

---

## Building Networks: Cooperation and Communication Among African Americans in the Urban Midwest, 1860–1910

Jack S. Blocker Jr.\*

---

In the dramatic narrative of African-American history, the story of the post-Emancipation years begins in the rural South, where the rights won through postwar constitutional amendments gradually yield to the overwhelming forces of segregation and disfranchisement. During the First World War, the scene shifts to the metropolitan North, where many members of the rapidly growing southern-born migrant population develop a new, militant consciousness. Behind this primary narrative, however, lies another story. An earlier, smaller migration flow from South to North had already established the institutional and cultural foundations for the emergence of a national racial consciousness in postbellum America. Much of this crucial work took place in small and mid-size towns and cities.

Some interpreters have seen the creation of a national racial consciousness as a natural and normal product of African heritage. This view, however, neglects the diverse origins and experiences of African Americans during the slavery years. “Alternatively,” writes historian Harold Forsythe, “we should consider that a distinctive national community developed from local roots during emancipation. Local associations of freedpeople, organized in families, neighborhood groupings, churches, [and] benevolent and fraternal orders, slowly developed into regional, statewide, and ultimately national consociations. This process of unification involved not only consciousness, but [also] institutional and power connections. It matured between 1909 and about 1925.”<sup>1</sup> The process of community-building can be seen clearly in the three states of Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois, which I call the Lower Midwest.

On the eve of the Civil War, about 56,000 African Americans lived in the Lower Midwest. Thirty years later, after a flood of wartime migration from the South and a trickle of migrants over the following quarter century, that number had risen to 190,000. Another wave of

---

\*Jack S. Blocker, Jr., is professor of history at Huron University College, University of Western Ontario, London, Ontario. He is coeditor of *Alcohol and Temperance in Modern History: An International Encyclopedia* (2003) and author of *American Temperance Movements: Cycles of Reform* (1989) and “Give to the Winds Thy Fears”: *The Women’s Temperance Crusade, 1873–1874* (1985).

<sup>1</sup>Posting on H-Afro-Am, February 17, 1999. Quoted by permission.



AFRICAN-AMERICAN WOMEN IN A MUNCIE, INDIANA, GLASS FACTORY C. 1915. INDUSTRIAL JOBS IN SMALL CITIES IN THE NORTH DREW BLACK MIGRANTS FROM THE SOUTH.

Courtesy: Archives and Special Collections, Ball State University Libraries

migration between 1890 and 1910 pushed the total to about 280,000. By the turn of the century, one-third to nearly one-half of each state's African-American population could be found in towns and small cities (more than 2,500 but less than 100,000 total population), but many more black migrants who eventually settled in large cities passed through such smaller urban places. Few of these communities had contained many African-American residents before the war, and in all but one of them—Brooklyn, Illinois—African Americans had constituted a small minority.

From their many social connections in the South, African-American migrants in the Gilded Age brought with them at most only their families, and those usually in part. Migrants left behind their churches and voluntary associations, and their networks of communication with friends and family members who stayed behind were disrupted, too—if only temporarily. In their new worlds, migrants found themselves associating not only with white strangers, but also with blacks from other states, other backgrounds. “A thousand theories about the peculiarities of Negro life in the United States,” writes Charles Tilly, “rest on beliefs about the wrenching effects” of migration

from the rural South to the metropolitan North.<sup>2</sup> Recent analysts of migration, however, tend to view the migration process generally as “reorganizing,” not “disorganizing.”<sup>3</sup> A minority within white worlds, the African-American residents of midwestern small towns and small cities may have found both the physical appearance of their new places and their lives within agricultural cycles familiar. But they had to rebuild their former social and communal networks. This essay explores associational activity and modes of intercommunal communication, two of the principal means through which new African-American residents of midwestern towns and small cities constructed their communal lives, and suggests the implications of community-building for political struggle.

African Americans created a network of churches and voluntary associations wherever numbers permitted. The necessary minimum number, however, was not very great. In Champaign-Urbana, Illinois, blacks organized African Methodist Episcopal (AME) and Baptist churches during the 1870s, when the African-American population of the twin cities numbered more than 173 (1870) but less than 334 (1880).<sup>4</sup> When churches of the same two denominations sprouted in Bloomington, Indiana, during the same decade, the town’s African-American population fell between the 51 of 1870 and the 323 of 1880.<sup>5</sup> Even these numbers overstate what was necessary to found a church. Only 64 African Americans appeared in the 1860 census of Washington Court House, Ohio, yet five years earlier a group had organized that town’s Second Baptist Church. “The brothers of the church,” wrote its historian, “purchased the property and they and the members contributed material and labor in the actual construction work.”<sup>6</sup> In 1867, an AME church joined the Baptists in Washington Court House, as the town’s African-American population rose—to 249 in 1870.<sup>7</sup> These figures understate the potential number of communicants for the new churches, since not only residents of these small towns but also co-religionists from the nearby countryside would have attended. Nevertheless, the numbers indicate that the critical mass necessary to build basic community institutions did not exceed a few hundred. By 1890, virtually all African-American urbanites in Ohio, Indiana,

---

<sup>2</sup>Charles Tilly, “Race and Migration to the American City,” in *The Metropolitan Enigma*, ed. James Q. Wilson (New York, 1970), 136.

<sup>3</sup>Howard P. Chudacoff, “A Reconsideration of Geographical Mobility in American Urban History,” *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography*, CII (October 1994), 517-18.

<sup>4</sup>Janet Andrews Cromwell, “History and Organization of the Negro Community in Champaign-Urbana, Illinois” (M.A. Thesis, University of Illinois, 1934), 91.

<sup>5</sup>Frances V. Halsell Gilliam, *A Time To Speak: A Brief History of the Afro-Americans of Bloomington, Indiana, 1865-1965* (Bloomington, 1985), 30-31.

<sup>6</sup>“Autobiographic Sketch of the New Second Baptist Church, 828 Columbus Avenue, Washington Court House, Ohio,” typescript (Carnegie Public Library, Washington Court House, Ohio).

<sup>7</sup>Frank M. Allen, ed., *History of Fayette County, Ohio* (Indianapolis, 1914), 237.

**Table 1: Distribution of African-American Urban Populations by Size, 1890**

African-American Population Size	Percent of Total African-American Urban Population	Percent of All Towns	Mean
<b><u>Ohio</u></b>			
0	0.0	4.0	0
1-99	2.7	34.0	41
100-499	18.8	40.0	238
500-999	21.6	15.0	731
1,000+	56.9	7.0	4,117
<b>Total Population</b>	<b>50,692</b>	<b>100</b>	
<b><u>Indiana</u></b>			
0	0.0	8.3	0
1-99	3.4	36.7	44
100-499	20.7	41.7	236
500-999	8.2	5.0	779
1,000+	67.8	8.3	3,872
<b>Total Population</b>	<b>28,566</b>	<b>60</b>	
<b><u>Illinois</u></b>			
0	0.0	6.6	0
1-99	3.2	43.4	33
100-499	18.4	35.5	231
500-999	14.9	9.2	721
1,000+	63.6	5.3	5,382
<b>Total Population</b>	<b>33,877</b>	<b>76</b>	

Source: *Population of the United States at the Eleventh Census: 1890*, Part I (Washington, D.C., 1895), 451-85.

and Illinois lived in communities where such a critical mass was present (Table 1). Even when a full-fledged church could not be supported, a circuit rider would conduct periodic services. In 1903, for example, AME circuits in southern Ohio included the hamlets of Dry Run, Berlin Cross Roads, and Carr's Run.<sup>8</sup> Still, some congregations' enthusiasm outran their denomination's ability to provide pastors. Baptist churches in twelve Ohio towns, including Washington Court House, lacked pastors at some point during 1903.<sup>9</sup> Church membership generally included a larger proportion of the population in small

<sup>8</sup>*Ohio Annual Conference, A. M. E. Church, 1903.*

<sup>9</sup>*Urbana Informer*, September 1903.

towns than in the cities.<sup>10</sup> A good example was Xenia, Ohio, where a U. S. Department of Labor researcher in 1902 found seven African-American churches serving a population of less than 2,000. Together 65 percent of the town's population above ten years of age belonged to one of the seven churches. Eighty-four percent of the families in Xenia reported at least one church member. The annual rites of baptism, held in one of the nearby streams, attracted "hundreds, and often thousands, of people from various parts of the country."<sup>11</sup>

Voluntary associations also proliferated quickly in small-town and small-city settings. One of the earliest in many places was the Prince Hall Masons. When the wave of Civil War migrants rolled into the Lower Midwest, African Americans found Masonic lodges already established not only in all the major cities but also in Xenia and Zanesville, Ohio; Carthage, Madison, Richmond, and Terre Haute, Indiana; and Alton and Springfield, Illinois.

Before 1900, lodges appeared in another forty-six Ohio towns. In Washington Court House, St. Luke's Lodge was chartered in 1870. Three lodges were organized in Springfield between 1863 and 1878.<sup>12</sup> The Order of the Eastern Star, Prince Hall Masonry's female counterpart, was also a common organization in non-metropolitan as well as metropolitan settings. Other widespread fraternal and sororal societies included the Odd Fellows, Household of Ruth, Knights of Pythias, United Brothers of Friendship, and Sisters of the Mysterious Ten.<sup>13</sup> In 1906, the 700 African Americans in Washington Court House supported a Masonic lodge and companion Eastern Star chapter, an Odd Fellows lodge and adjunct Household of Ruth chapter, and a Knights of Pythias lodge.<sup>14</sup> Another form of organizational support came from the African-American posts of the Grand Army of the Republic

<sup>10</sup>David A. Gerber, *Black Ohio and the Color Line, 1860-1915* (Urbana, Ill., 1976), 149.

<sup>11</sup>Richard R. Wright, Jr., *The Negroes of Xenia, Ohio: A Social Study*, Bulletin of the U. S. Department of Labor, No. 48 (1903), 1040-41.

<sup>12</sup>William H. Parham and Jeremiah A. Brown, *An Official History of the Most Worshipful Grand Lodge of Free and Accepted Masons for the State of Ohio*, (1906), 41-43.

<sup>13</sup>*Williams' Dayton City and Montgomery County Directory for 1890/1891* (Cincinnati, 1891; New Haven, Conn., n.d.), microfilm; *Williams' Springfield City Directory for 1892* (Cincinnati, 1892); *Ibid.*, 1893 and 1901; Johnson Publishing Company, *Anderson, Indiana City Directory* (Anderson, Ind., 1906); *Ibid.*, 1907; *Indianapolis City Directory 1880* (Woodbridge, Conn., 1983), "City Directories of the United States, 1861-1881" Collection, microfilm; *Indianapolis City Directory 1890* (Woodbridge, Conn., 1983), "City Directories of the United States, 1882-1901" Collection, microfilm; *Ibid.*, 1901; Charles Emerson, *Emerson's Muncie Directory 1903-1904* (Muncie, Ind., 1904); *An Almanac for the Year 1890: Also the Lives and Portraits of Some Distinguished Authors and Poets* (Richmond, Ind., 1891); also city directories for Decatur (1891, 1899, 1907, 1918), Jacksonville (1893-94, 1913, 1921-22), and Springfield (1890, 1900, 1920), Illinois; *Proceedings of the Fifth Annual Convention of the Grand Lodge of Indiana, Knights of Pythias . . .*, 1902, *Connersville, Indiana*, George P. Stewart Papers, Indiana Historical Society, Indianapolis.

<sup>14</sup>*Washington C. H. and Fayette County Directory, 1906-07* (Columbus, Ohio, 1906).



ELKS' PARADE ON INDIANA AVENUE, INDIANAPOLIS, 1952.

Courtesy: O. James Fox Collection, Indiana Historical Society

(GAR), organized by Civil War veterans. Washington Court House had such a post by 1890, as did Dayton and Indianapolis.<sup>15</sup> Both of the latter posts were named after Martin R. Delany—abolitionist, black nationalist, and the first African-American officer in the Union Army.<sup>16</sup>

Associational activity in midwestern communities during the Gilded Age served a multitude of purposes. One of the primary functions was social—these groups regularly brought people together within a structured setting to interact with each other and offer mutual support. Identification with a larger group also helped to create a social identity beyond the individual and family. Some associations, such as the Odd Fellows and Knights of Pythias, offered more concrete support by providing insurance for sickness and death. Beyond these functions, historians have disputed the relationship between associational activity and the creation of community. Critics

<sup>15</sup>Washington Court House *Cyclone and Fayette Republican*, October 30, 1889.

<sup>16</sup>City directories for Dayton (1890-91) and Indianapolis (1890). A recent biographer believes that after his death in 1885 Delany was forgotten until his rediscovery by black nationalists during the 1960s, but the existence of these GAR posts suggests otherwise. Nell Irvin Painter, "Martin R. Delany: Elitism and Black Nationalism," in *Black Leaders of the Nineteenth Century*, eds. Leon Litwack and August Meier (Urbana, Ill., 1988), 149-71.

have portrayed black voluntary associations, both sacred and secular, as introverted, divisive and, at best, compensatory for exclusion by whites.<sup>17</sup> Supporters respond that associational activity is widespread, if not universal, among human societies. This being so, it is unfair to single out African-American associationalism for criticism.<sup>18</sup> This line of argument, however, is weakened by evidence that voluntary associations are more numerous among African Americans than among European Americans. James Weldon Johnson, for example, notes that Gilded Age black New Yorkers created a seemingly endless proliferation of storefront churches.<sup>19</sup> In midwestern communities during the same period, African-American churches do seem to have been more numerous relative to population than European-American. Counts of churches in city directories for 12 towns between 1860 and 1900 reveal that in nearly every case the ratio of churches to population was higher for blacks than for whites. Ratios varied from place to place and across time within the same communities, but the ranges and averages were quite different. The number of African Americans per church ranged from 90 to 941, with the average at 339. The number of European Americans per church ranged from 461 to 1,018, averaging 749.<sup>20</sup>

Another argument in defense of African-American associationalism is that it functioned as an adaptive mechanism because "these organizations aid[ed] in the adjustment of individuals and groups to new and changing social environments."<sup>21</sup> Associational rituals and memberships provided continuity between origin and destination for individual migrants. Even if their stated purpose was different, voluntary associations afforded gathering places where individual tactics could be compared and group strategies hammered out. "Separate organizations and activities," Spencer Crew writes of New Jersey small cities during the Gilded Age, "provided blacks the opportunity to bridge the gap between the reality of their circumscribed existence and the rights enjoyed by other residents of the United States."<sup>22</sup>

<sup>17</sup>Ralph Watkins, "A Reappraisal of the Role of Voluntary Associations in the African American Community," *African Americans in New York Life and History*, XIV (July 1990), 51-60.

<sup>18</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup>James Weldon Johnson, *Black Manhattan* (1930; New York, 1968), 163-67.

<sup>20</sup>The communities and years examined are as follows: Chillicothe (1860-61, 1894-95) and Dayton (1880-81, 1891-92), Ohio; Columbus (1898-99), New Albany (1882-83), and Richmond (1890-91, 1903-04), Indiana; and Alton (1889-90), Danville (1878-79), Decatur (1891), Galesburg (1873-74, 1889-90), Jacksonville (1893-94), Moline (1878), and Rock Island (1878), Illinois. The population figures used for the computation were taken from the nearest census year to the city directory.

The sole exception to the pattern was Chillicothe in 1894-95. This may have resulted from an undercount of churches, however, since this directory listed fewer of both black and white churches than had the directory of 1860-61, while both African-American and European-American populations had increased.

<sup>21</sup>Watkins, "A Reappraisal," 54.

<sup>22</sup>Spencer R. Crew, *Black Life in Secondary Cities: A Comparative Analysis of the Black Communities of Camden and Elizabeth, N. J., 1860-1920* (New York, 1993), 149.



THE EAGLE BAND, MUNCIE, INDIANA, C. 1917. AFRICAN AMERICANS CREATED A WIDE VARIETY OF SOCIAL INSTITUTIONS IN NORTHERN SMALL CITIES.

Courtesy: Archives and Special Collections, Ball State University Libraries

Associations helped to foster group self-government and to develop leadership. For these reasons, their utility to Gilded Age African Americans living in midwestern small towns is obvious. Nearly all of the migrants had recently moved from southern settings in which African Americans were more numerous and where many of them had been slaves. They had entered a world in which their place was new and undefined. Most of the laws that had delineated African-American status before the war had been largely repealed or, if still on the books, were only sporadically enforced. New customs had not yet taken shape and, indeed, what those customs were to be was an object of controversy. African Americans, united by a history of oppression, were regarded by whites as a monolithic group and often treated as such (as in job discrimination), when in fact they had come from a variety of different backgrounds in their proximate places of origin and may not have generally regarded themselves as united by skin color—which was not uniform in any case. Furthermore, they probably looked forward to a qualitatively different life in the North. Under these circumstances, separate societies represented a first step toward building an African-American community. In Washington Court House, Ohio, for example, the Second Baptist Church brought together men and women from Virginia,



North Carolina, Georgia, and Kentucky.<sup>23</sup> But African-American associationalism did more than unite people of disparate origins. It also helped equip them for the struggle to define their individual and collective places within the white world.

John Coleman, who grew up in a midwestern small town (Madison, Indiana), testifies eloquently to the power of separate organization in resisting the effects of an oppressive environment.

Despite the oppression, or perhaps in part because of it, the minority populations were often able to form successful communities of their own. If we had the time, energy, and resources to research this issue, I suspect we would discover that there were many places like Madison—enclaves of people in neighborhoods who, though disadvantaged, discriminated against, segregated, and socially isolated from the majority because of race, nevertheless had a highly developed social, political, and moral organization.

In these Colored, segregated communities, very much like in present-day single-ethnic groups, oppression seemed to have a unifying and energizing force. Likewise, in Madison, the adversity created by the presence of an oppressing majority seemed to transform the minority population into a mutually caring, loving community with unusually high, almost idealistic, goals, supported by successful examples in both racial groups, who served as role models for achievement.<sup>24</sup>

In Brooklyn, Illinois, both sacred and secular associations helped to prepare John Evans and others to lead an ultimately successful political struggle for control of the community.<sup>25</sup> In nearby Alton, members of the United Brothers of Friendship and their women's branch, the Sisters of the Mysterious Ten, guided an eleven-year political and legal battle (1897-1908) against school resegregation. Members of these organizations took the lead in conflicts against white hegemony in other Illinois towns as well.<sup>26</sup> Women's clubs in Chicago and in downstate Illinois moved easily between social, charitable, and political activity.<sup>27</sup> In struggles to widen African Americans' "circumscribed existence," community took concrete form.

Robert Wiebe has powerfully shaped scholars' understanding of Gilded-Age small towns and their relations with the wider world.

<sup>23</sup>"Autobiographic Sketch of the New Second Baptist Church."

<sup>24</sup>Don Wallis, *All We Had Was Each Other: The Black Community of Madison, Indiana* (Bloomington, Ind., 1998), 28-29.

<sup>25</sup>Sundiata Keita Cha-Jua, *America's First Black Town: Brooklyn, Illinois, 1830-1915* (Urbana, Ill., 2000), 105.

<sup>26</sup>Shirley J. Portwood, "The Alton School Case and African American Community Consciousness, 1897-1908," *Illinois Historical Journal*, XCI (Spring 1998), 2-20; Portwood, "We Lift Our Voices in Thunder Tones: African American Race Men and Race Women and Community Agency in Southern Illinois, 1895-1910," *Journal of Urban History*, XXVI (September 2000), 740-58. For the importance of African-American religious and secular organizations in grass-roots political activity in the South, see Harold S. Forsythe, "But My Friends Are Poor: Ross Hamilton and Freedpeople's Politics in Mecklenburg County, Virginia, 1869-1901," *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography*, CV (Autumn 1997), 409-39.

<sup>27</sup>Anne Meis Knupfer, *Toward a Tenderer Humanity and a Nobler Womanhood: African American Women's Clubs in Turn-of-the-Century Chicago* (New York, 1996); Wanda A. Hendricks, *Gender, Race, and Politics in the Midwest: Black Club Women in Illinois* (Bloomington, Ind., 1998).

In a justly influential book, Wiebe invoked modernization theory—in particular the *Gemeinschaft*—*Gesellschaft* (i.e., community—society) distinction—in labeling late nineteenth-century towns as “island communities,” insular and introverted, and preoccupied with local affairs.<sup>28</sup> Wiebe, however, overstated small towns’ insularity. Midwestern towns were linked to larger regional, national, and even international systems by a constant flow of commerce, people, and information, welded together by a dense railway network, which as early as 1880 left few midwestern urban places isolated.<sup>29</sup> By the time the Depression of 1873 put a temporary halt to construction, 73 percent of the land in Illinois was within five miles of a railroad.<sup>30</sup> This already impressive infrastructure was further elaborated, extended, and connected to other regional systems during the 1880s and early 1890s. In 1888, Washington Court House was connected through the Columbus & Cincinnati Midland Railway to Indianapolis, Louisville, St. Louis, and New Orleans, and to Pittsburgh, Philadelphia, Baltimore, and Washington, D.C., through the Baltimore & Ohio system. The town was also still served by its first railway connection on the Cincinnati & Muskingum Valley line, which had been completed during the early 1850s and linked to the Pennsylvania Railroad and the Ohio Southern (which in turn connected with the B & O). Still under construction was the Dayton, Fort Wayne & Chicago, which ran only from Dayton to Ironton, Ohio.<sup>31</sup> In the 1890s Muncie, Indiana, enjoyed three passenger services running east to west. One of these was the Cleveland, Cincinnati, Chicago, and St. Louis—colloquially known as the “Big Four”—which sent three trains per day eastward through Muncie from St. Louis. Springfield, Ohio, also had access to three major east-west systems including the Big Four, as well as the Ohio Southern running north and south. Springfield, Illinois, was blessed (or cursed by travelers making changes) by four railroad stations serving major north-south lines, notably the Illinois Central, and a principal east-west system, the Wabash Line.<sup>32</sup> Steamboats on the Great Lakes and the major midwestern rivers—not only the Ohio and Mississippi, but also the Muskingum, Wabash, Illinois, and others—supplemented the railway network.

The Midwest’s superb transportation network allowed people considerable freedom of movement for all purposes, over short or long distances, for temporary or permanent moves. Only a minority of midwestern townspeople remained in the same community for as long as ten years between censuses. In Washington Court House, for

<sup>28</sup>Robert H. Wiebe, *The Search for Order: 1877–1920* (New York, 1967).

<sup>29</sup>See, for example, the map of Indiana’s railway network in 1880, in Emma Lou Thornbrough, *Indiana in the Civil War Era, 1850–1880* (Indianapolis, 1965), 351.

<sup>30</sup>John H. Keiser, *Building for the Centuries: Illinois, 1865 to 1898* (Urbana, Ill., 1977), 156.

<sup>31</sup>Washington Court House *Cyclone*, August 1, 1888, October 30, 1889.

<sup>32</sup>*Travelers’ Official Railway Guide . . .* (New York, 1893). June issue.

example, those who could be traced from one census to the next comprised only three-eighths of the population during the 1860s and two-fifths during the 1870s. The typical town contained a stable core, an elite who controlled a disproportionate share of political offices and wealth, and around this core swirled a constantly changing array of transients.<sup>33</sup>

News circulated through the Midwest even faster than people. By the 1870s, the telegraph system had been extended and improved for more than thirty years, and it allowed rapid transmission of large bodies of information. Mail arrived in every railroad town on nearly every incoming train, and departed with the same frequency. At the turn of the century midwesterners were accustomed to a speed of written communication that was probably not equalled until the coming of facsimile transmission and electronic mail near the turn of the next century. The laying of the Atlantic cable, completed in 1866, gave North Americans quick access to European news and, through British sources, news from much of the rest of the world. Within midwestern towns and cities, a flourishing press disseminated the news gathered by cable and telegraph. By the late 1860s, Washington Court House, below the urban threshold with only 2,100 residents, boasted two weekly newspaper—one Democratic, one Republican—which were bitterly partisan. As well as local news, they published boiler-plate pages distributed by central agencies containing news, features, and commentary on subjects familiar and exotic. Such print saturation was typical.

African Americans easily adopted the habits of their fellow midwesterners. Once settled in midwestern communities, they traveled about the countryside visiting friends, family, co-workers, and business contacts. During a six-month period beginning in November 1879, African Americans in Indianapolis received recorded visits from residents of seventeen other towns in Indiana, six in Ohio, and two in Illinois, as well as visitors from Iowa, Missouri, Michigan, Pennsylvania, the District of Columbia, North Carolina, Kentucky, Tennessee, Alabama, and Mississippi. Meanwhile, Indianapolis travelers journeyed to at least eleven other statewide destinations, as well as four Ohio and two Illinois towns, New York City, St. Louis, Louisville, Lexington, and Nashville.<sup>34</sup> During 1891, blacks in Springfield,

---

<sup>33</sup>The classic study of mobility is Stephan Thernstrom and Peter Knights, "Men in Motion: Some Data and Speculations about Urban Population Mobility in Nineteenth-Century America," in *Anonymous Americans: Explorations in Nineteenth-Century Social History*, ed. Tamara K. Hareven (Englewood Cliffs, N. J., 1971), 17-47; Richard S. Alcorn, "Leadership and Stability in mid-Nineteenth-Century America: A Case Study of an Illinois Town," *Journal of American History*, LVI (December 1974), 685-702.

<sup>34</sup>Indianapolis *Leader*, November 1879–May 1880. The pioneering study of African-American visiting practices is Earl Lewis, *In Their Own Interests: Race, Class, and Power in Twentieth-Century Norfolk, Virginia* (Berkeley, Calif., 1991), 102-104, 106-109.

Illinois, entertained visitors from at least thirty-one other Illinois towns, as well as from communities in Indiana, Missouri, Kansas, Iowa, Oklahoma Territory, Kentucky, Tennessee, Colorado, and Louisiana. Springfield residents, in turn, traveled to at least thirty-one other Illinois communities and to visit friends or family in Missouri, Nebraska, Kansas, Colorado, Wisconsin, Minnesota, the District of Columbia, Tennessee, and Georgia.<sup>35</sup> The *Cleveland Gazette* received notices from Oberlin, Ohio, that “Ex-sheriff H. P. Scott, of Mississippi, is here to spend the summer with his family,”<sup>36</sup> and from Springfield that “Elder C. L. Bradwell of Cartersville, Ga., preached an excellent discourse at North Street Church last Sunday. He left for his home Tuesday,” and that “Mr. E. J. Smoot, of Paris, Ky., is in the city, looking for a place to locate a good business.”<sup>37</sup> A host of special occasions brought visitors to midwestern towns and congregated African Americans together. These occasions included Sunday School conventions, preachers exchanging pulpits or visiting other clergymen, group baptisms, fraternal-society conferences, political conventions, GAR reunions and encampments, emancipation celebrations, state fairs, women’s mission conventions, teachers’ conventions, and cake-walk contests. A 1906 emancipation celebration in Paducah, Kentucky, for example, drew thousands of celebrants who came by boat and by rail from as far as Chicago to the north, St. Louis to the west, Louisville to the east, and Memphis to the south.<sup>38</sup> All such gatherings created links among the African-American communities scattered across the midwestern landscape and beyond.<sup>39</sup>

News also traveled between black communities. African Americans, of course, had access to the omnipresent white press, but such newspapers tended to render African Americans as invisible, criminal or ludicrous.<sup>40</sup> So, from an early point in the Gilded Age, African Americans published their own newspapers. The *Chicago Conservator* began publication in 1878, and Indiana’s first black newspaper, the *Logansport Visitor*, appeared in the next year, followed shortly afterward by the *Indianapolis Leader*. The *Cleveland Gazette* started up in 1883. Many more followed, and the midwestern newspapers became part of a northern array that dominated African-American publishing. By 1910, only eleven percent of the nation’s black population

<sup>35</sup>Springfield (Illinois) *State Capital*, January-December 1891.

<sup>36</sup>*Cleveland Gazette*, June 26, 1886.

<sup>37</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>38</sup>Darrel Bigham, *Towns and Villages of the Lower Ohio* (Lexington, Ky., 1998), 233-34.

<sup>39</sup>Washington Court House hosted the convention of Ohio’s Prince Hall Masons in 1888 and the reunion of the 5th and 27th Regiments, U. S. Colored Troops, in 1902. Washington Court House *Cyclone*, August 22, 1888; *Urbana Informer*, August 1902.

<sup>40</sup>J. Stanley Lemons, “Black Stereotypes as Reflected in Popular Culture, 1880-1920,” *American Quarterly*, XXIX (Spring 1977), 102-16; William L. Hewitt, “Blackface in the White Mind: Racial Stereotypes in Sioux City, Iowa, 1874-1910,” *Palimpsest*, LXXI (Summer 1990), 68-79.

# BAPTIST WOMEN TACKLE PROBLEM

The Ohio Colored Baptist Women's association, during its eleventh annual convention at the Mount Haven Baptist church, 3725 Cedar avenue S. E., took up the problem of looking after thousands of Colored children who have come into the state recently from the south.

The rush of Colored laborers and their families to northern states in the last few months has brought this problem of children directly up to Colored Baptists and mission workers.

The convention program was varied, and was prepared by a committee headed by Mrs. Anna M. Dodd of Sandusky.

Mrs. Mamie Ross of Cleveland is president of the northern district of the Colored Baptist Women's association, whose head is Mrs. Sarah Johnson of Dayton. Other officers are:

CLIPPING FROM THE CLEVELAND ADVOCATE, OCTOBER 27, 1917.  
MEMBERS OF BLACK CHURCHES WORKED TO EASE THE TRANSITION OF  
RECENT MIGRANTS FROM THE SOUTH.

Courtesy: Ohio Historical Society

lived outside the South, but thirty-seven percent of African-American newspapers were published there. When Robert S. Abbott's *Chicago Defender* began publication in 1905, it became the sixth African-American newspaper published simultaneously in that city.<sup>41</sup> On the initiative of editors such as Abbott, Harry C. Smith of the *Cleveland Gazette*, S. B. Turner of the Springfield, Illinois, *State Capital*, Charles E. Hall of the Illinois *Record* of the same city, Edward E. Cooper of the Indianapolis *World* and *Freeman*, George L. Knox of the *Freeman*, and George P. Stewart of the Indianapolis *Recorder*—not to mention poet and novelist Paul Laurence Dunbar, who briefly edited the Urbana, Ohio, *Informer*—midwestern African-American newspapers created a powerful nexus of communication among black communities.<sup>42</sup>

The newspapers' communication nexus was primarily based not on reporters but on correspondents. The papers were generally one- or two-person operations, so for news of local events in their circulation zone they depended upon community residents who wrote to the editor on a more or less regular basis with information on local affairs. Correspondents' reports usually focused on the mundane acts and events that made up daily life: illnesses, injuries, courtships, weddings, funerals, visits, journeys, business transactions, weather, celebrations, and the like. Community residents were congratulated, commemorated, criticized, and teased. Occasionally politics appeared in correspondents' reports, but not often. Instead, the editors provided the newspapers' political content, editorializing incessantly in support of their chosen candidates and party, usually Republican. When white editors insulted African Americans in their columns, black editors fired back. In 1879, for example, the Indianapolis *Sentinel*, recounting the Democratic theme that recent African-American migrants were penniless drones brought to bolster the Republican vote, reported, "One of these importations confessed that he had no money." The editor of the *Leader* replied, "He thought you wanted to borrow it."<sup>43</sup>

The newspapers' catchment areas for local community news varied. Some editors focused on their immediate area, while others sought a larger regional or even national audience. Most correspondents to the New Albany *Weekly Review* in 1881 wrote from towns in southeastern Indiana and southwestern Ohio.<sup>44</sup> The *Leader* addressed itself primarily to an Indiana audience.<sup>45</sup> By 1892 the six-year-old

---

<sup>41</sup>Emma Lou Thornbrough, "American Negro Newspapers, 1880–1914," *Business History Review*, XL (Winter 1966), 467–90.

<sup>42</sup>A. Gilbert Belles, "The Black Press in Illinois," *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society*, LXVIII (1975), 344–52, contains a list of papers and editors, but there are a few errors. Belles's list tries for comprehensiveness, listing many papers for which there are no surviving copies. For a listing of extant Ohio African-American newspapers, see Stephen Gutgesell, *Guide to Ohio Newspapers, 1793–1973* (Columbus, Ohio, 1976).

<sup>43</sup>Indianapolis *Leader*, November 29, 1879.

<sup>44</sup>New Albany (Indiana) *Weekly Review*, April 16, 1881.

<sup>45</sup>Between January and June 1880, the *Leader* published correspondence from 18 Indiana and four Ohio towns, as well as from Louisville, Chicago and St. Louis.

Springfield *State Capital* achieved wide coverage of Illinois towns and cities, publishing correspondence from forty-one communities.<sup>46</sup> The Cleveland *Gazette* was probably the most effective in creating a network of correspondents that was both regional and national. (This was probably out of necessity as much as choice, since the Cleveland black community at this time was tiny, and its immediate area, the Western Reserve, also contained relatively few African Americans. But the network was also a product of editor Harry Smith's racial activism.) During the last six months of 1886—only three years after its founding—the *Gazette* printed correspondence from sixty-six towns in Ohio, eighteen in Pennsylvania, nine in New York, five in Indiana, three each in West Virginia, Illinois and Kansas, and two in Kentucky (as well as individual communities in Ontario, Rhode Island, New Hampshire, Michigan, Wisconsin, Nebraska, Maryland, Tennessee, Georgia, Mississippi, Arkansas, and Texas). Both the *State Capital* and *Gazette* networks included towns ranging in size from the largest cities to tiny hamlets containing only a handful of African-American residents.<sup>47</sup> Even before George L. Knox took over the *Freeman* in 1892, the paper was seeking agents in “every city, town, and hamlet in the U.S.” Knox adopted his predecessor's aggressive tactics, and by 1893 the *Freeman* had achieved a broad national reach, although this was accompanied by relative neglect of its immediate area. During the last two months of that year, *Freeman* correspondents reported on affairs in communities located in twelve northern and western states, all of the former slave states except South Carolina, the Canadian province of Ontario, and Liberia.<sup>48</sup> Because they could comment freely on matters off limits to African-American editors in the South, northern black newspapers were often preferred by southern black readers.<sup>49</sup>

The Midwest's African-American newspapers played a large and indispensable part in creating and sustaining a national African-American public discourse. The foundation of that discourse was the system of exchanges among newspapers. American newspapers of this period typically sent out copies of each issue to many other newspapers and customarily received issues from the recipient papers in return. For the African-American newspapers, exchanges furnished much of the formal news reporting in their columns (although because black newspapers during the Gilded Age were weeklies, African-American readers seeking fresh news no doubt relied first upon European-American dailies).<sup>50</sup> More important, exchanges provided

---

<sup>46</sup>Springfield *State Capital*, 1891-92.

<sup>47</sup>Cleveland *Gazette*, June 26-December 25, 1886.

<sup>48</sup>Thornbrough, “American Negro Newspapers.”

<sup>49</sup>Thornbrough, “American Negro Newspapers,” 472; Neil R. McMillen, *Dark Journey: Black Mississippians in the Age of Jim Crow* (Urbana, Ill., 1989), 175.

<sup>50</sup>African-American newspapers, even if they could afford the fee, were not admitted to the Associated Press. Thornbrough, “American Negro Newspapers,” 486.

## Colored People of Columbus, O., to Organize Branch of U. N. I. A. And A. C. L.

The Colored people of Columbus, O., are urged to meet on Monday evening, April 12th at the A. M. E. Zion church, 485 E. Long St. for the purpose of organizing the Columbus Division of the Universal Negro Improvement Association and African Community League. Will meet at 8 p. m. prompt at the call of Rev. E. C. West, pastor A. M. E. Zion church.  
**COLUMBUS MONITOR.**

---

ANNOUNCEMENT FROM THE COLUMBUS, OHIO, *STATE MONITOR*, APRIL 10, 1920. MANY BLACK CHURCHES SERVED AS CENTERS FOR COMMUNITY ORGANIZING.

Courtesy: Ohio Historical Society

the raw material for running commentary on the pronouncements of other editors. African-American editors did respond occasionally to sallies by white editors that touched a raw nerve, but their attention was focused primarily on what other black editors, politicians, and clergymen were saying and doing. The resulting conversation took place within a limited framework, to be sure, as the viewpoints expressed were those of a middle-class elite. But in this respect black public discourse differed not at all from white public discourse. The important point is that editorial arguments involved readers, if only as spectators, in discussions about the conditions, strategies, and future direction of African Americans as a people. In doing so, the newspapers supplemented and extended the work of the churches and voluntary associations in creating and sustaining an African-American identity beyond the individual and the familial.

Associational ties and communications networks also sustained political struggles against the racism that African Americans confronted



in the Midwest. This process can be seen in a conflict provoked by white racism in Spring Valley, a coal-mining town in northern Illinois. In August 1895, a mob of immigrant miners attacked a settlement near the town that housed black miners and their families, driving them away. While the displaced workers reorganized in a nearby town, the African-American press publicized the events, and supporters mobilized across Illinois. Reports of the Spring Valley riot appeared in black newspapers as far away as Baltimore and Richmond to the east and Topeka to the west. Within Illinois, protest meetings were held in Peoria, Evanston, Rockford, Elgin, East St. Louis, and Moline, as well as Chicago. Contributions from supporters enabled the victims to pressure local authorities into launching criminal prosecutions, which ended with the conviction and imprisonment of eight rioters.<sup>51</sup>

Local conflicts did not always end so successfully for African Americans. The struggle against resegregation of the Alton, Illinois, schools, for example, ended in defeat after a sit-in, an eleven-year-long school boycott, seven jury trials, and five appeals to the state supreme court. Like their counterparts in Spring Valley, the black community in Alton received support from communities elsewhere in Illinois and beyond. Such local and extralocal mobilization would have been impossible to conceive or achieve for communities of black migrants without the networks constructed within and among midwestern towns.

Clearly, not only residents of small towns and small cities took part in the networks created by black southern migrants to the Midwest during the postbellum years. Voluntary associations appeared in large numbers in northern metropolitan centers, and rural dwellers both constructed their own networks and participated in those that grew in their local urban centers.<sup>52</sup> But non-metropolitan urban places, both in the North and in the South, played a unique role in the formation of African-American culture. In these settings, black migrants from diverse backgrounds came together; later, as many of those migrants moved on to the big cities, they brought with them the experience of building new institutions and new connections in small towns and small cities.

---

<sup>51</sup>Copies of articles from the *Chicago Tribune*, August 5, 7, 8, 10, 1895, and *Daily Inter Ocean*, October 21, November 2, 18, 25, 1895, Negro in Illinois File, Illinois Writers Project Collection, Vivian G. Harsh Research Collection (Chicago Public Library); Caroline A. Waldron, "Lynch-law Must Go!": Race, Citizenship, and the Other in an American Coal Mining Town," *Journal of American Ethnic History*, XX (Fall 2000), 50-77; Felix L. Armfield, "Fire on the Prairies: The 1895 Spring Valley Race Riot," *Journal of Illinois History*, III (Autumn 2000), 185-200.

<sup>52</sup>The best recent portrait of midwestern rural communities is Stephen A. Vincent, *Southern Seed, Northern Soil: African-American Farm Communities in the Midwest, 1765-1900* (Bloomington, Ind., 1999).