

To Make Our World Anew

VOLUME II



A HISTORY OF
AFRICAN
AMERICANS
FROM 1880

EDITED BY
ROBIN D. G. KELLEY — EARL LEWIS

To Make Our World Anew



National Guardsmen confront marchers on Beale Street, Memphis, in 1968.

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Volume Two: A History of African Americans since 1880

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Robin D. G. Kelley
and
Earl Lewis

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To You

To sit and dream, to sit and read,
To sit and learn about the world
Outside our world of here and now—
 Our problem world—
To dream of vast horizons of the soul
Through dreams made whole,
Unfettered free—help me!
All you who are dreamers, too,
Help me make our world anew
I reach out my hands to you.

—Langston Hughes

Preface to Volume Two

Robin D. G. Kelley and Earl Lewis

The decade of the 1870s ended on the heels of the greatest revolution in American history since the patriots declared their independence from England. In many respects, the revolution of the 1860s and 1870s was more far-reaching than what the Founding Fathers had had in mind a century earlier. Launched in the midst of the Civil War and postwar efforts to reconstruct the South and the nation, ex-slaves, along with radical Republicans and a few poor Southern whites, set out to transform the old plantation oligarchy into a true democracy. Newly freed men and women sought to create a civil society in which the role of government was to provide land for landless ex-slaves, protect all of its citizens from violence and exploitation, make education and basic public services available to all irrespective of race or economic status, ensure that all adult males enjoyed unfettered voting rights, and work actively to achieve full equality for all. As a result of this vision of democracy, Congress passed the 13th Amendment to the Constitution, abolishing slavery, the 14th Amendment granting black people citizenship and fundamental civil rights, and the 15th Amendment enabling black men and poor white men the right to vote without property qualifications. Members of Congress also succeeded in creating free, universal public education. All of this happened, in part, because former slaves ran for political office at the local, state, and national levels, and promoted legislation that continued to expand the definition of democracy.

African Americans did not simply wait for the state or the Republican party to solve their problems. Some freed people left their former masters in search of family members who had been sold away, to find better opportunities, or simply to find out what it felt like to be free. A new group of black leaders emerged out of the war, many of whom had fought for the Union army and saw themselves as liberators. They raised money to build churches and schools, hire teachers, and purchase land. Some former slaves assumed the land of their former masters belonged to them for, after all, “massa” was a war criminal and his wealth was built on the sweat and toil of Africa’s children. They were not wrong; indeed, there was some wartime

redistribution of land by the Union army and the Freedman's Bureau promised to settle former slaves on plots of their own. Not all former slaves reacted so boldly to the achievement of freedom. Tens of thousands throughout the South stuck close to their old plantations, afraid of starvation and severing deep family and community ties. The transition to freedom revealed that even the most settled families had certain vulnerabilities in the early years of Reconstruction. There were many incidents of planters evicting their former slaves, especially those too old or weak to work.

Despite initial setbacks, black people were indefatigable in their commitment to own land, enjoy citizenship, exercise political power, build institutions, and live in a South where everyone was free and equal. They remained optimistic because of the presence of federal troops and institutions such as the Freedman's Bureau. However, once Andrew Johnson was sworn in as president following Lincoln's assassination, he made his position clear: America is a "white man's nation" and white men shall be the ones to rule the South. Throughout 1866, President Johnson appointed avid racists to positions of power in the Southern provisional government. They, in turn, disarmed the majority of black federal troops at the very moment when planters formed armed terrorist organizations such as the Ku Klux Klan and the Knights of the White Camelia. In 1866, these new office holders dedicated to white supremacy passed a series of laws known as the Black Codes. The Black Codes restricted black freedom of movement, the amount of land blacks could own, whom they could marry (interracial marriages were outlawed), and their right to bear arms. Some of the most draconian of the Black Codes were the apprenticeship laws, which allowed former masters to literally retain ex-slaves under the age of twenty-one under the pretext that they needed a guardian.

Once the radical Republicans in Congress overturned President Johnson's Reconstruction policies in 1866 and passed the 14th and 15th Amendments to the Constitution granting black people citizenship and male suffrage, respectively, the erosion of liberty changed. Throughout the late 1860s and early 1870s, former slaves not only voted, they ran for office and held positions in the state legislature, Congress, and even the Senate. They insisted that free universal public education was a pillar of democracy. Unfortunately, the experiment in democracy was slowly dismantled as Northern industrialists re-established ties to the old planter class and sent black folks back to something akin to slavery. The black militias were disarmed, federal troops were withdrawn, and the Republicans struck a shady deal with the Democrats during the 1876 presidential election that allowed their own Rutherford B. Hayes to win the White House despite having lost in the electoral college, in exchange for withdrawing all federal troops from the South, ending their efforts to reconstruct democracy in the South, and granting the Southern oligarchy more federal appointments and funds for road and bridge construction. The Compromise of 1877 opened the door for the de facto denial of black citizenship, including the right to vote.

During the next fifteen years, things only got worse. It didn't have to be this way. If only poor whites had recognized that their own freedom was tied to the freedom of black people. If they had only understood the power of united action, of blacks and whites working together to overthrow landlords, merchants, and money-hungry factory owners. Instead, tragically, poor white people, barely able to make ends meet, chose allegiance to their race over their class—they identified more with being white than being a worker or a farmer who shared common interests with black workers and farmers. Thus begins what black historian Rayford Logan calls “the nadir” or low point of African-American history.

Low point indeed. During the 1890s and early 1900s, lynchings increased, racial segregation became law, and African-American citizens who had worked so hard for the Republican party in the days of Reconstruction found themselves without the right to vote. Many emancipated black people found themselves with no property working for white landlords under conditions reminiscent of slavery. These rural folk had to rent their land, grow the crops the market demanded, and give half or more of what they produced to their landlords. This system of sharecropping, sometimes called the new slavery, kept most African Americans in debt and in poverty. Yet, it did not destroy their fighting spirit. Africans Americans were more than victims of “Jim Crow” laws and racial violence. They organized, fought back, moved around, thought, wrote, and created works of art. They connected their struggles with the rest of the world, turning to Africa, Europe, and the Caribbean for guidance and inspiration. In many respects they kept a vision of justice and equality born during Reconstruction alive. Some African Americans joined interracial movements such as the Populists or the Knights of Labor; others turned inward and built religious, fraternal, educational, and political institutions that ultimately became sources of power and inspiration for the stony road ahead. Others simply left, finding refuge as far away as Liberia (West Africa), Canada, and Haiti, or as close as Kansas and Oklahoma. African-American men and women founded all-black towns, such as Mound Bayou in Mississippi or Langston and Boley in Oklahoma, and imagined a promised land free of white terrorism. A handful followed the advice of black educator Booker T. Washington, who called on Southern black folk to “cast down their buckets where they are” and carve out a life on the land. He believed proving that African Americans are a productive people, would reduce the terror and eliminate racism. Then there were those, such as Ida B. Wells, who believed blacks should cast down the gauntlet and punch it out with white supremacists. Wells, one of many leading black women activists of that era, declared war on lynching and sexual violence against black women.

If you can't beat them, leave. And this is what over one million Southern blacks did around the time war broke out in Europe. Scores made the move from the countryside to Southern cities such as New Orleans, Houston, Memphis, Birmingham, Atlanta, Durham, Richmond, and Norfolk. With the war-time economy booming and European immigration at a virtual standstill due to the conflict,

the demand for labor attracted hundreds of thousands of black folk to the Northern metropolises such as Chicago, New York, Philadelphia, Milwaukee, Cleveland, and Detroit. For some, the move North was a version of Exodus. They sought refuge and possibility in the North; they sought security and safety in the burgeoning ghettos of the Midwest and Eastern seaboard cities. Many found what they were looking for; others only found more misery. Most experienced a combination of exhilaration and disappointment. And everyone, whether they stayed in the South or joined the Great Migration, confronted a society in flux: The world during and immediately following the Great War was a world marked by destruction, international migrations, rapid industrialization, a wave of anticolonial uprisings in Africa and the Caribbean, revolutions in Russia, Germany, Mexico, Ireland, and elsewhere, and racial violence at home. Black men returned from the war to make the world safe for democracy ready to demand democracy for themselves. For their militancy they paid a dear price—black men were lynched in uniform, black institutions were attacked by racist white mobs, the ranks of black industrial workers that had swelled during the war were rapidly downsized. On the other hand, while the 1920s looked pretty bad for ordinary African Americans, the “artists of the race” experienced a renaissance. Popular fascination with blackness meant that the cultural achievements of African Americans—in literature, music, theater, dance, visual arts—would have an audience.

By the end of the decade, however, things looked bad for everybody. When the Great Depression hit America, African Americans were feeling it even before the stock market crash of 1929. But they had hardly given up hope. On the contrary, the crisis was seen by some as yet another opportunity to “make the world anew.” Hope in the midst of crisis is a major theme in the history of the 1930s and 1940s. Alongside images of bank closings, endless soup lines, jobless men selling apples, unemployed workers begging for work, hard-working middle-class Americans losing everything, we find newsreel footage of families glued to radios listening to the president’s inspirational speeches, labor leaders declaring victory in the aftermath of militant strikes, radical protesters fighting tenaciously to transform the country. This sense of hope and high expectation was also evident in the many letters ordinary people sent to President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, the man Americans sent to the White House three times in a row beginning in 1932. They believed things would change, that the nation would rise up out of the Depression. Roosevelt himself reinforced their hopes by promising a “New Deal” for all Americans. For African Americans, in particular, the era was simultaneously an inferno and an eden: Black workers had the highest unemployment rate at a time when black leaders held important positions in Roosevelt’s Administration; New Deal legislation threw hundreds of thousands of black sharecroppers off the land when the same federal government provided unprecedented opportunities for black writers and artists; dramatic episodes of racist violence against African Americans opened the decade just when Communists and other radicals launched a nationwide campaign against racial injustice.

This sense of hope amid crisis became even more pronounced once the United States entered the Second World War in 1941. For African Americans, the horrors of war provided an opportunity to demand equal treatment. They criticized the United States for fighting for democracy overseas while black people at home were treated like second-class citizens. Unlike the First World War, this time around black leaders called for a “Double Victory”—a victory against fascism abroad and racism at home. The war also created employment opportunities for many black working people, many of whom left the South permanently for the sprawling factories of the urban North. It was *deja vu* all over again. Hopeful that these Northern metropolises would be the “promised land,” a good number of these migrants found only frustration and disappointment since a comparatively small proportion of African Americans gained access to industrial jobs and training programs. Those who did obtain good-paying jobs often experienced violent reprisals from disgruntled whites who refused to work with blacks. Thus, throughout the war white workers waged “hate strikes” to protest the promotion of black men and women, and black workers frequently retaliated with their own strikes to protest discrimination. And in many instances, racial tensions spread beyond the workplace, erupting in riots in several major U.S. cities. Spurred by poor housing and living conditions in ghettos, competition between blacks and whites over the use of public parks, and police treatment of black citizens, these riots resulted in several deaths, thousands of injuries, and millions of dollars in property damage. Indeed, it might be said that while U.S. troops invaded Normandy and bombed Okinawa, African Americans in the urban ghettos fought their own war at home.

It was only the beginning. Despite a long and noble history of black resistance to racism and oppression in the United States, the period from 1945 to 1970 might be described as a protracted war for freedom. Black Americans were determined to be the architects of an inclusive America, one that championed human rights for all. Moreover, they openly linked local efforts to global conditions. The fight for economic and racial justice in Baton Rouge, Montgomery, and other southern towns and cities became part of a worldwide fight for human rights. In song, word, and deed, anti-colonial efforts in Africa were connected to human rights struggles in the United States; opposition to the war in Vietnam became linked to the oppression of Third World peoples everywhere. In that sense the black struggle in the United States became a beacon for the world.

The Second World War had exposed the persistent contradictions between the American ideal and the American reality. Black Americans resolved to eliminate that contradiction. They would not only fight for democracy abroad, they would pursue democracy at home. In communities large and small they organized after the war, often aided by the Second World War veterans who had resolved to return home and change things. They used indigenous institutions such as churches, fraternal orders, and civil rights organizations and created new ones to funnel their efforts. In the lawyerly crafted briefs of attorneys, the cadences of black ministers,

the lyrics of gospels and civil rights songs, the energies of college students, the noble dreams of ordinary folk, they plotted their strategies. Victories followed before the Supreme Court in *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954); through the determined actions of Montgomery and Baton Rouge residents; and in the desegregation of military ranks.

Lest it be forgotten, however, it took community mobilization; it took the poor and middle class, the young and old, the college educated and school dropouts to organize the communities for social change. Some resisted, fearing beatings, job loss, and even murder. For good reason—African Americans who organized the Civil Rights movement experienced the range of negative response. After all, the federal government reluctantly backed civil rights workers and aggressively investigated black leaders when they complained about the war in Vietnam and social inequities elsewhere. It is important to understand that while African Americans generally shared a vision of changing the world, they did disagree at times over strategies, procedures, and timing. In time, Southern activists came to realize that the challenges faced by Northern and Western urban dwellers required new emphases. Members of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) publicly and quietly feuded with elders in organizations such as the NAACP and the Southern Christian Leadership Committee (SCLC).

At the same time, women and men turned to a variety of media to capture the world and their place in it. Popular music pulsated with the rhythms and anthems of migrants who had earlier settled in Detroit, Philadelphia, and Memphis, among other locales. A new outpouring of writings probed the inner psyche of black urban and rural folk as well as the ways and folkways of whites. Hollywood tiptoed around the subject of racial inclusion, which television executives readily obliged, while graphically exposing the rawness of segregation and Northern exploitation for evening news viewers. Music, writings, and style played a pivotal role in the affairs of the day.

When the 1960s came to a close most black people were surprisingly optimistic. The Civil Rights movement had made remarkable gains, and many people believed that the Black Power movement might achieve for African Americans the self-determination they had been seeking for the past three centuries. There were some stunning victories, especially in the arena of electoral politics: Several major cities elected black mayors; African-American representation in Congress increased significantly; a black man named Jesse Jackson actually became a serious contender for the presidency. The black middle class expanded, as corporate board rooms became slightly more integrated and black college-educated professionals moved to newly built suburban homes.

However the majority of African Americans were not so lucky. The period after 1970 was marked by massive economic changes that adversely affected black workers: the disappearance of heavy industry, the flight of American manufacturers to foreign lands, and the displacement of millions of workers across the country.

Permanent unemployment and underemployment became a way of life. A few years after the War on Poverty had been declared a victory, the number of black poor grew dramatically. Despite the growing presence of African Americans in political office, city services declined, federal spending on cities dried up, affirmative action programs were dismantled, blatant acts of racism began to rise again (including renewed efforts to disfranchise black citizens), and American cities seemed to experience a constant economic crisis.

Economic decline, poverty, and rising racism in the “post-segregation” age is only part of the story. The final chapters of this book tell yet another story of how black people are still attempting to “make our world anew.” It is the same story of how an increasingly diverse and always-complicated black community resisted oppression, struggled for power, dealt with internal tensions, conflicts, and differences, and profoundly shaped American culture. It is the story of the resurgence of black nationalism, the rise of black neo-conservatism, the challenge of black feminism, the impact of Caribbean immigration on African-American communities, the escalation of interethnic tensions, and the roots of rap music and hip-hop culture. It is a story whose final chapters still have to be written by all of us.

To Make Our World Anew, volumes one and two, are the product of a truly collective endeavor. We have combined the efforts of eleven leading historians who had authored the original *Young Oxford History of African Americans* to produce the two-volume paperback edition. In this volume, Barbara Bair authored the first chapter, “Though Justice Sleeps: 1880–1900;” James R. Grossman, “A Chance to Make Good: 1900–1929;” Joe William Trotter, Jr., “From a Raw Deal to a New Deal?: 1929–1945;” Vincent Harding, Robin D. G. Kelley, and Earl Lewis produced, “We Changed the World: 1945–1970;” and Robin D. G. Kelley, “Into the Fire: 1970 to the Present.” Each of these authors deserves full credit as co-authors of *To Make Our World Anew*.

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To Make Our World Anew

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Though Justice Sleeps

1880–1900

Barbara Bair

In his 1884 book *Black and White*, African-American journalist and activist T. Thomas Fortune analyzed the denial of justice to African Americans and the process of disenfranchisement that characterized the post-Reconstruction era. He observed that the exclusion of African Americans from land ownership and voting were the twin roots of the “great social wrong which has turned the beautiful roses of freedom into thorns to prick the hands of the black men of the South.” Despite the promises of freedom, including legal emancipation from slavery and postwar talk of righting economic inequities and providing opportunities, the majority of African Americans faced landlessness, underemployment, and lack of access to political rights or protections. Land, as a symbol of freedom and citizenship, and as a means of independent livelihood, was at the crux of African-American desire in the last two decades of the nineteenth century.

During this period, nine out of ten of the 6.5 million African Americans in the United States made their homes in the South. Eighty percent of these black Southerners lived in rural areas, and most of them were farmers or agricultural laborers. Some were landowners and had their own small farms, but most were tenants. They rented the land where they worked for cash or a share of the crops they raised. Others worked for hire.

It was very difficult for tenant farmers working under sharecropping arrangements to get ahead financially, and having enough to eat and adequate clothing were always worries. Most faced each new year owing money from years before to the white people from whom they rented land and to the merchant who ran the store where they purchased their goods. “We make as much cotton and sugar as we did when we were slaves,” one black tenant farmer in Texas observed, “and it does us as little good now as it did then.” Laborers who questioned the high prices charged to them, which would invariably be set at a rate that would encompass or exceed the value of their entire year’s crop, had little legal recourse. As one black Mississippian testified to the Senate, “Colored men soon learn that it is

better to pay any account, however unjust, than to refuse, for he stands no possible chance of getting justice before the law.”

Many African-American sharecroppers and farmers sought greater justice by moving to different land. When their contracts were up at one place, they would often pack their belongings and enter into a new arrangement on another tract of acreage, hoping to improve over their last year’s experience. One Alabama sharecropper reported the frustration she felt when she went out in the moonlight to plant rosebushes to beautify the plot of land she was renting, never knowing whose yard it would be the next year. Some moved even further than from one plot in the neighborhood to another. They migrated from the South to form new black towns in the West, or dreamed of a life of justice and independence in an all-black Africa.

Leaving, for families already in debt and under white economic control, was no easy matter. It was hard to do without much money, and it could be dangerous. White Southerners did not want black laborers to leave, because their low-paid work made white economic gains possible. Despite the risks involved, thousands of laborers and middle-class people desirous of greater opportunities left for Kansas, Oklahoma, and other areas outside the South. “The word it has been spoken; the message has been sent,” wrote Sojourner Truth in verse she composed about the migrations. “The prison doors have opened, and out the prisoners went.” For Truth and other older activists who had worked hard to bring about the end of slavery, the post-Reconstruction treks to new lands were seen as one more step in the march toward real emancipation. For other leaders, such as Frederick Douglass, the migrations were a mistake. Douglass felt that African Americans should remain where they were, confront violence, and take a stand for equal rights. This was difficult to do, and while many African Americans did work and speak out to change conditions in the regions where they lived, others, particularly the poor, who lived under harsh circumstances, longed to escape rather than place their hopes in reforming political and economic systems that were so weighed against them.

Some black leaders argued that the federal government should make public lands available to black settlement as compensation for the centuries that Americans of African descent had spent in slavery. In 1887 William H. Thomas wrote in the *African Methodist Episcopal Church Review* that he saw the involvement of the government in the distribution of land as an issue of morality and legal principle, mandated by the “equity of justice between man and man, and government and citizen.” If slavery was wrong, Thomas argued, then “Negroes were illegally held to service; some measure of compensation, therefore, is due them, not only from individuals who were the nominal owners, but from the National Government which was the prime factor in their enslavement and maintenance in bondage. . . . No measure of compensation would work such beneficial results to the free people, . . . as the ownership of land.” Thomas, like many others who had come before and would follow him, proposed the creation of a separate black territory or state

within the United States. In Thomas's vision, the government would buy expanses of land in Southern states and divide their acreage into small homesteads that would be made available for black settlement.

The longing for land and political control that beckoned laborers and middle-class investors West also made them think of Africa. Henry Adams and Benjamin Singleton were among the African-American activists who advocated mass black emigration from the South in the late 1870s and 1880s. These advocates contacted organizations founded to provide passage to African Americans who wanted to move to West Africa, including the long-established (and white-dominated) American Colonization Society and several newer enterprises such as the black-administered Liberian Exodus Joint Stock Steamship Company. Gathering support from tens of thousands of rural black Southerners, Adams and other organizers like him viewed Liberia as a potential home for working people with agricultural skills.

Other African Americans, especially middle-class leaders, saw West Africa not so much as a place to escape from white violence or as a land of opportunity for workers with few resources, but as a place where educated blacks of African and African-American origin could develop their own business enterprises and political structures. In the mid-1880s and 1890s, grassroots groups like Benjamin Singleton's United Transatlantic Society, based in Tennessee and Kansas, continued to advocate migration to Africa as a means of racial unity and progress at the same time that they encouraged Southern blacks to move westward.

Bishop Henry McNeal Turner, a leader of the African Methodist Episcopal Church and an advocate of black emigration, had traveled to Liberia and wrote and spoke of its promise. Organizers for the American Colonization Society also toured through the South, speaking at churches and community centers about African heritage and black nationhood in Africa. When African Americans read Turner's letters about Liberia that were published in church newspapers in 1891, they responded. They formed local clubs to encourage emigration, and many wrote to inquire about securing passage or came East in hope of boarding a transatlantic steamer, but the colonization society did not have enough boats to carry them or the funding to promise future voyages. These disappointed travelers became temporary urban refugees. They either returned West or made homes in the city.

While the influence of the colonization society declined as a result of its financial hardships and administrative reorganization after 1892, several independent movements were formed in the 1890s. Emigration remained an important topic of discussion among lower- and working-class African Americans.

Small groups of emigrants successfully left for Africa, but the overwhelming majority of African Americans remained in the United States. Many who wanted to go to Africa could not afford to pay for the passage. If they decided to leave the South, they looked instead for places relatively close to home to secure land and contribute their labor. Since the late 1870s, black people from Kentucky, Missouri, and Tennessee had been establishing new lives in Kansas and in small settlements



For a fee of five dollars, black settlers of Nicodemus, Kansas, were granted this certificate entitling them to any vacant lot in the town. The chance to own their own land was a powerful lure for many African Americans.

on the Western prairies. Just as national proponents of African repatriation visited churches and schools to teach African Americans about Africa and the possibility of going there, so promoters of migration clubs who wanted to encourage relocation to the West organized through existing black social institutions.

The motivation for going to other states was similar to the idea of going to Africa. "We as a people are oppressed and disfranchised," one westward migrant wrote in a letter in 1891. "We are still working hard and our rights taken from us. [T]imes are hard and getting harder every year. We as a people believe that Affrica is the place but to get from under bondage are thinking of Oklahoma as this is our nearest place of safety."

In 1889–90 portions of what was called the Unassigned Lands in Indian Territory and all of Oklahoma Territory (areas that in 1907 would become parts of the state of Oklahoma) were opened to settlement by non-Indian peoples. Indian Territory had been the home of relocated Indian peoples since federal policy had forcibly moved Native Americans from their traditional homelands in the East in the 1830s. Many blacks and people of mixed race living in the region were former slaves, or the descendants of those who had been held in bondage by Cherokee, Creek, or other Indian peoples for generations. Many of these freedmen and their families were themselves citizens of the Indian nations. In the early 1890s, African

Americans from neighboring Arkansas and other Southern states were attracted to the land grants available in the areas newly opened to settlement by outsiders. More than seven thousand of them moved. They did so with the hope not only for property, but for political independence.

Several all-black towns were established in the territories. These were places where African Americans could form their own municipal governments and protect one another from white incursions and violence. Langston City was one such town. It had its own newspaper, and when black residents across the South read about the plans for the town, they joined dozens of Oklahoma booster clubs that advertised opportunities and promoted migration. A few hundred came to Langston. In 1897 Langston University (also called the Agricultural and Normal University), a college where black teachers were trained, was established in Langston by the territorial legislature. The town's primary promoter, Edward (also Edwin) P. McCabe encouraged emigrants to become involved in Republican party politics and to start businesses. McCabe had earlier helped settle the black town of Nicodemus, Kansas, which was named for an African prince who was brought to the American colonies as a slave and later purchased his own freedom. He hoped enough black people would respond to the Oklahoma Territory land rush that voting majorities of blacks would be created in the territory's local districts. African Americans who came would own land and businesses, and would be able to govern themselves.

Most newly arrived residents in the West and Midwest lived in simple dugouts and took up subsistence farming, much like the African Americans who were already living in the region. A more prosperous middle class also emerged, and these people operated hotels, blacksmith shops, barbershops, saloons, and other service-oriented establishments. Other blacks became deputy marshals or worked on ranches as cowboys and wranglers. Black churches, women's groups, and fraternal orders were founded. By 1900, more than 55,000 African Americans were living in Oklahoma and Indian Territories, and between 1890 and 1910, twenty-five black communities were founded in the Oklahoma region.

Efforts at westward migration and the formation of black towns, like transatlantic emigration to West Africa, were plagued by the relative poverty of the majority of black workers and subsistence farmers. Neither the emigration clubs nor African colonization organizations and companies had funds for long-term investment. Middle-class organizers and developers involved in the black-towns movement and in Liberian colonization schemes tried hard to attract settlers who had the financial capital to start or support businesses, purchase land, and establish long-lasting schools, churches, and civic and social associations. Accomplishing these things was difficult to do for those with little money. Colonists in Africa faced prolonged rainy seasons and types of illnesses and fevers they were not used to, and they often arrived in Africa to find that provisions and resources that had been promised to them were scarce.

Blacks who participated in the westward exoduses purchased more than twenty-thousand acres of land in Kansas in the early 1880s, but at the same time thousands

of individuals arrived after difficult journeys, impoverished, undernourished, and in need of help. For them, basics like seeds, clothing, and farming implements were hard to buy. Many took jobs on the railroads or in towns instead of establishing their own small farms as they had hoped to do. Crop failures and droughts made conditions worse. The economic depression of 1893–94 drove down cotton prices and raised interest rates, burying tenant farmers in deeper debt within the credit system, and made cash and jobs even more scarce than before.

Still, there were successes. The presence of a nearby railroad line could make a big difference in a black town's ability to last over time. Mound Bayou, Mississippi, had a railroad depot. Mound Bayou was a town with a majority black population that, like sites further to the West, was founded on the principles of racial pride and economic opportunity. Black citizens there were able to steadily increase the number of acres of land under tillage in surrounding farms. They established several commercial businesses, such as cotton gins and sawmills, whose success was linked to the availability of rail transportation that quickly moved products created or processed by the businesses to the market. In the 1890s, the residents of Mound Bayou replaced dugouts and log cabins with wood houses and built five new churches and a school building. Black people were elected as city aldermen and held office as mayor.

In the 1890s the Langston City, Oklahoma, *Herald* newspaper emphasized the desire of town leaders and promoters to attract middle-class people to their town. Ads called for shoemakers and other artisans, and invited those who could begin new businesses such as a lumberyard and a harness shop. Several grocery stores already existed, as did saloons, blacksmiths, barbershops, feed stores, mills, yeast and soap factories, a bank, hotels, and an opera house. The newspaper's editors also promised black readers that political liberty and justice would be by-products of life in Langston.

But in the same period when this promise was being made, African Americans saw their political rights increasingly under attack. By the 1890s, Jim Crow laws segregated people of different races in public places such as schools, restaurants, and theaters. They also applied different rules that affected blacks' and whites' ability to do things like vote, secure loans, or chose a place to live. The term "Jim Crow" was an old pejorative way of referring to black people. It had been in popular use since the 1830s. The Jim Crow laws made areas of the West and Midwest, which at first had seemed attractive, difficult places for blacks to fulfill their dreams of independent lives free of white control or repression. Despite injustices, people made good lives for themselves and their neighbors. They worked hard, raised families, and looked after one another in their communities. African Americans also had a large presence in the West serving in the U.S. military and working in ranching and the cattle industry. Many experienced black cowboys were born in the West or had served in U.S. Army infantry and cavalry regiments stationed in Western states.



Black cowboys in Texas around 1890. During the last part of the nineteenth century black cowboys played a large role in the development of the Western economy, participating in cattle drives and working on ranches.

With the coming of the railroads and the fencing of the land, the massive trail drives in which African-American cowboys had traditionally found employment gave way to the shipment of cattle by train. In the last part of the nineteenth century, the proportion of cowboys who were black varied from twenty-five to sixty percent in different areas of the West. Many of them worked in Texas and Indian Territory. By the late 1880s and early 1890s, these hands worked for hire on individual ranches, sometimes farming their own homesteads on the side and raising small herds. Other highly skilled cowboys entered the roping contest circuit, turning the work they did on the range into performance art. They competed for prize money as horseback riders and ropers in small town exhibitions, large regional expositions, and state and county fairs. Their presence on the roping circuits set the stage for the later achievements of men like Bill Pickett, a black cowboy at the Miller 101 Ranch who became famous for his performances in rodeo and Wild West shows.

Unlike men who made their living in the cattle industry and its offshoots, women in the West were employed primarily in farming family plots. And many were employed in the service economy, working as cooks, cleaners, and laundresses in households and boardinghouses or hotels, raising other people's children, or for a few, working in black-owned stores.

For most black women who remained in the South, the kinds of domestic chores and farmwork that they did had not changed much since emancipation. They worked long hours scrubbing floors, cooking and preparing food, sewing, washing, mending, and doing dishes. They cared for their children, and they planted, chopped, and picked cotton and helped with wheat, corn, and tobacco crops. They also grew small gardens or sometimes kept a cow in order to add greens, butter, and milk to the regular family diet of cornmeal, salt pork, and molasses. They

often would try to do what they could to earn a little cash: raise chickens and sell the eggs, pick wild berries for market, or take in extra laundry.

Most African-American households were headed by a husband and a wife, and on average they had four or five members living under one roof. Men usually were married by the time they were twenty-five years old, and women by age twenty. Hard manual labor, poverty, and poor nutrition among the majority of African Americans who worked as sharecroppers were reflected in low fertility rates, high child mortality rates, and an average life expectancy for black men and women of just thirty-three years. Many families lived near other kin, and as women and men grew older they often took into their households other relatives and boarders from outside their immediate family. In addition to caring for her family, a woman living in the rural South would also be involved in working with other women in her neighborhood.

Some African-American families left agricultural life behind completely. Moving to the city, like migration West and repatriation to Africa, was one of the forms of movement that African Americans engaged in as they searched for a better life. While tenant farmers or sharecroppers would often move from one plot of rented land to another, country people also moved from farms to small towns and from towns to cities. In the 1880s and 1890s, although four-fifths of African Americans still lived in rural areas, the concentration of black populations in the urban parts of the South and of black workers in industries continually increased. For them, it was not land but work that was the focus of their search for equality and rights.

Labor: "Let Us Put Our Shoulders to the Wheel"

In a letter published in the *United Mine Workers Journal* on July 14, 1892, African-American union organizer Richard L. Davis talked about the rights of working people and addressed some thoughts to those who saw solutions for blacks in migration or back-to-Africa movements. "The negro has a right in this country," Davis wrote, "They are here and to stay."

One of the places that African Americans were staying was in the cities of the South. Some black urban residents had been in the cities since before the Civil War, when they worked either as slaves or as freemen and freewomen. Others came or were born there in the last decades of the 1800s, when the numbers of black people in large Southern urban centers grew. In 1880, for example, the U.S. census showed 16,337 black people living in Nashville, Tennessee. They made up thirty-eight percent of the total population of the city. By the time of the next U.S. census, in 1890, there were 29,395 blacks in Nashville, comprising thirty-nine percent of the city's population. While African-American citizens were still a minority in Nashville in 1890, they made up more than half the populations of other cities, including Montgomery, Alabama, and Raleigh, North Carolina.

Although in this period only a small percentage of the black population of the

United States lived in Northern states, of those who did, most lived in cities. In the great migration movements of the 1900s, many black people moved to major industrial urban centers like Chicago, Detroit, and New York, but in the 1880s and 1890s, Philadelphia had the largest number of black residents of any of the Northern cities. In 1880, 32,000 African Americans were living in Philadelphia, and by 1900, 63,000 black people had made their homes there and accounted for four percent of the city's population as a whole. Proportionately small but significant black populations also lived in the Southern-Northern border city of Washington, D.C., in Baltimore, Maryland, the New England city of Boston, and other urban areas of the North.

For African Americans in the cities, North and South, employment helped determine the way marriages and families were organized. Racism limited black people to a small number of occupations, mostly very poorly paid. Severe racial discrimination also affected where African Americans could live within cities. These conditions made options regarding marriage and family for black people different than those of their white counterparts.

Life was very difficult for the white urban poor also, especially for recent immigrants from Europe who were impoverished and subjected to ethnic prejudice from native-born whites. But while employment options expanded for American-born whites and white-ethnic immigrants, especially in factory and industrial work, opportunities for African Americans in the cities became even more narrowly defined in the 1880s and 1890s.

Earlier in the century, most free black men and male slaves (and, after the Civil War, ex-slaves) who worked in the cities were manual laborers. A significant proportion of men also worked in skilled positions or as artisans and in construction trades such as carpentry and masonry. Richard R. Wright, who became a social scientist, recalled that when he was a young man in Savannah, Georgia, he could walk down the streets and see black carpenters, bricklayers, and wood sawyers at work. Much of the construction of the public works and transportation systems that made Southern cities function, their "railroads and streets . . . sewers and water works," Wright remembered, were "largely constructed by Negroes." Over time, however, black men were increasingly excluded from the trades and the variety of their presence in the city work world was diminished.

The racism that grew more overt in the last two decades of the 1800s meant greater segregation, restriction, and exclusion of black men from apprentice opportunities and from higher-paid skilled types of work. Some black men in the cities continued to work as artisans—as shoemakers, blacksmiths, coopers, bakers, and barbers. Indeed, one of the most famous shoemakers of the era was an African American named Jan Matzeliger who lived in Lynn, Massachusetts. He revolutionized the shoemaking trade when he invented a machine that he patented in 1883. His lasting machine shaped and stitched the upper portion of a shoe to its sole, something that previously had to be done by hand.

Despite their skill and achievement, black artisans and small shopkeepers were increasingly segregated and saw white patronage disappear. They found their customers among the growing number of African Americans coming to the cities, many of whom were very poor. Although there were very successful black businessmen and -women who achieved wealth, it was difficult for most black artisans and shopkeepers to make enough money to achieve middle-class status. Most of the relatively small number of middle-class blacks who made up the elite of African Americans in the cities were professionals—teachers, doctors, or lawyers—or were employed in white-collar government work.

The majority of black men in the urban work force after 1880—about seventy-five percent—were confined to manual labor positions or jobs in personal service. The laborers were stevedores, sailors, hod carriers (who carried supplies like mortar or brick to bricklayers, stonemasons, and others at a construction work site), janitors, and the people who did the heavy labor rebuilding city streets or installing public works such as sewer lines. One-third of the African Americans in Philadelphia in the late 1890s worked as servants. They were house servants, valets, coachmen, porters, hotel help, or waiters. Men made more money in personal service occupations than manual laborers or women in similar service jobs. Given the more strenuous alternatives for employment, they formed a kind of social elite who tended to look down upon those who made a living in ways that involved more dirt and brawn.

Women, too, were restricted in the types of jobs they were allowed to do. The majority of African-American women worked in household service or as laundresses or washerwomen. A few were dressmakers, hatmakers, seamstresses, typists, nurses, or teachers, but it was difficult to get these kinds of work because of white prejudice. White shop girls or office workers would refuse to work beside black women, and white women would not patronize black women who had skills to offer in health care or fashion. Prostitution was also an urban occupation for women. Like live-in personal service, it was a way of making a living that made child rearing difficult.

One out of five African-American residents of cities, men and women combined, worked as domestic servants within white households. Though many went home at night from these jobs, significant numbers lived in the household where they worked, separated from their families. As cities grew, many African Americans found themselves living among networks of friends or kin but outside a formal nuclear family structure. Besides the nature of employment that took them away from their families, many city dwellers were single men and women who had come to the city from the country seeking work. People who were poorly paid in their jobs, or who could not find work, or who were turned away because of prejudice, waited longer to marry. As a result, African Americans in the cities remained single later than those in the country and began having children when they were older. Among the poorest black urban residents—people who suffered most from

the strains of overcrowded housing, poverty, and crime—relationships might not be formalized and family arrangements might not last. Because of work conditions that fueled the cycle of poverty, black families tended to be smaller in size in the city than in the country. In the Northern cities, many more black women than those in the rural South remained childless throughout their lives. Whereas all members of a sharecropping family, old and young, worked in the fields and contributed to the family income, in the city it was the individual adult, rather than the family unit, who was most involved in earning support.

A neighborhood survey conducted in 1896 in Philadelphia found that 57 percent of black women and 48.7 percent of men over the age of fifteen were single, widowed, or divorced. These figures included the 85 percent of women over the age of sixty who were either no longer or never married. Black women outnumbered black men in major Southern cities such as Atlanta, New Orleans, Mobile, Richmond, and Savannah. This was true in Philadelphia as well, where an 1896 survey of the black population of the Seventh Ward revealed that there were 1,150 females to every 1,000 males. Of those African Americans who established families, about eight out of ten, in Southern and Northern cities alike, lived in households that were headed by two parents. But about twice as many urban as rural black households were headed by a woman alone.

In 1896–97 the African-American scholar W. E. B. Du Bois interviewed hundreds of black residents about their families in a house-to-house study he conducted with the help of Isabel Eaton in Philadelphia. Their findings were published in a book called *The Philadelphia Negro*. In addition to noting “an abnormal excess of females” among the black people in Philadelphia, Du Bois reported that an African-American “woman has but three careers open to her in this city: domestic service, sewing, or married life.” Staying home from work to make married life a woman’s “career,” although it might have been desired by working-class couples, was mostly just an option for the middle class. While white women of all classes viewed marriage as an alternative to employment, and most endeavored to stop working outside the home when they married, this was not true for black women. Many black women worked for pay throughout their life spans, in spite of marriage, child rearing, and old age.

Residential segregation meant that African Americans were excluded from living in the nicer sections of cities, which were occupied by whites, and were crowded into neighborhoods that had become defined as black. In Washington, D.C., blacks lived in brick or wooden-framed houses in alleyways, built in the middle of blocks behind more stately buildings fronting the main streets and occupied by whites.

In other cities, including Boston and Philadelphia, the backyards of existing buildings were filled with new tenements to accommodate the great need for housing. Theft, violence, and vice were part of black city life, and became more so in the 1890s as black young people who were reared by working parents with little means could often find no jobs for themselves and were welcomed into a developing

criminal subculture. Illness also had its impact on black families. Becoming seriously ill was a constant threat for poor city dwellers, who lived in conditions of malnourishment, poor ventilation, and lack of heating in which infectious disease could flourish.

Pay for all African Americans was low. Black men were paid at lower rates than white men or women for equivalent work, and black women made less than black men. In Philadelphia in the late 1890s, according to the Du Bois study, a black man working as a cementer reported that he "receives \$1.75 a day; white workmen get \$2-\$3."

At the same time that pay was lower, rent for African Americans was higher than that paid by whites for the same accommodations. Black Philadelphians living on one street in 1896 reported that African Americans paid "twelve to fourteen dollars and the whites nine and ten dollars. The houses are all alike."

Skin color made a difference in employment. Lighter-skinned women and men of mixed-race heritage were more likely than blacks to be middle class or wealthy, to have inheritances, own property, have acquired skills through education, be involved in the leadership of organizations, and work in professional or entrepreneurial capacities. Clergy, teaching, medicine, and the law were the most common professional occupations among middle-class African Americans in the city. Still, because of the racial prejudice of whites, a majority of mulatto people were restricted to the same narrow range of occupations and opportunities as their darker-skinned sisters and brothers. The bottom level of urban employment was filled with literate and capable African-American men and women who had skills and abilities they were not allowed to use in the workforce and who were vastly overqualified for the work that they were hired to do.

African Americans did many things to counteract job discrimination and to overcome the isolation and family problems that were the social side effects of that form of prejudice. Social status among blacks in cities came from sources other than a person's occupation. As in the country, women who moved to towns and cities often took up residence near kin and friends, so that their household existed not in isolation but in a network of others. They also boarded in the homes of siblings, cousins, or acquaintances, or took in boarders themselves. Black benevolent societies, mutual aid associations, fraternal orders, and church auxiliaries also thrived in the cities, with women's groups very active among them. In places like Petersburg, Virginia, and Atlanta, Georgia, in the 1890s black women's volunteer groups such as the Ladies Union, the Ladies Working Club, the Daughters of Zion, the Sisters of Love, and the Sisters of Rebeccah provided help in the form of food, clothing, medical care, and assistance with funeral arrangements to working women and families in need. They also functioned as social clubs, bringing community activists and neighbors together for fun and friendship. Like these associations, black churches combined social welfare functions and opportunities for socializing. In addition to providing services such as food kitchens and informal

employment bureaus, they were key centers for mass meetings and political debates, spiritual renewal, and shared expressions of faith.

The self-reliance and loyalties that were fostered by these group aspects of urban life were also reinforced by the choices that black men and women made about their labor. Although white employers in the cities wanted black women to supply the domestic labor that was necessary to maintain white households (much as white rural landlords wanted black sharecropper families to work the land for white profit), black women preferred the greater autonomy that they had working as independent laundresses instead of as household servants. As isolated live-in maids and cooks, they rarely saw their own children and were never far from their white employer's beck and call. By working in white households but living in their own homes, or taking in washing and ironing and staying at home, domestic workers and laundresses were able to give more time to their own families and social networks.

The Atlanta washerwomen's strike of 1881 is an example of the successful statement black working women could make by standing together. White city boosters in Atlanta organized an International Cotton Exposition to celebrate the New South's embrace of industrialism and Northern capital investment. The washerwomen, meanwhile, spread the word through church congregations that a mass meeting would be held at a certain church, and in July 1881 they met and formed a Washing Society. On July 19 they went out on strike, demanding higher wages to be paid to all members at a standard rate.

The white city council threatened to levy a business tax against the women workers, and landlords punished strikers who were their tenants by raising rents. The August 3, 1881, edition of the *Atlanta Constitution* reported that the strikers countered by announcing that they were willing to pay fees to the city "as a protection so we can control the washing for the city." They also told the council members to make up their minds soon: "We mean business this week or no washing." The influence of the initial mass meeting at the church continued to grow wider, as household workers, asking for higher wages, walked off their jobs and black male waiters at a prominent Atlanta hotel refused service to the dining room until their wages were raised.

In addition to doing service and trade work in the cities, African Americans worked in industries. Sometimes families that were primarily from the country would combine farming with seasonal industrial work. When men would go away for part of a year to work for wages, the women and young people in the family would remain behind to work the farm. Different sorts of wage work were available. In Florida in the 1890s, for example, more than 100,000 black men worked in the forestry industry, felling trees.

Sometimes the pattern of leaving and staying among men and women was reversed: for families who lived along the Atlantic coast, it was often the women, rather than the men, who would leave home to find seasonal work in seafood



While the majority of African-American women found employment as laundresses or in domestic service, a growing number were employed in industry, including those who removed stems and sorted leaves in tobacco processing plants.

processing plants. In rare instances, women would do jobs usually done by men, stepping in, for example, when a husband or brother was unable to work and filling his place in earning wages for the family in industry or manual labor.

Not all labor that African Americans did was voluntary. The convict lease system, in which prison officials collected fees from private employers who contracted with the state for work done by prisoners outside prison facilities, was a source of revenue for the penitentiaries and states that allowed the practice. It also provided industrialists with a steady labor supply otherwise unavailable in the South, where a majority of white as well as black workers were trained in agriculture rather than industry and were used to seasonal or part-time patterns of working.

The Black Codes made black people susceptible to arrest for petty crimes and, once imprisoned, made them available to be assigned to do forced labor. Under these laws, for example, black men who were homeless or unemployed could be arrested by whites and imprisoned on charges of vagrancy or loitering. Once convicted of a crime, they could be made to work under guard for the duration of their prison term rather than spend the time inside a penitentiary or jail.

The states of Alabama, Georgia, and Tennessee all had convict lease systems, and the brunt of the system was borne by African Americans. Eighty to ninety percent

of all inmates in Alabama in the 1880s and 1890s were black. In Tennessee, more than sixty percent of the prison population was black, and black convicts made up more than seventy percent of those who were leased out to work in coal mines. Between October 1888 and September 1889, twenty-six convicts died from injuries suffered in the Dade Coal Company mine in Georgia. Others were flogged for rebelling, and two men were shot trying to escape.

In 1891 labor activists in eastern Tennessee challenged the policies of the Tennessee Coal and Iron Company, which was by that time one of the major employers of convict labor in the state. In July 1891 hundreds of miners held a mass meeting. After the gathering they began a series of actions in which they armed themselves and took control of convict camps, freeing the men who were held within them. In the first such action, they freed convicts who were being sent to work in the company's Briceville mine and put them on trains headed for Knoxville or Nashville. Most of the liberated prisoners were black. More than one hundred of them were able to escape, but most were eventually recaptured and returned to prison.

The free laborers were furious that the mining company planned to replace them with less expensive convict workers whose labor they could better control. One observer of the rebellion of the free laborers, H. H. Schwartz, reported in the *United Mine Workers Journal* that "whites and Negroes are standing shoulder to shoulder" in the actions. Their protest sparked surprise investigations of the mines, during which the investigators found many safety and health violations. It also forced the Tennessee State Legislature to hold a special session to reconsider use of the convict labor system. When the legislators decided to continue the system because of the money it made for the state and the contracting companies, the scattered protests became an organized uprising. Support for the Tennessee protestors spread among miners in Kentucky and Virginia. In August 1892 the convict camp at Tracy City, Tennessee, was burned to the ground by protesting miners, and the inmates set free. Hundreds of miners were imprisoned by state militia that had been called out to subdue the protesters, and Jake Witsen, a black miner who was a leader of the free laborers' actions, was shot to death by soldiers. Thousands of opponents of the convict lease system attended his funeral in respect for his leadership and to bring public notice to the injustice of his death. As a result, in 1893 the Tennessee legislature passed a bill abolishing convict leasing as of January 1896, which is when the Tennessee Iron and Coal Company's contract with the state ended.

Several of the activists who led the convict wars in eastern Tennessee were involved in the Knights of Labor or in the United Mine Workers of America. The United Mine Workers was formed in 1890 during a time when mining was expanding as an area of employment for African Americans. By the turn of the century, some ten to fifteen percent of the 400,000 people working in mines were African Americans. They worked mainly in areas bordering between the North and the

South (West Virginia, Kentucky, Tennessee) and in Alabama. In the 1890s some of them also went to work in mines further North—in places like Ohio, Illinois, or Pennsylvania—as did immigrants from eastern and southern Europe, who joined the Irish immigrants and native-born whites who had previously made up most of the workforces in the mines. Instead of organizing these different groups of miners separately, the United Mine Workers attempted to join members of different backgrounds into what were called “mixed” locals. African Americans were an important part of building the union, and by 1900 twenty thousand black miners belonged to it.

Richard L. Davis was a black organizer in Ohio. He was one of the founders of the United Mine Workers and became a national leader of the union. He was born in Virginia at the end of the Civil War and had begun working in a tobacco factory in Roanoke when he was eight years old. At age seventeen he became a coal miner and went to work first in West Virginia and then in Ohio, where he married and had a family. He and other workers in the town of Rendville, Ohio, faced long periods of unemployment in the mid-1890s, when an economic depression caused many of the mines in Ohio to shut down or operate on irregular schedules.

A powerful speaker, Davis was elected to the national executive board of the United Mine Workers in 1896 and again in 1897. He often used verses from the Bible and examples of things that his fellow workers knew well from church to explain the importance of standing together to try to win greater rights, and to look for justice in this world as well as in heaven. “I know that in former days you used to sing ‘Give me Jesus, give me Jesus, you may have all the world, just give me Jesus,’” he told his audience of miners in a letter to the *United Mine Workers Journal* on April 18, 1892. “But the day has now come that we want a little money along with our Jesus, so we want to change that old song and ask for a little of the world as well. Don’t you think so, friends?”

Davis was involved in the Knights of Labor as well as in the United Mine Workers. The Knights of Labor was organized in 1869 and reached the height of its influence in 1886, when more than seven hundred thousand members belonged. The membership included between sixty thousand and ninety thousand black people, who, like Davis, joined through the locals in their communities. But unlike most traditional unions or the United Mine Workers, which focused on skilled workers or those in a particular trade, the Knights of Labor welcomed all kinds of laborers: farmers, field workers, women, men, black and white crafts workers, and those employed in all kinds of jobs in different industries.

African Americans like Davis were among the organizers who went into neighborhoods, churches, and workplaces to encourage other laborers to join. Many who became involved in the Knights of Labor did so for idealistic reasons. They believed, as Davis wrote in a letter to the mine workers’ journal, in the “brotherhood of all mankind no matter what the color of his skin may be” and in the inherent equality of black and white people. Organizers like Davis who believed in these

values established a tradition of interracial unionism among lumber workers in Florida, coal miners in Birmingham, Alabama, freight handlers in Galveston, Texas, and male and female tobacco workers in Richmond, Virginia.

Although many white members of the Knights opposed the organization of black workers, the Knights took steps to defy public practices that denied social equality to blacks. In October 1886, for example, they held a convention in Richmond, Virginia, at which a black delegate named Frank Ferrell, who was from New York, spoke to the assembly along with white dignitaries. He did so in defiance of local custom, which barred black people from sitting with whites in public places or from speaking to audiences made up primarily of whites.

Terence V. Powderly, the head of the Knights, believed that white and black workers doing the same kind of work should have equal wages. He also noted that one of the goals of the Knights was to provide education to working-class children, not just to those of the middle and upper classes. In a speech to an assembly in Richmond, Virginia, in January 1885, he explained that in the places where the Knights had become established the "colored men are advocating the holding of free night schools for the children of black and white. . . . The politicians have kept the white and black [working] men of the South apart, while crushing both. Our aim shall be to educate both and elevate them by bringing them together."

For many working-class African Americans, participation in Knights of Labor activities was one way of being treated with the kind of respect that was afforded mainly to middle-class people, and to the working class within their own churches and secret societies. This was especially true for the women. The African-American journalist Ida B. Wells reported on a meeting of the Knights of Labor that she attended in a piece published in the January 22, 1887, issue of the *Cleveland Gazette*. "I noticed that everyone who came was welcomed and every woman from black to white was seated with courtesy usually extended to white ladies alone in this town," Wells observed.

The Knights of Labor also tried to use collective actions to better working conditions. In Louisiana the year after Frank Ferrell spoke in Richmond, some six thousand to ten thousand laborers, mostly black, walked off their jobs in the sugarcane fields in support of a Knights of Labor strike for higher wages. Like the mine workers who participated in the convict wars in Tennessee, they faced white violence as a consequence of their demands, and several black strikers were killed when companies of state militia were sent in to end the strike.

African-American workers had success organizing in New Orleans, where in 1880 black and white dockworkers who pressed, moved, and shipped bales of cotton on the Mississippi River wharves formed a labor coalition called the Cotton Men's Executive Council. The council coordinated the goals of several dock unions, and covered common laborers as well as men working in the trades. Prior to the formation of the council, black cotton rollers, teamsters, coopers, wheelers, and freight handlers had already created their own separate benevolent or mutual aid

associations similar to the Washing Society that black washerwomen had formed in Atlanta. They met together to set uniform wages for their specialties and to help each other in times of need. Demands of the unions involved in the council, which represented some fifteen thousand workers, centered around the need for higher wages. In September 1880 black unionists joined whites in their same industries in a series of strikes that brought wage increases for teamsters, loaders, and other dockworkers.

A year later the unionized waterfront workers struck again, asking for fair wages and for the employers to recognize the union as the representative of the workers. Black unionists kept order until the second week of the general dock strike, when a lone policeman attempted to arrest a black teamster on a city street. The teamster, James Hawkins, was a person that the September 1881 *Weekly Louisianian* described as a "law abiding, peaceful man." He proclaimed his innocence when approached by the policeman and resisted the arrest. The policeman's actions drew the ire of the local African-American women, who threw frying pans and utensils at him from their windows. In the resulting commotion, the police officer drew his gun and shot Hawkins twice, killing him.

Hawkins was murdered, as one of the *Weekly Louisianian* reports of the killing put it, "for no other cause than that a negro has no rights which a police officer is bound to respect." Hawkins's death galvanized the working-class neighborhood.

White unionists joined black dockworkers and their families at Hawkins's funeral, and they emerged determined to defy the powers that would deny them a better standard of living and their desire to have a say in the structure of their own work. They shut down work on the riverfront. Soon all parties involved in the strike met and negotiated a settlement. The strikers succeeded in winning the employers' agreement to standard wages on the docks for each category of labor and some protections for the unions in hiring. More important, they set a standard for biracial working-class unionism that lasted in New Orleans into the 1890s.

The closely related populist and agrarian movements of the 1890s were other ways in which black workers sought to organize both among themselves and, for greater strength, with white working people. Their goals were the defense of racial justice and economic equity in American society. Populism and small farmers' associations were part of a grassroots political movement whose supporters sought to form alliances between poor and working people, especially those who made their living in agriculture.

For example, black farmers in Lovejoy, Texas, formed the Colored Farmers' National Alliance and Cooperative Union in March 1888. Their membership expanded and they joined with white farmers' groups from the Midwest and South. By 1891 the alliance had more than one million members in twelve states. Like the Knights of Labor, the farmers' alliances supported the idea of workers' cooperatives, enterprises in which workers would pool their resources, exchange labor or contribute goods, and share profits. They also wanted to reform wage work to give

working people better payment for their labor, and they organized boycotts of merchants who engaged in unfair practices. They sponsored consumer cooperative stores in Southern cities, helped members who were struggling to pay mortgages on their land, and worked to improve the education provided to rural black children.

While the farmers' alliances were being formed, the Populist or People's party emerged as an independent political party in February 1892, when farmers, labor unionists, and reformers met in St. Louis to develop a program to challenge business interests and the low prices being paid for agricultural goods. Populists supported the rights of non-landowning laborers, including black tenant farmers and field workers, and wanted reform of the country's financial system.

In some areas, one of the party's strategies for change was to try to elect black officials to public office. These officials, it was hoped, would be committed to black civil and political rights, including an end to convict lease systems, the right of black people to serve on juries, and what one black delegate from the Colored Farmers' Alliance termed a "free vote and an honest count."

This strategy had some success in North Carolina, where ten black candidates were elected to the state legislature on Populist-Republican tickets in the 1890s, and many more gained county and municipal offices. Racism as well as class differences marred the progressive aspects of the Populist cause over time, as white small farmers who owned land saw their own interests diverge from those of black sharecroppers and tenant farmers who did not own property.

There were many successes in black-white working people's cooperation in farmers' alliances, populist political coalitions, the Knights of Labor, and among unionists. But one of the unresolved questions in black industrial workers' minds at the end of the 1800s was whether it was better to compete against free white labor for jobs or to join in coalition with white workers to collectively demand better wages and conditions. Skepticism about the genuineness of whites' desire for long-range cooperation was rampant. As John Lucas Dennis, a black worker at the Black Diamond Steel Works in Pittsburgh, put it in a letter to the *New York Freeman*: "Our experience as a race with these organizations has, on the whole, not been such as to give us either great satisfaction or confidence in white men's fidelity."

Mining and work in the cities were two areas where the dilemma between competition or attempted coalition continually played out. In the North, mine workers in the late 1800s were almost all white. Mine operators' use of Southern black workers as strikebreakers thus took on more directly racial meanings than it did in the South, where blacks found themselves on both the unemployed and free-labor sides of such conflicts. In both the North and the South, industrialists used racial differences to divide the work force and prevent unionization. They paid black workers less money than white workers for the same labor, and they denied the higher-paid and higher-status positions in industries to blacks. Organized labor often followed these kinds of prejudiced policies. White union members often prevented blacks from becoming apprentices in trades or members of unions, and

even unions that claimed biracial principles were dominated by white leadership and weakened by segregated practices, including the organization of separate locals for whites and blacks. African-American experience in unions varied a great deal from industry to industry and from one region or locale to another. It also varied in the same places over time: A successful action in which white and black union members rallied together could be an exceptional event. A long history of exclusion and discrimination might precede and/or follow the period of cooperation. Many black workers were alienated from the very idea of involvement in organized labor because of their association of labor activism with white working-class racism and with union opposition to black industrial employment. At least fifty strikes took place in American industries between 1880 and 1900 in which white workers opposed the hiring of blacks.

Blacks who worked in crafts like carpentry, woodworking, or bricklaying were among those who suffered from white policies of exclusion. This was one reason why the number of black artisans and crafts workers that had once seemed so prevalent in the cities declined, and black men were gradually moved more and more into unskilled areas of labor.

Nonunion white women spinners and weavers in textile factories often spurned working with newly hired black women. Workers who did not have a trade or do skilled work were often excluded from union eligibility of any kind, since craft unions—such as those that represented conductors, locomotive firemen, or engineers in the railway industry—did not accept unskilled or semiskilled workers into their membership.

Black workers also sometimes found themselves in a tug-of-war between industrialists and the unions. In 1890 a leaflet was circulated among black miners in Birmingham, Alabama, that stated “WANTED! COLORED coal-miners for Weir City, Kan., district, the paradise of colored people. . . . Special train will leave Birmingham the 13th. Transportation advanced. Get ready and go to the land of promise.” When the black miners who responded to this call arrived in Kansas, they found the white workers at the mines on strike and manning a stockade barring the entrance to the work site. Some joined the strikers; others returned home to Alabama when the union paid their way. Still others seized the opportunity for employment at higher wages than they earned in Birmingham, but under conditions that hardly constituted a paradise for black people.

What was happening in the places where people worked mirrored the changes that had slowly been occurring on the political front since the end of the political Reconstruction that followed the Civil War. The exclusion from skilled and better-paying jobs and from union representation that African Americans were experiencing in the workplace coincided with the loss of rights to vote, to be elected to office, to live where one chose, or to receive the kind of education that black parents wanted for their children.

Justice: "They Have Promised Us Law . . . and Given Us Violence"

It was a spring day in May 1884. A young, well-dressed schoolteacher named Ida B. Wells refused to comply with a conductor's request that she move from the first-class "ladies" section of a Chesapeake, Ohio, and Southwestern Railroad train to a second-class smoking car further back in the train. Ida B. Wells was twenty-one years old. She often took the ten-mile train trip between Memphis, Tennessee, where she lived, and the town of Woodstock, where she taught public school.

But this day was different. On this day the conductor who came to take her ticket tried to enforce a Jim Crow law that had been passed in Tennessee two years before, authorizing separate accommodations for black and white travelers. When the conductor asked her to change cars, Wells protested. Then the conductor tried to pull her from her seat. Soon the two of them were scuffling in the aisle of the ladies' car as he tried to force her off the train and she attempted to keep her seat. Two other railroad employees came running to aid the conductor, and Wells was dragged away, resisting, and removed from the train, which was stopped in a station at the time the incident took place. When Wells chose to resist the trainmen, she turned a corner in her life. She began what would become a lifetime of public activism in which she would use words and deeds to challenge the injustices the American legal system dealt to African Americans.

On that May day she did not stop with standing up for herself inside the train. When she got home after the incident, she sought out a lawyer and filed a lawsuit against the railroad. Legal victory was briefly hers. The judge who heard the case in the local circuit court in December 1884 ruled in her favor. Although he did not question the policy of segregation itself, he found that the smoking car did not constitute accommodations equal to those of the first-class passenger car, and that Wells, having paid for a first-class ticket, deserved first-class conditions of travel. The railroad appealed his judgment, however, and at the beginning of April 1887 the Tennessee Supreme Court reversed the lower court's ruling.

"I felt so disappointed," Ida B. Wells wrote in her diary on April 5, 1887, describing how she reacted to the news of the high-court decision. She went on to explain what she had wanted to accomplish by filing the case. "I had hoped such great things from my suit for my people generally. I have firmly believed all along that the law was on our side and would, when we appealed to it, give us justice." She then voiced her disillusionment in discovering that this ideal was not supported. "I feel shorn of that belief and utterly discouraged," she confessed to her diary, "and just now, if it were possible, would gather my race in my arms and fly away with them." "O God," she continued, "is there no redress, no peace, no justice in this land for us?"

Ida B. Wells's act of defiance and her decision to bring the issue before the Tennessee courts made her a key part of the African-American challenge to a larger

legal process that was occurring throughout the 1880s and 1890s. During this time American laws that had been created in the Reconstruction era to guarantee the extension of rights to former slaves were reinterpreted by state and federal courts. As a result, the standard of justice by which black and white citizens lived was altered for decades to come.

These changes in rights came in two important areas. One was in a series of laws and court rulings about the right of blacks to equal access to public places such as inns, restaurants, parks, and—perhaps most important—schools, as well as the ability to travel in the same way as whites on trains, ships, and streetcars. These legal actions raised questions about how the principle of equality should be understood, and also how that principle should be justly applied to society. Most specifically, they created a legal debate about racial integration versus segregation.

The second area where legislation and court cases changed the meaning of racial justice was in regard to political or citizenship rights. In the last decades of the nineteenth century, states began to pass measures that resulted in the loss of political participation by African Americans. The loss of Reconstruction-era protections of the right of African-American men to vote influenced other rights as well, including the ability of blacks to be elected to political office, participate in political parties, and serve on juries. This last loss was doubly harmful, because the exclusion of African Americans from juries interfered with the right of black defendants to have their cases heard by juries of their peers—to be judged, according to the law, by people like themselves.

The most terrible outcome of this erosion of rights was the denial of due process of law: People who committed crimes against African Americans failed to be arrested or prosecuted, and African Americans who were accused of wrongdoing were not assured a fair trial. In the years when statutes were going into effect limiting black people's social and political rights, violence was often directed at African-American citizens. Black men and women were hurt or killed without being tried for alleged misdoings, and the white people who committed atrocities against blacks were not penalized for them. Often the misdeeds for which African Americans were punished outside the law was the simple "crime" of success itself.

Ida B. Wells's case against the railroad fit squarely into the first area in which African-American rights were denied. Her refusal to give up her seat on the train and the lawsuit that stemmed from her action foreshadowed a similar protest that a man named Homer A. Plessy would begin aboard a train in Louisiana in 1890.

Plessy's case, which was heard by the U.S. Supreme Court in 1896, would set the legal precedent by which other similar cases would be judged and made it possible for states to continue to enforce racial segregation laws and practices. Jim Crow laws created between the 1870s and 1910 would remain in force for decades. They would not be overthrown until a successful legal campaign by a new generation of African-American activists led to the U.S. Supreme Court's 1954 ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education* and to the Civil Rights movement that followed it.

In filing her suit to protest the railroad's attempt to segregate its passenger cars by race, Wells became the first African American to challenge the U.S. Supreme Court ruling of 1883 that denied access to blacks to transportation, theaters, hotels, or other places regularly used by the public. That case had revolved around the meaning of the 14th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, which guaranteed that no state could make discriminatory laws or "deprive any person of life, liberty, or property without due process of law, nor deny to any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of the laws." The justices ruled that this amendment was not meant to be applied to what they called "private wrongs," or the experience of discrimination by individual persons on private property. (The justices included in their definition of such property privately owned theaters, trains, and hotels.)

African-American journalists and politicians were in the forefront of the public outcry against the legal decisions and state laws that endorsed segregation. The newspaper writers and editors who gathered at the Afro-American Press Convention of 1890 denounced the consignment of black people to second-class facilities aboard railroads. Black members of the state legislatures in Louisiana and Arkansas fought against the segregation bills that were introduced in their legislative bodies in 1890 and 1891. Resistance also continued among African-American citizens' groups in cities and towns around the nation.

In Atlanta, Georgia, in 1892 a group of black citizens organized a successful boycott of the city's streetcars after the city council ordered separate cars for white and black passengers. Similar public demonstrations and boycott actions took place in Augusta, Georgia, in 1898, and in Savannah, Georgia, in 1899.

Homer A. Plessy was one of the countless number of African-American activists in cities North and South. The case that carried his name, *Plessy v. Ferguson*, was heard in the courts as the result of organized local African-American opposition to the Louisiana Separate Car Act of 1890. The new Louisiana law required what was termed "equal but separate" accommodations for white and nonwhite passengers on railways, with seats to be assigned in segregated cars according to race. In practice, these separate-but-equal regulations actually resulted in segregated and unequal treatment, with whites receiving the best accommodations or services available and blacks given inferior accommodations. According to the Louisiana law, passengers who refused to comply with the rules of segregation could be removed from trains and were permitted no legal recourse.

African-American members of the American Citizens' Equal Rights Association in New Orleans reacted immediately to the threat of the separate car bill. They filed a memorial with the Louisiana legislature on May 24, 1890, protesting that the measure violated the principle that all citizens are created equal before the law. The leaders of the protest action were Dr. Louis A. Martinet, a lawyer and physician who owned the *New Orleans Crusader*, and Rodolphe L. Desdunes, a customs clerk. Both men were prominent middle-class members of New Orleans's mixed-race creole community. They used the *Crusader* as a forum to attack the Separate Car