

“A Fair Chance To Do My Part of Work”

Black Women, War Work, and Rights Claims at the Kingsbury Ordnance Plant

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Mamie Johnson was at her wit's end. A widow who was unemployed during World War II, she had eagerly pursued a job at the Kingsbury ordnance plant, located more than forty miles away from her Gary, Indiana, home. The plant had been newly constructed to provide the troops with state-of-the-art weapons, and Johnson had visited the Kingsbury employment office at least eight times seeking a job. In a letter to President Franklin D. Roosevelt, she recounted her experiences there. After a good deal of pestering, she had been cleared for hire but could not pass the physical exam. Kingsbury's doctor told her she had high blood pressure. His advice, in her words, was to “see a doctor and get my pressure down then come back for a recheck.” Crestfallen, Johnson visited her private physician that same day to confirm the diagnosis, but he insisted her blood pressure was fine. He rechecked her two days later, found her to be in good health, and gave her a letter declaring

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her fitness to work. She had forwarded that letter to plant authorities, she explained, but had not received a reply. Johnson was afraid that the rumors she had heard were true: "They just don't want to hire colored people at Kingsbury. They will tell them anything to get rid of them."¹

Johnson's letter was forwarded to the President's Committee on Fair Employment Practices (FEPC), a federal agency created during World War II to receive and investigate complaints of racial discrimination in war industries. She was convinced that the government could and should do something to help her secure employment at Kingsbury. To prove that point, Johnson's letter referenced her status as a motivated worker, a dedicated citizen, and a disadvantaged woman alike: "I am a citizen of the United States[,] been here all my life[,] pays taxes here [and] am a widow. I wants to work."² To Johnson, the chasm between her appeal and the FEPC response may have proved more frustrating than her initial experiences at Kingsbury. "You must know how difficult it is to contradict a physician's diagnosis," wrote George M. Johnson, assistant executive secretary of the agency, whose rebuff of Ms. Johnson's claims sidestepped the list of attributes that she felt should guarantee her a war job. Further, since Kingsbury could prove that it had recently hired a number of blacks for a variety of positions, Mr. Johnson explained, "it would be extremely difficult to establish race discrimination in this case." Ms. Johnson was invited to submit any additional evidence of discrimination she could produce, but her case was considered closed. The sizeable gap between Ms. Johnson's aspirations and her respondent's answer reflected their different conceptions of fairness in employment practices and of the government's role in ensuring it.³

During World War II, the question of where and how one worked was laden with new meaning and increased significance. The rapid

¹Mamie Johnson to President Franklin D. Roosevelt, LaPorte, Indiana, May 16, 1942, Kingsbury Ordnance Plant Folder 1, box 67, Active Cases, Records of the Committee on Fair Employment Practice, Region VI, Record Group 228, National Archives and Records Administration, Chicago, Illinois (hereafter: FEPC-NARA). I have not added "*sic*" where spelling or grammatical errors occur in complainants' words. Instead, I have added parenthetical notes where complainants' meaning is potentially obscured.

²*Ibid.*

³George M. Johnson, Assistant Executive Secretary of FEPC, to Mamie Johnson, LaPorte, Indiana, June 3, 1942, Kingsbury Ordnance Plant Folder 1, box 67, FEPC-NARA.



Workers at the Kingsbury ordnance plant, where war jobs offered high salaries for dangerous work. Black women applicants were routinely ignored in favor of white women; those who did obtain work found themselves trapped in low-level jobs.

William P. Vogel, *Kingsbury: A Venture in Teamwork* (1946)

wartime expansion of the federal government—in terms of both its sheer size and its reach into people's lives—newly blurred the lines between civic and private obligations.⁴ In particular, a job in a plant that produced materials for the war effort enabled a worker simultaneously to earn high wages and to contribute to American victory overseas. War jobs proved especially tantalizing and symbolic to African Americans as a means to demonstrate their patriotism and to participate in the ongoing struggle for racial justice that had been reinvigorated by the pressures of war.⁵ Emboldened by the nation's escalating needs for industrial production and enraged by the hypocrisy of state-sponsored segregation, African American labor leaders pressured President Roosevelt to create a new federal agency to combat race discrimination. The FEPC, established in 1941, was mandated to field and investigate African Americans' claims of racist treatment in workplaces that were owned by or held contracts with the U.S. government.⁶ Following on the heels of the seismic political and cultural shifts of the 1930s—which had been spurred by economic disaster and the strong federal response—many Americans

⁴D'Ann Campbell, *Women at War With America: Private Lives in a Patriotic Era* (Cambridge, Mass., 1984); James Sparrow, *Warfare State: World War II Americans and the Age of Big Government* (Oxford, U.K., 2011).

⁵A wave of new scholarship interprets African American history through the frame of a "long civil rights movement," looking to the 1940s or earlier to excavate the roots and explain the outcomes of postwar activism. Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, "The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past," *Journal of American History* 91 (March 2005), 1233-63; Cornelius L. Bynum, *A. Philip Randolph and the Struggle for Civil Rights* (Urbana, Ill., 2010); Laurie B. Green, *Battling the Plantation Mentality: Memphis and the Black Freedom Struggle* (Chapel Hill, N. C., 2007); Tomiko Brown-Nagin, *Courage to Dissent: Atlanta and the Long History of the Civil Rights Movement* (Oxford, U. K., 2011); and Risa L. Goluboff, *The Lost Promise of Civil Rights* (Cambridge, Mass., 2007).

⁶Roosevelt created the FEPC with Executive Order 8802 on June 25, 1941. The order stated: "There shall be no discrimination in the employment of workers in defense industries or government because of race, creed, color, or national origin." In 1943, Roosevelt issued Executive Order 9346, which required that all government contracts include a non-discrimination provision. Scholars have debated the FEPC's effectiveness in creating meaningful improvements for black workers in wartime, but most conclude that the agency represented a crucial precursor to the federal government's postwar efforts to protect minorities' workplace rights. See Eileen Boris, "Fair Employment and the Origins of Affirmative Action in the 1940s," *NWSA Journal* 10 (Autumn 1998), 142-50; William J. Collins, "Race, Roosevelt, and Wartime Production: Fair Employment in World War II Labor Markets," *American Economic Review* 91 (March 2001), 272-86; Andrew Edmund Kersten, *Race, Jobs and the War: The FEPC in the Midwest, 1941-46* (Urbana, Ill., 2000); Paul D. Moreno, *From Direct Action to Affirmative Action: Fair Employment Law and Policy in America, 1933-1972* (Baton Rouge, La., 1999); Merl E. Reed, *Seedtime for the Modern Civil Rights Movement: The President's Committee on Fair Employment Practice, 1941-1946* (Baton Rouge, La., 1991); and Megan Taylor Shockley, "We, Too, Are Americans": *African American Women in Detroit and Richmond, 1940-54* (Urbana, Ill., 2004).

believed that directing labor rights claims toward the national government was natural and appropriate.⁷

The onset of war prompted African American women to seek new employment opportunities, to redefine the rights and responsibilities commensurate with their citizenship, and to levy unprecedented demands upon the federal government.⁸ Many such women, like Johnson, wrote to authorities in Washington about the Kingsbury ordnance plant.⁹ One of seventy-two weapons factories constructed during World War II, Kingsbury was built in 1941 on 13,000 acres of northern Indiana farmland. War Department officials preferred such sparsely populated inland locations for ordnance manufacture because catastrophic accidents were so common. Yet the same factors that made LaPorte

⁷The New Deal expanded government's role in individuals' lives and labor relationships. FDR personally encouraged Americans to look to the federal government as the powerful arbiter of fairness and citizens' rights. Elizabeth Cohen argues that feelings of common sacrifice, forged during the Great Depression, combined with the promise of the New Deal state to convince individual Americans of their entitlement to make personal claims upon governmental assistance. Elizabeth Cohen, *Making a New Deal: Industrial Workers in Chicago, 1919-1939* (New York, 1990). On the expansion of federally defined and protected workers' rights, see Nelson Lichtenstein, *State of the Union: A Century of American Labor* (Princeton, N. J., 2002). The 1930s also saw increased labor activism and workers' growing assertion that labor rights and civil rights were of a piece. See Michael K. Honey, *Southern Labor and Black Civil Rights: Organizing Memphis Workers* (Champaign, Ill., 1993); Green, *Battling the Plantation Mentality*; and Shockley, "We, Too, Are Americans."

⁸In the early twentieth century, African American women remained clustered in low-paying, back-breaking, and often informal employment. On the rare occasions when they worked alongside white women, they seldom received equal pay. Jacqueline Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work, and the Family, from Slavery to the Present* (New York, 1985). Seventy-five percent of African American women who indicated an occupation in the 1920 U.S. Census worked in agricultural, domestic, and laundry work. Alice Kessler-Harris, *Out to Work: A History of Wage-Earning Women in the United States* (New York, 1982), 237. Of the nine thousand black women in Indiana who were reported as employed in the 1910 Census, more than seven thousand were servants or laundresses. Others worked as seamstresses, hairdressers, waitresses, and laundry operators. Emma Lou Thornbrough and Lana Ruegamer, *Indiana Blacks in the Twentieth Century* (Bloomington, Ind., 2000), 6; Shockley, "We, Too, Are Americans," 65. In creating the welfare state of the 1930s, bureaucrats and politicians drew new gendered distinctions between assistance and entitlements. See Linda Gordon, *Pitied But Not Entitled: Single Mothers and the History of Welfare, 1890-1935* (Cambridge, Mass., 1998); Alice Kessler-Harris, *In Pursuit of Equity: Women, Men, and the Quest for Economic Citizenship in 20th-Century America* (Oxford, U. K., 2001); and Theda Skocpol, *Protecting Soldiers and Mothers: The Political Origins of Social Policy in the United States* (Cambridge, Mass., 1995).

⁹Cathy D. Knepper, ed., *Dear Mrs. Roosevelt: Letters to Eleanor Roosevelt Through Depression and War* (New York, 2004). On using women's letters as a primary source, see Regina Kunzel, "Pulp Fictions and Problem Girls: Reading and Rewriting Single Pregnancy in the Postwar United States," *American Historical Review* 100 (December 1995), 1465-87.

County geographically ideal meant that the 20,000 workers needed to staff Kingsbury would have to travel in from urban and rural areas for miles in every direction.¹⁰ In the Calumet region, the skyrocketing steel economy had spurred four decades of rapid urbanization and burgeoning communities of southern African Americans who had migrated in search of good jobs and a freer social climate.¹¹ Once there, however, they encountered resistant whites who enforced segregation in education, employment, and public facilities. The racial conflicts that erupted at the Kingsbury plant thus reflected the swelling tensions between politicized blacks and hostile whites in northern Indiana.¹² At Kingsbury, racial hierarchy was policed and resisted at the intersection of new federal nondiscrimination policy, personal expectations, and the particular pressures of wartime work in a newly erected munitions plant.

In their letters to the government, black women who held or sought employment at Kingsbury juxtaposed their specific grievances against the new federal mandate for workplace equality and the national climate of shared sacrifice and political engagement. They recounted their perceptions of discriminatory treatment they had experienced at the plant, argued that their problems required assistance, and suggested ways by which government officials could set things right. Yet their correspondence with federal authorities reveals tensions between the women's own consciousness of their rights and the perspectives of the federal investigators to whom they pleaded their cases. The women reasoned outward from personal experiences, envisioning a state that was at once disinterested and discerning. While local FEPC branches took varying approaches to carrying out the agency's mandate, officials typi-

¹⁰William P. Vogel, *Kingsbury: A Venture in Teamwork* (New York, 1946), 5, 13, 19, 72.

¹¹Between 1910 and 1970, approximately seven million African Americans migrated from the American South to the North. James N. Gregory, *The Southern Diaspora: How the Great Migrations of Black and White Southerners Transformed America* (Chapel Hill, N. C., 2005); James R. Grossman, *Land of Hope: Chicago, Black Southerners, and the Great Migration* (Chicago, 1991); Nicholas Lemann, *The Promised Land: The Great Black Migration and How it Changed America* (New York, 1992); Kimberley L. Phillips, *AlabamaNorth: African-American Migrants, Community, and Working-Class Activism in Cleveland, 1915-45* (Urbana, Ill., 1999); and Isabel Wilkerson, *The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America's Great Migration* (New York, 2010).

¹²Raymond A. Mohl and Neil Betten, *Steel City: Urban and Ethnic Patterns in Gary, Indiana, 1906-1950* (New York, 1986); Thornbrough and Ruegamer, *Indiana Blacks in the Twentieth Century*; James B. Lane, ed., *Steel Shavings: Gary's First Hundred Years: A Centennial History of Gary, Indiana, 1906-2006* 37 (2006); and Isaac James Quillen, *Industrial City: A History of Gary, Indiana to 1929* (New York, 1986).

cally responded to Kingsbury workers' claims by referencing the number of African American workers in the plant—thus demonstrating that the employer hired some blacks for some positions—and giving credence to plant officials' professed good intentions in the name of preserving order and industrial output.¹³

Black women's claims for employment at Kingsbury also displayed a pattern that scholars have traced across many decades. In contrast to African American men, whose complaints prioritized access to better jobs, black women also demanded government and employer acknowledgement of their abilities, sacrifices, and limitations.¹⁴ This different approach reflects black women workers' ambiguous position in employment law and policy, which placed them somewhere between black men—for whom equality was defined as increased access to jobs through the erosion of racial stigma—and white women, whose workplace rights were rooted in the ideology of protection and sex difference.¹⁵

¹³Collins, "Race, Roosevelt, and Wartime Production"; Kersten, *Race, Jobs and the War*. Boris's study of FEPC case files from World War II reveals that the local branches of the agency at times pressured employers to take affirmative steps to boost African Americans' overall representation in war plants. Boris, "Fair Employment and the Origins of Affirmative Action in the 1940s," 142. Despite women workers' demands, the FEPC did not take strong action at Kingsbury. On attempts to reconfigure American liberalism and worker rights in the aftermath of World War II, see Gareth Davies, *From Opportunity to Entitlement: The Transformation and Decline of Great Society Liberalism* (Lawrence, Kan., 1996); Nancy MacLean, *Freedom is Not Enough: The Opening of the American Workplace* (Cambridge, Mass., 2005); Allen J. Matusow, *Nixon's Economy: Booms, Busts, Dollars and Votes* (Lawrence, Kan., 1998); and John David Skrentny, *The Minority Rights Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass., 2002).

¹⁴On black women's rights consciousness and activism, see Gloria T. Hull, Patricia Bell Scott, and Barbara Smith, eds., *But Some of Us Are Brave: All the Women are White, All the Blacks are Men* (New York, 1993). See also Eileen Boris, "Gender, Race and Rights: Listening to Critical Race Theory," *Journal of Women's History* 6 (Summer 1994), 111-24; Elsa Barkley Brown, "To Catch a Vision of Freedom: Reconstructing Southern Black Women's Political History, 1865-1880," in Vicki Ruiz and Ellen DuBois, eds., *Unequal Sisters: An Inclusive Reader in U.S. Women's History* (4th ed., New York, 2007); Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore, *Gender and Jim Crow: Women and the Politics of White Supremacy in North Carolina, 1896-1920* (Chapel Hill, N. C., 1996); and Felicia Kornbluh, *The Battle For Welfare Rights: Politics and Poverty in Modern America* (Philadelphia, Pa., 2007).

¹⁵On black women's experience of their race, class, and sex, see Kimberlé Crenshaw, *On Intersectionality: The Essential Writings of Kimberlé Crenshaw* (New York, 2012). On sex-specific protective labor legislation, see Kessler-Harris, *Out to Work*, chap. 7; Kathleen A. Laughlin, *Women's Work and Public Policy: A History of the Women's Bureau, U. S. Department of Labor, 1945-1970* (Boston, 2000); Susan Lehrer, *Origins of Protective Labor Legislation for Women, 1905-1925* (Albany, N. Y., 1987); Suzanne B. Mettler, "Federalism, Gender, & the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938," *Polity* 26 (Summer 1994), 635-54; and Julie Novkov, *Constituting Workers, Protecting Women: Gender, Law and Labor in the Progressive Era and New Deal Years* (Ann Arbor, Mich., 2001).

Further, the pressures of war simultaneously created a powerful new impetus for black women's expansive definitions of fairness and legitimated state and employer assumptions that high production and industrial peace were more important than racial justice. Exposing the logic that underpinned black women's aspirations reveals the inherent challenges of enacting federal mandates for individual rights—the content and boundaries of which must be deployed, interpreted, and negotiated at the grassroots. While bureaucrats could define and measure fairness in the abstract, the project of implementing workplace equality was inherently local, context-specific, and dependent upon personal perceptions and experiences. To the black women employed or seeking employment at the Kingsbury ordnance plant, the state-protected right to meaningful work cemented their status as valued family members, as breadwinners, and as patriotic citizens—identities that they experienced as mutually constitutive and equally significant.¹⁶

Two coinciding trends in the early war years put the nation's industrial infrastructure in a bind: the men who predominated in heavy industry were increasingly drafted overseas just as the nation's need for those goods grew. The paucity of white male workers to fill both the abandoned and newly created jobs yielded a significant opportunity. As in World War I, female and African American workers previously barred from access to high-wage industrial jobs would be tapped to help produce the goods that were crucial to the war effort.¹⁷ Five million women entered the American workforce between 1940 and 1944.¹⁸ Work in a war plant was especially desirable and symbolic for African American women. Shut out of most types of employment, they worked for wages

¹⁶On the intersections of labor rights and political rights within citizenship claims, see Evelyn Nakano Glenn, *Unequal Freedom: How Race and Gender Shaped American Citizenship and Labor* (Cambridge, Mass., 2002); Kessler-Harris, *In Pursuit of Equity*; and Judith N. Shklar, *American Citizenship: The Quest for Inclusion* (Cambridge, Mass., 1991).

¹⁷On African American workers in war industry, see A. Russell Buchanan, *Black Americans in World War II* (Berkeley, Cal., 1977); Sally M. Miller and Daniel A. Cornford, eds., *American Labor in the Era of World War II* (Westport, Conn., 1995); and Neil A. Wynn, *The Afro-American and the Second World War* (New York, 1975). On women war workers, see Maureen Honey, *Creating Rosie the Riveter: Class, Gender, and Propaganda during World War II* (Amherst, Mass., 1984); Kessler-Harris, *Out to Work*; and Ruth Milkman, *Gender at Work: The Dynamics of Job Segregation by Sex During World War II* (Urbana, Ill., 1987).

¹⁸Kessler-Harris, *Out to Work*, 273.

at much higher rates than did white women.¹⁹ A 1940 survey of Northwest Indiana workers found black women concentrated in domestic service work even as their white counterparts labored in sizeable numbers in industrial, clerical, and semi-professional jobs.²⁰ Yet World War II transformed the region's economy. "Northwest Indiana was one huge engine," recalled a Gary resident, and the proportion of African Americans in the city's workforce increased from 14 percent to 22 percent between May and November of 1943 alone.²¹ At the dawn of the war, the promise of the FEPC, the president's calls for national unity and sacrifice, and well-publicized local labor shortages convinced many African American women that good jobs were theirs for the taking.²² Kingsbury worker Flora Campbell explained: "All over the radio is broadcasting, go to your employment house and tell them you want a war job."²³

However, African American women in northern Indiana had reason to expect that they might encounter resistance in their quest for jobs at Kingsbury. Despite its proximity to Chicago, LaPorte County, Indiana, was both very rural and extremely white. In 1940, only 1,148 blacks

¹⁹Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow*, 4. Karen Tucker Anderson's study of African American women war workers found that they typically made gains in feminized sectors such as textiles, nursing, and clerical work, but were often excluded from heavy industry. Thus, despite the new deluge of industrial jobs, on the national scale, black female jobseekers found more resistance than their white counterparts. Karen Tucker Anderson, "Last Hired, First Fired: Black Women Workers During World War II," *Journal of American History* 69 (June 1982), 82-97.

²⁰Gary Council of Social Agencies, "A Study of the Social and Economic Conditions of the Negro Population in Gary, 1944," p. 9, folder 3, box 3, CRA 160, Clifford E. Minton Papers, Calumet Regional Archives, Indiana University Northwest Library, Gary, Indiana.

²¹Michael Marchese, "Economy," in James B. Lane, ed., *Steel Shavings: Home Front: The World War II Years in the Calumet Region, 1941-1945* 22 (1993), 45; Mohl and Betten, *Steel City* (New York, 1986), 76; Lane, ed., *Steel Shavings* 37 (2006), 153-54.

²²Nelson Lichtenstein, *Labor's War at Home: The CIO in World War II* (Cambridge, Mass., 1982); Honey, *Creating Rosie the Riveter*; Collins, "Race, Roosevelt, and Wartime Production"; Kersten, *Race, Jobs and the War*; Shockley, "We, Too, Are Americans."

²³Flora Campbell to President Franklin D. Roosevelt, January 22, 1943, Gary, Indiana, Kingsbury Ordnance Plant Folder 1, box 67, FEPC-NARA. The wartime economy created unprecedented new opportunities for Adrana Turner, who moved to northwest Indiana from Georgia in 1943 when she was eighteen. She worked frying donuts until she finished high school, when she found assembly line jobs at General American and Pullman-Standard. In 1945, she had saved enough money to buy a house in cash. Sanita A. Turner, "Working and Jitterbugging," *Steel Shavings: Families of the Calumet Region During the World War II Years, 1941-1945* 5 (1979), 8. Black employment at Gary's U.S. Steel plant peaked at 24.4 percent of the labor force in September 1945; this included an unprecedented number of black women. Mohl and Betten, *Steel City*, 76.

resided in the 600-square-mile county, and “only about twelve or fourteen Negro families” resided in the town of LaPorte prior to the war. Thus, many area whites had never worked with or lived near blacks.²⁴ Further, the African American women who found and sought work at Kingsbury were no strangers to racial prejudice in their home community. Nearly all were residents of Gary, the booming industrial city that sat at the southern tip of Lake Michigan to the northwest of the plant. The area had been relatively barren until United States Steel selected the location for its new mill in 1906, but in just nine years, Gary’s population grew from several hundred to more than 55,000.²⁵ The city’s employment opportunities attracted increasing numbers of African Americans. Between 1910 and 1920, Gary’s black population grew from 383 to 5,299; by 1930, blacks constituted 18 percent of the city’s population; and by 1940, Gary had the largest ratio of African Americans to whites of any city north of the Mason-Dixon line.²⁶

White residents of Gary reacted to their city’s growing black population by enforcing racially segregated housing, education, and public parks and hospitals, and by barring African Americans from city jobs.²⁷ Labor shortages in World War I provided limited and temporary opportunities for African Americans at U.S. Steel. Black workers constituted 20.5 percent of total employment at the mill in 1923, but their represen-

²⁴The town of LaPorte was a historic lakeside town whose main industries were ice harvesting and tourism. Max Parvin Cavnes, *The Hoosier Community at War* (Bloomington, Ind., 1961), 134; Kenneth J. Schoon, *Calumet Beginnings: Ancient Shorelines and Settlements at the South End of Lake Michigan* (Bloomington, Ind., 2003), 207-208; Joy Schultz, FEPC Field Investigator, to Elmer Henderson, Region VI Director, December 17, 1943, Kingsbury Ordnance Plant Folder 2, box 67, FEPC-NARA; “Conference with Mr. Joseph Trace, Manager, La Porte Office of United States Employment Service,” Chicago, Illinois, Kingsbury Ordnance Plant Folder 2, box 67, FEPC-NARA.

²⁵Schoon, *Calumet Beginnings*, 155; Lane, ed., *Steel Shavings* 37 (2006), 15; Thornbrough and Ruegamer, *Indiana Blacks in the Twentieth Century*, 4.

²⁶A 1944 study commissioned by the Gary Urban League found that more African American residents of Gary had been born in Mississippi and Alabama than Indiana. “A Study of the Social and Economic Conditions of the Negro Population in Gary, 1944,” p. 6, folder 3, box 3, CRA 160, Clifford E. Minton Papers; Mohl and Betten, *Steel City*. The city’s population growth mirrored earlier statewide trends; in 1900, 73.5 percent of Indiana blacks lived in urban areas, and by 1910, the percentage had increased to 80.3. Historian Emma Lou Thornbrough credits primarily northern Indiana’s rapid industrialization for this trend. Thornbrough and Ruegamer, *Indiana Blacks in the Twentieth Century*, 2; Cavnes, *Hoosier Community at War*, 162.

²⁷Mohl and Betten, *Steel City*, 61-62; Lane, ed., *Steel Shavings* 37 (2006), 40, 48-50; Manervie Smith, “A Little Girl’s Dreams,” in James B. Lane, ed., *Steel Shavings: Families of the Calumet Region: During the Depression of the 1930s* 3 (1977), 10; Sheila J. Brown, “Whites Upstairs, Blacks in the Basement,” in Lane, ed., *Steel Shavings* 3 (1977), 28.

tation was constant at 15 percent for the next decade. Blacks were segregated in dead-end and dangerous jobs at the plant—when they could secure employment at all. During the 1920s, the Klan played a strong role in city politics.²⁸ Early Gary residents recalled that blacks were not allowed outside after dark in certain areas of the city, and that African American residents were confined to “blighted areas with chicken coops, hog pens and outhouses.”²⁹ Resident Arnold Greer recalled that “Gary was a very prejudiced place. A pregnant woman who was feeling sick was denied a drink of water at a drug store next to the Palace Theater.”³⁰ In 1930, the *Gary American* wrote that local blacks were “subject to insult and discrimination...they are Jim Crowed in the schools; they have little or no recognition in politics, and denied many of the rights, which, as citizens and taxpayers, they are justly entitled to.”³¹

In response to their ghettoization, Gary's black residents established social networks and organized around shared grievances.³² Many women were active in local churches, sororities, and service clubs. Men could play on the town's African American baseball team, which battled teams from neighboring black communities, and in 1935, Gary hosted a golf tournament for African Americans only. In the 1920s and 1930s, Gary's nascent NAACP chapter organized boycotts against discriminatory employers; protested the showing of *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) at downtown theaters; and fought mostly unsuccessful battles against segregation in schools, parks, and pools, and against police brutality. Historians Raymond A. Mohl and Neil Betten argue that Gary's black population was politically divided between the NAACP's integrationist goals and the Marcus Garvey-inspired push for separatism—a split that

²⁸The Depression hit Gary blacks hardest, with blacks constituting half of the city's unemployed in 1930. Thornbrough and Ruegamer, *Indiana Blacks in the Twentieth Century*, 73; Mohl and Betten, *Steel City*, 74, 76; Edward Anderson, “Blacks at the Mill,” in Lane, ed., *Steel Shavings* 3 (1977), 29; Lane, ed., *Steel Shavings* 37 (2006), 66. The Klan was active statewide in those years. An estimated one-quarter of all males born within the state of Indiana in the early twentieth century were Klan members. Thornbrough and Ruegamer, *Indiana Blacks in the Twentieth Century*, 48.

²⁹Herbert Steele, Katherine Eck, and Shirley Clay, “Gary's Central District,” in Lane, ed., *Steel Shavings* 22 (1993), 39.

³⁰Arnold Greer, “Gary's Central District,” in Lane, ed., *Steel Shavings* 22 (1993), 39.

³¹Quoted in Mohl and Betten, *Steel City*, 65.

³²Lane, ed., *Steel Shavings* 37 (2006), 143; Mohl and Betten, *Steel City*, 56; “Gary, Indiana,” *The Chicago Defender*, August 24, 1953, p. 3; “Delta Sorority Organizes Chapter in Gary, Indiana,” *The Chicago Defender*, December 31, 1938, p. 13; “Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorors and Committee Campaign,” *The Chicago Defender*, October 11, 1941, p. 17.

helps to explain the community's lack of lasting progress in the pre-World-War-II era.³³ Yet while the black women who wrote to federal authorities about Kingsbury were more in line with the NAACP's approach, they claimed more than entrance into the plant's high-paying industrial jobs. In addition, they took advantage of new opportunities provided by the war—particularly a government that they perceived as newly listening and accountable to them—to demand expansive rights of access and accommodation they argued would enable them to participate fully in American society on their own terms.

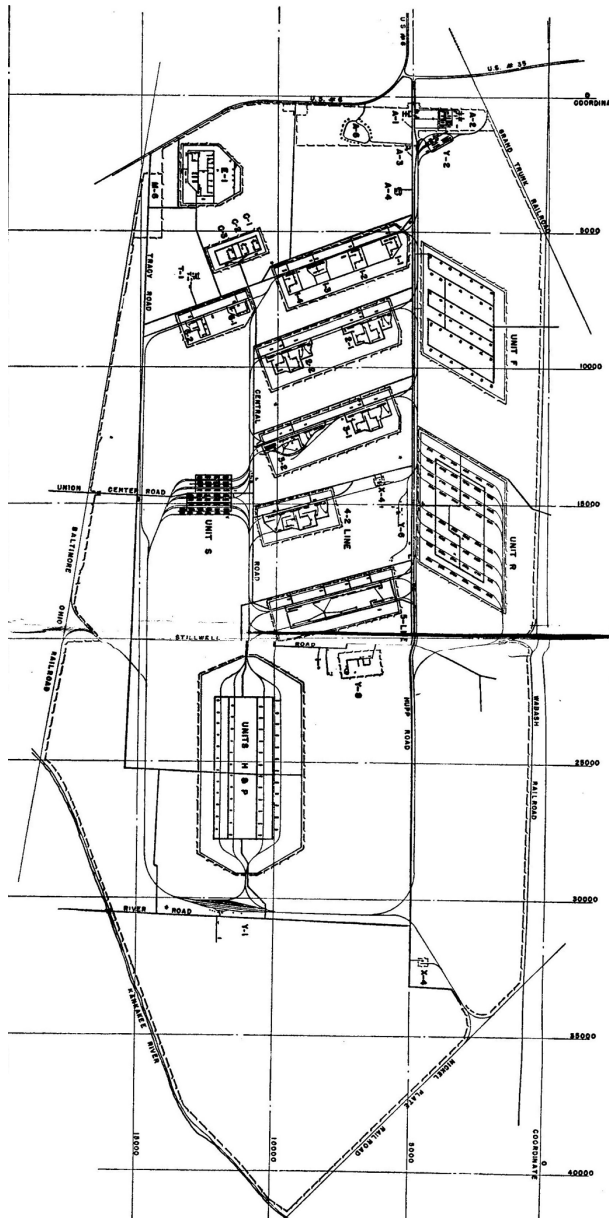
As the nation mobilized for war, federal authorities identified northern Indiana as a prime location for ordnance manufacture. The region was far enough inland to escape an enemy attack upon either coast but well-placed to distribute goods to either theater of combat. If a tragic factory mistake should end in a devastating explosion, the area was sparsely populated and insignificant to the nation's infrastructure. LaPorte County was particularly well-situated: the area featured flat, even terrain, intersections of preexisting cross-country railroads, a network of state and county roads, and adequate well and river water.³⁴ The Kingsbury plant was built between 1940 and 1941 to be one of the largest shell-loading plants in the nation. It was erected on a twenty-square-mile plot, forcing the relocation of several farms and a cemetery.³⁵ Kingsbury was authorized by the War Department, but its construction and operation were contracted to a private company. Todd & Brown, a New York-based engineering and construction firm, built and ordered the plant for maximum efficiency and productivity.³⁶

³³Mohl and Betten, *Steel City*, 80-82.

³⁴Kingsbury was the fourth ordnance site approved for World War II. Other sites included Ravenna, Ohio; Elwood, Illinois; and Burlington, Iowa. Vogel, *Kingsbury*, 17-19; Homer E. Marsh, "Local Labor Market Survey for the Michigan City-LaPorte-Kingsbury area in North Western Indiana: A Special Study," conducted by the Indiana Employment Security Division, 1941, Herman B Wells Library, Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana.

³⁵Employment Security Division Report: LaPorte County, 1942-1946, "Survey of the Employment Situation in Relation to the Kingsbury Ordnance Development in La Porte County, IN as of April 1, 1941," Record Group L1581, Indiana State Archives, Commission on Public Records, Indianapolis, Indiana; Vogel, *Kingsbury*, 23.

³⁶Todd & Brown was a relatively young offshoot of the family company whose projects included construction of Rockefeller Center and the reconstruction of colonial Williamsburg, Virginia. Susan Heller Anderson, "Webster B. Todd is Dead at 89; Ex-Leader of Jersey Republicans," *New York Times*, February 10, 1989. The original estimated cost of operation for the plant's first year was \$26,000,000; its construction cost approximately \$50,380,000. Vogel, *Kingsbury*, 5, 14, 26-27, 33.



Kingsbury Ordnance site plan. Railroads running on all four sides of the plant transported shells and ammunition to both coasts for shipment overseas; carefully separated buildings guaranteed that work would go on if an accident destroyed any part of the site.

William P. Vogel, *Kingsbury: A Venture in Teamwork* (1946)

Staffing such an enormous operation in a rural area proved a formidable challenge. Todd & Brown initially sought 10,000 workers, and the entire population of LaPorte numbered only 16,000 in 1940. To accommodate the influx of labor, the War Department constructed a new town right outside the factory gates. Kingsford Heights consisted of more than 2,600 dormitories, trailers, and prefabricated homes. Todd & Brown also financed repairs to existing homes in LaPorte and encouraged area residents to rent spare rooms to Kingsbury workers.³⁷ Through the United States Employment Service and local labor unions, the plant recruited in towns and cities up to fifty miles away—including Gary, where employers faced new competition with Kingsbury's high wages.³⁸ Gary resident Mary Kay Maisel, who worked at U.S. Steel as a secretary while her husband served overseas, recalled that "All my friends were going to the ammunition plant in LaPorte, however, so I went with them."³⁹ Kingsbury operated buses from nearby towns, and workers like Maisel and her friends carpooled, generating "clusters of traffic" each morning on previously desolate rural highways.⁴⁰

At Kingsbury, workers assembled and packaged the components of explosive weapons to be used in the war. Approaching the plant entrance, one would first notice its silhouette—punctuated by floodlight towers, several menacing brick buildings, five 200,000-gallon water tanks, and the "earth-covered concrete igloos" that stored TNT and chemicals. In the distance, one might also see workers initiating controlled burns on the prairie land to destroy the explosive waste produced by ordnance manufacture. The twenty-square-mile plant itself was traversed by eighty miles of railroad track. At its south end, trains brought onto the grounds the crates of empty cases for bullets, bombs, and other projectiles and the various powders and chemicals that would fill them. Inside the plant, workers unloaded the metal casings and filled them with explosive material. The shells were then fitted with fuses, boosters, and detonators. When they had been checked and counted, they were

³⁷Vogel, *Kingsbury*, 68, 78.

³⁸Robert Gyurko, "Women," in Lane, ed., *Steel Shavings* 22 (1993), 50; Vogel, *Kingsbury*, 65-66.

³⁹Mary Kay Maisel, "Women," in Lane, ed., *Steel Shavings* 22 (1993), 50-51.

⁴⁰Joan Cobb, "Women," in Lane, ed., *Steel Shavings* 22 (1993), 50; Vogel, *Kingsbury*, 8-9; Peski



View over the Kingsbury ordnance plant. The site's floodlight towers, large brick buildings, huge water tanks, and concrete storage igloos created a harsh silhouette on the Indiana landscape.

William P. Vogel, *Kingsbury: A Venture in Teamwork* (1946)

loaded into crates and onto train cars that would take them to their point of debarkation for the front lines.⁴¹

The work at Kingsbury was primarily assembly-line style and highly systematized. Each step built upon the last and was essential to the next worker's task further down the line. Careful work was crucial, as any mistake could be deadly. Yet the pressure to produce quickly for the raging war was made manifest by the conveyor belts that pushed components from one line operator to the next. Once a new worker was hired, he or she was medically examined and received a half-day of train-

v. *Todd & Brown Inc.*, 158 F.2d 59 (7th Cir., 1946).

ing and several lectures on plant regulations. From there, each worker was assigned to one of two ten-hour shifts. Kingsbury's employment and output grew rapidly. More than 2,000 workers joined the workforce in November 1941 alone, and in May 1942, Kingsbury's labor force reached its apex of more than 20,000. On an average day at the midpoint of the war, Kingsbury produced 180,000 fuses, 46,000 shells, and 500,000 rounds of ammunition.⁴²

Work at Kingsbury was dirty, difficult, and dangerous.⁴³ In 1942, twenty-one-year-old Esther Sanders was hired at Kingsbury to weigh powder for bullets. She recalled that as she worked, she could hear other staff testing the bullets outside, a sound that frayed her nerves. She also spoke sympathetically of a coworker whose initially untreated powder burns required lifelong pain medication.⁴⁴ Kingsbury's automated assembly line forced workers to remain alert and productive despite tasks that might be physically taxing, repetitive, or both; the assembly lines were only dimly lit, and many of the materials had to be quickly assembled with tweezers. All workers had to wear protective clothing and shower before leaving, as one chemical component turned any exposed hair or skin orange. Further, because workers routinely handled explosive powders, they followed strict rules concerning where and when they could smoke. The plant's design reflected the potential for disaster—four separate buildings were partially underground so that if one exploded, the structural integrity of the others would not be compromised. The pressure of producing for the war only compounded the physical dangers that were endemic to ordnance work.⁴⁵

In many key war industries, the flood of new groups of workers (primarily African Americans and women) into what were formerly white male spaces sent plant management scrambling to establish boundaries and norms of behavior that would keep production high and dissention among workers low. In 1941, Kingsbury's workforce was

⁴¹Vogel, *Kingsbury*, 5, 9, 36, 39.

⁴²*Ibid.*, 5, 9-10, 36, 39, 57, 66, 75.

⁴³Even transportation to Kingsbury could prove deadly, as a Todd & Brown-operated bus had a fatal accident on its way to the plant. *Peski v. Todd & Brown Inc.*, 158 F.2d 59 (7th Cir., 1946).

⁴⁴Wanda Jones, "Making Ammunition," in Lane, ed., *Steel Shavings* 5 (1979), 10.

⁴⁵Joan Cobb, "Women," in Lane, ed., *Steel Shavings* 22 (1993), 50; Maryalice Roberts, former Kingsbury worker, quoted in "Generation of Heroes: Rosie the Riveter," WNDU News Center, June 2, 2004, online at <http://www.wndu.com/news/generationofheroes/062004/generation>

approximately one-third female, and by the end of the war women comprised 45 percent of the labor force. The number of African American workers also steadily increased, with many men working in the warehouse and at demolition jobs. Todd & Brown policies divided Kingsbury workers by race and gender.⁴⁶ Every job was coded male or female, and black or white. Plant officials expected to hire African Americans but capped their percentage of total employment around 10 percent. If a real shortage of workers for “white” tasks occurred, management asked the U.S. Employment Service to find more white workers to maintain the racial balance—eventually recruiting from as far away as Georgia, Colorado, New York, and North Dakota.⁴⁷ Plant management set aside two of the nine production lines at Kingsbury for African American workers. “We do not work with the white people,” explained line operator Mrs. Willie Young. “We handle loose powder and the white women handle sealed powder.”⁴⁸

Black women’s opportunities for employment at Kingsbury were extremely limited. When the assembly lines designated for African Americans were fully staffed, plant managers simply stopped hiring black women to do anything but janitorial work. While undesirable and low-paid, the work was a plant priority. Government fear of disease outbreaks in war plants led to a strict sanitation code developed by the Office of Civilian Defense and issued to each war employer. The regula-

ofheroes_35545.php.

⁴⁶Memo re: meeting with Kingsbury officials March 13, 1942, Austin Scott, FEPC Field Representative, to Chicago FEPC Director Robert Weaver, March 14, 1942, Chicago, Illinois, Kingsbury Ordnance Plant Folder 1, box 67, FEPC-NARA. Historians have demonstrated that interactions on the factory floor during this period were characterized by hyper-awareness of workers’ race and gender. See Eileen Boris, “‘You Wouldn’t Want One of ‘Em Dancing With Your Wife’: Racialized Bodies on the Job in World War II,” *American Quarterly* 50 (March 1998), 77-108; Kevin Boyle, “The Kiss: Racial and Gender Conflict in a 1950s Automobile Factory,” *Journal of American History* 84 (September 1997), 496-523. In fall 1944, the Farm Security Administration also transferred 150 Jamaicans to Kingsbury, where they worked in ammunition storage. Vogel, *Kingsbury*, 68, 71-72; Eleanor Kincade to Earl Dickerson, Chicago Alderman, July 29, 1942, Gary, Indiana, Kingsbury Ordnance Plant Folder 1, box 67, FEPC-NARA.

⁴⁷For example, in November 1943, Kingsbury employed 965 “non-whites” out of 8,257 total workers. Elmer Henderson Report, November 2, 1943, Kingsbury Ordnance Plant Folder 2, box 67, FEPC-NARA; “Discrimination Report,” filed by Bernice Jena, LaPorte U.S. Employment Services Committee, filed October 20, 1942, LaPorte, Indiana, Kingsbury Ordnance Plant Folder 1, box 67, FEPC-NARA; Walter B. Swan to Eugene J. Brock, July 18, 1942, Kingsbury Ordnance Plant Folder 1, box 67, FEPC-NARA; Vogel, *Kingsbury*, 65-66.

⁴⁸Willie Young to Fair Employment Practices Region VI Office, June 7, 1943, Gary, Indiana,

tions mandated: "Drinking fountains shall be thoroughly cleaned at least once each day"; "all toilets and urinals and all toilet room floors shall be cleaned once, at least each working day"; "all shower rooms shall be cleaned daily"; and "equipment subject to serious contamination or exposure shall be periodically and thoroughly cleaned." Though African American women preferred higher-paid work as line operators, their janitorial labor was crucial to Kingsbury's safety and productivity.⁴⁹

Due to Todd & Brown policies, whites—especially white women—held all positions of authority over their African American counterparts. Most African American women workers answered immediately to a white "forelady" or to her African American assistant. Workers who overstepped the racial boundaries that kept this hierarchy in place could expect immediate punishment. African American women workers like Laura Washington Cyrus, an adopted daughter of Booker T. Washington who objected when her white forelady addressed her by her first name and acted as a self-appointed sub-forelady in that woman's absence, were fired for insubordination.⁵⁰ Such struggles for dignity and respect were easily construed as selfish acts that hindered the war effort.⁵¹ The result was the conflation of strict factory discipline with the maintenance of the racial order.

Historian Karen Tucker Anderson has argued that while white men demanded authority over black coworkers, white women insisted upon distance, fearful that proximity could cause disease and contamination. Evidence suggests that white women at Kingsbury pursued both separation from and intimate control over their black counterparts. African American and white women workers did not intermingle at leisure time. On the job, they ate lunch and took breaks in separate areas. At white women's insistence, separate bathrooms were designated for women of each race. In the event of an air raid, workers knew to proceed to the

Kingsbury Ordnance Plant Folder 2, box 67, FEPC-NARA.

⁴⁹Ethel Jackson to Eleanor Roosevelt, March 20, 1942, Gary, Indiana, Kingsbury Ordnance Plant Folder 1, box 67, FEPC-NARA; Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow*, 240; Indiana State Board of Health and Indiana Division of Labor, "Sanitation Bulletin," Box 30: Labor, WWII History Commission Inventory, Record Group 1984046, Indiana State Archives.

⁵⁰Mrs. Laura Washington Cyrus affidavit, May 5, 1942, Michigan City, Indiana, Kingsbury Ordnance Plant Folder 1, box 67, FEPC-NARA; Supporting affidavit by Vivian Pensinger, June 6, 1942, South Bend, Indiana, Kingsbury Ordnance Plant Folder 1, box 67, FEPC-NARA.



Women workers at the Kingsbury plant, 1942. Black women are conspicuously absent from the group, mirroring the segregation that dominated every aspect of the work site, from assembly lines to break rooms, bathrooms, and bomb shelters.

Courtesy of the LaPorte Historical Society, LaPorte, Indiana

bomb shelter specific to their race as well.⁵² Further, blacks were not permitted to live in the onsite housing at Kingsford Heights, instead commuting by bus or car.⁵³ An internal FEPC communication documented federal authorities' awareness of the lack of local housing for African Americans and whites' hostility to potential black neighbors. "There seems to be opposition in the local community to the in-migration of negroes, and it is almost certain that defense housing for negroes in or near LaPorte would be opposed by local community leaders and local organizations," wrote one official in 1942. Ruth and C. L. Strickland, Gary residents who stepped away from their undertaking business to

⁵¹Anderson, "Last Hired, First Fired," 86.

⁵²Cavnes, *Hoosier Community at War*, 134.

⁵³Ruth Strickland to Franklin Delano Roosevelt, August 27, 1943, Kingsbury Ordnance Plant

work for the war effort, drove five other passengers on the ninety-mile round trip to Kingsbury each day.⁵⁴

While African American men faced similar types of segregation within the plant, their assumed ability to perform manual tasks opened many more job categories to them. Although most of these jobs called for unskilled physical labor, they allowed for greater mobility and provided for significant interaction with white workers doing similar types of work—loading, cleaning, guarding, and inspecting.⁵⁵ African American women, then, were uniquely stigmatized and subordinated at Kingsbury.

Day-to-day interactions between white women supervisors and African American women workers were fraught with friction. “The officials there are inclined to be what you may call hard boiled, with no regard as to how they speak to one. They do not seem to realize that the [Negro] employees are there for the one and same cause that they are,” explained Willie Young. White women supervisors talked of having to “herd the operators,” observed Ruth Strickland; “the majority of the supervisors have the feeling and idea that the colored people are animals.”⁵⁶ Kingsbury worker Elizabeth Reed explained that her white overseer, “Dorothy Koch, [is] very arrogant. Once when the girls struck for better conditions she said in a speech to us that [since] we were making more money than we ever made in our lives and more money than we could get by scrubbing floors in Gary, then why not be satisfied.” White women overseers had unchecked discretion over black women line workers, regulating the pace at which they worked, whether and when they took breaks, and what tasks they performed day-to-day. This intimate control over their bodies and their workplace experiences fueled black women’s dissatisfaction with Kingsbury, setting it apart from other nearby plants. In her department at General American, another shell-loading plant in the area, Adrana Turner recalled that she and her fellow

Folder 2, box 67, FEPC-NARA.

⁵⁴Austin H. Scott to Dr. Robert Weaver, re: Field Report, Kingsbury Ordnance, March 23, 1942, Kingsbury Ordnance Plant Folder 1, box 67, FEPC-NARA; Ruth Strickland to Frances Perkins, U.S. Secretary of Labor, August 26, 1943, Gary, Indiana, Kingsbury Ordnance Plant Folder 2, box 67, FEPC-NARA.

⁵⁵Russell Jackson to FEPC, n.d., Kingsbury, Indiana, Kingsbury Ordnance Plant Folder 1, box 67, FEPC-NARA.

⁵⁶Willie Young to Fair Employment Practices Region VI Office, June 7, 1943, Gary, Indiana, Kingsbury Ordnance Plant Folder 2, box 67, FEPC-NARA; Ruth Strickland to President Franklin D. Roosevelt, August 27, 1943, Gary, Indiana, Kingsbury Ordnance Plant Folder 1,

African American coworkers cooperated well with whites and that she enjoyed her job.⁵⁷ By contrast, black women at Kingsbury resented the daily indignities they suffered while performing the most dangerous and dead-end work in the plant.

In handwritten and typed letters, black women described their experiences and outlined their grievances and expectations for fair treatment at Kingsbury. A few women sent letters to the FEPC or to other government officials, but most addressed their claims directly to the White House. Writers expressed the hope that the Roosevelts would take action on behalf of individuals, thereby boosting the black community as a whole. Arguments for intervention highlighted themes of personal sacrifice, meritocracy, patriotism, and racial justice, values many Americans associated with the president and his wife Eleanor.⁵⁸ Ethel Jackson wrote to Mrs. Roosevelt that “Being citizen[s] of the United States I feel that we are entitled to any job offered us by the government. I appreciate and await your answer.” Pernellia Hull concluded her letter to FDR “as a law abiding citizen with our country at heart and our boys on the front.”⁵⁹ Other correspondents described their education, skills, and work experience as evidence that Kingsbury’s policies of subordinating capable black women were “un-American” and thus required “immediate attention.”⁶⁰

Black women who described their experiences at Kingsbury to the president and first lady in personal terms were not taking uncalculated shots in the dark. For years, the Roosevelts had cultivated their reputations as political figures who were invested in the lives of individual Americans. Those with access to radios could hear FDR’s distinctive baritone deliver speeches that decried corruption and lauded honest work. And in her weekly *Woman’s Home Companion* column, Eleanor

box 67, FEPC-NARA.

⁵⁷Sanita Turner, “Women,” in Lane, ed., *Steel Shavings* 22 (1993), 55-56.

⁵⁸While the Roosevelts surely read some of the thousands of such letters written to them during the war years, White House staff forwarded without comment allegations of race discrimination in war work to the FEPC. Thereupon, the committee investigated complaints and mediated between workers and employers.

⁵⁹Ethel Jackson to Eleanor Roosevelt, March 20, 1942, Kingsbury Ordnance Plant Folder 1, box 67, FEPC-NARA; Pernellia Hull to President Franklin D. Roosevelt, February 16, 1942, Gary, Indiana, Kingsbury Ordnance Plant Folder 1, box 67, FEPC-NARA.

⁶⁰Mrs. Eugene Armstrong to Eleanor Roosevelt, undated, Kingsbury Ordnance Plant Folder 1,

described her daily life, answered questions mailed to her by readers, and established her commitment to standing up for the dispossessed against poverty and faceless bureaucracy.⁶¹ Thus many Americans, like the black women at Kingsbury, perceived the Roosevelts to be listening and interested in their struggles.⁶² “I want to have a head to head talk with you,” Flora Campbell’s complaint letter began. Thelma Morgan opened her letter with, “Mrs Roosevelt, I know your time is pretty well taken up, but could you please spare a few moments to listen to my problem.”⁶³ Irene Marks asked the president to contact Kingsbury on her behalf, claiming that “one has a hard time getting on unless someone pulls for them. So I am asking you to help me by sending a good word there for me or send me a letter to carry them. My application is in and a word from you would help me get in soon.”⁶⁴ The president and his wife, they reasoned, were powerful friends who would be outraged by unfair labor practices in a war plant and would rectify the injustices occurring at Kingsbury.

In their letters to federal authorities, black women described the racism that was built into Kingsbury’s employment policies and defined interactions among its workers. Echoing their male counterparts, women argued that their race should play no role in obtaining or holding a job, and that racism hampered efficiency and kept talented workers unfairly subordinated. They emphasized both their desire to cooperate and their demand to be treated as equal members of the community of respected Americans whose labor contributed to the war effort.

Complainants argued that racism unfairly limited their access to war work; race was irrelevant and only their qualifications and dedication to the cause were important. Ethel Stewart had recently moved to LaPorte from Chicago when she sought work as a typist at Kingsbury. In

box 67, FEPC-NARA.

⁶¹The letters from the public to First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt that are housed at the Franklin Delano Roosevelt Presidential Library in Hyde Park, New York, fill 3,000 boxes. Knepper, ed., *Dear Mrs. Roosevelt*, xx.

⁶²See Cohen, *Making a New Deal*, chaps. 5, 6; Knepper, ed., *Dear Mrs. Roosevelt*; and Jean Edward Smith, *FDR* (New York, 2008).

⁶³Flora Campbell to President Franklin D. Roosevelt, January 22, 1943, Gary, Indiana, Kingsbury Ordnance Plant Folder 1, box 67, FEPC-NARA; Thelma Morgan to Eleanor Roosevelt, March 27, 1942, Gary, Indiana, Kingsbury Ordnance Plant Folder 1, box 67, FEPC-NARA.

⁶⁴Irene Marks to President Franklin D. Roosevelt, March 26, 1942, Gary, Indiana, Kingsbury

her 1942 letter to Mrs. Roosevelt, she elaborated her lengthy resume as evidence that racism plagued Kingsbury's hiring policies. Stewart had fifteen years of experience as a secretary at premier African American-owned businesses including the *Chicago Defender* and the Binga State Bank. Stewart explained that she had sent her application, complete with recommendations from several past employers, to Kingsbury one year earlier:

Although I have made repeated telephone calls I have always been very courteously told that there was no opening yet, since production has not started. Nevertheless, a large number of [white] clerical people have been hired since that time, and even non-residents, [but] still there is no opening for me.

The FEPC should correct this unfairness, Stewart argued, because her race should not counteract her demonstrated ability to do the job for which she applied.⁶⁵ Other female Kingsbury applicants reported similar experiences. Mrs. F. H. Woods, upon applying for and being denied a job at Kingsbury, remarked, "it seems as if my color or race (Negro) is the only factor that prevents my receiving this position."⁶⁶

African American workers demanded the same respect that Kingsbury officials afforded to whites. They argued that plant managers should acknowledge their skills and work experience as individuals, rather than limiting all black workers to the bottom of the factory hierarchy.⁶⁷ "Among the hundreds of Negro operators there are school teachers, embalmers, printers, secretaries, ministers, ex-businessmen and

Ordinance Plant Folder 1, box 67, FEPC-NARA.

⁶⁵Ethel Stewart to Eleanor Roosevelt, March 20, 1942, Gary, Indiana, Kingsbury Ordinance Plant Folder 2, box 67, FEPC-NARA.

⁶⁶Mrs. F. H. Woods to Eleanor Roosevelt, July 31, 1942, Gary, Indiana, Kingsbury Ordinance Plant Folder 2, box 67, FEPC-NARA.

⁶⁷Nikhil Pal Singh writes that the quintessentially American concept of the "abstract individual subject"—a citizen freely acting within both the public and private spheres—has disadvantaged African Americans throughout U.S. history. He argues that "racial stigma has been applied to blacks as a group, preventing them from being perceived as qualitatively differentiated individuals," and thus not fully enabled to exercise the rights of citizenship. Nikhil Pal Singh, *Black is a Country: Race and the Unfinished Struggle for Democracy* (Cambridge, Mass.,

women, and men and women from all walks of life,” according to Ruth Strickland. She told the FEPC that

Of the two lines now operating and manned by Negroes, the highest position held by Negroes is sub-forelady or sub-foreman, but with no voice or authority. None of these people are chosen for their character, intelligence, schooling, earnestness or patriotism, or on their seniority in the plant.⁶⁸

They also sought equal privileges to white workers, protesting, for example, when they were forced to work during allotted rest and meal periods even as white women's leisure time was never violated. Further, they observed that Kingsbury management seemed to prioritize subordinating blacks ahead of maximizing productivity, as the plant left white-coded jobs empty even as area blacks clamored for work.

When confronted with biased treatment, African American women at Kingsbury were more tolerant of racial separation than of arbitrary personnel decisions by the white supervisors who punished them with impunity. Hattie Gardner was a line worker at Kingsbury who voiced her complaint to the FEPC in terms of a grievance against her floor supervisor, Mrs. Schneider. “For three weeks she has continually picked on me,” Hattie explained, and the plant personnel office had provided her no assistance. “They wouldn’t give me a transfer to another lady,” and she was instead terminated for her inability to cooperate with Mrs. Schneider. This was unfair, Hattie explained, for “This is the first time I have had trouble with anybody.”⁶⁹ Hattie’s coworker Elizabeth Reed had risen to the position of inspector on the detonator line, the highest position a black woman could hold at Kingsbury. “As such inspector,” she explained, “I am the last to leave the line, which means that the other girls leave for lunch from five to seven min. before I do.” When Elizabeth returned late from lunch on two occasions, “which was unavoidable,” her “very arrogant” floor lady had her terminated for

2004), 23-24.

⁶⁸Ruth Strickland, C. L. Strickland, and R. L. Lloyd to Mr. F. V. Terrell, n.d., Kingsbury Ordnance Plant Folder 2, box 67, FEPC-NARA.

⁶⁹Hattie Gardner to Fair Employment Practices Committee, September 15, 1942, Gary, Indiana,



Kingsbury workers boarding buses for home. Black workers complained to the federal government that plant management prioritized hiring white workers over qualified black workers, even when whites had to be transported over increasingly large distances to the work site.

William P. Vogel, *Kingsbury: A Venture in Teamwork* (1946)

insubordination.⁷⁰ Willie Young similarly decried her white supervisors' unwillingness to treat black workers with respect: "There are some officials there that have never been in authority before. Some of them have never lived in a town where the Negro lived, and therefore don't cooperate with the Negro as they should."⁷¹

In April 1942, Kingsbury workers voted to unionize under the aegis of the American Federation of Labor (AFL). The election was close: of 5,193 eligible workers, 2,751 voted in the election; 1,621 voted for the union, while 1,130 voted against unionization. After the election, labor and management drew up seventeen individual contracts: three for railroad workers, one for line operators, and thirteen for workers in specialized crafts such as painting. Evidence suggests that the union functioned primarily to set wage rates and determine seniority, doing little to fight segregation or advocate on behalf of aggrieved black workers. Even

Kingsbury Ordnance Plant Folder 1, box 67, FEPC-NARA.

⁷⁰Elizabeth Reed to Earl Dickerson, Chicago Alderman, n.d., Gary, Indiana, Kingsbury Ordnance Plant Folder 1, box 67, FEPC-NARA.

⁷¹Willie Young to Fair Employment Practices Region VI Office, June 7, 1943, Gary, Indiana,

so, Ruth Strickland, the chief union steward on the detonator line, had felt empowered by her position of authority to challenge the factory order.⁷² She explained to FDR: "My duties as Chief Steward were to conduct grievances brought up by other stewards and operators. There were many grievances, but none that could not be reasoned out. Most of the causes were due to lack of understanding between the supervision and operators." When a fistfight broke out on the detonator line between the white foreman and a "young colored man," Strickland went above the foreman's head to protest because the line worker was fired but the foreman was not. She explained that the plant's internal fair employment "committee and the supervisors on the lines seem to have an arranged understanding."⁷³ In response to her complaint, Kingsbury management contended that "Mrs. Strickland has no respect for supervision and was constantly leaving her work without obtaining permission from her immediate supervisor."⁷⁴ Factory officials were reluctant to place black women in authority, and those who complained about racist personnel policies were typically fired, as Strickland was. The difference in management's eyes between complaining about or defying racist discrimination and subverting factory order was slight, perhaps nonexistent.

Black women's demands for meritocracy and freedom from stigma resembled those of their male coworkers at Kingsbury. The male and female complainants who wrote on behalf of their peers at Kingsbury sought equality of opportunity to prove their dedication to working hard and serving their country. In a petition to the FEPC, twenty-two male workers of the African American detonator line appealed to the President's new mandate for racial equality, declaring that "the spirit as well as the letter of section 8802 of the FEPC has been and continues to be flagrantly and ruthlessly violated and ignored daily." They explained that "well-qualified, capable and competent Negro men" were relegated to menial and unskilled occupations, excluded from positions as firemen, policemen, and even supervisors of other black workers. They went on to relate that the few blacks selected for supervisory roles were

Kingsbury Ordnance Plant Folder 2, box 67, FEPC-NARA.

⁷²Vogel, *Kingsbury*, 73-74.

⁷³Ruth Strickland to President Franklin D. Roosevelt, August 27, 1943, Gary, Indiana, Kingsbury Ordnance Plant Folder 1, box 67, FEPC-NARA.

⁷⁴Memo re: Ruth Strickland from Todd & Brown to Joy Schultz, FEPC Field Officer, December

“the least competent and most ignorant...a mere stuge, for this prejudice[d] unsympathetic white building foremen.”⁷⁵ Like African American women, men emphasized their patriotism. Kingsbury worker William Sneed wrote, “We the colored men and women are not being treated fair in the employment like other races and we are American[,] we love America[,] we all ways stand by America.”⁷⁶

Like their male coworkers, the African American women at Kingsbury argued that their status as American citizens and as qualified, dedicated, and capable workers should open desirable jobs to them. In their letters about Kingsbury, however, these women also drew attention to their particular needs, obligations, and struggles, referencing their burdens and sacrifices as women to explain why they deserved equal opportunity and fair treatment at work. The war generated unprecedented interdependencies between state and employer and newly politicized elements of women’s private lives, giving new weight to their claims as mothers, wives, and breadwinners. In defining fairness by reasoning outward from their perceptions of their own needs and entitlements, black women articulated a vision of equality in which the government protected the self-sufficiency of all citizens—not turning a blind eye to women’s domestic responsibilities, private struggles, and differences (from men and from each other), but accounting for them.

Many of the women who wrote to government officials about Kingsbury referenced their personal sacrifices as wives. During the Great Depression, employers had fired married women to preserve breadwinner status for men with dependents.⁷⁷ Now, women opined that the government should care for those whose husbands were serving overseas—not through social security or disability payments, but with a job to help the war effort.⁷⁸ In a letter to her former Chicago alderman, Eleanora Kincade explained, “My husband is eligible for the army and is

30, 1943, Kingsbury, Indiana, Kingsbury Ordnance Plant Folder 1, box 67, FEPC-NARA.

⁷⁵Complaint and Petition Signed by Twenty-Two Male Workers of Unit E-1, Detonator Line, Kingsbury Ordnance Plant to Fair Employment Practices Committee, Kingsbury Ordnance Plant Folder 1, box 67, FEPC-NARA.

⁷⁶William Sneed to William Alexander, January 22, 1942, Kingsbury Ordnance Plant Folder 1, box 67, FEPC-NARA.

⁷⁷Kessler-Harris, *Out to Work*, 251.

⁷⁸For similar types of demands made by war wives, see Stephanie McCurry, “Citizens, Soldiers’ Wives, and ‘Hiley Hope Up’ Slaves: The Problem of Political Obligation in the Civil War South,”

subject to spill his blood for freedom the same as any other man beside many colored men are spilling their blood daily.” Kincade was a white woman whom plant officials had forced to resign for opaque reasons—she suspected because her interracial marriage unsettled her coworkers. She asked, “because of the color of my husband does that disqualify me for having a job in the defense of our government[?] I am with in the law of our country—I am lawfully married.”⁷⁹ Similarly, Willie Young felt especially entitled to a war job because her husband had lost his life during World War I.

I was made a widow by our government. My husband was killed while employed in defense work in the war No. 1 at muscle shoals in Alabama. I feel as I being the widow of one whom gave all he had when he gave his life, I should have concitiration especially with the government. I explained that to the supervisor. I told her that she had a hand in the government and a part to play.⁸⁰

To women like Kincade and Young, the government had inserted itself into the contract of marriage and thus owed wives something in return.

Other African American women workers cited their rights and personal sacrifices as mothers. Complainant Annie Kendrick reasoned that “if [my] boys can sleep on the ground with snak[e]s and water holes I am willing to try to do all I can.” African American and white mothers, she wrote, should be given equal consideration for war jobs—black women “hafter give up there sons” just as white women did.⁸¹ African American women also expressed their desire to help their men return quickly and safely. “We have sons husbands and brothers that are fighting for justice the same as other races,” explained Pernellia Hull. “We women here are in the first line of defence and facing the danger as any other women. . . . Our men are on the battlefields fighting for our

in *Gender and the Southern Body Politic*, ed. Nancy Bercaw (Jackson, Miss., 2000), 95-124.

⁷⁹Eleanora Kincade to Earl Dickerson, Chicago Alderman, July 29, 1942, Gary, Indiana, Kingsbury Ordnance Plant Folder 1, box 67, FEPC-NARA.

⁸⁰Willie Young to Fair Employment Practices Region VI Office, June 7, 1943, Gary, Indiana, Kingsbury Ordnance Plant Folder 2, box 67, FEPC-NARA.

⁸¹Annie Kendrick to Fair Employment Practices Committee Region VI, October 14, 1943, Gary,



Working on the assembly line at Kingsbury. Many of the black women who wrote letters of complaint to the White House and to the Committee on Fair Employment Practice cited their personal sacrifices as wives and mothers of soldiers.

William P. Vogel, *Kingsbury: A Venture in Teamwork* (1946)

rights.”⁸² In a telegram crafted to appeal to Mrs. Roosevelt’s parental status, Hallie E. Hayes, president of the Gary Negro Mothers Union, wrote: “Our boys and girls are not given any consideration at the Kingsbury ammunition plant at LaPorte Indiana. Will you please help us.”⁸³ The wives and mothers of black soldiers regarded the unfair treatment they experienced as especially abhorrent; they believed that their status lent their workplace complaints special force.

Black women who were breadwinners for their families also expected the government to provide work in light of those responsibili-

Indiana, Kingsbury Ordnance Plant Folder 2, box 67, FEPC-NARA.

⁸²Pernellia Hull to President Franklin D. Roosevelt, February 16, 1942, Gary, Indiana, Kingsbury Ordnance Plant Folder 1, box 67, FEPC-NARA.

⁸³Hallie Hayes, President, Negro Mothers Union, to Eleanor Roosevelt, January 30, 1942,

ties. "I have two children and no husband," related Hattie Gardner, while Ruth Strickland described herself as "a mother of three children, 31 years of age."⁸⁴ Other complainants described their obligations to care for adult family members. Mrs. F. H. Woods recounted that she bore "the responsibility of supporting my mother who is seventy-one years of age and refuses to accept a pension because of her belief that the government has enough responsibility already."⁸⁵ Willie Young described her need for "a sufficient job" to provide for both her unemployed sister and her "aged mother whom have not been successful enough to get old age pension yet because of furnishing sufficient proof of her age. She is a widow." Young, who was also a widow, deplored Kingsbury management's practice of firing female breadwinners while employing multiple members of the same family. She wrote:

In some cases there are four or five of one family working there, man wife son and daughters. And when it become[s] nessecery to lay some one off they don't look on the human side of life. They lay off single women and let the woman and her husband work. Instead of laying off the woman who have someone to support her.⁸⁶

Young and others argued that their government should provide responsible, capable Americans—men and women—with the means to earn enough money to meet their financial obligations.⁸⁷

Kingsbury Ordnance Plant Folder 1, box 67, FEPC-NARA.

⁸⁴Hattie Gardner to Fair Employment Practices Committee, September 15, 1942, Gary, Indiana, Kingsbury Ordnance Plant Folder 1, box 67, FEPC-NARA; Ruth Strickland to President Franklin D. Roosevelt, August 27, 1943, Gary, Indiana, Kingsbury Ordnance Plant Folder 1, box 67, FEPC-NARA.

⁸⁵Mrs. F. H. Woods to Eleanor Roosevelt, July 31, 1942, Gary, Indiana, Kingsbury Ordnance Plant Folder 2, box 67, FEPC-NARA; Willie Young to Fair Employment Practices Region VI Office, June 7, 1943, Gary, Indiana, Kingsbury Ordnance Plant Folder 2, box 67, FEPC-NARA.

⁸⁶Willie Young to Fair Employment Practices Region VI Office, June 7, 1943, Gary, Indiana, Kingsbury Ordnance Plant Folder 2, box 67, FEPC-NARA.

⁸⁷This was perhaps the earliest instance in which working women would have demanded that the government provide them a "family wage," typically a man's claim and frequently out of reach to African Americans. Historian Alice Kessler-Harris argues that the war accelerated the dismantling of the logic of the family wage as a male prerogative because women were increasingly providing for their families in what had previously been men's jobs. Alice Kessler-Harris,

Women also referenced their responsible local citizenship, believing that their civic-mindedness benefited their communities and their country and earned them the right to desirable employment. "I have lived in Gary for the past 18 years," Ruth Strickland wrote to FDR.⁸⁸ Mamie Johnson expressed a similar commitment to her community: "I live in Gary for 16 and a half years never has been in no kind of truble. I lived here at this address for 12 years and [I have] never caused any trouble in the community."⁸⁹ Ethel Stewart indicated that her husband had been a taxpayer in LaPorte County for thirty-five years; Merle Stokes Dunston explained that she was a twenty-year resident of and taxpayer in Gary as well as "an alert member of this community—active in its organizations, staff assistant volunteer of its Red Cross, speaker at its Forums on its Civilian Defense Committee and Disaster Preparedness Committee."⁹⁰ Pernellia Hull referenced her patriotic consumerism in her workplace rights claim. "I buy stamps and war bonds as far as I am able to help my country win this war," she explained, and thus, "I should be given a fair chance to do my part of work in the defense plant."⁹¹

Some complainants argued that their desire to work should outweigh their health problems, rejecting plant rationale that any physical limitations disqualified them from employment at Kingsbury. In her letter to the FEPC, Willie Young explained that constant standing aggravated her back problem. She was fired for asking to be transferred to a position where she could sit down, even though "at my age plus being in a certain state of life," standing all day was too difficult.⁹² Young asked the FEPC to secure her a less taxing position at Kingsbury. Leila White

A Woman's Wage: Historical Meanings & Social Consequences (Lexington, Ky., 1990), 94.

⁸⁸Ruth Strickland to President Franklin D. Roosevelt, August 27, 1943, Gary, Indiana, Kingsbury Ordnance Plant Folder 1, box 67, FEPC-NARA.

⁸⁹Mamie Johnson to President Franklin D. Roosevelt, LaPorte, Indiana, May 16, 1942, Kingsbury Ordnance Plant Folder 1, box 67, FEPC-NARA.

⁹⁰Ethel Stewart to Eleanor Roosevelt, March 20, 1942, Gary, Indiana, Kingsbury Ordnance Plant Folder 2, box 67, FEPC-NARA; Merle Stokes Dunston to Robert Weaver, FEPC Executive Secretary, February 18, 1942, LaPorte, Indiana, Kingsbury Ordnance Plant Folder 1, box 67, FEPC-NARA.

⁹¹Pernellia Hull to President Franklin D. Roosevelt, February 16, 1942, Gary, Indiana, Kingsbury Ordnance Plant Folder 1, box 67, FEPC-NARA.

expressed similar difficulty with the physicality of factory work. She was fired after she and her supervisor “had a little misunderstanding because of my not standing on the floor. [A]t that particular time I did not feel well to stand all day on my feet.”⁹³ In her letter to the FEPC, Kathryn Webb, a matron at Kingsbury, described her supervisor’s unwillingness to accommodate her physical limitations:

[I] tried to get transferred to another line of work (operating dept) for over two months after being advised by my doctor, the scrubbing and waxing floors was too strenuous for me, as I’ve had one of my ovaries operated on, and the heavy lifting and mopping was causing me severe pains.⁹⁴

In her complaint, fifty-four-year-old Annie Kendrick explained that she had been unable to obtain even a matron job at Kingsbury because she was perceived to be overweight. “The lady down at kingsbury employment told me that I was to heavy for the job well I was not as large as she was at least I am built in proportion to my high 5’7”1/2 weight about 200.”⁹⁵ These women asked for the opportunity to prove themselves in jobs where their particular health issues would not impede their performance. They referenced their physical attributes not to minimize them, but to ask the government to compel their employer to accommodate them.

African American women workers responded to the discrepancy between their perceptions of fair treatment and the reality of work at Kingsbury through appeals to their union, their president, and the FEPC. None of these yielded meaningful results. FEPC officials knew that the AFL did little to help aggrieved black workers, admitting that their agency, not the union, stood as black workers’ first line of defense.⁹⁶

⁹²Willie Young to Fair Employment Practices Region VI Office, June 7, 1943, Gary, Indiana, Kingsbury Ordnance Plant Folder 2, box 67, FEPC-NARA.

⁹³Leila White to Harry Baron, FEPC Administrative Assistant, n.d., Gary, Indiana, Kingsbury Ordnance Plant Folder 1, box 67, FEPC-NARA.

⁹⁴Kathryn Webb to Fair Employment Practices Committee Region VI Office, May 14, 1942, Gary, Indiana, Kingsbury Ordnance Plant Folder 1, box 67, FEPC-NARA.

⁹⁵Annie Kendrick to Fair Employment Practices Committee Region VI, October 14, 1943, Gary, Indiana, Kingsbury Ordnance Plant Folder 2, box 67, FEPC-NARA.

Yet over and over, the FEPC answered women's handwritten claims with form letters urging them to reapply at Kingsbury or elsewhere. Women received one of four types of responses: that Kingsbury had hired many black workers and thus proving race discrimination would be impossible; that the FEPC was doing its best to open jobs at Kingsbury for qualified African American workers; that the employer's actions seemed unfair, but not racist; and—if the agency had asked Kingsbury to defend itself—that the worker had been fired or denied a job because, as Laura Washington Cyrus was told, “her services were unsatisfactory as far as her work with this firm was concerned.”⁹⁷ In response to her complaint, Irene Marks received one of these standard replies:

The records of this office indicate that the Kingsbury plant has already employed a number of Negroes and that it has committed itself to employ others. I suggest, therefore, that you continue your applications at the plant and also at the Employment Services office in your vicinity.⁹⁸

In meetings between FEPC and Kingsbury officials, plant managers claimed that while they opposed race discrimination, they could not desegregate more jobs without risking a decline in factory output. “The production records of the negro lines have not been equal to those of the white lines,” explained the plant personnel director in 1943, who blamed the discrepancy on “a higher degree of absenteeism, lack of punctuality, and generally sloppy work habits among negro workers.”⁹⁹ The FEPC could only attempt to persuade officials otherwise. The commission's overall lack of power was compounded by tremendous pressure on the federal government to maintain industrial production. Thus, Todd & Brown set its own policies with impunity.

⁹⁶Ruth Strickland to President Franklin D. Roosevelt, August 27, 1943, Gary, Indiana, Kingsbury Ordnance Plant Folder 1, box 67, FEPC-NARA.

⁹⁷F. E. LeBaron, Labor Relations Division, Todd & Brown, to George M. Johnson, July 28, 1942, Kingsbury, Indiana, Kingsbury Ordnance Plant Folder 1, box 67, FEPC-NARA.

⁹⁸Robert C. Weaver, FEPC, to Irene Marks, March 29, 1942, Kingsbury, Indiana, Kingsbury Ordnance Plant Folder 2, box 67, FEPC-NARA.

⁹⁹Joy Schultz to Elmer W. Henderson, December 18, 1943, re: Conference with Col. Schubart,

When the war ended in August 1945, Kingsbury officials began the process of shutting down the plant. Black women workers returned to their home communities and found that their wartime opportunities for high-paying factory jobs had been fleeting. Corinne, a high school senior in 1945, recalled that postwar prosperity was not shared equally by Gary residents: "The mills were booming, the stores on Broadway were remodeling, the returning soldiers were using the G. I. Bill to purchase homes, and everyone was hoping to buy a new car and replace their worn out appliances." While young white women in Gary were hired as secretaries and retail clerks, black women were all but shut out of those jobs. Corinne eventually found work behind the counter in the canteen of a steel mill, as a housemaid, and as a school janitor.¹⁰⁰ By 1950, 60 percent of all employed black women nationwide were in institutional and private household service jobs, compared with 16 percent of white working women. Only 5 percent of black women workers were in clerical or sales jobs; 41 percent were domestic servants in private homes.¹⁰¹

After the war, the racial animosity that had plagued northwest Indiana for decades reared up with renewed ferocity.¹⁰² In 1945, several hundred white high school students in Gary boycotted their classes to protest school desegregation.¹⁰³ Even as schools were forcibly desegregated in the 1950s, residential patterns created de facto segregation, and the new proximities between blacks and whites created by urban renewal only ignited new conflicts.¹⁰⁴ The town of LaPorte also saw racial strife. In 1963, a group of African Americans tested a new statewide ban on race discrimination in state-licensed bars and restaurants. Their attempted "walk-ins" were met with locked doors, assaults with beer bottles, and gun-wielding tavern owners.¹⁰⁵

Commanding Officer and Mr. Hodgins, Kingsbury Ordnance Plant Personnel Director, December 18, 1943, Kingsbury Ordnance Plant Folder 2, box 67, FEPC-NARA.

¹⁰⁰Marcy Weinstein, "Fulfilling a Dream," in James B. Lane, ed., *Steel Shavings: Work Experiences in the Calumet Region* 7 (1981), 11-12.

¹⁰¹Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow*, 235, 256-57.

¹⁰²Postwar Gary also saw massive labor strife and a rise in crime and divorce rates. James B. Lane, "Anxious Years," in James B. Lane, ed., *Steel Shavings: The Postwar Period in the Calumet Region, 1945-1955* 14 (1988), 1.

¹⁰³Lane, ed., *Steel Shavings* 37 (2006), 169-73; Mohl and Betten, *Steel City*, 59.

¹⁰⁴Leroy Henderson, "Trying to Join the Cub Scouts," in James B. Lane, ed., *Steel Shavings: Race-relations in the Calumet Region: During the 1960s* 6 (1980), 1.

Gary blacks fought postwar racism through a new vanguard community organization, the Gary Urban League (GUL). Founded in 1945, the GUL emphasized integration and colorblindness as the hallmarks of racial equality. Far from the Kingsbury women's claims that equality could be flexible and self-defined, the GUL fought to open jobs "on the basis of merit without respect to race or non-occupational qualifications."¹⁰⁶ In a 1950 speech to the Gary Welfare Council, GUL executive director Clifford Minton justified expanding workplace opportunities for blacks by appealing to the bottom line:

Business enterprises and other institutions can never reach their highest efficiency in production, sales and service, without objective methods for selecting and upgrading workers. . . . Each year, Gary loses some of its best prospective negro citizens, because the normal channels of employment are not open to negro high school and college graduates.¹⁰⁷

The GUL chipped away at segregation in schools, jobs, and public spaces, achieving most of its goals by the 1960s. In the same decade, however, Gary was devastated by seismic shifts in the global economy.¹⁰⁸ The city experienced industrial disinvestment, white flight, and a declining quality of life by the time black residents first outnumbered whites in 1970. Gary's black population rose to power just as the city entered its most troubled era.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁵"Trouble in La Porte," July 8, 1963, *Gary Post-Tribune*, in Lane, ed., *Steel Shavings* 6 (1980), 5.

¹⁰⁶Clifford E. Minton address to Gary Urban League, "Indiana's Past, Present, Future," 1956, pp. 1, 4, folder 1, box 2, Clifford Minton Papers.

¹⁰⁷Clifford E. Minton address to Gary Welfare Council, Gary YMCA, October 16, 1950, re: "Essential Factors in a Democratic Society," folder 4, box 2, Clifford Minton Papers. The Urban League held several oversubscribed trainings for clerical workers in 1959. Gary Urban League Clerical Workshop, 1959, folder 33, box 3, Clifford Minton Papers; "Urban League Sponsors Two Workshops for Clerical Workers," *Gary Post-Tribune*, February 13, 1959, folder 33, box 3, Clifford Minton Papers.

¹⁰⁸Mohl and Betten, *Steel City*, 7.

¹⁰⁹Lane, ed., *Steel Shavings* 37 (2006), 223-24; Ed Mores, "Automation," in Lane, ed., *Steel Shavings* 7 (1981), 15; Petronia Radcliffe, "Store Closings," in James B. Lane, ed., *Steel Shavings: Life in the Calumet Region: During the 1970s* 9 (1983), 15; Mohl and Betten, *Steel City*, 6. On postwar Gary, see Andrew Hurley, *Environmental Inequalities: Class, Race, and Industrial Pollution in Gary, Indiana, 1945-1980* (Chapel Hill, N. C., 1995); Sandra L. Barnes, *The Cost of*

Perhaps ironically, black women workers had put forward bold demands in years that also saw a tremendous nationwide impetus toward labor discipline, cooperation, and productivity. The Second World War both reconfigured people's sense of belonging to the nation—empowering them to link their rights as workers, citizens, and family members—and created millions of new jobs that needed workers. African American women perceived an inherent flexibility in the FEPC mandates. They believed that their rights were partly defined by comparison to their male and white female counterparts. But they also argued that another essential element of fairness could only be measured in personal terms. They laid claim to their new government-protected rights vis-a-vis their powerful employers by referencing their status as citizens deserving of equality of opportunity, as women who had sacrificed heavily, and as individuals with their own abilities and limitations.

The workplace rights claims of blacks and women alike got new teeth in 1964 when Title VII of the Civil Rights Act outlawed workplace discrimination based upon race and sex.¹¹⁰ In its wake, Congress, the courts, and activists came to define equality in terms of access to what men and whites already had. The demands black women workers levied upon their government in the 1940s—that equality should guarantee desirable jobs to patriotic citizens regardless of their race or sex, and that fairness should be measured according a worker's personal circumstances and economic status within her family—became much more difficult to justify in the postwar era of federal regulation and court decisions. The power of the Kingsbury women's personal appeals—which called for equality and fairness in equal measures—diminished even as state power to enforce anti-discrimination policies expanded.



Being Poor: A Comparative Study of Life in Poor Urban Neighborhoods in Gary, Indiana (Albany, N. Y., 2005); Edward Greer, *Big Steel: Black Politics and Corporate Power in Gary, Indiana* (New York, 1979).

¹¹⁰Cynthia Harrison, *On Account of Sex: The Politics of Women's Issues, 1945-1968* (Berkeley, Cal., 1988); MacLean, *Freedom is Not Enough*; Serena Mayeri, *Reasoning from Race: Feminism, Law, and the Civil Rights Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass., 2011); Skrentny, *Minority Rights Revolution*.