civic inferiority, which DuBois argued, was "bound to sap the manhood of any race in the long run;" and finally, Washington advocated industrial training while deprecating institutions of higher learning; however the industrial schools depended on teachers trained at the very institutions Washington dismissed.<sup>41</sup> Although Washington showed a remarkable ability to garner the approval of Southern and Northern whites, Black support for accommodation was, at best, mixed.

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<sup>40</sup> "Booker T. Washington Denounced," *Washington Bee*, October 26, 1895.

<sup>41</sup> W.E.B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 43-44.

During an era when pseudo-scientific thought validated the inferiority of non-whites, domestically and abroad, African American workers were viewed as the problem, rather than as potential valuable allies in the struggle of the common laborer versus capital. Blacks were left with few options by the start of the twentieth century—they could accept second-class citizenship through disenfranchisement and racial terrorization in the South, or they could locate higher paying jobs in the industrial North by battling against an increasingly hostile labor movement. Black Illinoisans largely rejected Washington’s conciliatory philosophy and battled against the normalization of racism in the labor movement. Rather than acting as passive victims, the relatively small, but growing, Black population often took matters into their own hands through a variety of strategies intended to counteract racist labor policies. As historian Sundiata K. Cha-Jua noted, the thread of self-defense runs through the African American experience, and the notion of a the weak “old Negro” was largely a mythical idea.<sup>42</sup>

### *The Afro-American League*

In an attempt to alleviate the hardships African American workers faced, newspaper editor, T. Thomas Fortune formed the National Afro-American League in 1887 to battle against racial discrimination and against the “atrocious and appalling” labor conditions of African American workers, their wages and the overcrowded nature of labor in general.<sup>43</sup> During his opening address in Chicago in 1890, Fortune set forth the organization’s agenda through a combination of preminent philosophy of self-help and racial solidarity with the protest tactics of legalism, direct action, and violent self-help.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Cha-Jua, “Warlike Demonstration,” 67.

<sup>43</sup> Alexander, 147.

<sup>44</sup> Emma Lou Thornbrough, *The National Afro-American League, 1887-1908*,” *The Journal of Southern History*, Vol 27, No 4 (November 1961), 495; Sundiata K. Cha-Jua, “A Warlike Demonstration’ Legalism, Armed



“We propose to accomplish our purposes by the peaceful methods of agitation, through the ballot and the courts, but if others use the weapons of violence to combat our peaceful arguments, it is not for us to run away from violence. A man’s a man, and what is worth having is worth fighting for.”<sup>45</sup>

While Washington advocated silence among African Americans to advance his agenda, Fortune not only demanded more protest among the masses, he advocated physical violence during a time when the lynching of Black men had reached an all-time high. Following Fortune’s lead, Afro-Illinoisans refused to remain silent when their rights were trampled upon. Unfortunately, during the years before the Great Migration, African Americans were given plenty of opportunities to express angst over their rapidly deteriorating status.

By the 1890s, strikebreaking had become a common weapon against the workingman. And as long as they continued to advocate the exclusion of Black men from their labor unions or refused to work alongside Black workers, employers continued to use African American workers as strikebreakers. Fortune correctly placed the blame squarely on the shoulders of northern industrialists and white union workers. “It is hard to find fault with the poor colored men for the part they have taken in these inroads; but for the capitalists who have brought them to the North there should be nothing short of positive popular condemnation.” Every effort, he continued, “must be made to assert the rights of the colored, but they should be “loudly warned” against being used as strikebreakers to disrupt Northern labor conflicts.<sup>46</sup> The onus to “educate” Southern Black workers was on Northern organized labor, and although it was the responsibility of Northern organized labor for educating Black workers about the labor situation in the North, Fortune maintained that African Americans could not afford to “undermine white laborers when

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Resistance, and Black Political Mobilization in Decatur, Illinois,” *The Journal of Negro History*, Vol 83, No 1, (Winter 1998), 57.

<sup>45</sup> Shawn Leigh Alexander, ed. T. *Thomas Fortune, the Afro-American Agitator: A Collection of Writings, 1880-1928*, (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2008), 149.

<sup>46</sup> “Colored Men Reflect,” *New York Freeman*, December 4, 1886.

they make organized resistance to unjust wages or treatment at the hands of employers.”<sup>47</sup>

Although he argued against “antagonizing the interests of white laborers” because their interests were “identical in every particular” with Black workers, he displayed an acute understanding of the need to become a strikebreaker in the face of overwhelming discrimination:

“...it is not to be marveled at that colored men should embrace the inducements to better their condition held out to them by labor agents. These laborers are not always acquainted with the real condition of things in a district until after they have reached it, and when they have either to go to work or break the contracts and starve or suffer the effects of starvation in their efforts to reach again their Southern homes. It is a work of self-protection for the labor organizations of the North to educate the colored laborers of the South on the true conditions of the labor problem in the North.”<sup>48</sup>

Fortune’s stance on strikebreaking would be tested during the American Railway Union (ARU) strike of 1894. Secretary of the East St. Louis, Illinois branch of the Afro-American League offered two hundred Black workers to replace the freight handlers, and twenty-five more to replace the firemen and brakemen.<sup>49</sup> The effects of the Pullman strike, wrote the *Christian Recorder*, are to give a chance to men who had no chance or small chance before, and the power of the government, can be in no better business than opening a path to work for men to whom it was before closed.”<sup>50</sup> While Fortune may have disapproved of the general concept of strikebreaking, he understood that African American workers were virtually forced to use what few weapons they could in self-defense.

Progressive era leader, Eugene Debs, formed the industrywide ARU with the goal of uniting all railroad workers into one union regardless of race or skill level. He warned the

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<sup>47</sup> “White and Colored Laborers Detrimental,” *New York Freeman*, December 25, 1886.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>49</sup> “Doing Up the Debs,” *Chicago Tribune*, July 11, 1894.

<sup>50</sup> “Effects of the Strike,” *Christian Recorder*, July 12, 1894.

members that racial restrictions would be disastrous for the union, and further explained that he was “ready to stand side by side with [African Americans],” and help them whenever he had the power to do so. Yet when given the opportunity to remove the “whites only” clause from their constitution, ARU members scoffed at the idea because they believed it would cause a significant drop in union membership, and the organization would be destroyed.<sup>51</sup> One delegate stated bluntly that the South would rebel against Black membership and “lose five white members for every colored man taken in.” Even if the proportion reversed the union could not afford to take the step. The southern states, he continued, would have never organized had they believed “the colored men were to be admitted to membership with them.” Other members said they would be willing to accept Blacks into the general body of the union, but they should be given a separate organization.<sup>52</sup>

Undaunted by member rejection, Debs continued to strive for an egalitarian union because he understood that if they did not procure Black membership, it would adversely affect the union. In response to ARU members’ insistence on racial exclusion, he stated:

“It is not the colored man’s fault that he is black; it is not the fault of 6 million negroes that they are here. They were brought here by the avarice, cupidity, and inhumanity of the white race. The father of our country was an owner of slaves. Bind down the white race for centuries and their intellects would become stunted, their refinement would disappear. If we do not admit the colored man to membership the fact will be used against us. I am not here to advocate association with the negro, but I am ready to stand side by side with him, to take his hand in mine, and help him whenever it is in my power.”<sup>53</sup>

Deb’s warning to the ARU fell upon deaf ears, and when they went on strike against the Pullman Company in 1894, the strike quickly ended in disaster due to their exclusionary policies. The

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<sup>51</sup> “Question of Color Before the American Railway Union,” *Chicago Tribune*, June 19, 1894; William H. Harris, *The Harder We Run: Black Workers since the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 41.

<sup>52</sup> Harris, 41.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*

largest white railroad brotherhoods, known as the “Big Four,” did nothing to assist the ARU, and actually collaborated with railway management. The strike exposed the gulf between labor leaders like Debs, who advocated industrial unionism, versus the Big Four and their insistence on maintaining craft unions. Notions of racial hierarchy were inscribed not only onto the railroad brotherhood’s ideological outlook, but onto their personal and occupational identities and onto the organizations they constructed and joined as well. From the Big Four’s inception, race was written into the very definition of their unions’ membership. Representing the industry’s overwhelmingly white, native born male constituency, the brotherhoods adopted explicit provisions in their constitutions to ensure continued racial, ethnic, and gender homogeneity.<sup>54</sup> White workers were perfectly willing to sacrifice the potential for higher wages for what W.E.B. DuBois referred to as the “psychological wages” of being white. While white workers were given public deference and titles of courtesy because they were white, the wages for both blacks and whites remained artificially low, and white workers always feared that they would be replaced with Black laborers.<sup>55</sup>

Afro-Illinoisans did in fact play a major role in disrupting the ARU strike of 1894—they not only worked as strikebreakers, but in retaliation to the union member’s racist stance against African American workers, they formed an “anti-strike” union whose express purpose was to fight the ARU and replace white strikers. Anti-Strike union president, L.B. Stevens, explained that his organization had no desire to antagonize the interests of those who were “endeavoring to improve their condition.” However, Black workers were compelled to take action against the ARU because they had “declared war against the black man” and they had no intention of being

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> W.E.B. DuBois, *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860-1880*, (New York, Free Press, 1998), 700-701.

“driven to the wall without a struggle.”<sup>56</sup> Stevens was even more defiant when it came to the question of the value of Black labor—especially when compared to the labor of the European immigrant:

“Our labor has contributed largely to make this country great and prosperous, and now...we do not intend to be starved out of the country nor driven to the wall by the American Railroad Union and like organizations, largely composed of foreigners who have not been in America long enough for the ink to dry on their naturalization papers.”<sup>57</sup>

Stevens maintained that Black workers had the ability to “contribute largely toward breaking the back of [the ARU],” and they would exert themselves to accomplish their deed. Feeling that Black railroad workers were left with no alternative, he explained that the attitude of labor unions had become so aggressive and menacing as to cause “revulsion in public sentiment.” If industrialist had given employment to American-born Blacks instead of European immigrants, who were not in sympathy with and “incapable of comprehending American institutions,” many of the labor difficulties that now afflict the country would have been avoided.<sup>58</sup> Blinded by the illogic of progressive-era white supremacy, white workers consistently undermined their own efforts by restricting Black workers.

Unwilling to acknowledge their racist shortcomings, European American workers refused to unify with Black workers even though such unification would have been to their benefit. In a massive show of solidarity with their white comrades of the ARU, throngs of white packinghouse and slaughterhouse workers walked off their jobs and conducted a sympathetic strike with the struggling ARU. Between one and two thousand cattle butchers left their work,

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<sup>56</sup> “Snub is Resented,” Chicago *Inter Ocean*, July 2, 1894; “A Lesson That is Being Learned,” (Indianapolis) *Freeman*, July 14, 1894.

<sup>57</sup> “Snub is Resented” Chicago *Inter Ocean*, July 2, 1894.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid*; “A Lesson That is Being Learned,” (Indianapolis) *Freeman*, July 14, 1894.

partly in sympathy with the railroad workers but also in support of their own demand for a wage increase. The packers were divided from the beginning—the butchers remained on strike, while other departments took no part in the conflict. Violence did not take place immediately—but when the militia arrived, rioting was almost continuous from that point on. The militia’s arrival coincided with the arrival of imported strikebreakers, which riled up the packers even more. Although many of the strikebreakers were in fact non-Black workers, the mere sight of a few African American strikebreakers was enough to cause an exaggerated reaction from European American workers. One after the other, white managers quit their jobs because they refused to work with African Americans. Armed guards, hired to protect the packinghouses, were not enough to combat the racial animosity of the white workers who, not only set numerous fires in the stockyards to frighten the African American workers, they also attacked them outside the gates as they left the stockyards. At the entrance of the workplace, an effigy of a Black worker swinging from a telegraph pole at the corner of Root and Halsted streets, with a note attached to the breast of the figure bearing a skull and crossbones with the word “nigger scab” in bold letters.<sup>59</sup>

The African American press expressed outrage towards the treatment of Black workers during the conflict in the Chicago stockyards. “The moment a trade union man,” wrote the *Indianapolis Freeman*, “dares to even threaten to say nothing of laying violent hands upon a fellowman who desires to take up the work he has laid down, that moment he should be restrained by authority and made to understand without the loss of time that the same liberty he

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<sup>59</sup> James R. Barrett, *Work and Community in the Jungle: Chicago’s Packinghouse Workers 1894-1922*, (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1990), 127-129; Alma Herbst, *The Negro in the Slaughtering and Meat Packing Industry in Chicago*, (Boston, 1932) 18-19; William M. Tuttle, “Labor Conflict and Racial Violence: The Black Worker in Chicago, 1894-1919,” *Labor History*, (1969), 411; Spero and Harris, *The Black Worker*, 265.

arrogates to himself to quit work is just as sacred to the man who desires to work.”<sup>60</sup> The *Richmond Planet* commended President Grover Cleveland for sending troops to Chicago and declaring martial law, but criticized Illinois Governor John Altgeld for protesting against this action. “It is indeed a peculiar condition of affairs when a Democratic governor should enter into a contention with a Democratic president as to the right to order United States troops to aid in the execution of the laws.”<sup>61</sup> To the dismay of Afro-Illinoisans, Altgeld, himself the son of German immigrants, would confirm his position as a pro-immigrant governor during labor issues.

In the end, employers defeated the strikers because of violence and chaotic in-fighting—essentially what employers envisioned when they recruited Black strikebreakers in the first place. Very few African American workers were retained following the strike. However, as far as employers were concerned, the threat of using Black labor helped them in two ways: first, they tapped into an inexhaustible supply of “cheap” labor that could be utilized to undercut white workers; second, employers secured a labor force that offered even more resistance to unionization, through racial antagonism, than that supplied by the European immigrant through language barriers and ethnic hatred.<sup>62</sup> The “successful” formula utilized by employers worked to perfection as long as European American workers excluded Black workers from their unions, and continued to insist on a workplace that barred African Americans from skilled occupations. Until white workers could overcome their desire for homogeneity, employers continued to exploit this weakness.

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<sup>60</sup> “The Right to Strike the Right to Work,” (Indianapolis) *Freeman*, July 21, 1894.

<sup>61</sup> “The Strike,” *Richmond Planet*, July 14, 1894.

<sup>62</sup> Herbst, 19-20.

### *The Spring Valley Riot*

When news first surfaced about an attack on the African American community in Spring Valley, Illinois in August 1895, Black Illinoisans throughout the state called for immediate action to aid the families that remained in desperate need of help. The initial reports stated that Italian American coal miners attacked African American miners and their families, and killed at least thirty people, including women and children. While it was later confirmed that these reports were exaggerated, African Americans throughout the country expressed dismay over the idea that Italian Americans—many who were initially strikebreakers themselves—had the audacity to commit such violent acts. Italian American coal miners believed African American workers undercut their wages and would ultimately supplant them in the coal mines. Determined to rid themselves of their labor competition, Spring Valley Italians ransacked African American homes, smashed windows, broke down doors, and dragged several Black residents from their homes, beat and shot them.<sup>63</sup> Although the initial reports proved to be erroneous, evidence of a conspiracy to attack Black families in Spring Valley later surfaced.

Leading Afro-Illinoisans immediately sprang into action upon hearing the news about the Spring Valley mob attacks. John “Indignation” Jones headed the Afro-Americans Citizens’ Protective League whose duty was to “resist mob violence and lynch law,” as well as pledge themselves to “bring the guilty perpetrators of these atrocious acts to justice.”<sup>64</sup> Even traditionally conservative African Americans expressed a need for violent retaliation against the attackers. Quinn Chapel’s pastor believed that the Spring Valley mayor should step in to protect the Black families. If he failed to act, he advised Black Chicagoans to protect them. “This ain’t

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<sup>63</sup> Felix L. Armfield, “Fire on the Prairies: The 1895 Spring Valley Race Riot,” *Journal of Illinois History*, 3 No. 3 (2000), 188-190.

<sup>64</sup> “Colored Men Organize in Illinois,” *Chicago Tribune*, September 25, 1895.



Mississippi!” the pastor exclaimed. “This is Illinois and should this matter be dropped by the powers that be I am in favor of a fight,” he assured.<sup>65</sup> Black Chicago activists, led by Ferdinand L. Barnett, sent a telegram to Illinois Governor Altgeld to call his attention to the “murderous assaults upon colored men, women and children at Spring Valley, Illinois, and the further threat of extermination against the colored people of that district.” Their goal was not only to express their outrage over the conflict, but also to demand that the governor protect the Afro-Illinoisans in the region.<sup>66</sup>

Similar to his reaction during the ARU and Chicago Stockyard turmoil, Governor Altgeld showed limited sympathy for Black workers, by continuing to insist that the Spring Valley situation was insignificant. He maintained that the affair amounted to nothing more than a “street fight,” and did not at any time assume the proportions of a race war. Altgeld sent Secretary of the State Board of Labor and personal friend, George Schilling, to investigate the matter. He later concluded that the trouble in Spring Valley was caused by “a few lawless” African American miners. The *Decatur Herald* concurred with Schilling, stating: “never had any serious trouble existed, until the colored miners came into the place.” From that period, the paper continued, “trouble ensued with the Italians, Poles, Hungarians, Irish, Germans, Scotch, Swedes and a few American miners.” This irrational observation, along with the skewed conclusion by Schilling, blatantly ignored the fact that these workers were pitted against each other as one ethnic group was hired by employers to break the strike of another. Black miners in Spring Valley were simply the last group (due to racial exclusions) to be brought in to take the place of the Italian

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<sup>65</sup> “Recourse to Arms Advised,” *Chicago Tribune*, August 7, 1895.

<sup>66</sup> “Mass Meeting of Colored People,” *Chicago Tribune*, August 6, 1895.

miners. Thus, the violent reaction by the immigrant miners was not caused by the Black miners—it was caused by the mine owners who imported laborers.<sup>67</sup>

Historian Felix Armfield indicated that Altgeld had a reputation for sympathizing with European immigrants. He first revealed his alliance with immigrant concerns in 1893 when he pardoned the Haymarket rioters, and he displayed a strong allegiance to immigrant workers in the Pullman strike in 1894. During the Spring Valley riot, he was willing to send reinforcements, yet he did not offer similar sentiments to African Americans for their protection. Indeed, Altgeld continuously dismissed African American concerns for the Black miner's safety. African Americans in Chicago, East St. Louis, and other locations throughout the state should have been assured of greater interest from the governor's office. Instead, they were forced to offer their own protection of their brethren in Spring Valley.<sup>68</sup>

Working class Afro-Illinoisans angrily demanded action from the governor. Throughout the state, Black citizens enthusiastically attended indignation meetings to express their anger over the attacks. At a meeting in Chicago, an African American barber advised Black men to carry rifles to defend Spring Valley African Americans. "As American citizens we should insist upon our rights and not turn out of our tracks for these foreigners, the scum of Italy," said an irate African American barber from Chicago, who also insisted that Black men carry rifles to Spring Valley to defend the victims. Another meeting attendee invoked the honor of African Americans: "You cannot die at a better time for the glory of the negro race...I counsel peace, but if there is no peace, let us die by our guns."<sup>69</sup> Smaller indignation meetings, often led by working class African Americans throughout the state were held at residential houses rather than

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<sup>67</sup> "The Responsibility," *Decatur Herald*, August 25, 1895.

<sup>68</sup> Armfield, 199.

<sup>69</sup> "Recourse to Arms Advised," *Chicago Tribune*, August 7, 1895.

large churches. Men and women eagerly attended meetings in smaller cities and towns, with many attendees pledging to defend the victims. Black men in Rockford, Elgin, and Moline, Illinois met to denounce the attacks, and volunteered to act in conjunction with regiments from Chicago, as well as pledge to extend moral and financial aid to the families under attack.<sup>70</sup> A motion was supported to send a regiment of armed men from Peoria, Illinois to Spring Valley who were “willing to fight if need be.” In Evanston, Illinois seventy-five African American residents gathered and passed a resolution denouncing the sheriff and mayor of Spring Valley, and set forth an agreement to be obedient to the law and not take matters into their own hands.<sup>71</sup> According to the *Chicago Tribune*, when a man attending a Chicago meeting defended the Italian Americans of Spring Valley, the riled up audience immediately sought vengeance against him, and fearing for his life, he reportedly dashed through a glass window to escape.<sup>72</sup> On the heels of labor violence in Chicago’s stockyards the previous year in which Black men were regularly attacked, Afro-Illinoisans expressed an especially urgent desire for revenge against their Spring Valley assailants. It is very likely that Afro-Illinoisans expressed more desire for vengeance because their attackers were “foreigners” who had a long history of job competition with African Americans. Further, retribution against recently arriving European immigrants had less serious ramifications due to their own precarious status in their new country.

There was at least some evidence indicating that, for a brief moment, the Black workers in Spring Valley were more desirable than the Italian miners. A Chicago agent from the Spring Valley Coal Company assured that the Black population would be protected, “because [the coal company] has more faith in [the African Americans] than in the Italians and make better miners.”

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<sup>70</sup> “Promise Aid to the Negro Miners,” *Chicago Tribune*, August 8, 1895.

<sup>71</sup> “Colored Folk at Peoria Excited,” *Chicago Tribune*, August 7, 1895.

<sup>72</sup> “Recourse to Arms Advised,” *Chicago Tribune*, August 7, 1895.

He also guaranteed the mine owners would not fire the African American coal miners to appease the Italians. Instead, if the Italians did not end their violent attacks against the Black workers, the agent assured, the Italian coal miners would be fired.<sup>73</sup> Illinois' Black population was likely aware of the disdain prominent white Spring Valley residents had for new European immigrants, and therefore emboldened them to, at least rhetorically, react violently. Nevertheless, this was at best, a fleeting moment during the nadir—no matter what the degraded status of Italian Americans was at the end of the nineteenth century, they, like all other European immigrants, were eventually Americanized, and blended into white society.

The establishment of the United Mine Workers union in 1890, initially benefited the position of the African American miner. The UMW's constitution mandated that union officeholders must be English speaking, which was a direct attack on all immigrants. It was not uncommon for Americanized white UMW members to be more favorable towards African American miners than toward Italian Americans, particularly for officers and for organizing Black workers. Evidenced by the ascension of Richard L. Davis, an Ohio coal miner and a Black union official during the 1890s, the UMW did not exclude African Americans. Alabama was the South's leading producer of bituminous coal, and mine owners had employed only native whites and African Americans from its earliest days. As a result of numerous mining strikes, racial attitudes shifted, as Black miners were frequently used to break strikes. Those matters coupled with growing national sentiments of an early Jim Crow society soon crippled economic parity for African Americans in mining communities. These concerns would soon set the stage for numerous employment disruptions of African American mining opportunities. Spring Valley coal mines experienced that labor unrest as result of an 1889 lockout. African Americans became

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<sup>73</sup> "Black Men Must Go," *Chicago Tribune*, August 6, 1895.

at once the mining industry's reserve labor force and the center of its racial issues. In addition, Black and Italian immigrants were on a collision course for the scraps of labor in the mining industry of Spring Valley.<sup>74</sup>

As European immigration expanded during the late nineteenth century—particularly from Southern Europe--their status as citizens often came into question. Their relatively dark skin, foreign language, and unfamiliarity with American customs, made them easy targets for a Progressive era population eager to attach blame to the newcomers for society's ills. African Americans consistently remained at the bottom of the racial hierarchy, but they were not immune to utilizing the ethnocentric discourse of the dominant American culture—especially since newly arriving immigrants competed with Black workers for jobs. The bitter rival between free Black workers and the European immigrant in the North stretched back to the early nineteenth century. This bitterness was often captured by the African American press in words that were similar to the nativist stance of many Northern Republican mainstream newspapers. “We believe we should welcome every good citizen from the old world among us, said African American newspaper from Kansas City, the *Weekly Call*. “But when the slum and scum of the old world lands on our shores and brings with him low, vicious murderous habits, and attempts to strike down the rights of American citizens, whether Black or white, he should be put behind bars or exiled and sent back to his native country, if it takes the whole United States army to do it.”<sup>75</sup> The mainstream press went a step further by distinguishing the Italian miners from “white” miners.

“the outrages perpetuated upon the colored workingmen, their women and children, the practical confiscation of their property, the denial of every one of

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<sup>74</sup> Armfield, 190.

<sup>75</sup> *The Weekly Call*, August 17, 1895, p 2.

their rights of citizenship, and the terrorism exerted to banish them, were not the acts of the American white miners; they were the acts of the Italian miners, of those ignorant, vicious, morally degraded immigrants from Italy to whom this country has thrown open its generous doors in welcome, an after a brief period, before they can speak the language of the country, to the highest privileges of citizenship—namely, the suffrage. Not only are these scum of Italy are voters at Spring Valley, but one of their number is mayor of the city, and he has been again and again, by the most reliable authorities, charged with sympathizing with his murderous countryman in their assaults upon the persons and property of the colored miners. This affair would serve as a convincing object-lesson to any body of men who cared to learn the truth, but from the manner congress has so long faltered with the demand for a revision of the immigration laws, it is obvious that body does not want to learn anything on the subject.”<sup>76</sup>

Had the Spring Valley attacks been committed by white miners, the story may have been interpreted differently in the press—“working-class” men were fighting to “protect” their labor interest against “hordes of negroes” imported to steal their jobs. Instead, these were new, dark, and foreign “outsiders” who were making unwarranted attacks on *our* American Negroes. Although Italians were designated “white” upon their arrival at Ellis Island, they were (at least for a brief period) regarded as outsiders.<sup>77</sup>

Spring Valley African Americans ultimately triumphed due to their insight into relations between immigrants and native-born whites, and their wide support from African Americans throughout the state and around the country. Many of the African American families that initially fled Spring Valley found refuge in nearby Seatonville, Illinois, where they collected weapons and ammunition for their protection. They vowed to return to the mining town “at all hazards” and remain until the coal company fired them.<sup>78</sup> With the assistance of Afro-Illinoisans

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<sup>76</sup> *The Philadelphia Telegraph*, Quoted in *Public Opinion* (Chicago), August 15, 1895, (copied from Philip S. Foner and Ronald Lewis, *The Black Worker During the Era of the American Federation of Labor and the Railroad Brotherhoods*, Vol. IV, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1984), 204, 205).

<sup>77</sup> See James R. Barrett and David Roediger, “Inbetween Peoples: Race, Nationality and the ‘New Immigrant’ Working Class,” *Journal of American Ethnic History*, vol. 16, No 3 (Spring, 1997): they argue that becoming white was a process, and not necessarily instantaneous.

<sup>78</sup> “Black Men Must Go,” *Chicago Tribune*, August 6, 1895; Caroline Waldron, “Lynch-law Must Go!”: Race, Citizenship, and the Other in an American Coal Mining Town, *Journal of American Ethnic History* Vol. 20, No. 1 (Fall, 2000), 60.

throughout the state, Spring Valley African Americans returned to the town and returned to the mines, despite the protests of the Italian immigrants. By tapping into the white animosity for Southern and Eastern Europeans, Spring Valley Black residents started a criminal case against their assailants. Ten African American witnesses went directly to the mine shafts and identified thirty-six rioters as their attackers. By November the proceedings were over, and a jury found eight of the defendants guilty of riot and criminal assault; seven of the men were sent to the state penitentiary.<sup>79</sup>

The collective resistance displayed by Afro-Illinoisans in Spring Valley and Chicago in 1894 was not an anomaly. At the same time, in Decatur, Illinois, African Americans were in the throes of battle to avenge the lynching of Samuel J. Bush, an African American day-laborer accused of raping a white woman. A core of highly organized Black leaders led a five-year battle against Decatur's white Republican leadership. Like their Spring Valley and Chicago counterparts, Decatur activists advocated competing strategies and tactics that included legalism, and violent self-help.<sup>80</sup> During the years leading up to the mass migration of Southern Blacks into Northern cities, Afro-Illinoisans would continue to fight against discriminatory practices in the labor movement. While they would continue to display much of the same courage and tenaciousness in battle against their prescribed position within the racial hierarchy of labor, white workers also strengthened their resolve by refusing to budge on their collective stance against joining Black workers in solidarity. Progressive era ideas of white superiority were easily absorbed by white workers as they continued to castigate African Americans as inferior beings

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<sup>79</sup> Waldron, 66-68.

<sup>80</sup> Cha-Jua, "A Warlike Demonstration," 53.

who were unworthy and incapable of functioning as viable laborers. Racial exclusion not only continued in the labor movement in the years prior to the Great Migration, it flourished.

### *The Battle against Tannerism*

Any perceived advantages Afro-Illinoisans may have possessed over European immigrants during the last decade of the nineteenth century were tenuous, at best. Anti-black sentiment, along with Northern acquiescence to second class citizenship, cemented their position at the bottom of the economic ladder by the end of the nineteenth century. Recognizing their precarious position, many African Americans expressed dissatisfaction with Illinois Governor Altgeld over his handling of the Spring Valley riot, and his support for European immigrants over African Americans. Following the Spring Valley race riot, the Illinois governor supported legislation that was aimed at eliminating the usage of out-of-state Black workers when he recommended the passage of a law prohibiting the importation into Illinois of “squads of men to take the jobs of other men.”<sup>81</sup> Yet the criticism levied at Altgeld paled in comparison to the vitriol levied towards the next governor of Illinois, John R. Tanner. Initially seen as a friend of Afro-Illinoisans due to favorable legislation towards the all-black Eighth Regiment during the Spanish-American war, the Republican governor soon gained a reputation for a “pro-labor” stance during some of the most heated labor battles in the history of the state. Tanner would not only continue to push for laws that prohibited the importation of workers into Illinois by employers, he spearheaded his own bill to block labor importation after labor violence in 1899. Such legislation, according to historian Felix Armfield, sealed an unfortunate fate for Black employment in the mining industry in the Midwest.<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> Armfield, 198.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid, 198-199.



During the spring of 1898, a group of Illinois coal mining companies, including the powerful Chicago-Virden Coal Company, made preparations to lockout their miners. The sides initially agreed upon a new pay scale, but the owners had second thoughts, and decided to renege on the agreement, and hire less expensive, non-union labor. By August, the operators from Pana and Virden, Illinois, agreed upon exploiting the reserves of underpaid African American miners from the South, which would serve the dual purpose of operating the mines at a cheaper cost and the possibility of driving a wedge between white and Black union miners.<sup>83</sup> Deceptive advertising was the main method of recruitment, according to the sworn testimony of two African American workers:

Benj. Lynch and Jack Anderson being duly sworn, upon their oath say they are residents of Birmingham, Ala., resided at Birmingham for 11 years; occupation coal miners; say that on Monday, Aug. 22, 1898, they were approached by two white men and one colored man who represented that they were from Pana, Ill.; that most of the miners had gone to the war for two years; that there was a new mine opening there and a great demand for labor, and they wanted 150 men; and there was no trouble there; said about eight or nine months ago there had been a little trouble but that was all settled; affiants said they were working...but on being told that they could make from \$3 to \$5 per day they were induced to give up their jobs and go to Pana.<sup>84</sup>

Striking Virden miners sent representatives to attempt to persuade the African American miners to return home. A few of the miners left, while the majority remained aboard the train that transported them to Pana where they were to be housed in a make shift stockade. To thwart the possibility of retaliation from the striking miners, the Chicago-Virden company owners hired

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<sup>83</sup> Carl Weinberg, "Hotter Than San Juan Hill: The Battle of Virden, the UMWA and the Challenge of Solidarity," in Rosemary Fuerer, ed., *Remember Virden, 1898*, (Chicago: Illinois Humanities Council, 1998), 5; Victor Hicken, "The Virden and Pana Mine Wars" *Journal of the Illinois State History Society*, 52:2, 264-267; John H. Keiser, "Black Strikebreakers and Racism in Illinois, 1865-1900", *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society* 65 (Autumn 1972), 321-323; Keiser, *Building for the Centuries: Illinois, 1865-1898*, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1977), 251-252; Spero and Harris, *The Black Worker*, 212.

<sup>84</sup> *Pana Palladium*, August 25, 1898.

armed guards to escort the African American miners to the work site.<sup>85</sup> Miner Jim Walker, who was among the Black miners brought from Alabama, reported that the armed guards were on duty continuously and the stockades was surrounded with barbed wire “heavily charged with electricity.” He believed that the guards and the electric fences were intended to keep the miners locked in the stockade: “He who attempts to escape is a dead man.”<sup>86</sup>

Reminiscent of Southern Democratic reaction to the African American presence in the military and politics during Reconstruction, incredulous stories of Northern “negro domination” peppered Illinois papers throughout the conflict. Governor Tanner was also complicit in working European American Illinoisans into a frenzy over the Black miners’ arrival. In stumping for Congressional candidates during mid-term elections, the Republican governor competed with former Governor John Altgeld for the pro-labor vote. Historian Victor Hicken noted that the war in Cuba was becoming an embarrassing burden upon the Republican Party and the Virden-Pana conflict was greeted as a welcome diversion of public sentiment, and offered them an opportunity to renew their support of the Illinois white working class. His method to rally the white working class was flawed, however, as he stirred up racial, class, and nativist prejudices against “imported” labor, by referring to them as “ex-convicts” and “undesirable citizens”, who would immediately quit their jobs, and “enter upon crime.”<sup>87</sup>

If Tanner’s support for eradicating Illinois of “undesirable” workers did not excite the striking miners, the *United Mine Workers’ Journal* and local newspapers undoubtedly inspired them. The *Journal* reprinted an incredible story about alleged bullying tactics of the African

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<sup>85</sup> Hicken, 265.

<sup>86</sup> “Live Wires Placed Around the Stockade Keep Men in Prison,” *Birmingham Labor Advocate*, October 1, 1898.

<sup>87</sup> Carl Weinberg, “Hotter Than San Juan Hill,” 8.

American miners, who were supposedly brandishing their weapons and threatening Pana residents:

“Last evening while ex-alderman Ed Molz was going home he was stopped by two big Black buck niggers and when resenting their insults, they knocked Mr. Molz down and left him. Again while Louis Broadman was passing Penwells he was ordered to get ‘out of the way, you d—d cripple, by a big black scoundrel, as the same time kicking at his crutches to injure the boy. The cripple was bothering no one, and the black buck’s actions entitled him to arrest, which should have been done.”<sup>88</sup>

African American miner and union leader, Richard L. Davis took exception to the reprinting of the incredulous story in the *Journal*, and the derogatory language used to describe African Americans. As a stout union supporter, he backed the grievances of the striking Illinois miners, but suggested that their rage was misdirected: “I would advise that we organize against corporate greed, organize against the fellow who, through trickery and corrupt legislation, seeks to live and grow fat from the sweat and blood of his fellow man. It is these human parasites that we should strive to exterminate, not by blood or bullets, but by the ballot, and try as you may it is the only way.” He assured his readers that he had more respect for the “scab” than he had for anyone who suggested eliminating African Americans or referring to them as “big black buck niggers.” Davis believed Northern African Americans had no excuse to break strikes, Southern Blacks had “lots of them” because of shoddy treatment by white workers and low-paying jobs. African American workers were “here to stay,” he exclaimed, “and you may as well make up your minds to treat them right.”<sup>89</sup>

Not only was Davis a highly respected leader within the UMW union, he authored numerous opinion articles in the *Journal* and was one of the members at the union’s founding

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<sup>88</sup> “A Miner,” *United Mine Worker’s Journal*, September 22, 1898.

<sup>89</sup> “R.L. Davis,” *United Mine Workers Journal*, October 13, 1898.

convention in 1890. The UMW inherited a significant African American membership from the KOL, and by 1902 they had over 20,000 African American members—more than half the total Black membership of the AFL. That the UMW was an industrial union from the outset had much to do with the status it offered African Americans. It was impossible to apply principles of craft unionism when organizing coal miners because of the nature of the work. Furthermore, it would have destroyed the UMW if there were any attempt to organize the union on a racial basis in an industry that employed so many African Americans.<sup>90</sup> In fact, when news surfaced in late September that another train carrying African American workers was due to arrive in Virden, the riled-up miners were determined to halt the plans of the mine owners. Among the three hundred union miners from various parts of Illinois waiting in a heavy downpour, was a contingent of African American miners who were there to show their support. As the train finally approached the town and prepared to stop, several men aboard the train frantically signaled to the engineer to continue onward to Springfield, Illinois because of the menacing presence of miners. While in Springfield, many of the African American workers, after learning of the potential for violence in the mining towns, decided to leave. Ironically, while Tanner and the local newspapers tried to shape the conflict in racial terms, African American miners from, like Davis, supported the cause of the strikers and displayed solidarity with the Virden miners.<sup>91</sup>

Emboldened by their initial success, striking miners employed violence and intimidation in order to disrupt the plans of the Chicago-Virden Company operators. African Americans traveling through Central Illinois during this period were in constant danger. In the early weeks

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<sup>90</sup> *The Black Worker: A Documentary History from Colonial Times to the Present*, edited by Philip S. Foner and Ronald L. Lewis, Vol IV, *The Black Worker during the Era of the American Federation of Labor and the Railroad Brotherhoods*, 118.

<sup>91</sup> "Hotter Than San Juan Hill," 8.

of October sixty African American workers, bound for Pana from Washington, Indiana, were forced off their cars and persuaded to leave town. African Americans were accosted and forcibly removed from trains in Galesburg and Minonk, Illinois.<sup>92</sup>

All-out violence erupted on October 12th when the mine operators demanded that the train engineers force the African American workers off the trains in Virden—regardless of how dangerous the situation looked. Historian Ronald L. Lewis remarked that this wave of African American workers was not like the earlier miners. These men were “seasoned” strikebreakers, who were determined to work, and would regularly move from strike to strike in order to “gain employment at any cost.” For these veteran workers, conflict was always expected, and if it meant that they had to fight in order to work, they were prepared. Most of these men were non-union who “saw their bread coming from employers rather than the union.”<sup>93</sup> Strikebreaking appealed to many African Americans, explained labor historian, Stephen H. Norwood, because it provided Black men with the opportunity to assume a tough, combative posture in public and to display courage while risking serious physical injury or even death. Strikebreaking thus allowed African American men to challenge openly white society’s image of them as obsequious, cowardly, and lacking the ability to perform well under pressure.<sup>94</sup>

As the train rolled to stop in front of the stockade, heavy gunfire broke out between the guards and the miners. After the engineer disobeyed his orders and wisely sped the train out of town, seven miners and five guards were killed; more than thirty people were wounded; none of the African Americans aboard the train were killed, but several men were injured. The suffering

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<sup>92</sup> Hicken, 273.

<sup>93</sup> Lewis, 96-97.

<sup>94</sup> Stephen Norwood, *Strikebreaking & Intimidation: Mercenaries and Masculinity in Twentieth Century America*, (Chapel Hill: North Carolina Press, 2002), 79.

of those who were wounded on the train was greater than necessary because there was no physician available.<sup>95</sup>

The African American press was relentless in their criticism of Tanner. “In his zeal to cater to the striking miners and win favor with the laboring classes for political advantage,” charged *The American*, “he refuses to do his sworn duty in maintain peace, order and tranquility in his state.”<sup>96</sup> The *Colored American* once had “many complimentary things to say of Governor Tanner” because of his support of African American volunteers in Illinois during the Spanish-American conflict. However, the paper did not support his failure to aid the Black miners from Alabama. “It is the negro’s privilege to accept work from contractors anywhere and under any circumstances, if the wages are satisfactory, and the state must secure his against any molestation in the performance of that labor. Members of unions who interfere are lawbreakers and enemies to the peace and dignity of the commonwealth, and should be dealt with as such. To stand aloof in awe of their political power is cowardly in the extreme, and deserving of nothing but contempt.”<sup>97</sup> The *Christian Recorder* accused the governor of giving “encouragement to the rioters,” by leading them to believe that he sided with the white miners. “This Republican governor...has plainly intimated that colored laborers were not wanted in that state...”<sup>98</sup> Representatives of Chicago trade unions and officials of the central labor bodies joined the chorus of criticism levied at Tanner by denouncing his handling of the affair. They argued that while Tanner was “friendly” to the laboring classes, he catered to the mine operators in Pana and Virden. “Intelligent labor of our state will be run to the wall,” said the Illinois State Federation

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<sup>95</sup> Hicken, 273.

<sup>96</sup> “Tanner of Illinois,” *The American* (Kansas), October 15, 1898.

<sup>97</sup> “Under the Thumb of Unionism,” *Colored American*, October 8, 1898.

<sup>98</sup> “The Illinois Strike,” *Christian Recorder*, October 20, 1898.

of Labor, “degraded to mere serfs, and the enlightenment of our day will give way to the darkness of the middle ages, when labor was ignored and the laborer had no aspiration above a mere physical existence.” They took particular umbrage with their participation in the Spanish-American war, and the idea that they were “shedding the best blood” of their men “for the emancipation of the negroes of Cuba while these soulless operators [were] employing men of the same color to degrade and enslave white labor on our own soil.”<sup>99</sup>

Yet the harshest criticism against the Illinois governor came from the *Illinois Record*—the official organ of the Afro-American Protective League. The *Record* argued that the governor was derelict in his duties, and was the cause of the Virden/Pana riot and subsequent deaths of the miners. “The bombardment of the train loaded with human beings and the shooting down of laboring men was all uncalled for and would not have happened if Governor Tanner had been true to his oath of office and carried out the law which reads, ‘Duty of the Governor’ whenever there is in any city, town or county a tumult, riot, mob or body of men acting together by force with attempt to commit felony or to offer violence to persons or property or by force or violence, to break or resist a law of the state or when such tumult, riot or mob is threatened, and the fact is made to appear to the Governor, it shall be his duty to order such military force as he may deem necessary to aid the civil authorities in suppressing such violence and executing the law.”<sup>100</sup>

Early in the conflict, the *Illinois Record* exclaimed in bold letters: “THE FIGHT ON TANNERISM MUST CONTINUE TO THE END.”<sup>101</sup> From the newspaper’s viewpoint, the governor was a “shifty politician” who repeatedly refused to send in troops to protect the African American miners because they were “imported labor,” and gave orders to “protect property, but

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<sup>99</sup> “Republicans are Hit Hard,” *Chicago Eagle*, October 15, 1898.

<sup>100</sup> “Gov. John R. Tanner and the Negro Miners,” *Broad Ax*, October 15, 1898.

<sup>101</sup> “Tanner and the Pana Strike,” *Illinois Record*, September 17, 1898.

not the lives of the Black miners.” The *Record* agreed that the “importation of labor [was] a bad thing,” but Tanner should have been more concerned with “stopping the thousands of paupers who [were] coming from Europe and degrading American labor” before he railed against the few Black workers “who [were] shut out from nearly every avenue of industry by a caste prejudice, relentless as fate.”<sup>102</sup> Even when the Illinois Governor finally called for the National Guard to maintain order shortly after the shootings, the *Illinois Record* questioned not only the timing of the order, but also the purpose: “Who needed protection? Suppose the angry whites had begun to massacre the blacks, what would the troops have done?” The *Record* suggested that the Governor’s troops would not have helped the Black miners because the “governor would not allow them,” and he would have been “an accessory before the fact to the murder of every man that [was] slain.” The governor took his stand against the weaker side, hoping thereby to gain a transient popularity, but the “fair-minded, intelligent citizens of all races will reward him with their contempt.”<sup>103</sup> Like his predecessor, Governor Tanner was a champion for the “working-man.” Also like his predecessor, aid to the workingman was primarily limited to European American workingmen.

Afro-Illinoisans had learned lessons from the previous conflicts and were immediately suspicious of Tanner’s willingness to help Black workers. They not only contested the Tanner administration’s handling of the conflict, they also offered assistance to the African American miners. Five Black miners from Alabama were invited to meet at Quinn Chapel in Chicago during an indignation meeting. The men were introduced and they explained that they had come to Illinois “under no misrepresentation; that they came expecting to take the place of men who

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<sup>102</sup> Ibid.

<sup>103</sup> “Protect the Property But Not the Lives,” *Illinois Record*, October 8, 1898.



had broken their contract; that they had expected the protection of the government; and that, in their failure to secure this, they appealed to their race.” An address, signed by one hundred-thirteen miners of Pana and Virden, Illinois was then read, claiming the protection of the law in their labor. Resolutions at the meeting were adopted that extended the sympathy of Black Chicagoans to the miners, denouncing the charge that the men were convicts, and refuting the charge that they were taking the place of other miners.<sup>104</sup> Part of Tanner’s unwillingness to aid the Black workers in Pana came from the notion that the miners were ex-convicts from Alabama. Ida B. Wells met with Tanner days earlier to present him with evidence proving the African American miners were not ex-convicts. After he presented his evidence that the men had come from the State Mine Inspector, she read a letter from the inspector in which he denied having found any convicts among the miners.<sup>105</sup>

The accusation that the laborers were ex-convicts turned out to be false, but that did not stop Tanner from vilifying the Black miners from Alabama. According to the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, fifty-seven Black miners, along with fifteen women and five children elected to abandon Illinois, and headed to St. Louis. Attempts to persuade them to return to Virden were futile, but they adamantly refused. “We will not go back to Virden,” said one of the miners. “We have seen all we want of that place. We were brought there under false representations.” The men said they were hired in Birmingham to go to Virden, but they were not told of the labor trouble. “It was not until we reached Fulton, Kentucky, and a crowd of armed men boarded the train that we suspected anything wrong,” said another miner. When the Alabama miners arrived at East St. Louis more armed guards boarded the train. “As soon as we saw this we wanted to

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<sup>104</sup> “Negroes at Chicago Extend Sympathy to the Colored Miners,” *Chicago Tribune*, October 26, 1898; *Illinois Record*, October 29, 1898, p.1.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*

leave the train, but all the doors were locked on us and the curtains pulled down. It looked as though they sent us to Virden to be killed...”<sup>106</sup> Although it was true that some of the miners understood that they were in fact being hired to break strikes in Northern mines, many other workers were hired under false pretenses. They were nothing more than men seeking decent-paying labor, who, in some cases, brought their families to Northern locations where they had no idea that labor strife was taking place.

Some Alabama miners remained in Virden and Pana, and reports surfaced that some of the workers were sent to other labor conflicts in Carterville, Illinois and Indiana. Once again, the State Executive’s comments on Black working men did nothing to squelch the conflict in the region. Governor Tanner, according to the *Springfield Republican*, “served notice that he would use guns to make Illinois too hot for black men guilty of coming into the state to earn their living by honest labor.” The next month, tempers flared in Pana after the arrest of “Big Henry” Stevens, an African American miner from Alabama. A riot ensued and at least seven people were killed, including five African Americans.<sup>107</sup> Following the lead of Tanner, United Mine Workers union president, John Mitchell, suggested that Black workers were being used to reduce the wages of white Illinoisans, and therefore laws should be enacted to prevent laborers from being “imported.” The *Washington Bee* retorted: “Coming from such a source, these statements and recommendations are no doubt designed and certainly calculated to arouse opposition to colored labor in the mines of the north. It is another instance of the employment of specious forms to mislead the people and grossly misrepresent the colored laborer.”<sup>108</sup> Whether these men were hired as strikebreakers that went from conflict to conflict is only as important as their actual need

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<sup>106</sup> “Negroes Herded at the Four Courts,” *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, October 16, 1898.

<sup>107</sup> “Women Among the Killed and Wounded,” *Springfield Republican*, April 11, 1899.

<sup>108</sup> “Another Stab,” *Washington Bee*, April 22, 1899.

to be used in such a manner. The fact that these workers believed that they had to put themselves in these dangerous situations spoke more to the labor movement's racism and their unwillingness to include Black workers on a large scale.

Although the African American community condemned Tanner's actions during the conflicts, politicians and the voting public in Illinois continued to approve of his actions. In January of 1899, Representative Samuel J. Drew introduced a bill into the Illinois General Assembly which made it an offense for any individual or company to persuade workmen to come to Illinois or to change jobs by false representation of the kind of work to be done or the pay. It also forbade the hiring of out of state persons to guard property. Governor Tanner strongly supported the Drew Bill and it passed the house by a vote of 112 to 4. The purpose of the bill was to "prevent a repetition of riots similar to that which occurred in Virden last October, and all the troubles which followed the importation of colored miners from the south." The bill was sent to Tanner four days after the April riot in Pana and signed into law.<sup>109</sup>

### *Carterville*

The Chicago-Virden strike ended in May 1899 after the striking miners and mine owners held a conference in which they agreed to recognize the miners' union. Unlike Braidwood in 1877, where Black miners were allowed to stay and given an opportunity to join the local union, the African American miners from Alabama were asked to leave. Before the strike ended, African American miners formed the Afro-Anglo Mutual Association in an effort to protect their interests. The organization lobbied the state government to ensure that African American union

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<sup>109</sup> David Markwell, "A Turning Point: The Lasting Impact of the 1898 Virden Mine Riot," *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society*, vol. 99, No 3/4, (Fall 2006-winter 2007), 223; John Keiser, "Black Strikebreakers and Racism, 1865-1900," 321-323.

and non-union miners received the same protection as the union miners. However, their pleas were dismissed as the governor removed the troops that maintained order in the volatile town, and left the Black miners and their families to fend for themselves.<sup>110</sup> According to historian James Loewen, Pana residents created a “sundown” town after the violence by forcing virtually every African American family to leave town. Eventually more than two hundred African Americans left town—sixty three of them went back to Alabama. Others were recruited, along with African American miners from Jellico, Tennessee, to take the place of striking miners one hundred and thirty miles south of Pana, in Carterville, Illinois.<sup>111</sup>

Like the Pana-Virden riot, violence in Carterville was initiated by an angry and racist reaction by striking miners, which “could have been no surprise to any person familiar with the conditions prevailing” in the town, observed the *Chicago Inter-Ocean*. Unlike the previous riot, however, Carterville workers were determined to keep African American workers from setting foot in the town. Several months earlier, a train carry Black miners was fired upon, and troops were ordered to Carterville. It remained relatively peaceful during most of their stay, until a week after they were ordered away by Governor Tanner at the “urgent solicitation of the leading citizens, who pledged themselves to maintain order, but were powerless to do so.”<sup>112</sup> The *Washington Bee* called the Carterville riot, in which six African Americans were killed, a “complement” to the Pana-Virden riot:

“...white miners of that region have combined and sworn that a black man shall not exist if they can have anything to do with it. They call themselves

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<sup>110</sup> Noah Lenstra, “The African American Mining Experience in Illinois From 1800 to 1920,” (unpublished paper), <http://hdl.handle.net/2142/9578>, accessed in August 2009, 23.

<sup>111</sup> Loewen, *Sundown Towns*, 161.

<sup>112</sup> “Colored Miners in a Frenzy,” *Springfield Republican*, September 18, 1899; *Public Opinion (Chicago)*, September 28, 1899, copied from Foner, ed, *The Black Worker*, Volume IV, 245.

having a union, which is no more than abominable ‘trust’ so far as it relates to the still poorer blacks.”<sup>113</sup>

The white miners of Carterville were eventually acquitted of all charges, and not only did they win their battle against the mine operators, they also drove out all African Americans living in Carterville. The town had already pushed the sundown town concept to a new level prior to 1899, by not permitting African Americans to set foot inside the city limits during the day. This policy, according to Loewen, remained in force for decades.<sup>114</sup>

Predictably, the African American press placed the blame for the massacre squarely on Tanner’s shoulders and charged him with inciting white workers. During a period when African Americans could be lynched for merely speaking “out of turn”, the *Broad Ax* not only demanded justice for the massacre, but went as far as suggesting capital punishment for the governor.

“While the governor was raging like a madman and claiming that all Negroes who were honestly seeking employment in this state were nothing more nor less than foreigners or aliens, we at that time stated that ‘if we were president...we would hang John R. Tanner high as Haman, for arrogating unto himself power and authority which he was not invested with, by the constitution of the state nor the federal government and our mind has not changed from that respect today. For he has done more than all other agencies combined to unsettle the peaceful relations which heretofore existed between the two races in this great state.’”<sup>115</sup>

The *Washington Bee* lauded the courage of the miners who marched exultingly into Carterville “with their heads erect, breathing a defiance justifiable in the sight of God, warranted by the spirit of the laws of the land, hearts beating firm with high hopes and manly resolves, have been shot to death.” However, the newspaper captured the gravity of the moment by proclaiming that the tragedy marked a “racial epoch—the beginning of the end, whatever the end will be.”

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<sup>113</sup> “Brutal Murder,” *Washington Bee*, October 7, 1899.

<sup>114</sup> Loewen, 65.

<sup>115</sup> “Governor John Ricketty Tanner,” *Broad Ax*, September 30, 1899.

African Americans must hold their lives dearer, and they must “create a valuation if one does not exist.”<sup>116</sup>

Strikebreaking by African Americans was nothing less than a form of working class activism designed to advance the interests of Black workers and their families. In many instances it was a collective strategy as much as trade unionism. Strikebreaking afforded African American workers the means to enter realms of employment previously closed to them and to begin a long, slow climb up the economic ladder.<sup>117</sup> African Americans and other European immigrants were used as strikebreakers during the 1894 stockyard strike in Chicago, and some of the African American workers remained after the strike ended. Ten years later, another stockyard strike was launched, and more African American workers were used as strikebreakers. Most of the African American workers used during the strike were unskilled, and perhaps not the best workers. Yet their effectiveness was found in the amount of workers utilized during the strike—they weakened the strikers, and within a month the stockyards were using eighty-five percent African American labor. A variety of tactics were utilized to persuade the Black workers to quit work, including a telegram sent to Booker T. Washington by prominent members of the Chicago Federation of Labor.<sup>118</sup>

Similar to most of the other strikes in Illinois, when the labor conflict ended in the 1904 stockyards, the vast majority of African American workers were discharged. Conversely, Polish workers, who themselves entered the stockyards as strikebreakers in 1886, remained to form an important segment of the labor force. Although an estimated two thousand Black workers were

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<sup>116</sup> “Brutal Murder,” *Washington Bee*, October 7, 1899.

<sup>117</sup> Eric Arnesen, “Specter of Black Strikebreakers: Race, Employment, and Labor Activism in the Industrial Era,” *Labor History*, Vol 44, No 3 (2003), 322.

<sup>118</sup> Richard R. Wright, Jr., “The Negro in Times of Industrial Unrest,” *Charities and the Commons*, vol. XV, (October 7, 1905), 71.

hired by the packers during the strike, by 1910 only 365 of 16,367 workers classified by the census as stockyards and packinghouse operatives were African American. The strike did, however, induce the union to take greater cognizance of Black workers. The Amalgamated Meat Cutters and Butcher Workmen admitted those African Americans who remained in the yards, and by the time the packers began to employ large numbers of Black workers, it had become one of the few large unions to welcome African Americans as members. Despite these gains, the legacy of the strike was an intensified anti-Black sentiment in Chicago.<sup>119</sup>

Even after the series of violent outbreaks throughout Illinois in the 1890s, many African American workers continued their struggle for inclusion within labor unions and called for the need for greater class unity among workers across racial and ethnic lines. African American miner, Cal Robinson, from Springfield complained about continued racism in the mine shafts of Illinois. “If you do what is right in this matter,” he explained at the Illinois State UMW convention in 1900, “you will have none of your [Pana/Virden] and Carterville riots, and no blood will be spilled.” He suggested that violence would end when white miners ceased to allow mine operators to divide them among racial lines. “We want to abolish all of these evils, and then we shall not have to get our Gatling guns, we will have no fights along these lines, and we will have no riots.”<sup>120</sup> Contrary to contemporary Progressive era beliefs, African Americans were not necessarily choosing to remain outside of the labor movement or become strikebreakers—rather, Black workers were choosing to remain employed in an effort to feed and provide for themselves and their families. If they could not achieve this through the larger labor movement, then they were virtually forced to do so through union-busting methods.

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<sup>119</sup> Allan H. Spear, *Black Chicago: The Making of a Negro Ghetto, 1890-1920*, (Chicago: University of Chicago press, 1967), 38-39.

<sup>120</sup> Rosemary Feurer ed, *Remember Virden, 1898*, (Chicago: Illinois Humanities Council, 1998), 47.

### *The Springfield Race Riot of 1908*

During the summer of 1908, African Americans in Springfield, Illinois were forced to defend themselves against a two-day onslaught from white terrorists determined to excise the state capital of its Black population. White rioters sought revenge for the death of a white man, Clergy Ballard, and the rape of a white woman, Mabel Hallam. These crimes were allegedly committed by two African American men—Joe James and James Richardson respectfully. The night after the alleged rape of Hallam, Mr. Richardson was arrested and put in county jail in downtown Springfield alongside Mr. James. A menacing crowd of whites gathered outside the jail and began demanding that authorities turn over both prisoners. To the dismay of the crowd, both Black men had been secretly ushered out of Springfield. Unable to inflict their brand of justice on the prisoners, the angry mob turned their vengeance on Springfield's African American community. During two days of racially-motivated violence, white rioters gutted the city's Black business district, left blocks of African American homes in smoldering ruins, and lynched two innocent African American men. To be sure, Black inhabitants defended themselves and their property valiantly. They relied on their institutions, organizations, and leaders, supported by a communal network of family, friends, and associates, to resist rioters with organized force. Several Black men and women formed neighborhood patrols, strategically positioned themselves on rooftops, created traps for potential rioters and issued verbal warnings of certain death to individuals who threatened Black lives, liberty, or property. In all, two African Americans and four European Americans were killed; scores more people were injured before several thousand state militia finally imposed an uneasy peace on the city.<sup>121</sup>

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<sup>121</sup> *The Broad Ax*, "Anarchy, Mob and Lynch Law Reigned Supreme in Springfield," August 22, 1908; "Captain John T. Campbell, of the Soldiers' Home, LaFayette, Indiana," August 29, 1908; "Mrs. Earl Hallam Has Broken Down and Confessed that George Richardson Did Not Assault Her," September 5, 1908; E.L. Rogers, "A Review of the Springfield Riot: The Cause and Effect," *Colored American Magazine*, 15 (February 1909), 76-77; Roberta



At first glance, the Springfield race riot followed a similar pattern of earlier racial conflicts during the nineteenth century in the state: an overzealous European American working class attempts to exorcise the Black population due to some overarching fear of Black labor. Although the riot began as an attempt to inflict punishment on both James and Richardson for their alleged crimes, it mushroomed into an all-out assault on Springfield's Black community when the two suspects could not be located. The white mob deliberately avoided white businesses and homes, while they systematically inflicted destruction upon African American business and homes. At least twenty-one Black-owned businesses either sustained damage or were destroyed. Forty Black families were left homeless after their houses were burned.<sup>122</sup>

Booker T. Washington was among national and local Black leaders who impugned the riotous white mobs and their attack against Springfield's African Americans. However, Washington simultaneously believed the riot to be an indictment against Springfield's Black underclass, and essentially placed the cause of the riot on African Americans who he believed lacked in moral values. "Make yourselves worthy citizens," he told a Baltimore audience as he commented on the riot, "and the future will take care of itself." Black communities, he argued, could end racial violence by excising its "idle, vicious and gambling element." The "betters of the black race" could use their influence to ensure that the "idle element" who "lives by its wits without permanent or reliable occupation" would either be reformed or "gotten rid of in some manner." In most cases, he concluded, it was this "idle element" that "furnishes the powder for

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Senechal, *The Sociogenesis of a Race Riot: Springfield, Illinois, in 1908*, (University of Illinois Press: Urbana, 1990), 1-2; Anthony Landis, "They Refused to Stay in Their Place: African American Organized Resistance during the Springfield, Illinois Race Riot of 1908," (Master's Thesis: Southern Illinois University, Edwardsville, 2002).

<sup>122</sup> Antoine, David, and William Warfield, *Springfield Had No Shame: The Springfield Race Riot of 1908*, (Springfield, Ill: Office of Electronic Media, Center for State Policy and Leadership, University of Illinois at Springfield, 2008).

these explosions.”<sup>123</sup> Washington’s accommodationist philosophy called for Blacks to avoid Northern cities altogether because he maintained that they would not succeed. If they insisted on living in the urban north, they should follow “respectable” African Americans, and of course, avoid “lower-class” anti-moral behavior. Invoking the spirit of the Black Convention Movement of the 1840s and 1850s, Washington adhered to a philosophy that emphasized agriculture, rural landownership, and remain tied to the South. He further held that since all peoples who had gained wealth and recognition had agricultural roots, farming should be the chief occupation of African Americans.<sup>124</sup>

There was also a contingent among Springfield’s Black middle class residents who adhered to Washington’s self-help and racial uplift philosophies. The accommodationist principle of uplift was viewed by many Blacks as a way to use non-aggressive tactics to prove their worth to European Americans. Middle class African Americans used uplift because it represented the struggle for positive Black identity in a deeply racist society, turning the pejorative designation of race into a source of dignity and self-affirmation through an ideology of class differentiation, self-help and interdependence. Like Washington, this group respected the severity of the white mob’s actions, but they also maintained that at least some of the impetus lay with the “less respectable” element within the Black community. In particular, Springfield’s downtown district and the large settlement of poor African Americans in the neighborhood known as the Badlands, came under intense scrutiny from both white and black citizens. The Levee was located just east of the Springfield courthouse, approximately between Seventh and Tenth Streets on the east and west, and East Jefferson and East Washington Streets on the north

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<sup>123</sup> *Forum*, “The Role of the Negro,” August 15, 1908; *The Freeman*, “Wants Justice for Negro,” August 29, 1908.

<sup>124</sup> August Meier, *Negro Thought in America, 1880-1915: Racial Ideologies in the Age of Booker T. Washington*, (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1963), 105.

and south. Described by one resident, the Levee was “a mass of dive saloons, pawn shops, questionable hotels, fourth rate lodging houses and brothels from the lowest ramshackle hovels...” The East Washington Street blocks of the Levee contained most of the city’s African American businesses. For example, Addie Duncan, John E. Thompson and E.L. White operated grocery stores; A.M. Williams and O.V. Royall both maintained law offices; African American physicians S.A. Ware and N.B. Ford both had offices located in the Levee. There were also Black-owned bike shops, restaurants, barbershops and a theater all located in the Levee, and predominately for the benefit of Springfield’s African American community. While many of the Black-owned businesses were considered reputable, the Levee was best known for its less legitimate enterprises, such as prostitution, gambling, and any other vice that may have been available. The Badlands, located northeast of the Levee, was predominantly African American, poor, and was susceptible to the same vices that inhabited the Levee.<sup>125</sup>

The Reverend Dr. James Henry Magee was emblematic of Springfield’s Black elite and their precarious relationship with the Black underclass. Like many middle class African Americans in Springfield, Magee championed Washington’s uplift and self-help philosophies, and worked tirelessly to reform the poorer members of the Black community. In 1906, Magee published *High Thoughts and Aims Reach High and Noble Things*, in which he implored the Black underclass to act in a “respectable” manner—especially when in public, spend their money wisely, and to avoid vices. Magee, like other uplift reformers, sought to eliminate stereotypes that portrayed African Americans as loud and boisterous, unhealthy, and ignorant by teaching working class, and poor Blacks how to function within mainstream American society. If poor

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<sup>125</sup> Kevin Gaines, *Uplifting the Race: Black Leadership, Politics, and Culture in the Twentieth Century*, (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 2; Landis, 60-61, 74; Senechal, 15-16.

African Americans followed the sage advice of the Black elite, they argued, they too could achieve middle class status. If they achieved middle class status, there was a substantial opportunity to achieve their equal rights.<sup>126</sup> With the encouragement and influence of men such as Magee and other influential Blacks in Springfield, the Law and Order League was formed. The league was formed in order to monitor illicit behavior in the Black community, and was determined to suppress Black “immorality” and disorder.<sup>127</sup>

The fact that the Black business district was targeted offers revealing insight into white mob actions that takes us beyond economic motivation. Historian Roberta Senechal noted that the city’s Black business district doubled as the center of much of Springfield’s Black political activity during the turn of the twentieth century. Both Black business and political behavior became increasingly visible in this section of downtown Springfield, and both generated white resentment. Black political participation ran counter to many whites’ beliefs about the “proper place” for Blacks in American society. One white commentator exclaimed that “the negro is too fresh” because they had been given the right to vote. “The negro,” he continued, “feels that he holds the balance of power and so he feels his importance.” Springfield’s white press did little to dissuade its readers from developing anti-black sentiments. They occasionally singled out Black politics as a source of outrage to some whites. *The Springfield News*, for example, launched a tirade against C.C. Lee, a Virginia-born African American businessman, who was the proprietor of several businesses in the Levee district and a politically active Republican. In 1907 Lee launched an ambitious scheme and combined a theater, saloon, poolroom, and restaurant in a single large building on East Washington Street. *The News* described Lee as a “white coon” who

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<sup>126</sup> J.H. Magee, *High Thoughts and Aims Reach High and Noble Things*, (Springfield, Illinois, 1906).

<sup>127</sup> Senechal, 166.

wore a diamond on his lapel “as big as a hand mirror” and “conducted a saloon and crap game on the Levee between Seventh and Eighth Streets.” Lee was apparently “connected” politically, and supposedly, many of Springfield’s Black voters from the First and Seventh Wards owed their allegiance to him. His businesses, according to the *News* “swarmed with colonies of illegal voters” on election days. Lee’s places of business, along with other similarly accused Black establishments, were destroyed by the white mob during the riot.<sup>128</sup>

The white woman who sparked the riot, Mabel Hallam, dropped all charges against George Richardson two weeks after the conflict. In fact, she claimed that it was yet another Black man, Richard Burton who raped her. While the police frantically searched the city for the new assailant, rumors began to circulate that Hallam had never been assaulted and she had invented the entire story to conceal a foul play. Several months later, in fact, it was revealed that she had been having an affair and she had concocted the story of Richardson raping her. After the confession, Hallam and her family left town for good. George Richardson was released from prison and lived a relatively peaceful life in Springfield.

James Jones, the Black drifter who had been accused of murdering Clergy Ballard, faced a swift hearing, conviction, and ultimately, a death sentence. Jones garnered little sympathy from the Black middle class and the Law and Order League—when the league heard of an effort to raise money for his appeal, they quickly condemned the motion. Of the one hundred and seventeen indictments and more than eighty-five arrests, the all-white juries only convicted one

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<sup>128</sup> *Springfield News*, August 17, 1908; Senachal, 131-133.

person. Most of the cases were, in fact, dismissed. It was clear that the city that had just had a major race riot would not be conducive to impartial hearings.<sup>129</sup>

In an interesting twist, the *Springfield News* argued that the riot was not a “race war” as so many had claimed. In fact, the *News* claimed that it was “only blood thirst” that resulted from “uncontrolled passions of criminal instincts.” African Americans that were “law abiding negro citizens” were not the targets of the rioters since they were “indispensable in the economic service of the public.” The *News* echoed the same class argument of the Washington advocates—that the fault belonged to poor Blacks “who [had] not behaved themselves.” In addition, the article shifted the blame onto lower class whites, which, according to historian Carole Merritt, was to strip even this group of racist intent. The typical rioter was a white, working class male in his mid-twenties, who had likely been born in the Springfield area. The indicted rioters were disproportionately Irish and Italian.<sup>130</sup>

### *Conclusion*

Writing in 1905, sociologist Richard Robert Wright Jr. observed that during the tumultuous labor unrest at the turn of the twentieth century, Afro-Illinoisans were often forced to work where they could, rather than where they were qualified. He suggested that labor unrest offered African Americans opportunities for employment where they had been previously excluded.<sup>131</sup> Although Wright Jr.’s observations about Black employment were specifically about Chicago and its labor issues during this period, they also apply to the rest of Illinois. As the previous section displayed, labor unrest was rampant during the 1890s, and African

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<sup>129</sup> Senechal, 170; Carole Merritt, *Something So Horrible: The Springfield Race Riot of 1908* (Springfield: Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library Foundation, 2008), 65.

<sup>130</sup> *Springfield News*, “Is Not a Race War; Only Blood Thirst,” August 18, 1908; Merritt, 67.

<sup>131</sup> Wright, Jr., “The Negro in Times of Industrial Unrest,” 69.

Americans were more willing to break strikes due to an increase in racial exclusion. During an era when the “manliness” of African Americans was constantly called into question, Black workers throughout the United States, in an effort to prove themselves in the context of various forms of terrorism, refused to except their predetermined status as inferior workers.

Strikebreaking, of course, was only a single avenue for Black Americans to fight for a better position within a late nineteenth century racial hierarchy that was designed to maintain their degraded position on the economic ladder. And while European Americans, by the end the century, had largely equated strikebreaking with Black workers, African Americans continued to explore and create labor strategies that suggested they were anything but the “enemies of the labor movement.”

## CONCLUSION

1910 was a pivotal year for African Americans—in May, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People was established as a permanent organization designed to fight against the disenfranchisement of African Americans and racial segregation, advocate for equal education for black and white children, and for the complete enforcement of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments.<sup>1</sup> Initially motivated by the Springfield Race Riot of 1908, labor reformer, William English Walling challenged his readers in 1908: “what large and powerful body of citizens is ready to come to [Springfield Blacks] aid?”<sup>2</sup> His challenge led the gathering of several influential social reformers, including Ida B. Wells and W.E.B. DuBois. Out of these meetings came the formation of one of the most influential organizations of the twentieth century.

While the NAACP’s appearance on the national scene did not necessarily create a major stir that year, the presence of Jack Johnson certainly did. His victory over famed boxing heavyweight champion, Jim Jeffries that summer led to heightened racial antagonism throughout the nation. From its inception, the fight was framed as a contest to see which race had produced the most powerful man, according to historian Gail Bederman. When Johnson convincingly defeated “The White Hope”, the defenders of white supremacy were forced to confront a grim reality that they themselves insisted upon—the virility of white men was not necessarily better than men from other races. In fact, the trouncing that Jeffries received from Johnson indicated that African American men were in no way as degraded (especially in relation to white men) as

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<sup>1</sup> John Hope Franklin and Alfred A. Moss, Jr., *From Slavery to Freedom: A History of African Americans*, (Boston, McGraw-Hill, 2000), 353.

<sup>2</sup> William English Walling, “The Race War in the North,” *The Independent* (Vol. 65), September 3, 1908.



they had convinced themselves. Racial violence ensued in all parts of the nation, including Illinois. The *Chicago Tribune* reported that several lynchings were stopped because of police intervention. However, two men were killed as a result of rioting in Mounds, Illinois (eight miles north of Cairo, Illinois). According to the paper, Black men were killed in mob violence; one was in jail, and two other men were being pursued by white citizens. The Dubois brothers, the *Tribune* reported, were riding through town allegedly “shooting up the town” in celebration over the Johnson victory. When Jeff Davis, an African American policeman, along with his deputy, attempted to arrest the men, Davis was shot in the head. The deputy returned fire, killing one of the Dubois brothers.<sup>3</sup>

On the cusp of the Great Migration, the racial atmosphere continued to grow more toxic. While the Johnson/Jeffries aftermath is not related to labor, it demonstrates the sensitivity of race relations at a time when Black Americans were beginning to move north to locate better employment. During this volatile period in Illinois, African Americans may have been subjected to overwhelming racial discrimination in the workplace, yet they often refused to play hapless victims. In an effort to protect themselves and procure better labor, Afro-Illinoisans utilized a wide array of strategies in an effort to circumvent racist practices in the labor force.

As *The Specter of Black Labor* has demonstrated, anti-black violence surfaced regularly as soon as African Americans began to protest against racist laws within the state. In particular, anti-black violence during the late nineteenth century was often triggered by economic and occupational issues—often over a labor dispute, or some type of racial discord over a particular type of labor. Working class European Americans throughout Illinois vigorously fought against

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<sup>3</sup> “Eleven Killed in Many Race Riots,” *Chicago Tribune*, July 5, 1910; Gail Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880-1917*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 2-3.

the inclusion of Black workers because they represented a threat to their position within the labor hierarchy. The perception of an economic threat was heightened substantially during and after the Civil War. The precarious nature of white economic status coupled with the perception of Black economic and political advancement (allegedly at the expense of white workers) only intensified these fears. In addition, late nineteenth century pseudo-science exalting white superiority versus non-white inferiority had become firmly entrenched as an understood “fact” within mainstream American society. Free Blacks and ex-slaves, then, were not only saddled with locating and maintaining viable employment—just like other working class Americans; they were forced to do so within a society that was convinced of their innate inferiority, second class status, and invariably associated them with “cheap” and “degraded” labor.

The process of racializing labor during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was a fundamental factor in maintaining a level of relative economic adversity among Black workers throughout Illinois. Largely castigated as “menial” workers with inferior labor skills, Afro-Illinoisans were limited in the type of jobs they could procure and the type of training they were able to receive because European American workers throughout the state insisted on drawing the color line in order to maintain their place within the racial hierarchy. As the labor movement gained momentum, racial restrictions increased. Black workers confronted difficult decisions on whether to remain loyal to the larger labor movement—in spite of its restrictions—or look after their own interests. Indeed, Afro-Illinoisans held a variety of views on the issue of labor, and often openly debated their role as workers. Yet as racial restrictions continued to solidify by the close of the nineteenth century, Black workers more willingly made occupational choices based upon their own economic interests, rather than that of the larger labor movement. As a result of the racialization process as well as the overarching anti-black sentiment throughout

the United States, Afro-Illinoisans came to be regarded as the enemy of the labor movement by the turn of the twentieth century.

The racialization of labor in Illinois was a relatively gradual process that did not fully materialize until the last decade of the nineteenth century. My goal was not only to display how racialization adversely affected the labor of Afro-Illinoisans, but also exhibit the steady erosion of their collective position within the burgeoning labor movement; and how Afro-Illinoisans adjusted to this erosion of Black civil rights in the workplace. This dissertation exhibited that the labor experience of African Americans required decades to fully materialize not an instantaneous process. It was a process that began as soon as the possibility of Black workers entering the Midwest seeped into the bloodstream of white Illinoisans. By utilizing a state-wide synthesis that centralized racial identity, my goal was to understand the process that was essential in maintaining Black workers in Illinois to an economic and occupational disadvantage during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The malleability of race is a crucial factor in this dynamic because it displays how racism was utilized, in various forms and methods, to subjugate Afro-Illinoisans. I was also motivated to display the overwhelming odds that the small Afro-Illinois population had to overcome in an effort to simply exist within the state's borders. Their struggle was never simply an effort to locate and maintain viable labor. They were compelled to contend with laws bent on barring them from the state, voting rights, and citizenship. After an arduous battle to procure their civil rights, they had to contend with a hostile white population hell-bent on preserving racial order and exorcising the "black specter." Thus, the African American labor experience in Illinois was a seemingly endless battle that encompassed far larger ramifications than work.

This project had several overlapping goals that sought to demonstrate the complexity of the relatively small, but vibrant Black population during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in relation to labor. Afro-Illinoisans contained a variety of strategies and ideas about their economic and occupational advancement. While they simultaneously made decisions about their precarious position within the racial hierarchy of labor, they also dealt with issues involving citizenship and civil rights. Furthermore, Afro-Illinoisans were also forced to reckon with an overwhelmingly hostile white population that increasingly viewed them as an enemy to a burgeoning labor movement. Rather than accepting prescribed ideas of their own inferiority and degradation, Afro-Illinoisans throughout this period displayed remarkable zeal in combating their place within a society that consistently imposed ideological constraints upon them.

Yet the efforts of Afro-Illinoisans to reach a cohesive philosophy that would combat the racialization of labor were often difficult to obtain. As *The Specter of Black Labor* demonstrated, intra-racial debates of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were paramount in shaping philosophies to counteract the racialization of labor. Not only did Black leaders often have philosophical differences among each other—they also had to contend with a working class population that often viewed their economic position differently from the Black elite. From a Black middle class perspective, the Black working class of Illinois often fell into clichéd labor categories that adversely affected their respectability in the eyes of mainstream Americans. Conversely, working class Blacks often saw the Black elite as unsympathetic and out of touch with the reality of the daily drudgery they faced in the labor force.

By the mid-1910s, at the beginning of what became known as the Great Migration, African Americans protested with their feet by moving to Northern states. This mass exodus from the South was instigated by a campaign of white terrorism and other oppressive measures designed to reinstall white supremacy and further subjugate Southern Blacks. Between 1910 and 1920, Chicago's Black population increased from 44,103 to 109,458.<sup>4</sup> One of the main factors that caused African Americans to relocate to northern enclaves was the possibility of better employment. During the First World War, European immigration was at a virtual standstill, and African Americans took advantage of the dearth of wartime workers. However, as I have attempted to display in this project, working class whites throughout Illinois (and the rest of the country, for that matter) were reluctant to any perceived advancement for African Americans. Eerily similar to the smaller scaled race pogroms of the nineteenth century, race riots in Springfield (1908), East St. Louis (1917), and Chicago (1919), reinforced racial patterns and informed new Black migrants that white Illinoisans were determined to maintain their dominant position within the racial hierarchical order.

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<sup>4</sup> James R. Grossman, *Land of Hope: Chicago, Black Southerners, and the Great Migration* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1989).

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