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# CRESCENT CITY RADICALS: BLACK WORKING PEOPLE AND THE CIVIL WAR ERA IN NEW ORLEANS

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by

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**Abstract**

Crescent City Radicals: Black Working People and the Civil War Era in New Orleans

James W. Illingworth

This study examines the rise and fall of an alliance between black working people and the Republican Party in Civil War-era New Orleans. Between 1862, when Union troops invaded and occupied New Orleans, and 1877, when Reconstruction came to an end, the making and unmaking of this alliance had a crucial impact on the history of the Crescent City. In particular, the fate of this coalition was tied to the outcome of three of the central contests of the Civil War era: the military conflict between the Union and the Confederacy, the fight against slavery, and the struggle to determine on what basis Louisiana would return to the Union. This study shows how cooperation between African American working people and the Union army in occupied New Orleans contributed to the success of federal strategy in the lower Mississippi Valley, and how this collaboration led to the collapse of slavery in the city and its hinterland. Turning to the period after the Civil War, this study demonstrates how the freedpeople became the rank and file of a social movement that defeated the conservative policies of Presidential Reconstruction and elevated a Radical state government to control of Louisiana. Finally, this study reveals how growing social conflict between African American working people and the elite leadership of the Republican Party weakened the coalition's hold on politics in New Orleans and allowed a resurgence of white terrorism, spelling doom for Reconstruction in the city.

This study focuses on the impact of black popular political consciousness on the rise and fall of this coalition. It begins by examining African American politics in antebellum New Orleans, and shows how black working people, free and unfree, were able to construct an embryonic civil society, despite the efforts of the white elite. Turning to the Civil War years, this study demonstrates that the arrival of Union troops in New Orleans created a degree of political freedom without precedent in the city's history, and allowed a much fuller development of black popular consciousness. As African American women and men gained in confidence, they helped to drive forward both the federal war effort and the struggle against slavery, forcing the Republican Party to adopt more radical goals and strategies. This dynamic persisted during Reconstruction, when a confident and combative social movement among black urban working people came to form the activist and electoral base for the Radical Republican state government of Louisiana. As Reconstruction progressed, however, the militancy of African Americans workers became unpalatable to elite Republicans, who increasingly sided with employers during the labor strife of the 1870s. Developments in the political consciousness of black working people therefore played a role in the retreat from Reconstruction.

By focusing on New Orleans, this study reveals the particular experiences of the urban South in the Civil War era. It shows how the city provided a particularly conducive environment for the development of black political consciousness in this period. Before the Civil War, the needs of the urban-commercial economy forced slavery to adapt in several ways, introducing innovations such as slave hiring. These

developments gave black working people much greater autonomy than was possible in the southern countryside, and permitted the emergence of a stronger and more politically sophisticated African American community. This tendency would continue to exert an influence on the trajectory of social contestation during the years of Civil War and Reconstruction. Black working people from New Orleans became an important connection between the Republican-led national government and the rural African American population, and thus played an especially important role in coalition-building efforts. Following emancipation, urban working people exerted a particularly powerful influence over the politics of Reconstruction thanks to their collective experience of work as wage laborers.

## Acknowledgements

I have accumulated a great many debts of gratitude during the many years it took to complete this dissertation. Among the largest are those I owe to my two advisors, Bruce Levine and Dana Frank. Since I first met him almost fifteen years ago, Bruce has been a constant source of intellectual inspiration, and it is no exaggeration to say that his classes on the Civil War and Reconstruction, which I took as an undergraduate exchange student all those years ago, have played a major role in determining the course of my life since then. I met Dana a little later in my academic career, but her impact has been no less profound. Dana has consistently challenged me as a writer and a historian, and pushed me to see the past from perspectives that I might otherwise have neglected. I feel extremely fortunate to have benefited from the mentorship of two such generous teachers and scholars.

Although it has been several years since I was resident there, the scholarly community at the University of California, Santa Cruz, will always have a special place in my heart. In particular, I owe a special debt of thanks to David Brundage and Catherine Jones for agreeing, at fairly short notice, to serve on my dissertation committee. Going back a little further in time, Jon Beecher played a very important role in encouraging me to apply to the program and making me feel welcome when I arrived. I was fortunate to be part of a lively and talented cohort of graduate students during my time in Santa Cruz; Sara Smith deserves a special mention for the support she provided during the final stages of my dissertation in particular. Stephanie Hinkle

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# Introduction

## The Cook and the General

In December of 1862, Marianne Edwards, a northern-born white woman who now called New Orleans her home, wrote to her father describing a three-way struggle between her friend Mr. Brenford, one of his slaves, and the occupying Union Army under Gen. Benjamin Butler. Edwards recounted how the enslaved woman working in Brenford's household had taken advantage of an order from Butler "that all slaves bringing information of the disloyalty of their masters should have their freedom." In Edwards's telling of the story, the enslaved woman "went off and told Butler that her master had arms in his house." When a squad of Union soldiers arrived to search the property, however, they found nothing. A few weeks later, the woman went to Butler once more and told him that her master had buried the weapons in his garden. According to Edwards, Brenford "had been digging and making a garden" to pass the time under northern occupation, and his slave "thought it would annoy him to have it all dug up." Again, the Yankees found no evidence of wrongdoing. Eventually, the woman informed Union authorities that Brenford had been involved in an arson attack, and Butler finally had him arrested. To add insult to injury, the former slave returned to Brenford's house with a permit from Butler and removed a "bed and pillows…and three trunks full of clothes," according to Marianne Edwards.

Last seen, the newly free woman was working as a vendor, selling "cakes and such like to the [northern] soldiers."[1]

As this story shows, the northern military occupation of New Orleans, which began in the spring of 1862 under the command of Benjamin Butler, initiated a period of profound social and political upheaval. During the war years, the Union army and black working people engaged in a mutual struggle against the planter elite and its allies that would ultimately produce both the defeat of the Confederacy and the destruction of slavery. Later in the 1860s, Republicans and their new allies would engineer Louisiana's return to the Union, and build a loyal state government that became a central player in the violence and volatility of Reconstruction. At times, black working people participated in these changes in ways that were without historical precedent, as when thousands of black women and men came to serve in the northern war effort, or when African American men won the right to vote for the first time. On other occasions, black working people endured moments of ugly hatred like the race riot of July 1866 or the armed rising of the White Leagues in 1873. As the actions of the enslaved woman in Marianne Edwards' letter show, however, black working people frequently met the challenges of these years with inventive and courageous forms of political action.

The collaboration between the black woman and the Union army in Marianne Edwards's letter shines a light on the question of historical agency in the Civil War

[1] Marianne Edwards to "Dear Father," December 26, 1862, in Edwards, Marianne Letters, Mss. 1850, Louisiana and Lower Mississippi Valley Collections, Louisiana State University Archives, Baton Rouge, La (hereafter, LLMVC).

era. It suggests that, in order to grapple with the big questions of the Civil War period—why the North won and the South lost; who freed the slaves; why and how Reconstruction rose and fell—we need to place the relationship between black working people and the Republican party at the center of our analyses. During the 1860s and 1870s, the northern elite, acting through the Republican Party, faced a series of historic challenges with which it was unprepared to deal alone. The invasion and conquest of the Confederacy, the destruction of slavery, and the return of the seceding states to the Union would require the participation of political forces much broader than the narrow layer of bankers, merchants, and manufacturers who ultimately controlled politics in the free states. Various groups from the popular classes—slaves, free people of color, white farmers and urban working people—shared a real or perceived interest in some or all of these changes. The process through which these contentious factions became articulated into a powerful force for social and political transformation is one of the central stories of the Civil War era.

Marianne Edwards's letter shows how the alliance between black working people and the Republican-led national government emerged from seemingly innocuous acts of resistance and self-preservation and yet also had the power to shape events of national importance at this decisive historical moment. When the anonymous African American woman informed on her master she was not only acting to free herself and her husband from slavery but also apprising Butler's occupying forces of a potential threat to the northern presence in the city. Both sides gained something from the arrangement. Tens of thousands of black men and women

made similar calculations in Civil War-era New Orleans, and the social and political transformations of these years would have been impossible if they had not. Without allies among working people of color, the Republican government would have been unable to defeat the Confederacy, overcome slavery, return Louisiana to the Union, and establish a loyal government during Reconstruction. Neither northern officials like Benjamin Butler, nor ordinary black working people such as the slave woman in this letter, had mapped out this alliance in advance as a conscious political strategy; they developed it over time in response to the contingencies and unforeseen developments of revolutionary upheaval. And this was not a stable alliance, in which the interests of all sides aligned perfectly. There would be continual frictions, misunderstandings, and even open conflict between black working people and their partners in the Republican Party. Indeed, the story of the Civil War era in New Orleans is as much about the *un*making as it is the making of this alliance. Whichever side of the process we examine, however, we must see the relationship between the cook and the general as central to the history of this period.

The story of the Civil War era in New Orleans is also the story of the political awakening of black working people. It is the story of how an oppressed and exploited social group became aware of its position in southern society, developed a sense of its interests, allies, and enemies, and then acted individually and collectively in line with this emerging worldview. In order to tell this story, we have to step back in time to the years before secession and excavate the origins of black popular politics in antebellum New Orleans. Mr. Brenford, the slaveholder in Marianne Edwards's letter,

may have seen the actions of his slave as a bolt from the blue, but they were actually the continuation of an organizing tradition that had its roots in slavery times. In order to understand the story of black political awakening, moreover, we have to employ a broad understanding of what it means to act politically. The enslaved woman in our story did not vote, join a trade union, or fight in a Union army regiment—she claimed to have overheard loose talk in her owner's household, had his vegetable patch destroyed, and escaped with some of his furniture. Her actions were, nonetheless, a contribution to her own emancipation and to the northern war effort. In order to understand how and why this African American woman acted in the ways she did, furthermore, we need to understand the ways in which class, gender, and race intersected in the lived experience and political activism of black working people.

New Orleans provided a distinctive context for the political awakening of black working people and the development of their alliance with the Republican Party. Urban society was particularly conducive to the emergence of African American popular politics. The needs of the urban-commercial economy created groups of working people who enjoyed a degree of autonomy and independence that was highly unusual in the Old South. In the years before the Civil War, black men and women seized on the opportunities inherent in this situation to develop a picture of the world and their place in it and to assert what they saw as their economic and political interests. The urban environment continued to impact popular politics during the revolutionary years of the 1860s and 1870s. New Orleans was home to one of the largest and most sophisticated free black

populations in North America, and this community was well placed to respond to the crisis of secession and war. Pressure from free men of color played a crucial role in convincing northern authorities to enlist the first black units in the Union Army, for example. Once the Confederacy had been defeated, and a free labor system began to emerge in southern Louisiana, the distinctive urban-commercial environment of New Orleans gave black working people the economic leverage to play a major role in the political struggles of the Reconstruction years.

Herein, I have used the term "Radicalism" to describe the coalition between black working people and the Republican Party. In so doing, I have chosen to deploy the term in a sense that is related to, but broader than, the currently accepted usage as a description of the left wing of the Republican Party. Historians generally recognize as Radicals those Republicans who, during the Civil War and Reconstruction, were most determined to destroy slavery and build a new social order in the South.[2] As David Montgomery and Charles Post have argued, moreover, many Radicals also championed, or emerged directly from, the class of rising manufacturers in the free states.[3] When Radicals such as Charles Sumner, Thaddeus Stevens, and Benjamin Wade pushed the Republican leadership toward measures such as emancipation, enlistment of African American troops, land redistribution, and the post-war

[2] On the Radical Republicans, see Eric Foner, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men: The Ideology of the Republican Party before the Civil War* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 103-148; Hans L. Trefousse, *The Radical Republicans: Lincoln's Vanguard for Racial Justice* (New York: Knopf, 1969).
[3] David Montgomery, *Beyond Equality: Labor and the Radical Republicans, 1862-1872* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Publishing, 1967 [repr. 1981]); Charles Post, *The American Road to Capitalism: Studies in Class Structure, Economic Development and Political Conflict, 1620-1877* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2012).

enfranchisement of black men, they demonstrated that, among the representatives of the northern elite, they were the most enthusiastic advocates of an antislavery, anti-Confederate alliance with African American working people. Indeed, as Montgomery and other historians have shown, the Radicals were also willing to build political alliances with the emerging labor reform movement and revolutionary Irish nationalists in the North.[4] I have therefore used the term "Radical" to describe activists and politicians who advocated for and built an alliance between the elite constituencies of the Republican Party leadership and the popular classes of the Civil War-era North and South.

By telling the story of black working people and their relationship to the Republican Party, "Crescent City Radicals" engages with one of the central questions of Civil War historiography: who freed the slaves? This debate originally surfaced almost twenty years ago. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, Barbara J. Fields had used the PBS television documentary "The Civil War," and the accompanying book, to make a powerful case that, contra the popular image of Abraham Lincoln as the "Great Emancipator," the slaves were the agents of their own liberation. By fleeing to Union lines whenever they had the chance, Fields argued, slaves defied the desire of most white Americans to keep the war centered on the question of national unity. Enslaved African Americans therefore "taught the nation that it must place the

[4] See, for example, John B. Jentz and Richard Schneirov, *Chicago in the Age of Capital: Class, Politics, and Democracy during the Civil War and Reconstruction* (Urbana, Chicago, and Springfield: University of Illinois Press, 2012).

abolition of slavery at the head of its agenda."[5] Responding to Fields and other proponents of the "self-emancipation thesis,"[6] James McPherson urged historians not to discount the role of Lincoln and the Republicans in the downfall of slavery. "By challenging the 'myth' that Lincoln freed the slaves, proponents of the self-emancipation thesis are in danger of creating another myth—that he had little to do with it," McPherson worried.[7]

The revisionist historians such as Fields with whom McPherson took issue were, of course, attempting to rectify decades of neglect—or worse—of the role of African Americans in the Civil War era. Before the 1950s and 1960s, the racist assumptions of the Dunning School had dominated mainstream historiography on this period. In the early twentieth century, William Dunning, a professor at Columbia University in New York, had advanced the thesis that unscrupulous northern adventurers manipulated barbarous and childlike black southerners in order to take control of the prostrated post-war South and strip it of its wealth.[8] As Claude Bowers put it in one of the most popular examples of the Dunning School, African Americans were "loyal creatures" that demonstrated "childlike faith" in their former owners until

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[5] Barbara J. Fields, "Who Freed the Slaves?" in Geoffrey C. Ward (ed.) *The Civil War: An Illustrated History* (New York: Knopf, 1990), 179.

[6] McPherson mentioned Vincent Harding's work as being particularly instrumental in the emergence of the self-emancipation thesis. See Harding, *There Is a River: The Black Struggle for Freedom in America* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1981).

[7] James M. McPherson, "Who Freed the Slaves?" *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 139, no. 1 (March, 1995). For a response to McPherson from one of Fields's colleagues in the Freedmen and Southern Society Project, see Ira Berlin, "Who Freed the Slaves? Emancipation and its Meaning," in David W. Blight and Brooks R. Simpson (eds.), *Union and Emancipation: Essays on Politics and Race in the Civil War Era* (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 1997).

[8] William A. Dunning, *Reconstruction, Political and Economic, 1865-1877* (New York: Harper and Bros., 1907).

the machinations of the carpetbaggers made them "drunk with a sense of their power and importance."[9] Dunning's seminars at Columbia attracted a generation of graduate students from the South, many of whom went on to produce state-level studies of Reconstruction that supported their advisor's thesis.[10]

Even at the height of Jim Crow, however, the Dunning School had never gone unchallenged. Particularly during the 1930s and 1940s, scholars inspired by the social movements of the Depression years had attempted to construct a counter-narrative of the Civil War and Reconstruction. Most famously, W.E.B. Du Bois's *Black Reconstruction in America* returned black agency to the study of the Civil War era. Du Bois took aim at the racist scholarship of the early twentieth century in a blistering coda to his work titled "The Propaganda of History." A student in the 1930s would, Du Bois lamented, "in all probability complete his education without any idea of the part which the black race has played in America; of the tremendous moral problem of abolition; of the cause and meaning of the Civil War and the relation which Reconstruction had to democratic government and the labor movement

[9] Claude G. Bowers, *The Tragic Era: The Revolution after Lincoln* (Boston: Houghton Miflin, 1929), 47-48.
[10] W.W. Davis, *The Civil War and Reconstruction in Florida* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1913 [repr. 1964]); J.G. de Roulhac Hamilton, *Reconstruction in North Carolina* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1914); Walter L. Fleming, *Civil War and Reconstruction in Alabama* (New York: P. Smith, 1905 [repr. 1949]); J.W. Garner, *Reconstruction in Mississippi* (New York: Macmillan, 1901); Charles W. Ramsdell, *Reconstruction in Texas* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1910); Thomas S. Staples, *Reconstruction in Arkansas, 1862-1874* (Gloucester, Mass.: P. Smith, 1923 [repr. 1964]); Clara Mildred Thompson, *Reconstruction in Georgia: Economic, Social, Political, 1865-1872* (Gloucester, Mass.: P. Smith, 1915 [repr. 1964]); Ella Lonn, *Reconstruction in Louisiana after 1868* (New York: G.P. Putnam and Sons, 1918).

today."[11] *Black Reconstruction* attempted to rectify that tendency, and, in line with the character of black radicalism in the 1920s and 1930s, also placed the black freedom struggle in the context of anti-colonial struggles around the world. Following Du Bois, radical writers such as C.L.R. James, Herbert Aptheker, and James Allen made their own contributions to the historiography, all of which portrayed the slaves and freedpeople as central actors in their own liberation.[12]

As the Civil Rights Movement gathered momentum in the 1950s and 1960s, revisionism came to displace the Dunning School as the dominant paradigm in scholarship on the Civil War era. Where the Dunning School had seen the changes of the 1860s and 1870s as tragic violations of the Constitution, states' rights, and good sense, the revisionists hailed emancipation and the advent of black citizenship as inspiring victories for racial equality.[13] Indeed, the revisionists' wholesale

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[11] W.E.B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860-1880* (New York: Free Press, 1935 [repr. 1998]), 713.

[12] C.L.R. James (writing as J.R. Johnson), "Negroes in the Civil War," *New International* 9, no. 11 (Dec., 1943); James (writing as J. Meyer), "Stalinism and Negro History," *Fourth International* 10, no. 10 (Nov., 1949); James (writing as J. Meyer), "Herbert Aptheker's Distortions," *Fourth International* 10, no. 11 (Dec., 1949). In the latter two articles, James was polemicizing against the work of Communist Party historian Hebert Aptheker. See Aptheker, *The Negro in the Civil War* (New York: International Publishers, 1938); *American Negro Slave Revolts* (New York: International Publishers, 1943 [repr. 1983]); *The Negro in the Abolitionist Movement* (New York: International Publishers, 1941). For the work of another CPUSA historian, see James Allen, *Reconstruction: The Battle for Democracy, 1865-1876* (New York: International Publishers, 1937).

[13] John Hope Franklin*, Reconstruction after the Civil War* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961); Kenneth M. Stampp and Leon F. Litwack (eds.), *Reconstruction: An Anthology of Revisionist Writings* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1969); Stampp, *The Era of Reconstruction, 1865-1877* (New York, Knopf, 1965); Richard N. Current, *Reconstruction, 1865-1877* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1965); LaWanda C. and John H. Cox, *Politics, Principle, and Prejudice, 1865-1866: The Dilemma of Reconstruction America* (New York: Free Press, 1963); Joel Williamson, *After Slavery: The Negro in South Carolina during Reconstruction, 1861-1877* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1965); Benjamin Quarles, *The Negro in the Civil War* (New York: Russell and Russell,

identification with the struggle against slavery has led some commentators to refer to this scholarship as "neoabolitionist history." Part of the revisionist project involved the rehabilitation of Radical Republican leaders such as Thaddeus Stevens and Benjamin Wade who had suffered from character assassination at the hands of the Dunning School.[14] Perhaps more importantly, though, revisionist scholarship emphasized the historical agency of black people in the struggle over their own freedom. As James McPherson put it in the mid-1960s, "the belief still persists among many laymen and some historians that the slave was a passive, docile, uncomprehending recipient of freedom in 1865, and that the four and one-half million Negroes in the United States played no important or effective role in the tragic drama of civil war."[15] By the 1980s, the Neoabolitionist School had dramatically weakened the hold of such misconceptions on the historical profession, and Eric Foner's revisionist synthesis had become the seminal text on Reconstruction.[16]

The revisionist synthesis, with its stress on black agency and the progressive nature of emancipation and black civil rights, has provided a basis for further exploration of social transformation in this period. Much of the most stimulating

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1953); Eric L. McKitrick, *Andrew Johnson and Reconstruction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960); Leon F. Litwack, *Been in the Storm So Long: The Aftermath of Slavery* (New York: Vintage Books, 1980).

[14] Ralph Korngold, *Thaddeus Stevens: A Being Darkly Wise and Rudely Great* (New York: Harcourt and Brace, 1955); Hans L. Trefousse, *Benjamin Franklin Wade, Radical Republican from Ohio* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1963). See also, for example, Richard N. Current, *Those Terrible Carpetbaggers: A Reinterpretation* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).

[15] James M. McPherson, *The Negro's Civil War: How American Negroes Felt and Acted during the War for the Union* (New York: Vintage Books, 1965).

[16] Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877* (New York: Harper and Row, 1988).

recent work on the Civil War and Reconstruction has attempted to interject an awareness of gender dynamics into our understanding of the period, missing from previous work. The feminist scholarship of the last twenty or thirty years has demonstrated that altered gender relations and family structures were as significant a part of emancipation as the parallel—indeed, intertwined—transformations of labor systems and racial ideologies of this period.[17] Indeed, this literature has now demonstrated conclusively that historians of the Civil War era cannot understand any one axis of change in isolation, and must instead investigate the intersections of class, gender, and race.[18] This has profound implications for the question of who freed the

[17] Catherine Clinton and Nina Silber (eds.), *Divided Houses: Gender and the Civil War* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1992); Clinton and Silber (eds.), *Battle Scars: Gender and Sexuality in the American Civil War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006); Laura F. Edwards, *Gendered Strife and Confusion: The Political Culture of Reconstruction* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997); Edwards, *Scarlett Doesn't Live Here Anymore: Southern Women in the Civil War Era* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000); Amy Dru Stanley, *From Bondage to Contract: Wage Labor, Marriage, and the Market in the Age of Slave Emancipation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); Nancy Bercaw, *Gendered Freedoms: Race, Rights, and the Politics of the Household in the Delta, 1861-1875* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2003); Jane Turner Censer, *The Reconstruction of White Southern Womanhood, 1865-1895* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2003); Carol Faulkner, *Women's Radical Reconstruction: The Freedmen's Aid Movement* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004); Susan E. O'Donovan, *Becoming Free in the Cotton South* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2007); Hannah Rosen, *Terror in the Heart of Freedom: Citizenship, Sexual Violence, and the Meaning of Race in the Post-emancipation South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009); LeeAnn Whites, *The Civil War as a Crisis in Gender: Augusta, Georgia, 1860-1890* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1995); Whites, *Gender Matters: Civil War, Reconstruction, and the Making of the New South* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005); Stephanie McCurry, *Confederate Reckoning: Power and Politics in the Civil War South* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2010).

[18] My thinking on the concept of intersectionality has been influenced by the work of numerous feminist scholars of color. See, for example, Kimberle Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory, and Antiracist Politics," *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, no. 140 (1989); Martha Gimenez, "Marxism and Class, Gender, and Race: Rethinking the Trilogy," *Race, Gender, and Class* 8, No. 2 (2001).

slaves. It reminds us that scholars must go further than simply insisting upon the agency of African Americans in their own liberation. We must examine how the ways in which black people fought for freedom, and what they imagined freedom to be, were gendered. My own project has therefore taken particular inspiration from the work of historians such as Thavolia Glymph, Stephanie Camp, Tera Hunter, and Julie Saville, who not only cast black women as the architects of their own freedom but also highlight the ways in which transformations in gender relations and family structures affected the lives of *all* southerners—black and white, male and female.[19]

The feminist and neoabolitionist scholarship on the period of the Civil War and Reconstruction opens up space for a deeper interrogation of the question of historical agency. This literature has forced the role of ordinary southerners to the center of our narrative of war, emancipation, and reunion. It has, moreover, illuminated the ways in which race, gender, and sexuality structure the experiences and actions of men and women within subordinate social groups. With an awareness of the diversity of the cast of actors on the stage of history during this period, therefore, scholars should now be able to move beyond a problematic in which *either* Lincoln *or* the slaves played the central role in emancipation. We need to examine the

[19] Thavolia Glymph, *Out of the House of Bondage: The Transformation of the Plantation Household* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008); Stephanie M.H. Camp, *Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women and Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 2004); Tera W. Hunter, *To 'Joy My Freedom: Southern Black Women's Lives and Labors after the Civil War* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997); Julie Saville, *The Work of Reconstruction: From Slave to Wage Laborer in South Carolina, 1860-1870* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994); Noralee Frankel, *Freedom's Women: Black Women and Families in Civil War Era Mississippi* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1999); Leslie A. Schwalm, *A Hard Fight for We: Women's Transition from Slavery to Freedom in South Carolina* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997).

relationships between different groups—slaves, free people of color, Republicans, northern soldiers, poor southern whites—and ask what combination or constellation of these social and political forces led to the extraordinary changes of the mid-nineteenth century. When and why did the interests of these groups align at specific moments during the 1860s and 1870s? How can we best theorize the ways in which such an alliance or coalition came into being? How might we characterize its internal structures and the ways in which it changed over time?

In order to understand the dynamics of alliance-building in the years of Civil War and Reconstruction, we must first understand the nature of the historical processes underway in those years. In general, the post-revisionist consensus concludes that the 1860s and 1870s constituted the "Second American Revolution." In other words, the Civil War era completed the process begun in the 1760s and 1770s and led to the emergence of the United States as a modern, industrial capitalist nation state. According to James McPherson, for example, the Civil War hastened and molded the emergence of a "new America of big business, heavy industry, and capital-intensive agriculture that surpassed Britain to become the foremost industrial nation by 1880."[20] This is not to argue that the Civil War created industrial capitalism in North America, of course, merely to suggest that it facilitated the dominance of this new form of society. According to Neil Davidson, who has done more than any other

[20] James M. McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 452-453. See also McPherson, *Abraham Lincoln and the Second American Revolution* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992). McPherson took the term "Second American Revolution" from the work of Charles and Mary Beard. See, Charles A. Beard and Mary R. Beard, *The Rise of American Civilization* (New York: Macmillan, 1927).

scholar to theorize the relationships between the various revolts in the "Age of Revolution," episodes such as the English Civil War, the French Revolution, and the American Civil War were "not…about the origins and development of capitalism as a socioeconomic system but the removal of backward-looking threats to its continued existence and the overthrow of restrictions to its further expansion."[21] In the North American context, threats and obstacles to the existence and expansion of industrial capitalism included slavery (and its potential expansion into the western territories), the domination by the planter class of the federal government, the weak and fragmented state apparatus, and the continued resistance of Native Americans. The Civil War era would see a new capitalist elite overcome these challenges.

The historical writings of C.L.R. James provide an excellent example of how to theorize the relationships between different social groups in the era of the Age of Revolution. In *Black Jacobins*, James showed how the interests of plantation slaves, free people of color, and white republicans came together and diverged during the revolutionary struggles of France and Haiti in the 1790s.[22] His writings on the American Civil War, although far less thorough, expound an equally compelling framework. In a short essay on the rise of the antislavery movement, for example, James demonstrated a keen awareness of both the hierarchies of class power and the structures of historical agency within abolitionism. "The impending revolution is to

[21] Neil Davidson, *How Revolutionary Were the Bourgeois Revolutions?* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2012), p. 420. See also, Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Revolution, 1789-1848* (London: Abacus, 1962 [repr. 1977]).
[22] C.L.R. James, *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution* (New York: Vintage, 1938 [repr. 1989]).

be led by the Northern bourgeoisie. But that is the last thing that it wants to do," James noted. "By 1830 the conflict was between two sections of the ruling class based on different economies but tied together by powerful economic links." In this context, the northern elite of bankers, manufacturers, and merchants was not initially enthusiastic about the struggle against slavery: "They will not lead. *They will have to be forced to lead.*" For James, this situation explained the crucial historical agency of subordinate social groups in both the antislavery movement, and, ultimately, the Civil War. "The first standard-bearers of the struggle are the petty bourgeois democracy, organized in the Abolition movement, stimulated and sustained by the independent mass action of the Negro people," he argued.[23]

Understanding the significance of the shifting alliances between diverse social groups can also shed light on the central politico-military question of this period: why the North won the Civil War. Traditionally, historians have sought the causes of the Union victory in the immense economic superiority of the free states, in the relative merits of the political and military leaderships of either side, or in the failure of Confederate diplomacy.[24] More recently, James McPherson has emphasized the role of contingency in the outcome of the war,[25] while leading military historian Gary Gallagher has insisted on the strength of Confederate nationalism and pointed to events on the battlefield as being the ultimate arbiter of which side won the Civil

[23] James (writing as J.R. Johnson), "Negroes in the Civil War."
[24] David H. Donald (ed.), *Why the North Won the Civil War* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1960).
[25] James M. McPherson, "American Victory, American Defeat," in Gabor S. Boritt (ed.), *Why the Confederacy Lost* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).

War.[26] My own work draws inspiration from those scholars who have seen the ability (or inability) of each side to maintain a successful political and social coalition as crucial to its military fortunes. Drew Gilpin Faust, for example, has shown how the Confederacy's failure to maintain the morale of southern women contributed to an overall decline in willingness to continue the fight. Examining the process from different angles, Bruce Levine, Armstead Robinson, and William Freehling have shown how the planters' republic failed to win the loyalty of enslaved black people.[27] Joseph Glatthar, meanwhile, has illuminated the military significance of the alliance between black southern troops and white northern officers in the Union Army.[28]

Similarly, a number of scholars have studied how the changing relationship between the Republican Party and black and white working people helps explain the fall of Reconstruction in the 1870s.[29] In *Beyond Equality*, for example, David

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[26] Gary W. Gallagher, *Becoming Confederates: Paths to a New National Loyalty* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2013); Gallagher, "'Upon their Success Hang Momentous Interests': Generals," in Boritt (ed.), *Why the Confederacy Lost*.

[27] Drew Gilpin Faust, *Mothers of Invention: Women of the Slaveholding South in the American Civil War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996); Bruce Levine, *Confederate Emancipation: Southern Plans to Free and Arm Slaves during the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007); Armstead L. Robinson, *Bitter Fruits of Bondage: The Demise of Slavery and the Collapse of the Confederacy* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2005); William W. Freehling, *The South Vs. The South: How Anti-Confederate Southerners Shaped the Course of the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

[28] Joseph T. Glatthar, *Forged in Battle: The Civil War Alliance of Black Soldiers and White Officers* (New York: Meridian Books, 1991).

[29] Since the 1950s, C. Vann Woodward's *The Strange Career of Jim Crow* has provided the dominant interpretation of the retreat from Reconstruction. Woodward argued that the southern elite turned to segregation in the 1890s as a way of splitting an emerging populist alliance between black and white farmers and laborers; northerners went along with this because they shared the white supremacist views of the southern elite. See Woodward, *The Strange Career of Jim Crow* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1955). For other scholars who have focused on racism as the cause of the end of Reconstruction, see, for example, Michael Perman, *The Road to Redemption: Southern Politics, 1869-1879* (Chapel Hill:

Montgomery showed how an alliance between rising manufacturers, urban professionals, elements of the labor movement, and Irish nationalists allowed the success of the Radical Republicans in the early years of Reconstruction. Using Chicago as a case study, John Jentz and David Schneirov have recently demonstrated the value of Montgomery's thesis: that city's Radical municipal government of the late 1860s did rest on an uneasy coalition of the sort described in *Beyond Equality*. The work of Montgomery and Jentz and Schneirov also suggests one of the reasons for the crisis of Radicalism in the 1870s, and hence the subsequent retreat from Reconstruction. By the early 1870s, as Montgomery noted, "Radicalism had been tried and found wanting: by labor reformers because the support it provided working-class needs was at best ambivalent, by manufacturers because it failed to provide an adequate barrier to working-class pretensions." In Chicago, this manifested in the highly ambiguous response of the Radicals to the growing movement for the eight-hour day, and subsequent general strike. Returning to the national level, Heather Cox Richardson has suggested that Republican concerns over the militancy of their

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University of North Carolina Press, 1984); Joel Williamson, *The Crucible of Race: Black-White Relations in the American South since Emancipation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984); George Fredrickson, *The Inner Civil War: Northern Intellectuals and the Crisis of the Union* (New York: Harper and Row, 1965) and Fredrickson, *The Black Image in the White Mind: The Debate on Afro-American Character and Destiny, 1817-1914* (New York: Harper and Row, 1971). Some historians have posited a reaction against corruption, the search for southern votes, or fatigue with continued military occupation, as reasons for northern abandonment of black civil rights in the South. See, for example, Vincent P. DeSantis, *Republicans Face the Southern Question: The New Departure Years, 1877-1897* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1959); Stanley P. Hirshon, *Farewell to the Bloody Shirt: Northern Republicans and the Southern Negro, 1877-1893* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1962); William Gillette, *Retreat from Reconstruction, 1869-1879* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1979); Xi Wang, *The Trial of Democracy: Black Suffrage and Northern Republicans, 1860-1910* (Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 1997).

erstwhile allies among black and white working people led to a resurgence of racism in the North and a consequent abandonment of Federal involvement in the South.[30]

If the growing militancy of working people played a role in the fall of Reconstruction, historians of the period need to understand how the consciousness of women and men from the popular classes changes and develops over time. This question was the focus of the "new social history," a generation of scholarship inspired, in part, by E.P. Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class*.[31] The rise of the women's movement and its socialist-feminist wing produced a critique of the absence of gender in Thompson's account.[32] But these generally sympathetic feminist critiques do not obscure the lasting influence of Thompson's work on the development of labor history, particularly in the United States. Indeed, Thompson's resolve to resist economic determinism in the study of class consciousness, and to focus on themes of culture and community, inspired a whole generation of scholars in what became known as the "new social history." Before the "cultural turn" of the 1990s, this research agenda dominated the American historical profession for at least two decades, and it did a great deal to advance our understanding of popular

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[30] Montgomery, *Beyond Equality*, p. 368; Jentz and Schneirov, *Chicago in the Age of Capital*; Heather Cox Richardson, *The Death of Reconstruction: Race, Labor, and Politics in the Post-Civil War North, 1865-1900* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 2001). For an account of how class divisions within the Radical coalition impacted Reconstruction in one southern city, see Michael W. Fitzgerald, *Urban Emancipation: Popular Politics in Reconstruction Mobile, 1860-1890* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2002).

[31] E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London: Pelican, 1963 [repr. 1986]).

[32] See, for example, Joan Wallach Scott, "Women in *The Making of the English Working Class*," in Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999) and Anna Clark, *The Struggle for the Breeches: Gender and the Making of the British Working Class* (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 1995).

consciousness in the nineteenth century in particular. Historians studying the northern states used the social history methodology to examine the ways in which working women and men experienced, understood, and (in some cases) resisted the changes in their lives brought about by the industrial revolution.[33] In a parallel development, scholars also developed a subfield of social history dedicated to the study of the African American experience under slavery.[34]

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[33] It is, of course, impossible to do justice to this incredibly rich literature in a single footnote. Nevertheless: see, for example, Mary H. Blewett, *Men, Women, and Work: Class, Gender, and Protest in the New England Shoe Industry, 1780-1910* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988); John Bodnar, *Immigration and Industrialization: Ethnicity in an American Mill Town, 1870-1840* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1977); George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World* (New York: Basic Books, 1994); Lizabeth Cohen, *Making a New Deal: Industrial Workers in Chicago, 1919-1939* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990); Alan Dawley, *Class and Community: The Industrial Revolution in Lynn* (Cambridge, Mass.: Cambridge University Press, 1976); Dirk Hoerder, *Struggle a Hard Battle: Essays on Working-Class Immigrants* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1986); Paul Johnson, *A Shopkeeper's Millenium: Society and Revivals in Rochester, New York, 1815-1837* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1978); Alice Kessler-Harris, *Out to Work: A History of Wage-Earning Women in the United States* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1982); David Montgomery, *Workers' Control in America: Studies in the History of Work, Technology, and Labor Struggles* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1979); Roy Rosenzweig, *Eight Hours for What We Will: Workers and Leisure in an Industrial City, 1870-1920* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983); Mary P. Ryan, *Cradle of the Middle Class: The Family in Oneida County, New York, 1790-1865* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981); George Sanchez, *Becoming Mexican-American: Ethnicity, Culture, and Identity in Chicano Los Angeles: 1900-1945* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1993); Christine Stansell, *City of Women: Sex and Class in New York, 1789-1860* (New York: Knopf, 1986); Joe W. Trotter, Jr., *Black Milwaukee: The Making of an Industrial Proletariat, 1915-1945* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1985); Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, *A Midwife's Tale: The Life of Martha Ballard Based on Her Diary, 1785-1812* (New York: Vintage, 1991); Sean Wilentz, *Chants Democratic: New York City and the Rise of the American Working Class, 1788-1850* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1984).

[34] John Blassingame, *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1979); James Borchert, *Alley Life in Washington: Family, Community, Religion, and Folklife in the City, 1850-1970* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1980); Barbara J. Fields, *Slavery and Freedom on the Middle Ground: Maryland during the Nineteenth Century* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1985); Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women in the*

One of the most important debates to emerge from this period of scholarship concerned the extent to which black people accommodated to the regime of slavery in the antebellum South. Famously, in his magisterial study of slave life and culture *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, Eugene Genovese argued that the paternalistic worldview of the planter class had become "hegemonic" in the sense deployed by Antonio Gramsci—it had, at least partially, been accepted by the subaltern classes of the South, thus removing the need for the planters to resort to constant violence in order to maintain their rule.[35] Genovese's approach to the study of slave culture was to prove extremely controversial, however. One of Genovese's most famous interlocutors was Herbert Gutman, who suggested that the black family provided a powerful counterweight to the internalization of paternalist ideology among the slaves.[36] Both Sterling Stuckey and Lawrence Levine, meanwhile, found enough evidence of African legacies in the black community to suggest that slave culture may have been significantly more autonomous than Genovese imagined.[37] Finally, in the harshest of these polemics, James D. Anderson suggested that Genovese's portrayal of black

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*Old South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988); Jacqueline Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work, and the Family from Slavery to the Present* (New York: Basic Books, 1985); Charles Joyner, *Down by the Riverside: A South Carolina Slave Community* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1984); Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1984); Deborah Gray White, *Ar'n't I a Woman? Female Slaves in the Plantation South* (New York: Norton, 1985).

[35] Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York: Vintage Books, 1972 [repr. 1976]).

[36] Herbert G. Gutman, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom, 1750-1925* (New York: Pantheon, 1976), 311.

[37] Sterling Stuckey, *Slave Culture: Nationalist Theory and the Foundations of Black America* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1987); Lawrence W. Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1977).

accommodation to slavery harked back to the worst racist stereotypes of an earlier era. "*Roll, Jordan, Roll* is Aunt Jemima sugar-coated in Marxian dialectics," Anderson wrote.[38]

In attempting to think through the relationship between consciousness and resistance under slavery, I have drawn on the work of scholars interested in "the politics of everyday life." This approach has its origins in the writings of political anthropologist James C. Scott, whose work on peasant resistance in Southeast Asia has had an important impact on African American history.[39] As Robin D.G. Kelley has noted, Scott's method allows historians to probe beneath the veil of apparent consent and discover a hidden realm of political struggle: "The veiled social and cultural worlds of oppressed people frequently surface in everyday forms of resistance—theft, footdragging, the destruction of property."[40] At its best, this scholarship has drawn extremely fruitful connections between the seemingly mundane practices of everyday resistance and the sudden eruption of collective, revolutionary struggles such as the fight for emancipation during the Civil War. As

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[38] James D. Anderson, "Aunt Jemima in Dialectics: Genovese on Slave Culture," *Journal of African American History* 87 (Winter, 2002): 27.
[39] James C. Scott, *The Moral Economy of the Peasant: Rebellion and Subsistence in Southeast Asia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976), *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), and *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990).
[40] Robin D.G. Kelley, *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class* (New York: Free Press, 1994), 8. For other scholarship in slavery studies influenced by Scott's approach, see Marvin L. Michael Kay and Lorin Lee, *Slavery in North Carolina, 1748-1775* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995); Emilia Votta da Costa, *Crowns of Glory, Tears of Blood: The Demerara Slave Rebellion of 1823* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1994); Alex Lichtenstein, "'That Disposition to Theft, with Which They Have Been Branded': Moral Economy, Slave Management, and the Law," *Journal of Social History* 21, no. 3 (Spring, 1988).

Stephanie Camp has written, for example, "the role that slaves played in their emancipation was the product of both northern military victories and a history begun in slavery, in the antebellum tradition of moving beyond the plantation's legitimated spaces." Camp's characterization of black politics in the 1860s as "an open and mass enactment of previously covert practices" has shaped my own understanding of this period.[41]

One of the most important critiques of this approach comes from Samuel Farber. In *Social Decay and Transformation*, Farber offers a sharp but sympathetic appraisal of the work of Scott and Kelley, highlighting both the strengths and weaknesses of their approaches to consciousness, resistance, and the "politics of everyday life." Scott, Farber believes, all but ignores the relationship between consciousness and resistance: "he pays little, if any, attention to the general political ideas of the oppressed."[42] For Farber, this leaves Scott unable to explain why oppressed and exploited social groups sometimes acquiesce to the rule of the elite, or how and why the forms and appearances of subaltern resistance change over time. Farber also takes aim at what he sees as Kelley's "insufficient sense of analytical discrimination," which "makes it appear as if every action of the oppressed is as important as every other action."[43] Farber believes that, like Scott, Kelley devotes insufficient consideration to the conscious motivation behind the actions of oppressed people. This leads to some problems of equivalence: Farber wonders if Kelley can

[41] Camp, *Closer to Freedom*, 119.
[42] Samuel Farber, *Social Decay and Transformation: A View from the Left* (New York: Lexington Books, 2000), 99.
[43] Farber, *Social Decay and Transformation*, 114-115.

really believe that attending a dance is the same sort of political action as attending a union organizing meeting. A given activity is not an act of political resistance simply because it is carried out by a woman or man from the popular classes, Farber suggests. Rather, "politics refers to the quality and manner in which any human motivation ranging from a concern with economic well-being to various facets of daily life are conceived, formulated and fought for."[44]

In drawing on these literatures, I have headquartered "Crescent City Radicals" in New Orleans, the largest city in the nineteenth-century South. Historians of the urban South face the question of representativeness. What, if anything, does the experience of a city like New Orleans tell us about the historical development of what was, after all, an overwhelmingly rural and agricultural society? In *Southern Discomfort*, her study of women's activism in Tampa, Nancy Hewitt described this challenge eloquently. "Tampa's disruption of fixed identities, biracial categories, regional boundaries, and gender ideals have converged to define the city and others like it—New Orleans, El Paso, Miami—as in, but not of, the South," she writes.[45] Hewitt's formulation captures the idea that, for many historians, southern cities were incongruous, aberrant islands of urban development in an ocean of plantations and farms.

This notion of urbanization as an incongruous, perhaps even subversive, development in nineteenth-century southern society seems to inform much of the

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[44] Ibid.
[45] Nancy A. Hewitt, *Southern Discomfort: Women's Activism in Tampa, Florida, 1880s-1920s* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001), 15.

literature on cities in the antebellum South. In the 1960s, social historian Richard Wade suggested that city life gave slaves and free people of color a degree of independence that had no precedent in the rural South, thus posing serious disciplinary problems for the planter class and significantly retarding southern urbanization.[46] Midori Takagi has produced similar findings in a case study of Richmond, Virginia, while David Cecelski and William Buchanan have discovered a rich tradition of resistance among slaves working on the waterways of maritime North Carolina and the Mississippi Valley, respectively.[47] Approaching the problem from a slightly different angle, Frank Towers has shown how the "free labor" politics of white workingmen created another potential fifth column within southern cities.[48] All of these studies seem to confirm the idea that fear of the non-agricultural popular classes—black and white—gave the antebellum southern elite cause to shy away from the same sort of urbanization and economic development as was taking place in the free states.

The work of other scholars contradicts the idea that slave resistance was an important factor in the retardation of southern urbanization and industrialization, however. Historians of industrial slavery Robert Starobin and Charles Dew have

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[46] Richard C. Wade, *Slavery in the Cities: The South, 1820-1860* (London and New York: Oxford University Press, 1964).
[47] Midori Takagi, *Rearing Wolves to Our Own Destruction: Slavery in Richmond, Virginia, 1782-1865* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2000); David S. Cecelski, *The Waterman's Song: Slavery and Freedom in Maritime North Carolina* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001); Thomas C. Buchanan, *Black Life on the Mississippi: Slaves, Free Blacks, and the Western Steamboat World* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004).
[48] Frank Towers, *The Urban South and the Coming of the Civil War* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2004).

demonstrated the multiple strategies through which slaveholding industrialists maintained control over their unfree workers, and shown that southern industry could be highly profitable.[49] Economic historian Claudia Goldin launched a more direct attack on Wade's thesis regarding slavery in the cities. Using a quantitative method, Goldin attempted to discover whether problems of labor discipline really did lead to higher costs for urban slaveholders, thereby creating the incentive for the southern elite to shift its slaves to the countryside. Finding no such costs in her data, Goldin concluded it was the higher prices for field hands that led urban slaveholders to sell their unfree workers to rural planters.[50] In an important recent work of political economy, Charles Post has argued that the South's failure to industrialize had more to do with the specific mode of accumulation inherent in slavery than it did with any particular fears about slave resistance among the southern elite.[51]

The black population of New Orleans stands out even among other examples of the urban and industrial South. Many historians have been attracted to the study of this city's unusually large and sophisticated African American community, and have attempted to explain how the interaction between distinctive colonial cultures and the hard realities of political economy shaped the emergence of black New Orleans. As Gwendolyn Midlo Hall and Daniel Usner have suggested, eighteenth-century Louisiana was a chaotic borderlands environment in which encounters between

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[49] Robert S. Starobin, *Industrial Slavery in the Old South* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1970); Charles B. Dew, *Bond of Iron: Master and Slave at Buffalo Forge* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1994).
[50] Claudia Goldin, *Urban Slavery in the American South, 1820-1860: A Quantitative History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976).
[51] Post, *The American Road to Capitalism*.

Native Americans, white settlers, and people of African descent produced a world of shifting and dynamic racial identities.[52] The final quarter of the eighteenth century saw major changes in this fluid social order, as the arrival of widespread plantation agriculture, the impact of revolutionary upheavals across the Atlantic World, and the threat of slave rebellion led the local elite to impose a more rigid regime of exploitation and oppression. As Hall notes, "The semi-egalitarian tradition among master and slaves born on the insecure frontier gave way to systematic, preventative terror."[53] The emergence of a more "American" plantation system could not erase the French and Spanish colonial legacy completely, however. New Orleans and the lower Mississippi Valley remained home to an unusually large and prosperous community of free people of color—a group whose social weight gave the racial categories of New Orleans a "tripartite" character similar to other French and Spanish colonies.[54]

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[52] Gwendolyn Midlo Hall, *Africans in Colonial Louisiana: The Development of Afro0-Creole Identity in the Eighteenth Century* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1992); Daniel H. Usner, Jr., *Indians, Settlers, and Slaves in a Frontier Exchange Economy: The Lower Mississippi Valley before 1783* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992).

[53] Hall, *Africans in Colonial Louisiana*, p. 370. Jennifer Spear has argued that the hardening of racial categories in Louisiana actually took place in the early nineteenth century: Jennifer M. Spear*, Race, Sex, and Social Order in Early New Orleans* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 2009). For another critique of Hall's analysis, see Gilbert C. Din, Spaniards, *Planters, and Slaves: The Spanish Regulation of Slavery in Louisiana, 1763-1803* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1999).

[54] Kimberly S. Hanger, *Bounded Lives, Bounded Places: Free Black Society in Colonial New Orleans, 1769-1803* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1997); Paul F. Lachance, "The Formation of a Three-Caste Society: Evidence from Wills in Antebellum New Orleans," *Social Science History* 18, no. 2 (Summer 1994). On the role of immigration from revolutionary Haiti in reinforcing the tripartite racial structure of New Orleans, see Nathalie Dessens, *From Saint-Domingue to New Orleans: Migration and Influences* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2007).

Despite the distinctiveness of the colonial history and political economy of New Orleans in the context of the antebellum South, I believe a study of this city nonetheless sheds a great deal of light on broader themes in southern history. Tensions between production for the market and the archaic labor system of slavery were a factor throughout the South for example. Important recent work by Edward Baptist and Walter Johnson has emphasized the centrality of cotton and slavery for the emergence of global capitalism in the first half of the nineteenth century, and has shown how innovations in banking and financial speculation were always part of the South's supposedly "pre-modern" social formation. Johnson, in particular, has drawn our attention to the Old South's *combination* of advanced technology and profit-drive agriculture on the one hand, and expansionist settler-colonialism on the other.[55] Perhaps even more importantly for this study, Kate Masur's study of Washington, D.C. during Reconstruction has demonstrated that the nation's capital city became a laboratory for political change during this crucial period.[56] If this southern city became "an example for all the land," perhaps other urban centers did, too. These findings give weight to Nancy Hewitt's argument that, "As historians…we need to recognize that this is the South, however uncomfortable the fit with dominant conceptualizations."[57] It is in this spirit that I offer the current project as contribution

[55] Edward E. Baptist, *The Half Has Never Been Told: Slavery and the Making of American Capitalism* (New York: Basic Books, 2014); Walter Johnson, *River of Dark Dreams: Slavery and Empire in the Cotton Kingdom* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2013).
[56] Kate Masur, *An Example for All the Land: Emancipation and the Struggle over Equality in Washington, D.C.* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010).
[57] Hewitt, *Southern Discomfort*, 15.

not only to southern urban history but to our understanding of the nineteenth-century South as a whole.

In this study, I argue that the rise and fall of the Radical coalition helped to decide the outcomes of three of the most important social and political contests in Civil War-era New Orleans: the military conflict between the Union and the Confederacy, the fight against slavery, and the struggle to determine on what basis Louisiana would return to the Union. Following the invasion of New Orleans in the spring of 1862, the Republican Party was forced to accept the military service of African American women and men in order to achieve its goal of destroying Confederate power on the lower Mississippi. By working with the northern invaders, thousands of African Americans were able to free themselves from slavery, and in so doing, push their new allies toward making emancipation a part of Republican political and military strategy. When the fighting was over and slavery had been destroyed, the coalition forged during the war years became the basis for a biracial, democratic government that returned Louisiana to the Union as a free state. While these processes are already familiar to historians, this study's uniquely close and detailed attention to the process of alliance building sheds new light on how, when, and why these struggles played out the way they did.

Rather than simply celebrate the Radical alliance, this study portrays it as complex, shifting, and, ultimately, unstable. I demonstrate that relations between black working people and white northern soldiers and Republican politicians were, from the beginning, characterized by frictions and tensions. African American

women, for example, faced the risk of sexual violence at the hands of their supposed allies when they choose to collaborate with Union forces in New Orleans; later, as slavery collapsed, some Republican policymakers would attempt to enforce a vision of "free labor" that restricted the rights of the city's freedpeople. For their part, moreover, black working people never simply adopted the Republican program as their own. They had begun to develop a vision of the just society during the antebellum period, and therefore came to the alliance with distinctive expectations. In the 1860s, the African American popular classes of New Orleans would re-forge their worldview in the crucible of war and emancipation. Emboldened by the experiences of military service and mass mobilization, black men and women quickly came to terms with their new position in southern society and began to assertively articulate a sense of their interests as wage earners. The Republican leadership had been willing to tolerate, even encourage, a black political awakening so long as it served the interests of the struggle against the Confederacy. But when black radicalization threatened interests that the Republicans regarded as legitimate, such as the right of strikebreakers to cross a picket line, Radicalism began to experience internal tensions. In the latter chapters of this study, I show how this growing rift between the northern elite and the freedpeople was one of the causes of the northern retreat from Reconstruction in the 1870s.

Although a multiplicity of factors determined the rise and fall of the Radical coalition, in this study I focus on the particular impact of black political consciousness. Many scholars have illuminated the ways in which nineteenth-century

black consciousness emerged from quotidian acts of informal resistance and community building. My own work builds on this approach and puts it into conversation with the major themes of the political history of the Civil War era. I show that black working people had constructed an embryonic subaltern civil society in the years before the Civil War, and that it was able to emerge from the shadows when Union troops invaded New Orleans in 1862. Over the course of the next fifteen years, the continued political awakening of black working people would help determine the fate of the Radical coalition. In this new context, everyday acts of resistance and survival, such as eavesdropping in a white household, for example, or cultivating a talent as a cook, could become contributions to the defeat of the Confederacy and the destruction of slavery. At the same time, changes in the national political terrain, such as the enactment of the Emancipation Proclamation or the passage of the Reconstruction Acts, would create new possibilities for the flowering of black grassroots struggle. I demonstrate that this back-and-forth dynamic had a profound influence on the successes and failures of Radicalism in New Orleans.

"Crescent City Radicals" examines the relationship between Radicalism and black political consciousness in the context of urban society in the South's largest city. I show that, as Richard Wade and other historians have argued, black working people found it significantly easier to develop a semi-autonomous oppositional culture in the context of city life. This was true in the antebellum period, when the needs of the urban economy led to an advanced commodification of labor power in New Orleans, and a consequent intercession of the market into the relationship

between master and slave. I show how this situation, which was quite distinctive within the broader structures of southern slavery, facilitated the first stages of a black political awakening under the very noses of the planter class. But I also demonstrate that this dynamic of urban society persisted into the Civil War years and beyond. When northern troops arrived in New Orleans in the spring of 1862, they found an urban black population that was well prepared to assist in the struggle against the Confederacy, and well positioned to provide a connection between the forces of the Union and the rural African American population. During Reconstruction, moreover, black working people in New Orleans found that their status as wage earners gave them a relatively greater degree of collective power than, for example, sharecroppers.

"Crescent City Radicals" begins in Chapter 1 by examining the evolution of this distinctive urban environment. It shows how, from the earliest days of French colonization, the rise of New Orleans as a major port city was inextricably linked to the emergence of the planter class. Aspiring landowners and slaveholders needed New Orleans as a base of military operations for their wars of expropriation against the indigenous population, as a site for the importation of unfree labor from Europe and Africa, and as the main hub for the export of staple crops such as tobacco, sugar, and cotton. Over time, New Orleans also emerged as a major financial center, and came to play a crucial cultural role in the unification of a fractious and ethnically diverse elite. Chapter 2 examines the development of black popular consciousness in antebellum New Orleans. Beginning with the place of African American women and men in the city's economy, it shows how the urban-commercial environment led to a

blurring of the lines between free and slave, facilitating the emergence of a sophisticated, subversive black civil society with connections to the world beyond New Orleans. This chapter also demonstrates that, whether or not urban life did create a greater degree of resistance and rebelliousness among slaves and free people of color, it certainly created major concerns about labor discipline and social peace among the southern elite.

Chapters 3 and 4 examine the war years in New Orleans. Chapter 3 looks at the intersection of Union strategy and black resistance in occupied New Orleans. It suggests that the coming together of military necessity and African American agency led to the disintegration of slavery in and around New Orleans, mass participation in the war effort on the part of black working people, and the beginnings of an alliance that would carry forward the revolutionary process for the remainder of the war years and into Reconstruction. Chapter 4 shifts focus to study wartime efforts at the political reconstruction of Louisiana. It reveals how Union policymakers, particularly General Nathaniel Banks, hoped to circumvent the growing radicalization among black working people by restricting participation in political reconstruction to loyal white men. Banks's plan for a white reconstruction did not go unchallenged, however. An emerging political movement, led by free men of color and radical anti-racist whites, demanded citizenship and civil rights for the black population of New Orleans and began to build important connections with African American working people in the city and in the surrounding countryside. By the end of the war, the

efforts of these radicals had led to the creation of the Louisiana Republican Party, and paved the way for the struggles of the Reconstruction years.

The final two chapters of "Crescent City Radicals" tell the story of the Radical coalition in New Orleans during the rise and fall of Reconstruction. Chapter 5 studies the role of urban unrest in the coming of Radical Reconstruction at both the local and national levels. It suggests that, in the immediate aftermath of the war, an ongoing political awakening among black working people ran head-on into the hopes and expectations of returning Confederates. The resulting clashes culminated in the New Orleans massacre of July 1866, which was one of the major factors in Radical success in the Congressional elections that fall and the subsequent displacement of Andrew Johnson from the leading role in Reconstruction. Once Republicans in Congress had seized control of the political process, their actions had a dynamic back-and-forth relationship with the activism of black working people on the ground in New Orleans, with each electoral and legislative breakthrough seeming to produce an efflorescence of militancy at the grassroots. By 1870, this fruitful dialectic had produced a state government for Louisiana that strongly reflected the Radical alliance between the Republican Party and the black working people of New Orleans.

Chapter 6 relates the demise of this government at the hands of both its external enemies and its internal contradictions. The Radical coalition had always been inherently unstable. It rested on an alliance between the Republican Party, which ultimately represented the interests of the northern elite, and the black working people of the South. Through much of the 1860s, the interests of these groups had seemed to

align—albeit with many frictions and misunderstandings. Indeed, the Republican-controlled national government could never have accomplished its tasks of reunion, emancipation, and reconstruction without the political awakening of African American working people. In the 1870s, however, the interests of radicalized black workers and the leadership of the Republican Party came into conflict. African Americans had adapted quickly to their new position in society, and they had begun to articulate an identity as wage earners. At times, this new consciousness led black workers into militant confrontation with their employers, forcing the Radical state government to take sides in clashes between African American strikers, strikebreakers, and employers. By the mid-1870s, the government was invariably siding with scabs and employers. The consequent decline in black working-class enthusiasm for the Radical government came at a time of poisonous factionalism in the leadership of the Republican Party and a growing threat from a revived white supremacist movement. Radicalism was a spent force in New Orleans even before the notorious electoral compromise of 1877.

## Chapter One

## Capital of the Cotton Kings:

## New Orleans and the Rise of the Planter Class

Whether they arrived by land or by river, visitors to antebellum New Orleans often found that their entrance to the Crescent City formed a powerful study in contrasts. Approaching the city, travelers passed through one of the most fertile and prosperous agricultural regions anywhere in the Atlantic world. Here, the banks of the Mississippi were lined with fields of sugar cane and cotton, interspersed with the impressive dwellings of their owners. "Plantations, with handsome buildings, followed in quick succession," wrote one tourist of the area around New Orleans in the 1820s. The same traveler was equally impressed with the extensive gardens of the plantation homes: "Noble live oaks, which had been trimmed to regular shapes, young orange trees…and other tropical trees and bushes, along the road."[1] Suddenly, an urban skyline emerged above the orange groves and fields of sugar cane, clashing sharply with the rural idyll. The masts of hundreds of ships rose above the surrounding countryside, appearing to one observer in 1836 as "a large forest of dead trees."[2] And alongside these "dead trees" were even more potent reminders of the

[1] Karl Bernhard, Duke of Saxe-Weimar Eisenach, *Travels Through North America during the Years 1825 and 1826* (Philadelphia: Carey, Lea, & Carey, 1828), 54.
[2] Herbert A. Kellar (ed.), "A Journey Through the South in 1836: Diary of James D. Davidson," *Journal of Southern History* 1, no. 3 (August, 1935): 357.

modern, commercial character of New Orleans: "the black pipes of a long line of steamboats, and the tall chimneys of the numerous steam cotton-presses."[3]

That visitors to New Orleans felt moved to remark on the bounty of the surrounding countryside was hardly surprising. From the city's founding in the early eighteenth century to its rise to international prominence in the early nineteenth century, the fate of New Orleans remained tied to the emergence of a powerful and wealthy rural elite. Beginning in the earliest days of white settlement on the lower Mississippi, wealthy European and North American colonists had sought to transform the region's lush landscape into an outpost of plantation agriculture, geared toward the production of staple crops for sale on the world market. In order to do so, this elite engaged in wars against the indigenous inhabitants of the lower Mississippi and imported thousands of unfree laborers from Europe and Africa. By the 1830s the dreams of these men had been realized, and the planter class claimed mastery over an empire of cotton and sugar in the lower Mississippi Valley.

But the chimneys and "dead trees" were just as important to this process as the fields of cane and orange groves: the efforts of the planters to tame the countryside of the Old Southwest, and turn it into a source of profit, had also produced urban development. For one thing, the men who owned the beautiful gardens, impressive country homes, and well-ordered plantations of the lower Mississippi made use of the most modern technology available anywhere in the world. They could not bring their crops to market without the cotton presses and steamboats of the New Orleans

[3] Thomas Law Nichols, *Forty Years of American Life, 1821-1861* (New York: Stackpole Bros., 1937), 125.

waterfront. Moreover, for this emerging elite, New Orleans was the most important point of contact with the world of credit, markets, and trade upon which their transformation of the countryside fundamentally relied. The city was home to some of the most powerful financial interests in the emerging capitalist world market of the early nineteenth century. Thus, rural abundance and commercial dynamism combined to allow New Orleans to become one of the fastest growing cities in the United States by the early antebellum period. What may have seemed jarring or contradictory to visitors were in fact inseparable parts of the whole.

My interpretation of society and culture in antebellum New Orleans draws on the work of those scholars who have emphasized the hybrid character of slavery and the Old South. Rather than categorize the plantation system as either "capitalist" or "precapitalist" in an uncomplicated way, these historians have examined the slave states within the broader context of North American (and, indeed, global) uneven economic development, and remarked upon the combination of different elements in southern society. In a work comparing the southern slaveholders and Italian landowners, for example, Enrico Dal Lago noted how "capitalist practices and precapitalist conditions coexisted and a combination of paternalism, violence, discipline enforcement, and efforts toward maximization of production was the norm on most plantations."[4] Referring to the Mississippi Valley in particular, Walter Johnson has emphasized how the project of the planter class contained "The confrontation of steamboat and wilderness, of civilization and savagery, of relentless

[4] Enrico Dal Lago, *Agrarian Elites: American Slaveholders and Italian Landowners, 1815-1861* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2005), 57-58.

direction with boundless desolation."[5] Agricultural historian Jairus Banaji, meanwhile, has characterized the Old South as operating within the global capitalist market while making use of a non-typical form of exploitation. "The slave-plantations were capitalist enterprises of a patriarchal and feudal character," he writes, "producing absolute surplus-value on the basis of slave-labor and a monopoly in land."[6]

Taking the concept of hybridity as its jumping-off point, this chapter approaches the early history of New Orleans thematically rather than chronologically. It seeks to uncover the role of this urban center in several facets of the rise to power of the planter class on the lower Mississippi Valley. How did the emergence of ruling elite with paternalistic and aristocratic pretensions produced a commercial city of global importance? In attempting to answer this question, I begin with a brief tour of New Orleans as it appeared to various writers and travelers who observed the city in the antebellum period. Next, I ask how New Orleans featured in the process through which planters and prospective planters acquired the land, labor, and capital necessary to secure wealth and power. What was it about the city that made it so crucial to the transformation of the countryside in the Old Southwest? What does the importance of New Orleans in this process tell us about the nature of southern society? Finally, I assess the city's role as a center for elite culture and state power. In what ways did urban society facilitate the cultural and political unity of a rising rural elite in the early antebellum period?

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[5] Walter Johnson, *River of Dark Dreams: Slavery and Empire in the Cotton Kingdom* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2013), 77.
[6] Jairus Banaji, *Theory as History: Essays on Modes of Production and Exploitation* (Chicago: Haymarket, 2011), 71.

This chapter therefore provides the political and economic context of elite control that forms part of the backdrop for the story of black working people in the Civil War era. It lays out the urban geography of New Orleans, which formed the political and social, as well as the physical, terrain on which the women and men of the African American popular classes would begin to become conscious of their place in the world. This chapter also introduces the elite classes of New Orleans. It attempts to explain who they were, what they wanted, how they saw themselves, and how they ruled. The men and women of these elite groups were the owners and employers of black working people, the foil against which slaves and free people of color defined themselves and their vision of a better, fairer society. Finally, this chapter presents some of the key concepts in my understanding of nineteenth-century New Orleans. It attempts to theorize the relationship between town and country, and the relationship between slavery and capitalism. On a deeper level still, this chapter asks how a given social group develops a shared understanding of the world and begins to build institutions to reflect and advance that shared vision. These themes will be crucial as we move forward into the years of Civil War and Reconstruction.

**Antebellum New Orleans**

French colonists founded New Orleans in 1718 as the main settlement in their bid to control the lower Mississippi valley. Although historians have generally labeled the French colonial project an abject failure, the early elite successfully undertook the initial steps in making the region a center of staple crop production,

importing the first African slaves to Louisiana, and establishing a hub of indigo and tobacco plantations surrounding New Orleans. When the lower Mississippi passed to Spain in the 1760s as a result of the Seven Years War, the local elite was able to strengthen the plantation regime and the commercial economy. New Orleans grew as a center for slave imports and agricultural exports, particularly after sugar cultivation took hold on the lower Mississippi toward the end of the Spanish period. The early nineteenth century saw the lower Mississippi passing back from Spain to France and then quickly to the United States as part of the Louisiana Purchase of 1803. The American period coincided with a boom in sugar production and the spread of cotton cultivation to the Mississippi Valley. These years also saw the mass migration of planters and slaves from the eastern seaboard to the new states of the Deep South, including Louisiana. By the third decade of the nineteenth century, New Orleans had become a major city, the main port serving a booming empire of commercial agriculture.[7]

New Orleans inhabited the ideal location to serve as the major port for the lower Mississippi Valley, but the local geography also presented serious challenges for the growth of a major urban center. Situated one hundred miles upriver from the mouth of the river, the city occupied a thin strip of land between the banks of the

[7] On the colonial and early national history of New Orleans, see Gwendolyn Midlo Hall, *Africans in Colonial Louisiana: The Development of Afro-Creole Culture in the Eighteenth Century* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1992); Thomas N. Ingersoll, *Mammon and Manon in Early New Orleans: The First Slave Society in the Deep South, 1718-1819* (Knoxville, Tenn.: University of Tennessee Press, 1999); Lawrence N. Powell, *The Accidental City: Improvising New Orleans* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 2012); Daniel H. Usner, Jr., *Indians, Settlers, and Slaves in a Frontier Exchange Economy: The Lower Mississippi Valley before 1783* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992).

Mississippi and the shores of Lake Pontchatrain. Because of its proximity to these two major waterways, and the portage between them provided by Bayou St. John, local Native Americans had made camp in the area long before the coming of French settlement.[8] New Orleans sprouted on swampy land that was actually below the level of the river, a state of affairs that impacted the building of the city. As Virginian visitor James Davidson noted in 1836, "The streets are well paved, but the water being but eighteen inches blow [sic] the surface, the heavy drays are continually pressing it up."[9] White colonists found the location to be both a blessing and a curse: the fertile alluvial soil made the area surrounding New Orleans a perfect locale for plantation agriculture, but the swampy and malarial geography took a heavy toll on the health of early European settlers. Deep into the antebellum period, visitors to the city remarked on New Orleans' infamous reputation as a place of death and disease.[10]

By the mid-1830s, New Orleans had grown into a bustling city of around fifty thousand people. Including its suburbs, the city occupied a two-mile stretch of the riverbank along the crescent-shaped bend in the Mississippi that gave New Orleans its nickname, and stretched back toward the lake for another half-mile. In the center of the city stood the French Quarter, the oldest part of New Orleans and the neighborhood that most strongly reflected the influence of the European colonial

[8] Ingersoll, *Mammon and Manon*, 30.
[9] Kellar (ed.), "Diary of James D. Davidson," 357, 361.
[10] See, for example, S.A. Ferrall, *A Ramble of Six Thousand Miles Through the United States of America* (London: Effingham Wilson, 1832), 205-206.

powers.[11] Upriver from the old city, and bordering it along Canal Street, was the Faubourg (or suburb) of St. Mary. By the 1830s this section of the city had become the home to many of the Americans who were rapidly settling in New Orleans, and in 1836 the neighborhood would became the Second Municipality. Faubourg Marigny was downriver from the French Quarter. According to one 1846 observer, Marigny was "mostly filled with old French buildings one story high." By the 1830s the neighborhood, which became the Third Municipality in 1836, had acquired a reputation for its working-class immigrant population and the apparently high incidence of prostitution in the area.[12]

New Orleans was located in what had by the 1830s become an incredibly rich region of commercial agriculture. A visitor arriving down the Mississippi by steamboat from the north passed more than a hundred miles of "coast" where magnificent cotton and sugar plantations lined the riverbanks on both sides. Following a visit to the area in 1845, Thomas Law Nichols expressed his enchantment at the sight of such a prosperous scene. "On either shore, as far as the eye could reach, were scattered the beautiful houses of the planters," he wrote of the scene fifty miles north of New Orleans. "For miles away, up and down the river, extended the bright green field of sugar cane…on every side, in the midst of each great plantation, rose the tall white towers of the sugar-mills, throwing up graceful

[11] James Stuart, *Three Years in North America* (Edinburgh: R. Caddell, 1833), 231; Ferrall, *A Ramble*, 188-189.
[12] A. Oakey Hall, *The Manhattaner in New Orleans* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1976), 35-36; Kellar (ed.), "Diary of James D. Davidson," 359.

columns of smoke and clouds of steam."[13] The obvious fertility of the soil and richness of the flora often made a strong impression. "The planters' houses are…surrounded by gardens full of orange trees, flowers, and evergreens, presenting the idea of perpetual spring," wrote one traveler in 1830.[14] Even an abolitionist observer in 1854 called the region around New Orleans "the most beautiful portion of country that is has been my fortune to ever set eyes upon," and noted that in this area "my ideal of southern grandeur, wealth, magnificence, &c., were not only fully realized but a little exceeded."[15]

As the depot for this burgeoning region of staple crop production, New Orleans became the destination for thousands of ships from the river and sea. The huge number of sailing vessels and steamboats moored at the city's famous levee invariably caught the attention of antebellum travelers. "The shipping is lying here three tiers deep for a distance of half a mile. The wharf is therefore a scene of mighty bustle," noted one visitor in late 1836.[16] Another observer in 1830 remarked on "a forest of masts…along the levee…there are sometimes 1500 flatboats lying at the sides of the levee at a time….Steamboats are arriving every hour."[17] For the Duke of Saxe-Weimar Eisenach, the scene on the New Orleans levee bore comparison to the greatest port city in the nineteenth-century Atlantic world. "The ships lay four and

[13] Nichols, *Forty Years of American Life*, 123.
[14] Ferrall, *A Ramble*, 185.
[15] Philo Tower, *Slavery Unmasked* (New York: Negro Universities Press, 1969), 287.
[16] Kellar (ed.), "Diary of James D. Davidson," 360.
[17] Stuart, *Three Years*, 231-32.

five deep, in tiers along the bank, as in the Thames, at London," he wrote of his visit in 1826. "Below them, were ten very large steamboats, employed in the river trade."[18]

The sheer volume of freight arriving on the New Orleans waterfront required a huge and busy workforce. To visitors in the antebellum period, the waterfront often appeared as an unprecedented hive of human activity, with thousands of people working on the levee and nearby streets. At the waterfront, the working day began at dawn. One visitor to New Orleans in 1847 noted that "one short hour after sun-rise, the decks and wharfs are all astir, processions of loaded drays are going by."[19] The sheer scale of the work underway on the levee impressed many observers. One traveler in 1854 described "thirty thousand men…loading and unloading, weighing, branding, inspecting, rolling and boding the drays, mules."[20] This was a rough, plebian world, and for some elite spectators, mingling with the crowd of working people on the waterfront could be an unpleasant experience. James Stuart, who visited New Orleans in 1830, complained of "a great deal of rudeness and a great deal of swearing, among the carmen of carters, and among the persons delivering goods from the vessels and unloading them."[21]

Commercial enterprise on this scale required more than mere human and animal exertion: it also required an impressive infrastructure of engineering and machinery. Some of the technological achievements of antebellum New Orleans were visible from beyond the city limits. Approaching New Orleans down the Mississippi

[18] Bernhard, *Travels Through North America*, 54.
[19] Oakey Hall, *Manhattaner in New Orleans*, 27.
[20] Tower, *Slavery Unmasked*, 291.
[21] Stuart, *Three Years*, 239.

on a steamboat in 1845, Thomas Law Nichols listed "the tall chimneys of the numerous steam cotton-presses" alongside the city's church spires and domes as amongst the most striking features of the urban skyline. Up close, Nichols found the waterfront infrastructure even more impressive, describing "blocks of immense warehouses" for the storage of cotton and sugar, and on the levee itself "extensive cotton-presses, requiring a great many hands, powerful steam-engines, and severe labor."[22] The small town of Algiers stood on the opposite bank of the Mississippi from New Orleans, and in the antebellum period it was developing as a local center of shipbuilding and manufacturing. One traveler in 1854 called it "the principal workshop of the city" and described "several extensive shipyards, and numerous artizans [sic]."[23] Examining Algiers from the deck of a steamboat, another visitor in 1847 characterized it as "an uncivilized appearing strip of land…dotted with shipyards" and noticed that "a dry dock and an iron foundry were in building."[24]

The prominence of the slave trade in antebellum New Orleans gave another indication of the city's commercial importance. James Davidson, a Virginian visiting New Orleans in 1836, visited Hewlett's Exchange on Chartres Street, a major slave market. "From 10 AM. to 3 PM. it is a scene of tumultuous confusion, in which all the business and professional men of the City engage," Davidson remarked. "It seems to be the Soul of New Orleans."[25] If this really was the city's soul, many observers found it terrible to see. In 1826, the Duke of Saxe-Weimar also witnessed the slave

[22] Nichols, *Forty Years*, 125.
[23] Tower, *Slavery Unmasked*, 297.
[24] Oakey Hall, *Manhattaner in New Orleans*, 4.
[25] Kellar (ed.), "Diary of James D. Davidson," 358.

trade taking place on Chartres Street, but he could not describe it as coolly as Davidson did. "There were two establishments that constantly revolted my feelings, to wit: shops in which negroes were purchased and sold," he remembered. "These unfortunate beings, of both sexes, stood or sat the whole day, in these shops, or in front of them, to exhibit themselves, and wait for purchase." [26] S.A. Ferrall provided a particularly scathing description of the scene at one slave market in New Orleans in 1830. "Here may be seen hundreds of animals of our own genus exposed in the public bazaars for sale, and examined with as much care, and precisely in the same manner, as we examine horses," Ferrall fumed.[27]

Alongside and intertwined with the city's commercial economy, New Orleans also had an economy of social reproduction—an economy of child-rearing, marketing, waiting tables, and a spectrum of commercial sexual relations.[28] The bustling markets of New Orleans often caught the attention of visitors. Timothy Flint thought one could find "half the city" in a crowd "half a mile in extent" attending market on a "pleasant March forenoon" in 1822.[29] Women of color did most of the buying and selling in the markets, and also worked going door-to-door as petty traders of dry goods and produce. "In every street during the whole day women, chiefly black women, are met, carrying baskets upon their heads calling at the doors

[26] Bernhard, *Travels Through North America*, 57-58.
[27] Ferrall, *A Ramble*, 192-193.
[28] On the concept of social reproduction, see Lise Vogel, *Marxism and the Oppression of Women: Toward a Unitary Theory* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1983).
[29] Timothy Flint, *Recollections of the Last Ten Years in the Valley of the Mississippi* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1968), 308-309.

of houses," noted Benjamin Latrobe in 1820.[30] In the hotels and on the steamboats, visitors to New Orleans encountered poor whites, slaves, and free people of color working as chambermaids, stewards, and waiters.[31] In some circumstances, the "private" sphere of the household economy intruded into the public realm, and the unpaid domestic labor of working women became suddenly visible. Abraham Oakey Hall noticed this phenomenon in 1847, even if his language betrayed no small measure of class and gender prejudice. "Scolding wives, with disheveled hair and dirty babies…compliment themselves, and their acquaintances who may be within ear-shot distance," Oakey Hall wrote of the scene in one of the working-class suburbs of New Orleans.[32] Although this middle-class white male observer wanted the domestic economy to remain in the home, it was just as much a part of public life as the slave markets or the levees.

As one of the Atlantic's greatest port cities, New Orleans played host to people from all over the world. This cosmopolitanism seems to have repelled at least some visitors to the city. When S.A. Ferrall visited New Orleans in 1830, he found the marketplaces and streets "crowded with people of almost every nation in Europe, Africa, and America" and remarked that the foreign visitors "create a frightful confusion of tongues."[33] A witness in 1854 agreed with Ferrall's assessment of the unpleasant auditory impact of this diversity, remarking on how "the foreign accents

[30] Benjamin H. B. Latrobe, *Impressions Respecting New Orleans* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1951), 101.
[31] See, for example, Stuart, *Three Years*, 228-229, 275.
[32] Oakey Hall, *Manhattaner in New Orleans*, 102.
[33] Ferrall, *A Ramble*, 190.

of French, Spanish, German, Italian, Russian, Chinese…fall upon your ear with harsh discordant echoes."[34] A third bystander stressed the plebian nature of this motley crew ashore.[35] Timothy Flint described the crowds of New Orleans in 1822 as made up of "samples of the common people of all the European nations, Creoles, all the intermixtures of Negro and Indian blood, the moody and ruminating Indians, the inhabitants of the Spanish provinces, and…boatmen."[36]

If the cacophony of foreign voices sometimes gave the impression that New Orleans was not altogether an "American" city, so too did the legacy of French and Spanish rule. And in no other neighborhood was this European colonial influence as apparent as it was in the famous French Quarter. "In the old town," wrote James Stuart of his visit in 1830, "almost all the sign-posts are in the French language, and very many of the store-keepers are unable to speak English."[37] Writing in the 1820s, Timothy Flint found the European character of the old city to be quite beguiling. "There is something fantastic and unique in the appearance" of the French Quarter, he reported. "The houses are stuccoed externally, and this stucco is white or yellow, and strikes the eye more pleasantly than the dull and somber red of brick."[38] Architect Benjamin Latrobe agreed with this assessment when he visited New Orleans in the late 1810s. "Altho' [sic] the sort of house built here by the French is not the best

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[34] Tower, *Slavery Unmasked*, 290.
[35] On the use of the term "motley crew" to describe the waterborne working class of the Atlantic World, see Peter Linbaugh and Marcus Rediker, *The Many-Headed Hydra: Sailors, Slaves Commoners, and the Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2000).
[36] Flint, *Recollections*, 308.
[37] Stuart, *Three Years*, 235.
[38] Flint, *Recollections*, 302-303.

specimen of French arrangement," Latrobe stated, "it is infinitely, in my opinion, superior to the arrangement which we have inherited from the English."[39]

Located upriver and just across Canal Street from the French Quarter, the American section of New Orleans presented quite a stylistic contrast with the old city. In the early 1820s, Flint noticed "the greater number of the houses" in the new city that "are of brick, and built in the American style."[40] Latrobe for one found this area much less aesthetically pleasing than its Creole counterpart. "The red brick fronts are gaining ground," he complained in 1820, and the American neighborhood "already exhibits the flat, dull, dingy character of Market Street, in Philadelphia, or Baltimore street, instead of the motley & picturesque effect of stuccoed French buildings of the city."[41] Whether an observer agreed with Latrobe's preferences may have depended on their partisanship in the tensions between the American and French-Creole populations. Abraham Oakey Hall, a native New Yorker, disagreed with Latrobe on this score; in 1847 he found the French Quarter "narrow, dark, and dirty," but remarked with approval that the American section of New Orleans, which he thought had "here a little of Boston, there a trifle of New York, and some of Philadelphia."[42]

Both the French Quarter and the American section of New Orleans played host to a highly visible world of elite culture, leisure, and sociability. Visiting the city in 1830, Scottish writer James Stuart found himself impressed with the sophisticated entertainment on offer in New Orleans. "The French theatre is large, very neatly fitted

[39] Latrobe, *Impressions*, 42.
[40] Flint, *Recollections*, 302.
[41] Latrobe, *Impressions*, 42.
[42] Oakey Hall, *Manhattaner in New Orleans*, 35.

up, and well attended," he noted. "There were several very good performers from Paris when I was here."[43] Given the city's Catholic and libertine values, New Orleans high society seemed to come into bloom on Sundays in particular. Thomas Law Nichols described how, on one antebellum Sabbath in 1845, "The cafés were filled with visitors, smoking and drinking, and playing billiards and dominoes. Ladies, dressed in gay costumes, were chatting in their balconies and remarking on the passers-by."[44] As a tourist in New Orleans in 1826, the Duke of Saxe-Weimar Eisenach naturally gravitated toward elite social circles. He seems to have become particularly enamored of the city's masked balls, and attended several during his visit. At one such event the Duke had cause to remark on the "very pretty" wealthy women in attendance and their "genteel French air."[45]

The streets of New Orleans also played host to a thriving popular culture, and even those city dwellers unable to afford the price of a subscription ball left a strong impression on visitors. Even the aristocratic Duke of Saxe-Weimar experienced the seedier side of urban entertainment when, in 1826, he "went to several coffee-houses, where the lower class amused themselves, hearing a workman singing in Spanish, which he accompanied with the guitar."[46] Another antebellum visitor, Timothy Flint, lacked the Duke's taste for the charms of plebian leisure pursuits. "The tippling houses, and other resorts of vice, have such an aspect of beastliness and degradation,

[43] Stuart, *Three Years*, 236.
[44] Nichols, *Forty Years*, 128.
[45] Bernhard, *Travels Through North America*, 58.
[46] Bernhard, *Travels Through North America*, 55.

as to render them utterly unbearable," Flint fumed during his 1822 visit.[47] The rough popular culture of New Orleans often spilled out of the coffee houses and drinking dens and into the streets. Thus diarist James Laroe described a diverse crowd of revelers on the riverbank in 1847: "some riding in carriages, some going to church, some dancing, some music in the grog shops and some playing with minkeys [sic] on the streets with their music and performing with the monkeys to take in a few dimes."[48]

**The Urban Economics of Plantation Society**

The booming New Orleans of the 1830s was largely a product of the rise of plantation agriculture in the lower Mississippi Valley. Almost from its inception, the city acted as the urban seat of an emerging planter class that was determined to use coerced labor to grow staple crops for sale on the world market. New Orleans played a central role in the economics of this massive commercial undertaking. It served as a military headquarters when the planters went to war over land and access to the river, and it functioned as the main port of entry for white indentured servants and African slaves destined for work on the plantations. In order to purchase land, or buy tools and slaves while their crops were still growing, the planters of the lower Mississippi relied on credit from merchants and factors based in New Orleans. And when it came

[47] Flint, *Recollections*, 309.
[48] "Sunday, January 17, 1847," James S. Laroe Diary, 1846-1850 Mss. 253, Louisiana and Lower Mississippi Valley Collections, Hill Memorial Library, Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge, Louisiana (hereafter, LLMVC).

time to send their crops to market, the planters looked to New Orleans as their point of connection to buyers in England, France, and the northern states.

The power of the planters depended on their ability to control a large "unfree" labor force.[49] In the context of European settler colonialism, according to Peter Kolchin, slavery "emerged to meet the pervasive labor shortage that developed wherever landholders tried to grow staple crops…for market in areas of population scarcity."[50] Plantation agriculture was a form of large-scale commodity production, and as such it depended on a workforce made up of propertyless laborers. After experimenting with Native American slavery and white indentured servitude, the emerging North American colonial elite had by 1700, at the latest, settled on the racialized system of chattel slavery as the most effective way to prevent rebellion, escape, and competition for land from their plantation hands. Planters found gang labor, involving groups of 15 to 20 or more slaves, to be the most efficient way to centralize and discipline the cooperative labor process required on a cotton or sugar plantation. Gang labor made the plantation more efficient than, for example, a family farm.[51] The rise of the planter class therefore depended in part on the availability of African slave labor.

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[49] Although, broadly speaking, I agree with Jairus Banaji's argument that it is problematic for historians to posit "a rigid dichotomy between free and unfree labor," I will henceforth use the term "unfree" to designate those forms of coerced labor—specifically, indentured servitude and chattel slavery—charateristic of plantation society in the Americas.. See Banaji, "The Fictions of Free Labour: Contract, Coercion, and so-called Unfree Labour," in *Theory as History*, 131-154.

[50] Peter Kolchin, *American Slavery, 1619-1877* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1993), 5.

[51] Robert W. Fogel, *Without Consent or Contract: The Rise and Fall of American Slavery* (New York: Norton, 1989), 50, 74-80. It is not necessary to accept Fogel's contentious conclusions regarding the "work ethic" of slaves in order to agree with his argument that

The planters also required access to abundant "free" land. Historians today generally agree that plantation slavery was an expansionary system, even if they often disagree about the reasons for this tendency. Eugene Genovese, for example, argued that slavery inevitably led to soil exhaustion, forcing the planters to aggressively seek out new lands.[52] More recently, Charles Post has suggested that slavery's territorial expansionism originated in its peculiar dynamics of accumulation. Unlike industrial capitalists, Post argues, planters could not simply reduce their workforce through firings and invest the money saved in new, labor saving machinery. To reduce production costs, therefore, they needed to expand into new territories.[53] In the context of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century North America, such an expansionary drive would often bring the planters into armed conflict with indigenous people and their allies.

The planters relied on merchants for credit and to get their crops to market. In particular, the South developed a complex system of factorage to meet the commercial needs of the big plantation owners. As Harold Woodman demonstrates, "factors were the most important of the middlemen involved in financing and

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gang labor was the most efficient way of organizing production on a plantation. For the debate on some of Fogel's specific claims regarding the productivity of slave labor, see Herbet G. Gutman, *Slavery and the Numbers Game: A Critique of Time on the Cross* (Urbana, Chicago, and London: University of Illinois Press, 1975); Paul A. David, Gutman, *et al*., *Reckoning with Slavery: A Critical Study in the Quantitative History of American Negro Slavery* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976).

[52] Eugene D. Genovese, *The Political Economy of Slavery: Studies in the Economy and Society of the Slave South* (New York: Pantheon, 1965), 89.

[53] Charles Post, *The American Road to Capitalism: Studies in Class Structure, Economic Development and Political Conflict, 1620-1877* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2012), 131-36.

marketing the Southern staple crops in the antebellum period."[54] One of the most important roles of the factor, or commercial merchant, was to provide credit to planters who were not yet able to realize the value of their crop. As Post notes, "credit is a feature of all commodity production," and is "especially important in agriculture, where the long period between planting and harvesting creates the need for substantial credit to purchase land, seeds and tools and secure labor before the first crop is harvested, no less sold."[55] Factors took orders for all manner of goods and provided them to the planters in return for the promise of payment when the crop was finally sold. They also extended cash loans and other forms of credit, securitized against the promise of the exclusive right to sell the crop or as a mortgage on the planter's lands.[56]

Factors were also responsible for marketing the crop once it was ready for sale. As noted, they usually extended credit to the planters with the promise of exclusive rights to sell the crop. Although a minority of planters preferred to sell their crop directly to firms in the northeastern states or England, the majority delegated this role to commercial merchants based in urban areas, trusting that a factor would have access to a greater number of potential clients. As Woodman notes, therefore, "most planters found it advantageous to have the crop sold in coastal cities where buyers in greater numbers produced a more active demand."[57] Many factors had strong

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[54] Harold D. Woodman, *King Cotton and His Retainers: Financing and Marketing the Cotton Crop of the South, 1800-1925* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1968), 6.
[55] Post, *American Road to Capitalism*, 146.
[56] Woodman, *King Cotton*, 30-42.
[57] Woodman, *King Cotton*, 15

relationships, or even formal partnerships, with buyers in New York, Philadelphia, or Liverpool, allowing the planters to get the best market price available for the crop. In return for providing this service, factors charged a commission of 2.5 percent of the value of the crop once it was sold.[58] Through arrangements such as these, the urban class of factors and commercial agents made themselves indispensable economic partners of the rural planters.

From the earliest days of white settlement in the lower Mississippi Valley, New Orleans played an important role as a base for the expansion of plantation agriculture. In the French colonial period, this frequently meant that the settlement served as a military headquarters for wars of expropriation against local Native Americans. In 1729, the French went to war with the Natchez, a nation of about 3000 people living near the present-day city of the same name. Although relations between the French and Natchez had begun on relatively friendly terms,[59] the region's potential as a site for tobacco plantations finally brought the French into all-out war against their neighbors. Hoping to emulate the success of the British in the Chesapeake and desperate that their Louisiana holdings would become commercially viable, French colonial authorities strongly encouraged the spread of tobacco

[58] Lewis C. Gray, *History of Agriculture in the Southern United States to 1860, Vol. 2* (Gloucester, Mass.: P. Smith, 1958), 711-13;Woodman, *King Cotton*, 30-42. For more on the system of factorage in the antebellum South, see Ralph W. Haskins, "Planter and Cotton Factor in the Old South: Some Areas of Friction," *Agricultural History* 29, no. 1 (January 1955); A.H. Stone, "The Cotton Factorage System of the Southern States," *American Historical Review* 20, no. 3 (April, 1915).

[59] Daniel H. Usner, Jr., "The Frontier Exchange Economy of the Lower Mississippi Valley in the Eighteenth Century," *William and Mary Quarterly* 44, no. 2 (April. 1987): 169.

agriculture on the lower Mississippi in the 1720s.[60] By 1729, almost 450 white settlers and 300 African-descent slaves lived among the Natchez, where the best tobacco lands were located.[61] In the summer of that year, the French military commandant demanded that the Natchez move their settlement so that he could set up a tobacco plantation on the site. In November, several hundred Natchez warriors attempted to pre-empt their eviction with a surprise attack on the French settlement that killed over 200 white colonists. In the two-year war that followed, however, the French and their Native American allies were able to divide and defeat the Natchez, driving them from their villages and selling hundreds into slavery on the Caribbean sugar islands.[62]

Having defeated the Natchez, the French turned their attention to the Chickasaw. Allied to the British, this nation inhabited the strategically vital territory between the Mississippi and Tennessee Rivers—present-day northeastern Mississippi. As Wendy St. Jean has noted, "In addition to the Chickasaws' proximity to the inlets of major waterways, they were located at the crossroads of two major overland trading paths, the north-south Natchez Path and the east-west Creek Path."[63] While these indigenous people were ensconced on this land, French control of the Mississippi River would remain contested, thus hindering trade with colonial

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[60] Patricia D. Woods, "The French and the Natchez Indians in Louisiana: 1700-1731," *Louisiana History* 19, no. 4 (Autumn, 1978): 429-430.
[61] Woods, "The French and the Natchez," 432.
[62] Louise Phelps Kellogg, "France and the Mississippi Valley: A Resume, " *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 18, no. 1 (January, 1931):14; Woods, "The French and the Natchez," 432-34.
[63] Wendy St. Jean, "Trading Paths: Mapping Chickasaw History in the Eighteenth Century," *American Indian Quarterly* 27, no. 3/4 (Summer, 2003): 759.

settlements to the north. On the other hand, as historian Michael J. Foret has noted, "If the Chickasaws left their present territory...the French would be able to use the Ohio and Mississippi rivers in almost complete safety."[64] The Chickasaw also harbored some of the survivors of the war against the Natchez.[65] Hostilities began in earnest in the fall of 1733, and, by the end of 1734, French authorities had decided that only the complete destruction of the Chickasaw people could guarantee their control over the Mississippi Valley and its vital trade routes.[66] Despite the relatively small size of the Chickasaw nation—perhaps 6,000 people at the time of first contact with Europeans—massive French military campaigns in 1736, 1739, and 1752 failed to drive them from their land.[67]

New Orleans remained at the center of these wars of expropriation after control of the lower Mississippi passed in the hands of the United States in 1803. Andrew Jackson's victory at the Battle of New Orleans in early 1815, for example, spelled the final defeat of an alliance between the British, the Seminole and Creek peoples, and insurrectionary black slaves that sought to keep white settlers from spreading plantation agriculture into Florida and the Old Southwest. Jackson's victory and his subsequent removal of the Creeks was a huge boon to the planter class.[68] A

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[64] Michael J. Foret, "War or Peace? Louisiana, the Choctaws, and the Chickasaws, 1733-1735," *Louisiana History* 31, no. 3 (Summer, 1990): 278.
[65] Foret, "Louisiana, the Choctaws, and the Chickasaws," 275.
[66] Foret, "Louisiana, the Choctaws, and the Chickasaws," 279-284.
[67] St. Jean, "Trading Paths," 759-60. For a more detailed discussion of the Chickasaw and their resilience in the face of European settler colonialism, see James R. Atkinson, *Splendid Land, Splendid People: The Chickasaw Indians to Removal* (Tuscaloosa, Ala.: University of Alabama Press, 2004).
[68] Frank Lawrence Owsley, Jr., *Struggle for the Gulf Borderlands: The Creek War and the Battle of New Orleans, 1812-1815* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1981).

quarter-century later, New Orleans raised several companies of volunteers for the fighting against fierce indigenous and black resistance during the Second Seminole War in Florida from 1835 to 1842, and Fort Pike just outside the city served as a prison for black and Seminole captives taken during the conflict.[69] Historian Edward Miller has convincingly argued that New Orleans merchants were among the most ardent advocates for, and supporters of, the Texas Revolution of 1835, which aimed to expand plantation agriculture and chattel slavery into Mexican territory.[70]

Wars of expropriation against indigenous people gave European settlers access to land on which to grow staple crops and access to the waterways on which to transport them. But a vast amount of labor remained to be done if a commercial economy were to emerge on the lower Mississippi. Someone would have to clear the land, drain the swamps, build the levees and the settlements, grow the crops, crew the boats and ships, and perform all of the domestic and reproductive labor necessary to raise future generations of laborers. Unlike their English and Spanish imperials rivals, the French did not make a serious attempt to use enslaved Native Americans as the basis for an extractive economy, although some white male settlers did purchase indigenous women for use as domestic servants and slaves.[71] The colonial elite seems to have feared the ability of indigenous workers to escape and find shelter with

[69] Canter Brown, Jr., "Persifor F. Smith, the Louisiana Volunteers, and Florida's Second Seminole War," *Louisiana History* 34, no. 4 (Autumn 1993); Kenneth W. Porter, "Notes Supplementary to 'Relations Between Negroes and Indians,'" *Journal of Negro History* 18, no. 3 (July 1933): 301.
[70] Edward L. Miller, *New Orleans and the Texas Revolution* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2004).
[71] Juliana Barr, "From Captives to Slaves: Commodifying Indian Women in the Borderlands," *Journal Of American History* 92, no. 1 (June, 2005).

neighboring tribes.[72] Already in the 1720s, Native Americans made up little more than 10 percent of the slaves in colonial Louisiana, and when the Spanish took control of the colony in the 1760s they instituted a formal ban on the use of Native Americans as slaves.[73]

With Native American slavery never an important institution in French Louisiana, colonial authorities sent a large number of unfree European workers to the lower Missisippi in the early eighteenth century. Again, this was an attempt to emulate the British experience in Virginia, where indentured white servants were a significant source of labor for the first few decades of the colony's existence. Beginning in 1718, the French government, in alliance with Scottish entrepreneur John Law's Company of the Indies, initiated a major effort to develop the commerical economy of its colony on the Gulf Coast, and instigated a program of forced emigration to Louisiana.[74] Between 1717 and 1721, one thousand European *engagés*, or indentured laborers, arrived in the colony, most of them convicted vagabonds, prostitutes, and salt smugglers.[75] In the hopelessly underdeveloped colony, however, even the free white settlers struggled to feed themselves and fend off death from disease and starvation—they cared little for the wellbeing of their indentured sercants. The morality rate for white contract laborers and indentured convicts was horrifically

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[72] Thomas N. Ingersoll, "The Slave Trade and the Ethnic Diversity of Louisiana's Slave Community," *Louisiana History* 37, no. 2 (Spring, 1996): 137.
[73] Stephen Webre, "The Problem of Indian Slavery in Spanish Louisiana, 1769-1803," *Louisiana History* 35, no. 2 (Spring, 1984).
[74] Thomas N. Ingersoll, *Mammon and Manon in Early New Orleans: The First Slave Society in the Deep South, 1718-1819* (Knoxville, Tenn.: University of Tennessee Press, 1999), 6-9.
[75] James D. Hardy, Jr., "The Transportation of Convicts to Colonial Louisiana," *Louisiana History* 7, no. 3 (Summer, 1966): 210.

high, therefore, and 80 percent died within months of arriving in Louisiana. By 1721, less than 200 *engagés* remained to work for the approximately 850 French settlers on the lower Mississippi.[76] The planters had never been enthusiastic about the use of unfree white labor, which might explain why they allowed hundreds of *engagés* to simply perish once they reached the colony. In any case, the experiment was an undoubted disaster and the colonial elite resumed their clamor for African slaves.

Alongside white *engagés*, the Company of the Indies sought unfree labor from Africa, and black slaves began to arrive in Louisiana in the summer of 1719. Within two years a total of 2,000 slaves had reached the colony, and they were initially put to work improving the rudimentary settlement of New Orleans. "Some built levees and drainage ditches along the river," according to Daniel Usner. "Others cleared the forests and prepared timber for vessels and houses."[77] Like white indentured servants, however, the first generation of black slaves faced terrible mortality rates. Although European slavers brought 7,000 Africans to the French settlements before 1735, less than half lived long enough to begin the development of the local economy.[78] Slave labor did bring rapid development and prosperity to some areas of Louisiana. In 1731, for example, the Chapitoulas settlement just above New Orleans, one of the richest agricultural districts in the entire colony, had over 1,000 black slaves working its cotton, indigo, and tobacco plantations.[79]

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[76] Hardy, "Transportation of Convicts," 220.
[77] Daniel H. Usner, Jr., "From African Captivity to American Slavery: The Introduction of Black Laborers to Colonial Louisiana," *Louisiana History* 20, no. 1 (Winter, 1979): 28.
[78] Usner, "From African Captivity to American Slavery," 33.
[79] Usner, "From African Captivity to American Slavery," 30.

After the 1760s, Spanish rule brought major socio-economic changes to the lower Mississippi Valley. The new colonial powers had a powerful motivation for making Louisiana a commercially viable imperial holding: they needed to placate a disloyal and unruly local population. The revelation that France had ceded control of the colony to its Spanish ally had produced a major rebellion among the local elite in 1766, and Spain only regained control through force of arms in 1769. According to Thomas Ingersoll, Spanish "bureaucrats hoped to endear the people Spain's rule by increasing the trade and economic prosperity of the colony."[80] The Spanish authorities therefore attempted to liberalize trade restrictions so that more black slaves would enter Louisiana and the plantation economy would grow. As a result of these policies, Ingersoll notes, "several New Orleans merchants were deeply involved in the slave trade" by the end of the 1780s, at which point the enslaved black population of the lower Mississippi Valley had reached almost 21,000.[81]

Under American control, New Orleans became the most famous slave market in the slave states. The emergence of the sugar industry in the 1790s created a huge new demand for slaves, and was followed in the early nineteenth century by the arrival of cotton cultivation in the Deep South states of Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana. In 1810, the enslaved population of Louisiana was a little less than thirty-five thousand, but by 1830 it had grown to 110,000.[82] The slave market in New Orleans became the most important destination in what Ira Berlin has called the

[80] Ingersoll, *Mammon and Manon*, 156.
[81] Ingersoll, "Slave Trade," 146; Hall, *Africans in Colonial Louisiana*, 278.
[82] Joe Gray Taylor, *Negro Slavery in Louisiana* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana Historical Association, 1963), 37.

"Second Middle Passage"—the forced migration of one million black slaves into these new plantation regions.[83] Tens of thousands of slaves arrived in Louisiana every year in each of the first three decades of the nineteenth century. Between 1830 and 1840 alone, 31,500 slaves arrived in the state.[84] Probably 60 to 70 percent or more of the slaves reaching the Deep South in these years arrived in the region through slave trading rather than planter migration.[85] New Orleans was the largest slave market on the continent of North America; on any given day during the winter months that represented the height of the trading season, as many as 1,000 to 3,000 slaves might be able for sale.[86] The city's markets were a crucial source of labor for Louisiana's emerging sugar industry in particular. Crescent City slave traders had a special relationship with the urban centers of the Chesapeake, particularly Norfolk and Richmond, and shipped large numbers of adult male slaves from the declining tobacco regions of Virginia and Maryland to labor under the brutal regime of the cane fields.[87]

As plantation agriculture boomed in the new states of the Deep South, New Orleans assumed an increasingly important role in the export of staple crops to markets in Europe and the Northeastern United States. The planters of the West owed

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[83] Ira Berlin, *Generations of Captivity: A History of African-American Slaves* (Cambridge, Mass., and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003), 161-65; Berlin, *The Making of African America: The Four Great Migrations* (Cambridge, Mass., and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2010), 100.
[84] Taylor, *Negro Slavery*, 37.
[85] Walter Johnson, *Soul by Soul: Life Inside the Antebellum Slave Market* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 1999), 5-6; Michael Tadman, *Speculators and Slaves: Masters, Traders, and Slaves in the Old South* (Madison, Wis.: University of Wisconsin Press. 1989), 22-25.
[86] Johnson, *Soul by Soul*, 2; Tadman, *Speculators and Slaves*, 95-96.
[87] Tadman, *Speculators and Slaves*, 64-70.

their economic prosperity to their ability to transport cotton and tobacco in particular to distant consumers, and as commercial agriculture boomed in the Mississippi Valley, so too did the stream of vessels making their way down the river to New Orleans. In 1802, New Orleans exported 375,000 pounds of cotton, 1,300,000 pounds of sugar, 80,000 pounds of indigo, and 120,000 pounds of tobacco.[88] In 1835-6, almost 1,300 Mississippi steamboats arrived in New Orleans, carrying almost 45,000 tons of freight valued at almost $40 million.[89] By the middle of the 1830s, New Orleans was exporting almost half a million bales of cotton every year, with the vast majority heading for the hungry textile mills of the northeastern United States, France, and especially Britain. At the same time, the city was exporting 3,000 hogsheads of tobacco to Europe and the North every year, and 8,500 tierces of rice.[90] By 1835 the exports of New Orleans totalled somewhere in the region of $35 million per year, well ahead of New York, its closest North American competitor, with $30 million.[91]

This huge export trade, and the capital investment needs of Louisiana's cotton and sugar planters, led to a dramatic increase in the city's banking sector in the early 1830s. Although factors remained the main source of credit for the planter class, these commerical merchants in turn borrowed from banks. By the middle of the decade

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[88] Ingersoll, *Mammon and Manon*, 277.
[89] James E. Winston, "Notes on the Economic History of New Orleans, 1803-1836," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 11, no. 2 (September 1924): 205.
[90] Winston, "Economic History of New Orleans," 206-207.
[91] Lawrence H. Larsen, "New Orleans and the River Trade: Reinterpreting the Role of the Business Community," *Wisconsin Magazine of History* 61, no. 2 (Winter 1977-1978): 114; Winston, "Economic History of New Orleans," 207-208.

there were 14 chartered banks in the city with a claimed capital of $34 million and actual specie on hand in the amount of $2.5 million.[92] These figures made New Orleans one of the nation's primary financial centers, and Louisiana as a whole was behind only Massachusetts, New York, and Pennsylvania in terms of total banking capital.[93] According to economic historian John G. Clark, most of these banks were land banks "in which the stock was secured by mortgages and crop estimates of planters."[94] Other banks were tied to the construction of specific internal improvements, such as canals, streetlights, or railroads.[95] The state's banking capital and facilities were so concentrated in New Orleans that local planters became utterly dependent on the city for their access to credit. As economic historian George Green put it, "Rural Louisiana relied for its banking facilities and for a portion of its supply of credit upon branches of the New Orleans banks."[96]

By the 1830s, then, the lower Mississippi Valley had become one of the world's richest plantation societies, and from the city's founding in the early eighteenth century, New Orleans had been central to the rise of the region's planter class. Beginning with the French wars against the Natchez and Choctaw peoples and concluding with the removals of indigenous peoples and Texas Revolution of the 1830s, New Orleans had consistently served as the urban headquarters for wars of

[92] Larsen, "New Orleans and the River Trade," 114-115; Winston, "Economic History of New Orleans," 216.
[93] George D. Green, "Banking and Finance in Antebellum Louisiana: Their Influence on the Course of Economic Development," *Journal of Economic History* 26, no. 4 (December, 1966): 579.
[94] John G. Clark, "New Orleans and the River: A Study in Attitudes and Responses," *Louisiana History* 8, no. 2 (Spring 1967): 123-24.
[95] Green, "Banking and Finance," 579.
[96] Ibid.

expropriation—bouts of military aggression that seized new lands for plantation agriculture and satisfied the expansionist needs of the slaveholding class. The city had been even more central to the planters' attempt to build a plantation workforce of unfree laborers. In the early French period, wealthy colonists had used New Orleans to bring in thousands of indentured white servants and, when this form of forced labor failed to take root in Louisiana, the first cargoes of African slaves. The years of Spanish control saw New Orleans emerge as a truly significant hub of the Atlantic slave trade, and this tendency only increased after the region entered the United States. With the explosion of plantation agriculture in the Mississippi Valley after 1800, moreover, New Orleans became not only the most important city for the export of slave-grown staple crops, but also a major financial center in its own right, home to the banks, commercial merchants, and factors without which the planter class could never have secured vital credit.

**State and Civil Society**

The planters made ample use of New Orleans in their rise to dominance over land, labor, money, and markets. They also utilized the city as the locus of their state power and the seedbed of an embryonic civil society. For a number of reasons, the local elite depended on these institutions to maintain their position at the pinnacle of society on the lower Mississippi. In the first instance, the planter class needed bodies of armed men to coerce and discipline unruly working people. We have already seen that the indigenous peoples whose land the planters coveted had mounted frequent—

and frequently successful—resistance to white settler-colonialism. But the emerging elite also faced challenges from rebellious servants and slaves within the plantation regime, and relied on military or paramilitary force to defeat them. Planters also needed the state to secure their cohesion and internal unity as a self-conscious social group. With Louisiana changing hands between France, Spain, and the United States in the first century of its settlement, the local ruling class threatened to become hopelessly divided against itself on axes of culture, language, and national allegiance. State institutions based in New Orleans therefore emerged as a vital way in which the planters recognized and asserted their collective interests. So too did the city's nascent civil society, an emergent network of cultural institutions and social spaces in which the planters and their allies could articulate a shared identity and worldview.

The experience of production and exchange did relatively little to foster a sense of group identity within the local elite. In this sense, the commercial and patriarchal sides of plantation society tended to reinforce one another. Planters were large-scale commodity producers who competed with one another to realize the value of their crops on the world market. At the same time, they often remained relatively isolated from one another due to the dictates of plantation management, and experienced their domination of labor in a fairly direct and personal way. As Richard Follett has noted of the sugar planters, this combination of profit-oriented production and an archaic labor system made it difficult for planters to express a collective self-interest. "The slaveholding barons rarely cooperated for their own mutual good," he

writes.[97] The planters also faced conflicts with the emerging merchant class. Although the groups were bound together by a strong community of economic interests, planters frequently complained that their factors were charging exorbiant fees, demanding excessive prices for goods and supplies, or setting their interest rates too high, while, for their part, merchants became frustrated when planters failed to pay their debts or spreads rumors about the unreliability of a given factor.[98]

Alongside economic competition, the rising elite also faced the threat of potential internal conflict based on differences of language and national origin. While these divisions were real, some historians have overstated the politics of ethnicity as the driving force in the history of nineteenth-century New Orleans. Beginning in the late nineteenth century, a group of Creole historians began to construct a version of this narrative in which grasping and avaricious Anglo-American capitalists overthrew the genteel and sophisticated culture of the existing Francophone elite. This narrative, if not its particular value judgments, has continued to exert an influence on the subsequent scholarship. In one collection of essays, for example, Arnold Hirsch and Joseph Logsdon claimed that "the long conflict between the creoles and the Americans proved a major force in shaping the unusual character of New Orleans."[99] Joseph Tregle, Jr., who has produced some of the most influential work on relations between Louisiana's Americans and Creoles, has made a similar argument. Writing

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[97] Richard Follett, *The Sugar Masters: Planters and Slaves in Louisiana's Cane World, 1820-1860* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2005), 41.
[98] Haskins, "Planter and Cotton Factor," 4-7, 9-11.
[99] Arnold R. Hirsch and Joseph Logsdon, "The American Challenge: Introduction," in Hirsch and Logsdon (eds.), *Creole New Orleans: Race and Americanization* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1992), 91.

of the American influx after 1803, he stated "there could be no escaping the awareness that they represented a deadly threat to the way of life of the original inhabitants or theat their presence made conflict for control of the community an inevitability."[100]

The possibility of subaltern resistance, however, presented a more serious threat than ethnic and linguistic divisions within the ruling elite. From the beginning of the French colonial project on the Lower Mississippi, unfree working people staged violent revolts against their exploitation and oppression. In September 1719, for example, a group of 150 young Frenchwomen rioted as they were being transported by ship to New Orleans. When their guards opened fire, six women died and twice as many were wounded.[101] Ten years later, a number of African slaves cooperated with the Natchez people in their uprising against the French. According to Gwendolyn Midlo Hall, before attacking the French settlers, "the Natchez assured themselves of the support of several blacks…who told the other blacks that they would be free if they supported the Natchez." Later, a group of escaped slaves fought alongside the Natchez against the French and their Choctaw allies.[102] The planters would need to find ways in which to control these unruly laborers if they were to establish a profitable regime in Louisiana.

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[100] Joseph G. Tregle, Jr., "Creoles and Americans," in Hirsch and Logsdon (eds.), *Creole New Orleans*, 134. See also Tregle, "Early New Orleans Society: A Reappraisal," *Journal of Southern History* 18, no. 1 (February, 1952).
[101] Hardy, "Transportation of Convicts," 214.
[102] Hall, *Africans in Colonial Louisiana*, 100-102.

In the face of such challenges, the state apparatus emerging in New Orleans became a vital tool for planters and merchants. Even under the French and Spanish colonial regimes, institutions of local government served to defend the collective interests of the emerging elite. In the early years of white settlement on the lower Mississippi, the French instituted a judicial and legislative body known as the Superior Council, made up of local planters and merchants, to help administer the colony.[103] When members of the Council led the revolt against Spanish rule in 1768, Lieutenant General Alejandro O'Reilly abolished the institution and replaced it with a Cabildo, or municipal government, based in New Orleans.[104] The change did not alter the class nature of the state, however. O'Reilly chose five planters to sit on the first Cabildo, believing that "government properly belonged to persons of substance who were rooted in the colony."[105] Although it was theoretically the governing body for the whole of Spanish Louisiana, in practice the Cabildo exercised relatively little power outside New Orleans and the plantation districts surrounding it. The exception to this tendency was the Cabildo's determination to represent the interests of the planter class when it came to labor discipline. The municipal government frequently expressed dissatisfaction with "lenient" Spanish laws governing slavery, for example, and pushed for a return to the more stringent French Code Noir.[106]

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[103] Jerry A. Micelle, "From Law Court to Local Government: Metamorphosis of the Superior Council of French Louisiana," *Louisiana History* Vol. 9, No. 2 (Spring, 1968).
[104] Gilbert C. Din and John E. Haskins, *The New Orleans Cabildo: Colonial Louisiana's First City Government, 1769-1803* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1996), 44-49.
[105] Din and Haskins, *New Orleans Cabildo*, 54.
[106] Gilbert C. Din, *Spaniards, Planters and Slaves: The Spanish Regulation of Slavery in Louisiana, 1763-1803* (College Station, Tex.: Texas A&M University Press, 1999), 46.

Under American rule, too, the local state machinery continued to serve as a vehicle for the planters' interests. Although William C.C. Claiborne, Jefferson's appointed governor, ruled the District of Orleans as a virtual dictator for the first eighteen months of the American period, a more representative government emerged after the region achieved Territorial status. But only the wealthiest planters and merchants would enjoy representation in the Orleans territorial—and, after 1812, Louisiana state—government. The franchise remained extremely restrictive, with high property and taxation qualifications—not to mention the complete exclusion of women—until well into the 1840s. Of a total state population of over seventy-six thousand, less than four thousand men voted in Louisiana's first gubernatorial election.[107] Under Louisiana's first constitution after statehood in 1812, the local government kept its centralized and oligarchic character. Until the 1820s, selection of presidential electors remained in the hands of a state legislature that, despite its location in New Orleans, gave disproportionate representation to the plantation districts.[108] Under such circumstances, it was inevitable that the local state would continue to favor the planters, as evinced in a hardening of the Black Codes once the cotton and sugar booms began in Louisiana.[109]

One of the most important functions of the planters' state was its capacity to mobilize armed men in order to repress subaltern resistance. Under the Spanish

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[107] Joe Gray Taylor, *Louisiana: A Bicentennial History* (New York: Norton, 1976), 51.
[108] Joseph G. Tregle, Jr., *Louisiana in the Age of Jackson: A Clash of Cultures and Personalities* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1999), 55-64.
[109] Judith K. Schafer, *Slavery, the Civil Law, and the Supreme Court of Louisiana* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1994), 6-9.

regime, New Orleans functioned as a major military installation. By the end of the Spanish period, three infantry battalions had their headquarters in the city, with the result being that "as many as five hundred troops were stationed in the city and nearby.[110] The Cabildo was never afraid to use this military might to enforce labor discipline on the plantations. In the 1770s, the municipal government made a major push to end the threat from runaway slaves and maroons. It instituted a tax on slaveholders in order to establish a regular slave patrol and raised forces to root out the communities of black fugitives emerging in the backcountry.[111]

The advent of American rule did not fundamentally change the character of the state's repressive function. In 1806, municipal authorities established a city guard for New Orleans, which, according to historian Dennis Rousey, "closely resembled…a small army."[112] Armed with swords and pikes, the guard patrolled the city streets but faced fairly serious restrictions on their ability to deploy lethal force against white citizens. The city guard was, however, fully authorized to use deadly force when dealing with the black population.[113] Indeed, the local ruling class proved quite capable of deploying overwhelming force when slave rebellion became a real danger. During the massive insurrection on the German Coast north of New Orleans in 1811, local planters were able to call on dozens of militiamen and vigilantes as

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[110] Din and Haskin, *New Orleans Cabildo*, 13.
[111] Din, *Spaniards, Planters, and Slaves*, Chapter Four. See also, Dennis C. Rousey, *Policing the Southern City: New Orleans, 1805-1889* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1996), p. 15. We will have cause to examine this episode in more detail in Chapter Three.
[112] Rousey, *Policing the Southern City*, 13.
[113] Dennis C. Rousey, "Cops and Guns: Police Use of Deadly Force in Nineteenth-Century New Orleans," *American Journal of Legal History* 28, no. 1 (January 1984): 43-45.

well as a detachment of regular U.S. Army troops under the command of General Wade Hampton. Historian James Dorman has described their suppression of the uprising as "hardly a battle at all…more in the form of a mass execution, an open season on blacks in the vicinity."[114]

Control of the state machinery meant more to the planter class than just the ability to maintain a monopoly of force. The structures, institutions, and rituals of the state helped to bind the planters together as a self-conscious social group. As Thomas Ingersoll has written of the Creole experience with the transition to American government, "The planters were assimilated with ease into the class structure of the South via republican institutions, a structure in which there was no power on earth above the planters."[115] The volunteer militia company the *Battalion d'Orléans* demonstrated the overlapping repressive and ideological role of the republican state. Reflecting the traditional republican mistrust of standing armies, the *Battalion* was made up of volunteers from the local Creole population and had an officer corps of wealthy planters and merchants. These men fought against the British under Andrew Jackson at the Battle of New Orleans in 1815, an episode that helped the local elite come to terms with the new American regime.[116] General Lafayette, French hero of the Revolutionary War, visited New Orleans as part of his tour in 1825 and received a rapturous welcome from all sections of the local elite. As a participant in both the

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[114] James H. Dormon, "The Persistent Specter: Slave Rebellion in Territorial Louisiana," *Louisiana History* 18, no. 4 (Autumn, 1977): 393-97.
[115] Ingersoll, *Mammon and Manon*, 275.
[116] Paul D. Gelpi, Jr., "Mr. Jefferson's Creoles: The Battalion d'Orléans and the Americanization of Creole Louisiana, 1803-1815," *Louisiana History* 48, no. 3 (Summer, 2007).

American and French Revolutions, Lafayette provided a living link between the republican political traditions of both nations and his visit helped bring to the surface the shared political values of Anglophone and Francophone residents of New Orleans.[117]

Education was an arena in which the state attempted to serve the interests of the elite as a whole rather than depend on the public spiritedness of individual merchants and planters. Under French and Spanish rule, education had remained in private hands. Religious orders such as the Ursuline nuns ran some schools, and the other private educational institutions charged high tuition and thus remained the preserve of the children of the wealthy.[118] After he won election as the state's first governor in 1812, William C. C. Claiborne sponsored an ambitious plan to give New Orleans what would have been, by the standards of the time, a modern and extensive system of public education. Claiborne imagined a College of Orleans sitting atop "a network of local academies, libraries, and primary schools" with the whole structure explicitly designed to bind the French-Creole and American sections of the population more closely together. Claiborne would not live long enough to see his plan come to fruition, and Louisiana only began to develop a genuine public school system in the 1840s.[119]

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[117] Patricia Brady, "Carnival of Liberty: Lafayette in Louisiana," *Louisiana History* 41, no. 1 (Winter, 2000).
[118] Thomas G. Conway, "John A. Kennicott: A Teacher in New Orleans," *Louisiana History* 26, no. 4 (Autumn, 1985): 403.
[119] Donald E. Devore and Joseph Logsdon, *Crescent City Schools: Public Education in New Orleans, 1841-1991* (Lafayette, La.: University of Southwestern Louisiana Press, 1991), 5-9.

The local government's drive to create a public school system for Louisiana showed there was no hard-and-fast line between the state machinery and what we might think of as organizations of civil society. The development of religious cultures and institutions in New Orleans showed the same dynamic at work. Under French and then Spanish rule, the colonial regime sponsored Catholicism as a state religion but fostered a relatively open climate of spiritual toleration. Although the coming of American rule meant the end of Catholicism's privileged position, the state still acted to support religious institutions, including those of Protestant denominations. In 1814, William Winans, an early Methodist leader, was allowed to begin his New Orleans preaching career in the Hall of the House of Representatives in the state capital.[120] Although the appearance of organized Protestantism might have posed the threat of religious divisions within the ruling elite, it actually demonstrated their ability to articulate shared values. When Anglo-American Protestants began to create their own congregations in New Orleans in the 1810s and 1820s, they initially turned to Anglicanism because of its similarities to the Catholic faith of the pre-existing elite.[121] According to historian Timothey Reilly, the emergence of Unitarianism from a split in the local Presbyterian Church in 1832 provides another example of how

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See also, Raleigh A. Suarez, "Chronicle of a Failure: Public Education in Antebellum Louisiana," *Louisiana History* 12, no. 2 (Spring, 1971).

[120] Ray Holder, "Methodist Beginnings in New Orleans, 1813-1814," *Louisiana History* 18, no. 2 (Spring, 1977): 177.

[121] Ingersoll, *Mammon and Manon*, 260-1.

Protestants incorporated religious liberalism and proslavery ideology into their faith.[122]

Spreading out beyond the state, the churches, and the schools was a dense network of spaces of leisure and sociability in which members of the elite met, mingled, and mixed. The St. Charles Hotel, completed in 1837, became probably the most famous such location in New Orleans and served as common ground for visiting businessmen, merchants, and planters. [123] New Orleans also became a center of music and entertainment in the early nineteenth century. Although the first English-language performance did not reach the city until 1806, and such events remained rare for several years thereafter, Francophone performers made an effort to reach an American audience in 1807 with a presentation of *The Portrait of Washington* honoring the first President of the United States.[124] The theater could be a force for propagating and reinforcing the ideology of the planter class. As Joseph Roppolo has shown, plays shown in New Orleans regularly allowed white patrons to "see the 'happy' plantation Negro, the carefree, faithful, and funny slave in whose existence most Southern white theatergoers seemed to believe."[125] These institutions of civil society created the spaces in which members of the elite could develop a shared understanding of their collective interests and worldview.

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[122] Timothey F. Reilly, "Pason Clapp of New Orleans: Antebellum Social Critic, Religious Radical, and Member of the Establishment," *Louisiana History* 16, no. 2 (Spring, 1975): 169-170.
[123] Martha Ann Peters, "The St. Charles Hotel: New Orleans Social Center, 1837-1860," *Louisiana History* 1, no. 3 (Summer, 1960).
[124] Roger P. McCutchceon, "The First English Plays in New Orleans," *American Literature* 11, no. 2 (May, 1939): 183-85.
[125] Joseph P. Roppolo, "Uncle Tom in New Orleans: Three Lost Plays," *New England Quarterly* 27, no. 2 (June, 1954): 217.

Appearances by well-known celebrities could become major events in the social lives of the New Orleans elite. Moreau Gottschalk's series of concerts in 1853 was one such occasion. The young Creole pianist and composer was a Crescent City native but had left his home in the early 1840s to study in France, where his interpretations of Louisiana folk tunes such as "Bamboula" rapidly propelled him to fame. For the well-heeled residents of New Orleans, it was a source of major municipal pride that a native son had risen to such heights. Thus, when Gottschalk returned to New Orleans to play several sold-out concerts in 1853, he created a media sensation.[126] A similar furor had greeted the visit of Jenny Lind two years earlier. The Swedish concert singer, often referred to as "Nightingale," arrived in New Orleans to rapturous crowds as a part of an international tour organized by P.T. Barnum. Admirers—many of them almost certainly wealthy planters—flocked to New Orleans from across Louisiana and the rest of the Deep South, creating a commercial bonanza for local merchants and shopkeepers.[127] Events like these provided shared points of reference for an elite culture based in New Orleans, one that was capable of uniting different fractions of the local planter and merchant classes.

New Orleans became famous for its public masked balls in the nineteenth century. As R. Randall Crouch has shown, these events became common under the

[126] Willie Prophit, "The Crescent City's Charismatic Celebrity: Louis Moreau Gottschalk's New Orleans Concerts, Spring 1853," *Louisiana History* 12, no. 3 (Summer, 1971).
[127] Keith S. Hambrick, "The Swedish Nightingale in New Orleans: Jenny Lind's Visit of 1851," *Louisiana History* 22, no. 4 (Autumn, 1981).

period of Spanish rule, and persisted right up until the Civil War.[128] The balls allowed masked revelers to pay a small entrance fee to dance and socialize with other, similarly anonymous, patrons. Although the balls catered to all sections of the population, with some even allowing black guests, members of the local elite increasingly turned to subscription-only balls. "By the mid-1840s," Crouch writes, "subscription balls were too exclusive to be considered public in any sense."[129] Antebellum visitors to New Orleans found the masked balls to be one of the city's most interesting and surprising cultural innovations. Karl Bernhard, the Duke of Saxe-Weimar, visited several such balls during his time in New Orleans in the mid-1820s. "None but good society were admitted to these subscription balls," Bernhard wrote of one such event at the French theater. "The dress was extremely elegant, and after the latest Paris fashion."[130]

New Orleans had developed a rich local print culture by the 1830s, although its influence was likely restricted to elite circles. Most of the city's early newspapers published in French. In 1794, for example, Jean Baptiste Leseur Fontaine established *Le Moniteur de la Louisiane*, New Orleans' first newspaper, in 1794, while the *Courrier de la Louisiane* began publication in 1807 and endured until the outbreak of the Civil War. *L'Ami des Lois*, which emerged in 1809, became *L'Abeille* (*The Bee*) in the 1820s and was one of the longest-running newspapers in the United States when it folded a century later. The first major English-language newspaper, the

[128] R. Randall Crouch, "The Public Masked Balls of Antebellum New Orleans: A Custom of Masque outside the Mardi Gras Tradition," *Louisiana History* 35, no. 4 (Autumn, 1994).
[129] Crouch, "Public Masked Balls," 427.
[130] Bernhard, *Travels Through North America*, 58, 61-63.

*Louisiana Gazette*, was launched in 1804.[131] By 1835, there were five dailies operating in New Orleans: *The Bee*, *The Commerical Bulletin*, *The Courier*, *The Post and Union*, and the *True American*. The city's most important English-language newspaper, the *Daily Picayune*, was launched in 1837.[132] Many of the city's newspaper publishers also dabbled in the printing and selling of books. The first specialized bookshop appeared on Chartres Street around 1810. By 1836, the city had at least eleven independent booksellers and printers, with the majority of them probably working in French.[133]

New Orleans thus operated as the hub of a developing planters' public sphere. Right up until the 1830s, the city housed the local state machinery and the bodies of armed men responsible for keeping the slave population in line. But it also played home to an array of civil society institutions that were vital to the internal coherence and unity of the local elite. Planters and merchants developed a sense of their collective interests and values through participation in social and political spaces like the French Theatre and the St. Charles Hotel. Thus, a shared vision of elite republicanism and white supremacy emerged from the newspapers and plays and found expression in the apparatus of the state machinery. Just as it had been central to

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[131] Samuel J. Marino, "Early French-Language Newspapers in New Orleans," *Louisiana History* 7, no. 4 (Autumn, 1966).
[132] Alex Dienst, "The New Orleans Newspaper Files of the Texas Revolutionary Period," *Quarterly of the Texas State Historical Association* 4, no. 2 (October, 1900): 143.
[133] John M. Godeau, "Booksellers and Printers in New Orleans, 1764-1883," *Journal of Library History* 5, no. 1 (January, 1970); Florence M. Jumonville, "Frenchmen at Heart: New Orleans Printers and Their Imprints, 1764-1803," *Louisiana History* 32, no. 3 (Summer, 1991).

the planters' economic success, so New Orleans helped cement their power and prestige.

**Conclusion**

The rise of New Orleans to the bustling port city of the 1830s had been intimately tired to the rise of the local planter elite. In the eighteenth century, French colonists had set out from the city on their way to wars of expropriation aimed at the local Native American population, and Spanish merchants had used New Orleans as the center of the slave trade. Once cotton and sugar cultivation arrived on the lower Mississippi, New Orleans became even more important to the local elite. As planters and slaves poured into the new agricultural districts, the Crescent City served as the biggest slave market in the Deep South and also began to rise in prominence as a port for the shipment of staple crops. New Orleans also climbed to significance as a local center of banking and credit, the home of the commercial merchants and factors who advanced money to the planters and helped bring their crops to market. Throughout its rise, the city functioned as a bastion of the armed power of the planter class, and the home of state and civil society institutions that helped unite the local elite as a self-conscious social group.

The significance of New Orleans for the emergence of the planter class in the lower Mississippi Valley tells us something important about the nature of antebellum southern society. In a very real sense, the growth of New Orleans expressed the sharpest manifestation of a contradiction common to the whole plantation system.

Slavery may have been an ancient and patriarchal labor system, but in its North American form it was also deeply woven into the fabric of the emerging world market. So while the planters dreamed of mastery in their exercise of private and paternalistic power over the plantation "household," they were also reliant on the much more public and impersonal world of commerce and urban life. In the heart of slavery's empire, New Orleans was simultaneously incongruous and essential.

For the planters, New Orleans became a vital hub for trade, banking, culture, and politics. The relative openness of urban society was a great source of wealth and power for the local elite. But, as we will see in the next chapter, urban society also created serious problems for the owners and employers of labor. Planters and merchants were not the only city dwellers capable of taking advantage of urban society's unusual features. African American working people also found that life in New Orleans allowed them to develop a sense for, and advance, their own interests as a social group. Alongside, and even within, the world of masked balls and theatre performances, a popular culture arose expressing the experiences and desires of African American women and men. It is to the emergence of African American popular consciousness that we will now turn.

## Chapter Two

## Black Enlightenment:

## Understanding African American Politics in Antebellum New Orleans

"Some will say that it is very queer and they cannot understand how the slaves get so enlightened," Eliza Potter noted in her autobiography. "It is very easily understood." Potter, a northern-born free woman of color who worked as a hairdresser in antebellum New Orleans, was a penetrating observer of subaltern political culture in the Old South. Like her peers among the black working people of North American slave society, Potter was excluded from the formal public sphere. She could not vote, attend a political meeting, or own or edit a newspaper. And yet Eliza Potter understood the ways in which slaves and free people of color could achieve "enlightenment" even in the South's closed society. She filled her 1859 autobiography with such moments of illumination: secret gatherings at which slaves read and discussed the latest newspapers; indiscretions overheard in the boudoirs of rich southern ladies; reading lessons from sympathetic whites; whispered conversations about the promise of freedom in Canada; the sense of empowerment that came from possession of a sought-after skill. At the same time, however, Potter knew that, for many white observers, this enlightenment was "queer"—strange,

hidden, and subversive—because it took place in the shadows and reflected the political awakening of a people whose political activity was deemed impossible.[1]

Eliza Potter's observations capture a crucial dynamic in the political culture of black working people in antebellum New Orleans. Despite huge obstacles, slaves and free people of color in this southern city were able to achieve "enlightenment": an understanding of the society in which they lived and their place in it, a sense of how things might be different, and an awareness of potential allies and enemies in the struggle to make such changes. They derived this understanding from a multitude of sources, including their experiences of labor in the urban-commercial environment, the constant battle to escape the violence of owners, employers, and the state, and their consciousness of events in the world beyond New Orleans. Moreover, black working people used this understanding to inform political projects such as strengthening and maintaining families and kinship networks, building the institutions and values of a coherent community, and the constant fight for autonomy and freedom. In this sense, black enlightenment was a collective, as well as an individual, process. As Eliza Potter remarked, however, slaves and free people of color kept their enlightenment out of sight. In order to preserve the fragile gains of their political work, black working people knew they must hide it from the paternalism and violence of the white supremacist power structure.

What did "enlightenment" mean for black popular politics in antebellum New Orleans? In the realm of ideas, the Enlightenment of eighteenth-century Europe and

[1] Eliza Potter, *A Hairdresser's Experience in High Life* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991 [1859]). Quotation is on 157.

North America championed the application of reason to human affairs, and emphasized concepts such as liberty, equality, and democracy. As Jurgen Habermas suggested, moreover, the Enlightenment had its social base in the emerging "bourgeois public sphere"—the complex of newspapers, salons, and coffee shops in the towns and cities of the Atlantic World.[2] Since Habermas, many historians have rightly drawn attention to the elitist, racist, and often pro-imperialist tendencies in Enlightenment thought and the bourgeois public sphere.[3] Most recently, however, scholars have tended to highlight the existence of "multiple Enlightenments"—moments at which these ideas facilitated the emergence of subversive political currents and counter-hegemonic narratives.[4] At the level of the public sphere, feminist historians in particular have revealed the existence of an "Enlightenment from below." This work demonstrates that Enlightenment-era women, including women of the popular classes, created their own networks and institutions of public speech and discussion, and were sometimes able to force their way into the realm of "official" politics.[5]

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[2] Jurgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991).
[3] See, for example, John Gascoigne, *The Enlightenment and the Origins of European Australia* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002) and Emmanuel Chukwudi Eze (ed.), *Race and the Enlightenment: A Reader* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1997).
[4] See Sankar Muthu, *Enlightenment Against Empire* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003), Peter Cryle and Lisa O'Connell (eds.), *Libertine Enlightenment: Sex, Liberty, and License in the Eighteenth Century* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2004), and Daniel Carey and Lynn Festa (eds.), *The Postcolonial Enlightenment: Eighteenth-Century Colonialism and Postcolonial Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).
[5] Carla Hesse, *The Other Enlightenment: How French Women Became Modern* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2001); Catherine M. Jaffe and Elizabeth Franklin

This idea—that men and women of the subaltern classes create their own political culture and impact the official public sphere—has long been familiar to historians of the antebellum South. Frederick Douglass and other authors of slave narratives, the first chroniclers of life in bondage, understood that African Americans in the South constantly sought opportunities "to learn to read, at any cost" and to discuss the nature of slavery whenever possible.[6] Thus, even when enslaved black people remained excluded from the official public sphere, they were able to politicize their everyday lives and develop an ideological critique of southern society.

The same theme has been at the center of the best historical literature on slavery for many decades. Especially from the 1930s and 1940s, scholars such as W.E.B. DuBois noted that even "beneath the Veil" of white supremacy and slavery, African Americans developed "a philosophy of life and action."[7] This insight gained further impetus with the rise of the Civil Rights Movement in the post-Second World War United States. Historians such as Kenneth Stampp, Eugene Genovese, Lawrence Levine, Albert Raboteau, and George Rawick studied the political implications of informal slave resistance and black efforts to build families, communities, and a religious life under slavery.[8] If this body of literature did not always highlight the role

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Lewis (eds.), *Eve's Enlightenment: Women's Experience in Spain and Spanish America, 1726-1839* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2009).

[6] Frederick Douglass, *Autobiographies* (New York: Library of America, 1996), 221-228.

[7] W.E.B. Dubois, *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860-1880* (New York: Free Press, 1992), 14. For other work in this early period, see Alice and Raymond Bauer, "Day to Day Resistance to Slavery," *Journal of Negro History* 27, no. 4 (October 1942).

[8] Kenneth Stampp, *The Peculiar Institution: Slavery in the Antebellum South* (New York: Random House, 1956), George Rawick, *From Sundown to Sunup: The Making of the Black Community* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1973), Eugene Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York: Vintage Books, 1976), Lawrence Levine, *Black Culture*

of black women in this process, subsequent generations of historians have rectified the problem and drawn our attention to the myriad ways in which enslaved and free black women became political actors in the nineteenth-century South.[9] Most recently, historians such as Robin D.G. Kelley and Stephanie Camp have drawn on political anthropology and postcolonial studies in order to theorize the "hidden transcripts" of subaltern politics. Kelley's work on black working-class culture emphasizes that "the political history of oppressed people cannot be understood without reference to" the acts of informal resistance that make up the day-to-day lives of people from these groups.[10]

In the present chapter, I argue that antebellum New Orleans was a particularly fertile environment for the enlightenment of black working people. New Orleans possessed an urban-maritime-commercial environment that contrasted sharply with the rural isolation of the plantation districts. Because of its peculiar role in the southern economy, the city required a more flexible workforce than was necessary in the countryside, and thus allowed black working people a great deal more autonomy

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*and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The 'Invisible Institution' in the Antebellum South* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1978).

[9] See, for example, Deborah Gray White, *Ar'n't I a Woman? Female Slaves in the Plantation South* (New York and London: Norton, 1985), Betty Wood, *Women's Work, Men's Work: The Informal Slave Economies of Lowcountry Georgia* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1995), Tera Hunter, *To 'Joy My Freedom: Southern Black Women's Lives and Labors After the Civil War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997).

[10] Stephanie M. H. Camp, *Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women and Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 2004); Robin D. G. Kelley, *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class* (New York: Free Press, 1994), 8. For a look at the theoretical origins of Camp and Kelley's approach, see James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1985).

than was the case in staple crop production. In antebellum New Orleans, therefore, free people of color, and even slaves, hired their own time, earned wages, and lived apart from their owners and employers, and used their relative freedom to build a coherent community based on kinship, the church, and independent leisure and cultural activities. Perhaps most importantly, the Crescent City's role as one of the most important port cities in the emerging nineteenth-century capitalist world market allowed black working people to trade news, rumors, and gossip with communities throughout the Atlantic world. At the end of the chapter, I reflect on whether the fear of this black enlightenment may have led white city dwellers to expel at least part of the African American population from New Orleans in the decades before the Civil War.

**Black Labor in the Urban Economy**

For much of the antebellum period, black women and men provided most of the labor that powered the economy of New Orleans. The city's population had remained relatively stable at just under 30,000 between 1820 and 1830. By the latter date, African Americans constituted a solid majority of the urban population, with the 8,000 free people of color and over 9,000 slaves accounting for more than 56 percent of all residents of New Orleans. The city's population exploded during the 1830s, as the cotton boom in the lower Mississippi Valley drew tens of thousands of new white settlers, enslaved black migrants, and free people of color to Lousiana. By 1840, New Orleans had mushroomed to a city of over 100,000 people. Whites now accounted for

60 percent of the urban population, with the 20,000 free black people and 23,000 slaves now a slight minority. This trend would accelerate in the two decades before the Civil War. By 1860, New Orleans had a population of 169,000 people, of whom 145,000 were white and just 24,000 African American.[11] We will discuss possible explanations for changes in the urban black population at the end of this chapter. For the African American population of antebellum New Orleans, the experience of labor in the urban economy formed the bedrock upon which their consciousness arose. Whether they were free or enslaved, the overwhelming majority of black women and men found their daily lives structured by work and the workplace. In New Orleans, working people of color labored in the key sectors of the urban-commercial economy—particularly the household, which organized the social reproduction of the city's population—and the commercial economy, which was devoted to the movement of commodities by river and sea. Within these broad categories, however, black working people played a wide variety of roles, and found that gender, skill, and other factors could profoundly impact the nature of work.

**The Household Economy**

The household probably employed more black working people than any other sector of the urban economy. This was partly a function of gender demographics in early New Orleans. Men always made up a significant majority of white residents of New Orleans during the antebellum period, and the number of white women in the

[11] Richard C. Wade, *Slavery in the Cities: The South, 1820-1860* (London and New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), 326.

city had actually declined in both absolute and relative terms over the course of the 1820s. Within the black population, by contrast, women held large majorities: more than 60 percent of free black people and slaves were female in 1830. The race and gender assumptions of the antebellum South dictated that, in addition to managing their own families and households, these women would most often find employment in the white household, working as domestic servants, cooks, and nannies. As one commentator noted, even white working-class women in the South "consider such services a degree of degradation to which she could not condescend."[12] In a study of postbellum Atlanta, Georgia, Tera Hunter found that white women of relatively humble status often employed black women to carry out at least some household tasks, particularly laundry.[13] While both the gender ideology of the period and the blindspots of the historical profession have tended to render this type of domestic labor invisible in the antebellum urban economy, its ubiquity played a major role in shaping the black community as a whole.

For many black domestic workers, therefore, the white household structured the experience of life and labor in the urban economy of New Orleans. They purchased, prepared, and served the meals, cleaned the house, and cared for the children of white families—a complex of tasks and activities that scholars have called

[12] Frederick Law Olmsted, *A Journey in the Back Country* (New York: Mason Bros., 1863), 301.
[13] Hunter, *To 'Joy My Freedom,* 108-111

"reproductive labor" or "social reproduction."[14] For many black women, household labor began in their early teens. In 1836, for example, the fourteen-year-old slave Hannah was advertised for sale as "accustomed to wait on children," while thirteen-year-old Maria was, in the same year, described by her seller as "accustomed to waiting in the house."[15] Although most domestic workers were enslaved, historian Jane Dabel's survey of occupational patterns among free women of color found that domestic service was also one of their major sources of employment. One of Dabel's surveys showed with approximately 7.5 percent of free black women working as servants between 1840 and 1857, while a survey of free women of color in Ward Five of New Orleans showed over 12.5 percent working in this field.[16] Black men also worked in the white household. In the early 1830s, fifteen-year-old James Fisher was sold to a boardinghouse-keeper in New Orleans and worked for him as a "house-servant" for four years.[17] James Maguire, a talented slave barber who lived in New Orleans in the early 1850s, dressed the hair of both his wealthy master and mistress every day.[18] In addition to the physical labor associated with the household economy, black domestic workers were also expected to perform the emotional labor of appearing happy, contented, and polite. Newspapers from antebellum New Orleans reveal that slaveowners placed a premium on female slaves with both the skills and

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[14] For an introduction to "social reproduction theory," see Lise Vogel, *Marxism and the Oppression of Women: Toward a Unitary Theory* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1983).
[15] *New Orleans Commercial Bulletin*, May 3, 1836.
[16] Jane E. Dabel, "'My Ma Went to Work Early Every Mornin': Color, Gender, and Occupation in New Orleans, 1840-1860," *Louisiana History* 41, no. 2 (2000): 227-229.
[17] John W. Blassingame, *Slave Testimony: Two Centuries of Letters, Speeches, Interviews, and Autobiographies* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 1977), 231.
[18] Blassingame, *Slave Testimony*, 274.

the temperament to be effective household workers. Sarah, a forty-year-old enslaved woman, was therefore advertised in 1830 as a "good cook" who had also "acquired an excellent character for stability and industry."[19]

Some of the work of feeding and provisioning the white household took place outside the home, and the marketplace thus became another important site of labor for many black working women. The markets of New Orleans were famous for their vivid colors and smells, the variety of their merchandise, and the race and gender composition of their workforce. According to one European visitor in 1826, the Chartres Street market on the banks of the Mississippi was "filled with buyers and sellers," mostly "people of color," haggling over "meat, fish, vegetables, and fruits…peas, carrots, tomatoes, melons, strawberries, pine apples [sic], and bananas…eggs, butter, bread, and mutton chops."[20] Markets like the one on Chartres Street were places where cooks and domestic servants came to purchase food for the white family's table, often from the many women of color who worked as vendors and hawkers. According to Jane Dabel's findings, the markets of New Orleans employed 25 percent of free women of color between 1840 and 1857, more than any other industry in New Orleans besides laundry.[21] This continued a West African tradition in which public markets were important locations of women's work.[22] On Sundays the markets were open to slaves from the city and surrounding countryside

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[19] *New Orleans Bee*, January 5, 1830.
[20] Francis and Theresa Pulszky, *White, Red, Black: Sketches of Society in the United States During the Visit of their Guest*, II (New York: Negro Universities Press, 1968 [1853]), 264.
[21] Dabel, "'My Ma Went to Work Early Every Mornin'," 227.
[22] B. W. Hodder and U. I. Ukwu, *Markets in West Africa: Studies of Markets and Trade Among the Yoruba and Ibo* (Ibadan, Nigeria: Ibadan University Press, 1969), 50.

who had wares to sell. As another European visitor noted in 1830, the markets could not have functioned with the stamina and hard work of these women of color, who seemed to him "very strong…carrying baskets of bread, and everything on their head."[23]

Like the marketplace, the washtub was a public space where black women undertook domestic labor. One historian has described laundry work as "the single most onerous chore in the life of a nineteenth-century woman." Black laundresses fetched water from wells or pumps, and used it to wash the load, often in a homemade tub. Because the water was hot and the work vigorous, these female workers often moved the tub outside, where they could work in the shade of a tree. Once a laundress had washed the clothes and hung them up to dry, she pressed them with irons heated on the stove and treated with beeswax.[24] Jane Dabel found that this work employed more free black women than any other section of the economy in antebellum New Orleans. In her survey of the years 1840 to 1857, Dabel found that 53 percent of free black women were employed as laundresses; the survey of Ward Five in 1860 produced a figure of just less than 30 percent.[25] The market also employed a great many slave women: Betsey Madison hired out her time as a washerwoman after arriving in New Orleans in 1812 from a plantation near Natchez, Mississippi.[26] Likewise, eighteen year old Mathilda was described in 1830 as a "good

[23] James Stuart, *Three Years in North America* (Edinburgh: R. Cadell, 1833), 234-235.
[24] Hunter, *To 'Joy My Freedom*, 56-57.
[25] Dabel, "'My Ma Went to Work Early Every Mornin'," 227-229.
[26] Blassingame (ed.), *Slave Testimony*, 186.

washerwoman,"[27] and another slave woman of the same age was advertised in 1836 as a skilled "washer, and ironer."[28]

The most lucrative occupation for women of color in the domestic economy was the ownership or management of boardinghouses and bordellos. Jane Dabel found a number of free black women engaged in this business in her survey of New Orleans in the 1840s and 1850s.[29] Eliza Potter, a free black hairdresser from Cincinnati, noted the prevalence of these establishments when she visited antebellum New Orleans, and believed that their landladies were often able to "make fortunes" through renting furnished rooms "side by side with some of the very best mansions."[30] One young white man recalled that his father was disgusted when he discovered that his son was lodging with a free woman of color while studying law in New Orleans in February 1857, and forced him to seek alternative accommodation.[31] Many other black women who kept rooms probably catered to the large numbers of transient and mobile maritime workers who moved through the city, and to those slaves who had either been given permission to live apart from their masters or who had run away. Sella Martin, a formerly enslaved black steamboat worker, recalled lodging with free black boardinghouse keepers while staying in or visiting New Orleans in the mid-1850s, for example.[32]

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[27] New Orleans *Bee*, January 5, 1830.
[28] New Orleans *Commercial Bulletin*, May 12, 1836.
[29] Dabel, "'My Ma Went to Work Early Every Mornin'," 227-228.
[30] Eliza Potter, *A Hairdresser's Experience in High Life*, 160.
[31] H.E. Sterkx, *The Free Negro in Ante-Bellum Louisiana* (Rutherford, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1972), 229.
[32] Blassingame, *Slave Testimony*, 432-433, 731.

Antebellum New Orleans became notorious for the scale of commercial sex carried on within the city limits, and many African American women undoubtedly labored in this sector of the economy. As Alecia P. Long has demonstrated, women of color experienced a wide spectrum of commercial sexual relationships with male residents of the city. As commodities in the "fancy trade," some light-skinned women were sold as sex slaves to wealthy white planters and merchants, or as prostitutes to the owners of brothels. Other slave women managed such brothels on behalf of their owners. Some free black women actually became the owners of such establishments themselves, a category that probably overlapped with boardinghouse owners, while others worked as prostitutes for wages. Women of color involved in these kinds of commercial sexual relationships undoubtedly performed a wide array of labor for their "clients." Many were in effect the common-law wives of their white "friends," and therefore performed the labor associated with a wife's domestic duties in the household. Slave women probably carried out most of the day-to-day labor necessary to run and maintain many white-owned brothels, and other black women were employed in selling sex itself. In many cases, moreover, these women of color often had to undergo the labor of childbirth and rearing as a consequence of their other work.[33]

**Trade and Commerce**

[33] Alecia P. Long, *The Great Southern Babylon: Race, Sex, and Respectability in New Orleans, 1865-1920* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2004).

Commerce was probably the second most important source of employment for black working people in antebellum New Orleans. The levees and wharves in particular provided employment for thousands of workers. As steamboats arrived at the levee, men swarmed around them to unload their cargoes. These longshoremen passed the bales and barrels to draymen, who in turn transported the cargo to the warehouses and cotton presses, huge brick buildings containing mighty steam engines that compressed the bales to as little as a third of their size for shipment to the factories of New England and Britain.[34] In 1845, one visitor described the cotton presses as "requiring a great many hands, powerful steam engines, and severe labor."[35] In the early antebellum period, black men provided most of these hands and much of this labor. The New Orleans Levee Steam Cotton Press, just one of many such operations on the waterfront, owned more than a hundred slaves by 1850.[36] Tom Wilson, who was sold away from his wife and children on a Mississippi plantation, was brought to work at one of the cotton presses on the New Orleans waterfront in the 1850s, where he struggled to learn the secrets of tying and baling the cotton.[37] Nelson, advertised as having run away in early 1830, was "well known in town" as the driver of a dray, and was "frequently in the quarter of the cotton presses."[38]

Hundreds more slaves and free black people worked on the steamboats of the Mississippi river system. One historian of what he calls the "western steamboat

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[34] Eric Arnesen, *Waterfront Workers of New Orleans: Race, Class, and Politics, 1862-1923* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1991), 39.
[35] Nichols, *Forty Years of American Life*, 126.
[36] Wade, *Slavery in the Cities*, 36.
[37] Blassingame, *Slave Testimony*, 339.
[38] *New Orleans Bee*, January 4, 1830.

world" has estimated that between three and five thousand African American workers crewed these boats by the 1850s, making up almost 20 percent of the multiracial steamboat workforce.[39] Most black male steamboat workers, both free and slave, performed unskilled labor as part of the steamboat operation. They usually worked as firemen, who fed the steam engine with wood, or roustabouts, who helped local stevedores to load and unload the cargo. Thus Jack, a runaway slave in the early 1830s, was described as having been "openly and publicly employed in the city in loading and unloading the boats,"[40] while John Williams, a free man of color, worked as a fireman on the steamboat Mary Bess running between New Orleans and the Red River cotton district in the 1850s.[41] This was demanding labor. One former slave who worked as a roustabout on the steamer *Robert E. Lee* in the 1860s remembered it as "the hardest work a man ever done."[42] A minority of African American men, almost all of them free, would have held more skilled jobs as engineers.[43]

Mississippi steamers carried people as well as produce, and many African American working people labored to provide services for the white passengers of these "floating palaces." Black women worked on the steamboats as chambermaids tending to the needs of the more affluent white passengers. An enslaved woman named Eliza reportedly earned $15-$18 a month for her owner while working as a

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[39] Thomas C. Buchanan, *Black Life on the Mississippi: Slaves, Free Blacks, and the Western Steamboat World* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 10.
[40] *Strawbridge vs. Turner and Woodruff et al*, No. 2803, 8 La 537 (1835), Louisiana State Supreme Court Records, University of New Orleans, New Orleans, Louisiana (hereafter, LSCR).
[41] "Testimony of John Williams, F.M.C.," *Barry vs. Kimball*, No. 4684, 12 La Ann 372 (1857), LSCR.
[42] Blassingame, *Slave Testimony*, 600.
[43] Sterx, *Free Negro in Ante-Bellum Louisiana*, 226.

chambermaid on the steamboat *Freedom*, which ran between New Orleans and Bayou Sara in the 1830s.[44] African American men employed as stewards, waiters, and barbers stood at the top of the black steamboat workforce. These skilled workers, who catered to the most demanding passengers, could earn wages of $25 a month of more, whether they were slave or free. Stephen Fisher, a free man of color, recalled a slave steward "carrying up the plates and dishes" on the steamboat *Louisiana* in the early 1830s.[45] Isaac Throgmorton, a slave from Kentucky, may have visited New Orleans while working as a barber on a Mississippi steamer in the 1830s,[46] and John Hatfield, a free black man from Pennsylvania, came to Louisiana while doing the same job on a boat running between Cincinnati and the Crescent City in the 1850s.[47] These mobile workers—slave and free, male and female—may have only been temporary residents and visitors in New Orleans, but they were a vital component of the city's commercial workforce.

**Artisan Production**

Some black women and men, free and enslaved, worked in skilled trades in antebellum New Orleans. The only such position open to African American women was that of seamstress, and even this was restricted to a relatively narrow layer of women. Jane Dabel found that mixed-race women were most likely to possess the

[44] *Eliza Burk vs. Thomas Clark and Samuel Locke*, No. 3112, 11 La 206 (1837), LSCR.
[45] "Testimony of Stephen Fisher," *McMaster vs. Beckwith*, No. 2017, 2 La 329 (1831), LSCR.
[46] Blassingame, *Slave Testimony*, 432.
[47] Benjamin Drew, *A North-Side View of Slavery* (Boston: J.P. Jewett and Co., 1856), 363.

skills necessary to go into business as seamstresses in the 1850s; in certain areas of New Orleans as many as 65 percent of free black women in this job category were classified as "mulattoes" in the 1860 census.[48] Clearly some slaves also learned this trade, however: a woman named Jenny advertised for sale in 1836 was described as a "very likely mulatto girl, between 17 and 18 years of age: a tolerable seamstress."[49] A large number of free black men, as well as some enslaved men, became skilled craftsmen and artisans. By far the largest proportion of free black tradesmen were employed in the building industry as carpenters and masons—in 1850, almost 800 free men of color worked in these two occupations alone.[50] New Orleans was also famous for the skill of its Afro-Creole cigar makers, more than 150 of who worked in the city by 1850.[51] Many of these black cigar makers were French-speaking immigrants from the Caribbean like Joseph, "a creole of St. Domingo," who escaped his master in the spring of 1830.[52] Many male slaves apparently worked as butchers and bakers, including Henry, who escaped from his master in early 1830; Caesar, who ran away two months later; and Ned, who went fugitive that summer.[53]

Black industrial workers were few and far between in antebellum New Orleans. As one 1845 visitor noted, "no manufactures but those of necessity are

[48] Dabel, "'My Ma Went to Work Early Every Mornin'," 225.
[49] *New Orleans Commercial Bulletin*, May 3, 1836.
[50] Robert C. Reinders, "The Free Negro in the New Orleans Economy, 1850-1860," *Louisiana History* 6, no. 3 (Summer, 1965): 275.
[51] Ibid.
[52] *New Orleans Bee*, May 4, 1830.
[53] *New Orleans Bee*, January 14, March 27, and July 24, 1830.

carried on there."[54] This was not strictly true, however. Seven male slaves were included in the property of an iron foundry advertised for sale in 1836, where they probably worked to produce or repair machinery for the cotton presses, or to make the large iron kettles used in sugar refining.[55] In the 1830s, black working men at a New Orleans sugar refinery performed skilled industrial labor: their ability to "attend even to the boilers" and generate substantial profits encouraged one newspaper to call for more such factories in the city.[56] Many visitors to antebellum New Orleans commented on the novel system of gas lamps lighting the city streets: in 1836, one mentioned that "the smell of the gas lights was at first unagreable [sic] to me."[57] Few would have realized that the New Orleans Gas Works, which was constructed in 1835 with technology imported from England, employed a largely slave-labor workforce, and that the overseer was an African American man.[58] Nevertheless, these small groups of industrial workers were the exception among African American working people in antebellum New Orleans

**Discipline and Punishment**

Few black working people in antebellum New Orleans could escape the constant, frequently brutal, exercise of power by owners, employers, and the state. On

[54] Nichols, *Forty Years of American Life*, 126.
[55] *New Orleans Commercial Bulletin*, May 3, 1836.
[56] *New Orleans Bee*, June 2, 1836.
[57] Herbert A. Kellar (ed.), "A Journey Through the South in 1836: Diary of James D. Davidson," *Journal of Southern History* 1, no. 3 (Aug. 1935): 361.
[58] Francis and Theresa Pulszky, *White, Red, Black: Sketches of Society in the United States During the Visit of their Guest*, II (New York: Negro Universities Press, 1968 [1853]), 265; Harold Sinclair, *The Port of New Orleans* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, Doran, and Co., 1942), 190.

one level, slaves and free people of color experienced this power in the form of paternalistic relationships with white masters or patrons. But they also found that southern social norms gave owners and employers enormous latitude to dispense private coercive discipline. For many black women, furthermore, the fear and reality of sexual exploitation and violence was an ever-present feature of their working lives, a crucial way in which those in power enforced their control over black labor. And even when African Americans were able to avoid or escape the web of paternalism, the threat of the lash, or the unwanted advances of their employers, they knew that the urban elite could count on the state to defend the hierarchical social order of antebellum New Orleans.

Not all forms of control involved the use of physical force. Owners and employers in antebellum New Orleans also made use of a web of cultural, social, and ideological practices that replicated some of the paternalist aspirations of southern plantation owners. Frank Towers has suggested that paternalism in the antebellum urban South "encouraged employers and employees to conceive of their relationship as that of a powerful patron who dispensed favors to a subordinate client who reciprocated with loyal service."[59] In New Orleans, owners and employers often used housing as a way of enforcing a paternalistic relationship with their slaves. Many slaveholders quartered their slaves in small dwellings that were part of a secure, walled compound attached to the main house. In so doing, these owners hoped to isolate their slaves from the outside world and, in the words of Richard Wade, "center

[59] Frank Towers, *The Urban South and the Coming of the Civil War* (Charlottesville, VA and London: University of Virginia Press, 2004), 3.

their activity on the owner and the owner's place." The compound was to urban paternalism what the plantation was to its rural counterpart.[60] The owners of the New Orleans Gas Works, which was built in the 1830s, certainly made use of urban paternalism, providing housing for slave employees and their families inside the plant, and constructing "a fifteen-foot brick wall and a first-class set of iron gates" to make sure they could not leave at will.[61] White patrons and employers also established paternalistic relationships with free people of color. As Ira Berlin has shown, some white employers felt a "sense of *noblesse oblige*" towards free black working people with whom they had a patron-client relationship.[62]

Owners and employers of black labor may have harbored paternalistic pretensions, but they were well aware—as were black working people—that the southern social order rested primarily on the private dispensation of violent physical coercion. This was of course particularly true when it came to the labor of enslaved men and women; every sector of the urban economy that made use of slave labor produced examples of brutal labor discipline. Referring to the enslaved black waiters in his employ, the clerk of Richardson's Hotel in 1830 told a European guest that "never an evening passed on which he had not to give some of them stripes."[63] In the presence of the Duke of Saxe Weimar, visiting New Orleans in 1826, the landlady of an expensive boarding house exacted a particularly brutal punishment on one of her

[60] Wade, *Slavery in the Cities*, 59-62.
[61] Sinclair, *Port of New Orleans*, 191.
[62] Ira Berlin, *Slaves Without Masters: The Free Negro in the Antebellum South* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1974), 339.
[63] Stuart, *Three Years in North America*, 240.

enslaved chambermaids who had resisted an unprovoked attack from a white customer. According to the Duke, the landlady "disgraced herself by having twenty-six lashes inflicted upon the poor girl with a cowhide, and…forced the sweetheart of the girl, a young negro slave…to count off the lashes upon her."[64] Down on the levee in the 1840s, a man called Burke, overseer at one of the cotton presses, gave Tom Wilson "200 or 300 [lashes] with a leather strap" after the slave struggled to master the tying of cotton bales, leaving Wilson scarred for life.[65] Even skilled black artisans experienced physical punishment. Emperor Williams, an enslaved carpenter and mason, was apparently relieved to leave his abusive black owner in favor of a white master in 1841.[66] Slaveholders and business owners clearly saw violent punishment as a crucial way to maintain control over, and extract maximum profit from, enslaved African Americans.

Owners and employers also enforced and acted out their positions of power over black working people through sexual exploitation and abuse. Indeed, white men virtually institutionalized the practice of rape in antebellum New Orleans, particularly in connection with the domestic slave trade and the buying and selling of "fancy maids"—light-skinned women of color intended for sale as sexual slaves and prostitutes. White men had a "relentlessly sexualized vision of the trade," Edward Baptist observes, a vision in which "sexual fetishes and commodity fetishism intertwined with such intimacy that coerced sex was the secret meaning of the

[64] Karl Bernhard (Duke of Saxe-Weimar-Eisenach), *Travels Through North America , During the Years 1825 and 1826* (Philadelphia: Carey, Lea, and Carey, 1828), 82.
[65] Blassingame, *Slave Testimony*, 339.
[66] Blassingame, *Slave Testimony*, 621.

commerce in human beings."[67] In the early 1830s, William Wells Brown witnessed a white slave trader acting out this vision in the stateroom of a steamboat running between Natchez, Mississippi, and New Orleans. Mr. Walker, who had hired Brown from his owner in rural Kentucky, singled out and isolated an attractive "quadroon" slave named Cynthia, to whom he made "vile proposals" and offers of a position of housekeeper on his farm.[68] Indeed, as William Buchanan has demonstrated, white men found steamboats a conducive environment in which to act out their sexual power over black women, a place where "cabin rooms, officers quarters, and laundry areas…all offered assailants fleeting moments of privacy in which to make their assaults."[69] Owners and employers had similar opportunities to demonstrate their sexual power over domestic slaves and servants in the privacy of the white household. In the early 1850s, one white mistress demanded that her enslaved hairdresser James Maguire "go into her bed chamber and comb and dress her head for more than an hour at each time," according to an interview Maguire gave following his escape. When Maguire, aware of the danger inherent in this situation, eventually refused to comply, his mistress apparently threatened him with sale to a cotton plantation.[70]

Even when owners and employers were unable or unwilling to administer physical coercion themselves, they could rely on the power of the municipal

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[67] Edward E. Baptist, "'Cuffy,' 'Fancy Maids,' and 'One-Eyed Men': Rape, Commodification, and the Domestic Slave Trade in the United States," *American Historical Review* 106, no. 5 (Dec., 2001): 1621.
[68] Gilbert Osofsky (ed.), *Puttin' on Ole Massa: The Slave Narratives of Henry Bibb, William Wells Brown, and Solomon Northrup* (New York: Harper and Row, 1969), 194-195.
[69] Buchanan, *Black Life on the Mississippi*, 55.
[70] Blassingame, *Slave Testimony*, 275.

authorities to help maintain their dominance over black labor. In this sense, the state played a larger role in labor discipline in urban areas of the South than it did in the countryside. Masters without the time or inclination to administer punishment themselves could delegate the task to the chain gang, where recalcitrant slaves were put to work cleaning the city streets.[71] The owner of runaway slave Francis could thus remark in 1836 that Francis was "well known in the city, as she worked in the chain gang all last summer."[72] Slaveholders could even send their slaves to the local authorities with a note dictating the number of lashes they were to receive. The master of James Fisher, an enslaved house servant who attempted to escape in the 1830s, had him lodged in the city jail and given "two floggings, one with a big driver's whip, and one with a paddle."[73] Free people of color often became ensnared in the web of state control. Constance, a free black woman who worked as a cook and washerwoman in 1860, was mistaken for a troublesome slave named Anaise, thrown in the city jail and whipped so severely that she miscarried.[74]

**Unusual Labor Practices**

If the creation of the black urban workforce required paternalism, violence, and coercion, it also needed flexibility, mobility, and a degree of impersonality. Many New Orleans employers wanted to buy labor power by the day or hour, rather than

[71] Stuart, *Three Years in North America*, 235.
[72] *New Orleans Commercial Bulletin*, May 10, 1836.
[73] Blassingame, *Slave Testimony*, 232.
[74] *Constance Bique Perrine vs. Edward Plonchard et al*, No. 6036, 15 La Ann 133 (1860), LSCR.

buy laborers for life; many others preferred to have black employees organize their own social reproduction, including housing and family life, rather than take a direct and paternalistic interest in such matters themselves. In order to meet these demands, the urban economy therefore forced the institution of slavery into several significant adaptations characteristic of an increased commodification of labor power. In a study of antebellum Richmond, Midori Takagi described these changes—adaptive strategies such as slave hiring, living out, and the payment of wages to enslaved workers—as "unusual labor practices."[75] Jonathan Martin has noted the contradictory impact of slave hiring. On the one hand, hiring allowed slavery to adapt to a multitude of economic activities in the antebellum South. On the other hand, however, these modifications introduced elements of the market into relations between employers and employees, and gave enslaved black working people a significant amount of autonomy. As Martin notes, therefore, "The everyday unfolding of hiring transactions actually did as much to strain the social relations of slave South as to strengthen them."[76]

Slave hiring was the most widespread unusual labor practice in antebellum New Orleans. Indeed, Claudia Goldin has argued that this was "probably the most important contribution to the economic survival of slavery in its urban environment."[77] It allowed business owners to make use of enslaved workers even if they lacked the means or inclination to purchase slaves of their own. The hiring-out

[75] Takagi, *'Rearing Wolves to Our Own Destruction'*, 22.
[76] Jonathan D. Martin, *Divided Mastery: Slave Hiring in the American South* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 2004), 2.
[77] Goldin, *Urban Slavery in the American South*, 35.

system made it possible for these employers to lease slave labor for a given period of time—a day, a month, or a year—or by the task—the unloading of a steamboat, or washing a load of laundry—depending on the vagaries of the economy or the needs of a particular business or household. So common was the practice that by 1817 the city government had already passed an elaborate series of laws regulating the hiring of slaves, providing badges for the identification of slave hirelings, and designating certain areas for such transactions to take place.[78] Slave hiring was apparently so important for the functioning of the New Orleans Gas Works that by the outbreak of the Civil War the management was using a standard printed form to identify its hired slaves.[79] Self-hiring was the logical extension of the slave-leasing system. This practice gave some slaves permission to seek employment wherever they could find it, so long as they remitted a greater or lesser percentage of their wages to their masters. Many of these slaves received passes from their owners and then wandered the city looking for work, particularly on the levees and steamboats. In 1861, an observer familiar with the process noted that "it is not customary for the negroes to come and hire themselves without a pass. Their owners generally come with them or send an order for them to hire themselves."[80]

Slave hirelings were a particularly important section of the workforce in the commercial economy of New Orleans. Probably hundreds or even thousands of hired

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[78] *Digest of the Ordinances and Resolutions of the Corporation of New Orleans* (New Orleans, 1817).
[79] Robert S. Starobin, *Industrial Slavery in the Old South* (London and New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), 94.
[80] Testimony of J. Thompson, *Pelham v Messenger*, no. 6629, 16 La Ann 99 (1861), LSCR.

slaves worked on the New Orleans waterfront. As city regulations from 1817 dictated, enslaved black men could gather "at several places on the quay of this city" to wait for the arrival of steamboats in need of unloading.[81] Some hired slaves probably worked exclusively on the waterfront, like Peter, who, according to witness testimony given in an 1840 trial, "hired himself on the levee and received his money himself" while working as a stevedore and a fireman on various steamboats during the 1830s.[82] Others found employment there on a temporary or episodic basis. In the 1850s, the slaves belonging to James H. Riggin often found employment on the waterfront when their master, a builder by trade, had "no work for them at his buildings," according to witness testimony in another trial.[83] Hired slaves also made up a large proportion of the unskilled and semi-skilled crew on the steamboats. According to a witness familiar with the practice, African American men in search of work on the levee made contact with the boat's mate, who was generally "charged by the captain with the hiring of firemen."[84] William Wells Brown was hired out to a slave trader for a year in the 1830s, and worked as a steward on steamboats taking their human cargo from Kentucky and Missouri to the markets in New Orleans.[85]

New Orleans municipal authorities attempted to restrict the autonomy inherent in the system of slave hiring. As noted, beginning in 1817 the city put in place

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[81] *Digest of the Ordinances and Resolutions of the Corporation of New Orleans* (New Orleans, 1817), 226.
[82] Testimony of Lewis Horton, *Emmerling v. Beebe*, no. 3642, 15 La Ann 251 (1840), LSCR.
[83] Testimony of Robert Montgomery, *James H. Riggin v. Bernard Kendig*, no. 4718, 12 La Ann 451 (1857), LSCR.
[84] Testimony of George Swaney, *Strawbridge v. Turner and Woodruff et al*, no. 2803, 8 La 537 (1835), LSCR.
[85] Osofsky, *Puttin' on Ole Massa*, 191-202.

regulations requiring slave hirelings to display special badges, and also set aside certain urban spaces for the hiring of enslaved workers. It forbade slaves from living apart from their owners without a special dispensation. The mayor, meanwhile, was instructed to maintain a list of all slaves in the city with permission to hire their own time, and keep track of their names, ages, and physical appearances. The city government also decreed that no slave hireling had the right to refuse an offer of work from any free person, or the right to negotiate a wage higher than the mandated one dollar per day. Authorities dictated a raft of punishments, including floggings and fines, for any slave who violated these regulations. The government in New Orleans obviously intended to curtail the liberties of hired slave as much as was possible while maintaining the flexibility of the system.[86]

Despite these regulations, slave hirelings found that the system gave them an uncommon negotiating power with both owners and employers. Such slaves were sometimes able to dictate the type of labor they performed, often opting for positions that gave them the most independence and mobility. In the 1850s, Sella Martin convinced his owner to let him work as a messenger on a steamboat running on Lake Pontchatrain rather than as a steward in a Mobile, Alabama hotel. Martin would later tell an interviewer that his owner had agreed to the situation "on condition that I would pay him…the sum of ninety-eight pounds per annum."[87] John Scott constantly struggled with his master over a similar issue. According to a former owner, Scott openly defied instructions to work as a drayman in the city in the early 1830s because

[86] *Digest of the Ordinances and Resolutions of the Corporation of New Orleans*, 222-226.
[87] Blassingame, *Slave Testimony*, 728.

"he preferred working on steamboats," and on at least one occasion hired himself to a captain without his owner's permission.[88] Other hired slaves were able to use the separation between owner and employer to fight for a share of the fruits of their own labor. According to a white witness, the slave Francois, who was apparently hoping to save enough money to purchase his own freedom, consistently failed to surrender his monthly wages while working as a clerk in a store in the early 1840s.[89] African Americans who participated in the leasing system obviously learned to exploit its potential for loosening the chains of slavery.

Many slaves who hired their time also lived apart from their masters. In line with city regulations, slave hirelings were only allowed to enjoy this privilege if they obtained the express permission of their owners, and faced painful retribution if they sought to circumvent the law. Black working people who lived apart from a white master or mistress were guilty until proven otherwise, and faced the constant harassment of city authorities if they did find a place to stay.[90] Nevertheless, significant numbers of enslaved workers either gained this permission or ignored the regulation. Having apparently received a dispensation from his owner, Sella Martin lived as a lodger in the home of a free person of color while working on the steamboats plying the waters of Lake Pontchatrain in the 1850s.[91] In the early 1830s,

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[88] Testimony of Mathew Maker, *McMaster v. Beckwith*, no. 2017, 2 La Ann 329 (1831), LSCR.
[89] Deposition of Jacinto Lobrano, *Francois v. Jacinto Lobrano*, no. 5347, 10 La Rob 450 (1845), LSCR.
[90] *Digest of the Ordinances and Resolutions of the Corporation of New Orleans* (New Orleans, 1817), 216.
[91] Blassingame, *Slave Testimony*, 731.

one white resident of New Orleans remarked on the number of slaves who, like Martin, "contrive to pay a few dollars for the rent of a back tenement in the back parts of the city."[92]

A relatively high number of slaves who hired their own time and kept a percentage of their wages were able to use the money to purchase their own freedom or that of friends and family members. Although she would later tell an interviewer that she "had some difficulty in hiring her time," enslaved washerwoman Betsey Madison was apparently able to earn enough to purchase her own freedom "in little more than a year" sometime around 1815, before going on to do the same for Fanny, her adopted daughter, in the early 1820s.[93] In 1850, the slave Cox paid the large sum of $2,100 for his freedom, money he earned working as a steward on a Mississippi steamboat and engaging in a little (perhaps illicit) trade on the side.[94] Sometimes slave hirelings found that the road to freedom was a long one. William Jackson, who lived in New Orleans and Louisville, Kentucky, spent twenty years saving the money to purchase his own freedom. [95] Other slaves were distraught to find that, given the arbitrary nature of power in the antebellum South, years of careful scrimping and saving could easily be for naught. Thus the hairdresser James Maguire saved $850 over the course of the 1840s, only to have his owner die just as the self-purchase transaction was about to be completed. Maguire found himself sold to new owners

[92] Quoted in Wade, *Slavery in the Cities*, 69.
[93] Blassingame, *Slave Testimony*, 186-187.
[94] Blassingame, *Slave Testimony*, 389-390.
[95] Blassingame, *Slave Testimony*, 440.

and forced back into servitude.[96] Despite these obstacles, slaves must have seen the prospect of self-purchase as a powerful incentive to enter the leasing system.

Given the complex nature of urban labor systems, white residents of New Orleans frequently found it difficult to determine which black working people were slaves and which were free. Once they had escaped the direct oversight of their owners, slave hirelings could reinvent themselves. Pierre De Laronde, a white plantation owner, described how the slave Peter, who hired his own time as a fireman on Mississippi steamers in the late 1830s, "passed as a free person among all who knew him."[97] Some white employers apparently demonstrated a lax attitude when it came to identifying the status of their black workers. James Pedis, engineer of the steamer *New York*, admitted to failing to even check the papers of the slave Prince when he came aboard the boat claiming to be free and applying for work as a fireman in the early 1840s.[98] Other white observers noted that slaves could make use of this confusion to escape punishment. An officer of the city watch reportedly told one white resident of New Orleans in the 1850s that many slaves were "in the habit of saying they are free" when faced with the prospect of a whipping.[99]

Unusual labor practices had a paradoxical impact on the workings of slavery in antebellum New Orleans. These practices were essential if slavery was to remain a profitable source of labor in the urban environment. Hiring-out and living-out were

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[96] Blassingame, *Slave Testimony*, 274-275.
[97] Testimony of Pierre De Laronde, *Emmerling v. Beebe*, no. 3642, 15 La Ann 251 (1840), LSCR.
[98] Testimony of James Pedis, *Buel v. New York*, no. 3689, 17 La 541 (1841), LSCR.
[99] Testimony of Gregorio Gargani, *Constance Bique Perrine v. Edward Plonchard et al*, no. 6036, 15 La Ann 133 (1860), LSCR.

crucial ways in which slavery responded to the need for flexibility in a commercial economy. Nevertheless, these practices also gave enslaved black working people an unusual degree of control over their own time, employment, living situation, and earnings, and created a situation in which many residents of New Orleans struggled to discern between slave and free. But even more potent than these confusing episodes was the tendency for many slave hirelings to get the impression that they were just as good as free people. Clement Eaton noted that slave hirelings "lost much of their submissiveness and became more sophisticated in the milieu of city ways."[100] Former slave Isaac Throgmorton, who had worked as a barber aboard a Mississippi steamer and lived with free people of color, would probably have agreed with Eaton's conclusions. "As I had been raised a barber and among freedmen," he recollected, "it always seemed to me that I was free." These sentiments inspired Throgmorton to escape from slavery in the 1850s.[101]

**Crossing the Color Line**

If unusual labor practices blurred the lines between freedom and slavery, several features of New Orleans society did the same thing to the standard southern demarcation between black and white. One factor was the prevalence of commercial sex across the color line, a situation that produced generations of light-skinned children with complex racial identities. The presence of large number of relatively

[100] Clement Eaton, "Slave-Hiring in the Upper South: A Step toward Freedom," *The Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 46, no. 4 (Mar., 1960): 677-678.
[101] Blassingame, *Slave Testimony*, 434.

dark-skinned "white" people also complicated racial categories. New Orleans' peculiar history, culture, and society therefore made it difficult to tell not only who was a slave and who was free, but also who was black and who was white. Most importantly for the development of black popular politics, the permeability of racial categories gave people of color the opportunity to cross—and sometimes re-cross—the color line, thus facilitating the agency, mobility, and self-confidence of some black working people.

The children born to relationships between women of color and white men had complicated racial identities, and stories of both men and women crossing and re-crossing the color line were common in antebellum New Orleans. According to French colonial tradition, the offspring of these *plaçage* relationships often passed into the white population, sometimes along with their mothers, because, as Gwendolyn Midlo Hall argues, "there was a strong social consensus…that the concubines and children of white men should be free."[102] Eliza Potter, who dressed the hair of many women from the Crescent City elite, seemed to take great pleasure in pointing out just how many of New Orleans' wealthy Creoles had black ancestors in their family trees. She told of how one man, "whose mother was a mulatto, and his father a Frenchman," passed as white after returning from being educated in Europe, inherited his father's fortune, and married "a rich white lady of Virginia."[103] Henriette Delille moved across the color line in the other direction, angering her legally "white"

[102] Gwendolyn Midlo Hall, *Africans in Colonial Louisiana: The Development of Afro-Creole Culture in the Eighteenth Century* (Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1992), 240.
[103] Potter, *A Hairdresser's Experience in High Life*, 154-155.

family by embracing a black identity and choosing a life of service as a Catholic nun working among the city's poor people of color.[104]

The question was even more vexing when the mixed-race people in question were also enslaved. Some of these were female slaves caught up in the "fancy trade," in which light-skinned women were the objects of desire. As Edward Baptist has argued, "light-skinned and mulatto women symbolized for traders and planters the claimed right to coerce all women of African descent." Slave women who appeared to be white represented the ultimate fetish for men engaged in slave trading, whether sellers or buyers, and were brought to New Orleans in large numbers.[105] William Wells Brown, who had a great deal of experience in the slave trade, understood the fascination these light-skinned slave women had for many whites. In his autobiography, Brown described how he had witnessed "a general anxiety among the passengers and crew" of a Mississippi steamer in the 1830s as they eagerly sought to ascertain the racial identity of "a beautiful girl, apparently about twenty years of age, perfectly white, with straight light hair and blue eyes" who had been brought aboard as a slave.[106] Light skinned slaves could also cause significant anxiety for whites, however, thanks to their potential ability to cross the color line and win freedom. Edmond, described by one witness as "the whitest man I ever saw a slave," fulfilled

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[104] Virginia Meacham Gould, "Henriette Delille, Free Women of Color, and Catholicism in Antebellum New Orleans, 1727-1852," in David Barry Gaspar and Darlene Clark Hine (eds*.), Beyond Bondage: Free Women of Color in the Americas* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 271-286; Caryn Cossé Bell, *Revolution, Romanticism, and the Afro-Creole Protest Tradition in Louisiana* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 1997), 128-129.
[105] Baptist, "'Cuffy,' 'Fancy Maids,' and 'One-Eyed Men'," 1648.
[106] Osofsky, *Puttin' on Ole Massa*, 188-189.

his master's worst fears by escaping on a steamboat trip down the Mississippi in the mid-1850s.[107] Light-skinned slaves sometimes crossed the lines between race and freedom going in the other direction, however: William Wells Brown claimed to have known "a young white man" who had been sold into slavery by his employer.[108] Even slaves, therefore, found that the color line could be porous.

Under these circumstances, some observers felt moved to comment on what often seemed to be arbitrary distinctions between black and white in New Orleans. Light-skinned free people of color and white slaves mingled on the streets of New Orleans with dark-skinned Creoles and immigrants from Mediterranean Europe, Latin America, and the Caribbean, further complicating the racial hierarchy of the city in the eyes of its visitors. Indeed, Jennifer Spear has suggested that, while the legal system of Louisiana had enshrined a tripartite racial structure by 1808, "official desires for racial endogamy were slow to be accepted by all New Orleanians, who continued to form families across color lines well into the antebellum era."[109] Visiting in the 1820s, the Duke of Saxe-Weimar commented on the apparently arbitrariness of race in antebellum New Orleans, noting that the famous "quadroons" had "as fair a complexion as many of the haughty creole females."[110] After visiting New Orleans in the 1850s, Philo Tower made a similar argument in the abolitionist polemic *Slavery Unmasked*, maintaining that the city's free people of color were often "whiter, more

[107] *Sarah Hill v. James White*, no. 4489, 11 La Ann 170 (1856), LSCR.
[108] Osofsky, *Puttin' on Ole Massa*, 201-202.
[109] Jennifer Spear, *Race, Sex, and Social Order in Early New Orleans* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 2009), 5.
[110] Bernhard, *Travels Through North America*, 61.

talented, better looking, and more accomplished than many of the southern white family."[111]

**The Black Public Sphere**

Slaves and free people of color took the autonomy and anonymity of urban labor and used it to create a rich and independent social and cultural life. In this respect, city-dwelling African Americans emulated, and in some ways were able to exceed, the achievements of their rural counterparts. The wealthiest and best-educated members of the Afro-Creole elite pushed the community-building process the farthest, and built a sophisticated complex of literary, spiritual, and political organizations and institutions in early New Orleans. But for most slaves and free people of color, this level of overt activism was impossible. Black working people made use of the urban environment to strengthen and expand the basic institutions and values of their community, such as families, spaces of leisure and sociability, and religious groups. In doing so, these black men and women were acting politically: the structures and networks they created helped to magnify and deepen the independence already inherent in the urban environment, created spaces for collective discussion, and gave slaves and free people of color even greater cause to question the legitimacy of southern society.

Families and kinship networks formed the bedrock of the cultural and political life of black working people in New Orleans. These were the most basic institutions

[111] Philo Tower, *Slavery Unmasked* (New York: Negro Universities Press, 1969), 27.

of black civil society, the first spaces in which African Americans could begin to share and develop a collective understanding of the world. In her work on the black family in antebellum Louisiana, Ann Patton Malone described the importance of kinship networks to enslaved African Americans: the family "provided slaves with a protective structure, a defensive building, a fluid, adaptive fortress" and could "enable them to survive the dangers and humiliations of slavery with a semblance of dignity and belonging."[112] According to Herbert Gutman, moreover, "a cumulative slave experience transmitted through closely related families of different generations was the social basis" for black consciousness in the antebellum South.[113] African Americans took advantage of urban-commercial society to strengthen their families in several ways. Many free people of color and former slaves attempted to purchase the freedom of their friends and relatives. After arriving in New Orleans as a slave in the late 1830s, for example, Emperor Williams had worked as a carpenter and stonemason. When his master freed him for performing a particularly challenging feat of architectural prowess, Williams married a slave woman and saved two thousand dollars in order to purchase her from her owner.[114] The former slave Cox, who worked as a steward in the cabin crew of a Mississippi steamboat, paid more than two thousand dollars for his own freedom in 1850 and was also able to purchase the

[112] Ann Patton Malone, *Sweet Chariot: Slave Family and Household Structure in Nineteenth-Century Louisiana* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992), 6.
[113] Herbert G. Gutman, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom* (New York: Pantheon, 1976), 308.
[114] Blassingame, *Slave Testimony*, 621.

liberty of two nephews, one of whom he sent to Oberlin College.[115] Jim, an enslaved steamboat worker, lived in New Orleans in the 1830s but maintained a relationship with a wife who lived on a plantation "nearly two leagues distant from the city." Jim's wife accompanied him on several trips along the river, according to witnesses, and frequently brought Jim to stay with her on the plantation, especially when he was recovering from an illness.[116]

Churches and other religious congregations were another component of black civil society. For those from the city's Creole community, the Catholic Church remained at the center of spiritual life throughout the antebellum period. As a numerous visitors to New Orleans noted, slaves and free people of color, particularly women, were always well represented amongst those receiving the sacraments in the city's cathedral and Catholic churches. The Duke of Saxe-Weimar believed that, with the exception of important holidays, "most of the worshippers" at the Catholic cathedral in 1826 "consisted…of blacks, and coloured people, the chief part of them females."[117] Black Catholics apparently found little segregation in the twenty or so churches in New Orleans. According to one observer, racial mixing was so common among New Orleans Catholics in 1845 that "the most ardent abolitionist could not have desired more perfect equality."[118]

Slaves and free people of color who migrated to New Orleans in the early antebellum period, voluntarily or involuntarily, were among the pioneers of

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[115] Blassingame, *Slave Testimony*, 389-390.
[116] *Emmerling v. Beebe*, No. 3642, 15 La Ann 251 (1840), LSCR.
[117] Bernhard, *Travels Through North American*, 56.
[118] Nichols, *Forty Years of American Life*, 127-128.

Protestantism in New Orleans. African Americans from Virginia and elsewhere brought their Methodist and Baptist beliefs and practices with them, and still others converted to these strains of Protestantism after contact with white missionaries in New Orleans. Thousands of slaves and free people attended services at white-run Methodist and Baptist churches in the antebellum period, and several chapels were designated for slaves and run by black preachers. English-speaking free black men from the Prince Hall Masonic movement helped bring the African Methodist Episcopal church to New Orleans in the late 1840s when they made contact with an itinerant AME preacher working as a steamboat steward, and by the time of the Civil War there were enough congregants to support three separate AME churches.[119]

Abigail Mott's interview with Betsey Madison, conducted in 1827, illustrates the importance black working people attached to church and family. Madison had been born in Essex County, Virginia, in the years before the American Revolution. During the 1780s, she married a local slave man and gave birth to three children, but experienced the tragic deaths of one child and her husband within a few years of the marriage. Under the impact of these losses, Madison entered a spiritual crisis, went through a powerful conversion experience, and dedicated her life to evangelical Christianity. In the early years of the nineteenth century, Madison was sold to a planter in Natchez and eventually to New Orleans, where she arrived in the second decade of the century. In the Crescent City, Madison hired out her time as a laundress

[119] John W. Blassingame, *Black New Orleans, 1860-1880* (London and Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973), 6-7, 13-16; Robert C. Reinders , "The Churches and the Negro in New Orleans, 1850-1860," *Phylon* 22, no. 3 (3rd Qtr., 1961); Bell, *Afro-Creole Protest Tradition*, 82-85.

and managed to save enough money to purchase her own freedom for two hundred and fifty dollars. She then attempted to buy the freedom of her son and daughter-in-law, who were also in the city, but found their owner uncooperative. Madison did, however, successfully secure the manumission of her friend and coreligionist, Fanny, whom she evidently thought of as "a child and companion." Madison married a free man of color named Reuben, who had moved to New Orleans from Kentucky, and the new couple formed a household with Fanny. Together, Madison, her husband, and their adopted daughter "by their united industry…were soon able to build a comfortable house, in which they set aside a room for religious purposes." The Madisons' private religious meetings attracted a group of fellow worshippers, but the church suffered constant persecution from the white community, and in 1825 the family eventually decided to leave for New York, where they told Mott they hoped "they might enjoy religious privileges unmolested."[120]

The black public sphere also incorporated less formal and organized spaces. For many slaves and free people of color, drinking, smoking, and gambling were ways of escaping the violence and alienation of their working lives and spending a few moments in the company or friends and peers. The numbers of black men and women smoking cigars in the streets of New Orleans prompted the *Bee* to demand action in the mid-1830s, for reasons of both safety and racial etiquette. "Allowing blacks to smoke in all places certainly is no hindrance to incendiarism," the newspaper's editor opined in 1836, "without enumerating the offensiveness to some,

[120] Blassingame, *Slave Testimony*, 185-187.

of coming into contact with a negro's cigar puff."[121] Other black working people found a similar release in casual drinking. The public drunkenness of slaves often caused concern and irritation among the white elite.[122] According to contemporary observers, urban slaves and free people of color had more latitude to engage in these "vices" than their rural counterparts. In 1852, a New Orleans doctor and author of several pseudo-scientific articles on the African American "constitution" complained that laws against slave drinking "do not so well protect those negroes who reside in or near towns and villages, and are not under proper discipline."[123] Even within the high walls and strong gates of the New Orleans Gas Works, and despite public appeals from management, enslaved working people managed to get their hands on liquor in the 1830s.[124] Enslaved and free men of color who worked on the waterfront or the river seem to have had particularly frequent opportunities to procure alcohol. In 1857, the owner of Preston, an enslaved steamboat worker, described him "always getting drunk" during testimony in a court case.[125] According to a European steamboat passenger in 1830, "even the firemen, all of them slaves, had whiskey at their command."[126]

Some black working people visited New Orleans' many grog shops, coffee houses, and cabarets to imbibe alcohol. One slave who worked as a steamboat

[121] *New Orleans Bee*, July 2, 1836.
[122] See for example, *Francois v. Jacinto Lobrano*, No. 5347, 10 La Rob 450 (1845) and *Constance Bique Perrine v. Edward Plonchard et al*, No. 6036, 15 La Ann 133 (1860), LSCR.
[123] Dr. Samuel S. Cartwright, "Philosophy of the Negro Constitution," *New Orleans Medical and Surgical Journal* IX (July 1852), 198.
[124] *New Orleans Commercial Bulletin,* June 14, 1836.
[125] "Testimony of John Byrne," *Barry v. Kimball*, No. 4684, 12 La Ann 372 (1857), LSCR.
[126] Stuart, *Three Years in North America*, 281.

fireman in 1840 "kept in the grog shops all the day," according to testimony from a white witness at a trial.[127] The slave Robert, belonging to Samuel Stewart, was beaten to death by New Orleans police officers in the early 1850s during a raid on North Market Street cabaret. The subsequent civil court case revealed that many black working people visited the establishment on Sunday nights in order to meet with friends, drink alcohol, and dance.[128] Slaves probably favored black-owned establishments, and a number of free people of color went into this line of business. In these grog shops and cabarets, enslaved and free black men and women could socialize and mingle beyond the glare of white scrutiny—a fact that caused some disquiet for the city's elite. Black drinking and sociability in these establishments provoked the *New Orleans Bee* to speak out. In cabarets, the *Bee* claimed in 1837, "mobs and caucuses of our slaves nightly assemble at their orgies, to inflame their brains with copious libations, and preach rebellion against their white masters."[129]

Every Sunday during the early antebellum period, hundreds of men and women of color gathered in New Orleans' Congo Square to participate in dancing and social activities that had a strong connection to African cultural traditions. The role of black working people, and particularly women, in the urban markets was, as we have already seen, reflective of the importance of these spaces in many African societies. On Sundays the West African influence became especially apparent. While others observed the Sabbath, some of the enslaved men and women of New Orleans came to

[127] "Testimony of John Easton," *Emmerling v. Beebe*, No. 3642, 15 La Ann 251 (1840), LSCR.
[128] *Samuel Stewart v. The City of New Orleans*, No. 3043, 9 La Ann 461 (1854), LSCR.
[129] *New Orleans Bee*, November 8, 1837.

this public space to dance, sing, and make music together. When these men and women performed dances such as the Bamboula and Calenda, or played African instruments and drums, they were doing more than expressing a connection to a lost home: they were also developing a collective identity as people of color living under white supremacy, and reclaiming the right to express themselves in public. As Daniel Walker has argued, the African Americans who participated in the activities at Congo Square "redefined spaces in a manner that countered the debilitating effects of the slave regime's space-centered social-control initiatives."[130]

The working lives of women of color produced some of the most important locations for the black public sphere in antebellum New Orleans. Domestic labor took many black women to sites of collective labor such as the washtub and the marketplace, places where they had opportunity to form a female community and sense of collective identity. As Tera Hunter noted in her study of African American women in post-war Atlanta, "laundry work was crucial to the process of community-building because it encouraged women to work together in communal spaces within their neighborhoods, fostering informal networks of reciprocity that sustained them through health and sickness, love and heartaches, birth and death."[131]

The marketplace played a similar role. Black domestic servants did most of the shopping for their white owners and employers, and at the market they mixed

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[130] Daniel E. Walker, *No More, No More: Slavery and Cultural Resistance in Havana and New Orleans* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 19. See also, Freddi Williams Evans, *Congo Square: African Roots in New Orleans* (Lafayette, LA: University of Louisiana at Lafayette Press, 2011).
[131] Hunter, *To Joy My Freedom*, 62.

with other women on similar errands, as well as with the many women who worked there as vendors. Women in pre-industrial societies have often used marketplaces as political and cultural centers. According to Alice Clark, for example, women in early modern England used their interactions in the marketplace to form "a feminine public opinion on current events."[132] In Africa, too, as Paul Bohannan and George Dalton have shown, "the dominant non-economic function of markets places is their role as nodes in the network of communication," especially for women.[133] Particularly during the "slave market" every Sunday, black women domestic servants also rubbed shoulders with enslaved women from the plantations around New Orleans, who came to town at the weekends to market the products of their own garden plots. Thus Betty Wood's contention that, in the marketplaces of early national Savannah, "the cultures, as well as the economies, of countryside and town intersected" was also true in the markets of New Orleans.[134] As they bartered and chatted, African American market women undoubtedly had chance to exchange news of happenings in the city and countryside, to report on stories gleaned from conversations overheard at the planter's table and in the merchants bedroom, and to reflect on their significance for the broader African American community.

**The Grapevine**

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[132] Alice Clark, *Working Life of Women in the Seventeenth Century* (New York: Frank Cass, 1968 [1919]), 51.
[133] Paul Bohannan and George Dalton (eds.), *Markets in Africa: Eight Subsistence Economies in Transition* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1965), 19.
[134] Wood, *Women's Work, Men's Work*, 81.

The black civil society of antebellum New Orleans developed in contact with the world beyond the city. African Americans successfully created a far-reaching and sophisticated network of news and information to inform their community-building project and to develop a sense of their place in the broader struggles of the North American black diaspora. As Steve Hahn has noted, the transmission of news and rumor "had much to recommend [it] as a discursive practice for slaves, as it did for other highly repressed social groups." Subversive networks of news and gossip had the benefit of anonymity, and were easily maintained through the daily interactions of the black popular classes. They also provided space for the sort of discussion and collective interpretation vital for the development of political consciousness.[135] New Orleans formed a vital hub in the grapevine, a place where currents of news and rumor from across the Anglophone and Francophone Atlantics met and collided before finding their way to black communities inland or across the ocean. The grapevine thus connected the black population of New Orleans to news from plantation communities throughout Louisiana and the Mississippi Valley, from free black communities in the North, and from the swirling political currents of the nineteenth-century Atlantic World.

Reflecting the cosmopolitan and transnational character of their home, many of New Orleans' black working people learned to communicate in more than one language, and thus increased the number of potential information sources for their

[135] Steven Hahn, *A Nation Under Our Feet: Black Political Struggles in the Rural South from Slavery to the Great Migration* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003), 57.

community. Indeed, if runaway advertisements in New Orleans newspapers are anything to go by, slaves who only spoke one language were perhaps more notable than those who were multilingual. Thus thirty-year-old fugitive Mary was described as "speaking very little French" in a January 1830 issue of the *New Orleans Bee*, whereas a teenage runaway called Louis, advertised the same day, spoke both French and English.[136] Traveling on a Mississippi steamboat in 1852, a European traveler encountered a female African American domestic servant who spoke "good English, French, and German, with equal facility."[137]

Black working people also found the written word to be a useful source of information. Slaves and free people of color in New Orleans enjoyed more opportunities to learn to read, and to access written materials such as books and newspapers, than did their counterparts in the rural South. According to one visitor to the city in 1845, therefore, a slave working as a clerk in his owner's bookstore "knew all of the current literature."[138] Household slaves and domestic servants probably had the greatest opportunities to learn to read and write. Eliza Potter noted that black domestic servants were "very easily learned," and pointed out that "if a [white] family has a favorite servant they will treat them as one of the family." In one anecdote, Potter described a male slave of her acquaintance who had learned to read and write from the children of his owners while living in Kentucky. Caught forging passes for his fellow slaves, the man was put to work in the cotton fields, but house slaves

[136] *New Orleans Bee*, January 5, 1830.
[137] Pulszky, *White, Red, Black*, 241.
[138] Nichols, *Forty Years of American Life*, 355

continued to steal newspapers and bring them to him to read aloud. "They would lay in the grass around a tree, while he sat in the tree reading to them," Potter remembered. In this manner the slaves on one particular plantation were able to learn about the McLeod and Caroline incidents in the late 1830s, border disputes between British Canada and the United States that threatened to bring war, and thus perhaps an opportunity the slaves might exploit.[139]

Black steamboat workers brought New Orleans into contact with communities of color along the Mississippi and other rivers. As they traveled the waterways of the antebellum South, these African American women and men had many opportunities to interact with plantation slaves. Roderick McDonald found that slaves in the sugar parishes often engaged in legal and illicit trade with passing steamboats and disreputable "river peddlers."[140] One steamboat passenger described how, in the late 1840s, he "bought some oranges that grew on the banks where we now lay for the night. The blacks brought them to the boat."[141] A decade earlier, a steamboat running between New Orleans and Vermillion Bayou hired slaves from two riverside plantations to help with getting wood for the engine.[142] The plantation slaves who bartered with the passengers and crew of steamboats, or worked the steamer's captain or mate, came into contact with black members of the crew. As George Pabis notes,

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[139] Potter, *Hairdresser's Experience in High Life*, 156-157.
[140] Roderick A. McDonald, "Independent Economic Production by Slaves on Antebellum Louisiana Sugar Plantations," *Slavery & Abolition* 12, no. 1 (May 1991): 195-196.
[141] Laroe, James S. Diary, 1846-1850 (typed copy), Mss. 253, Louisiana and Lower Mississippi Valley Collections, LSU Libraries, Baton Rouge, La (hereafter, LLMVC).
[142] *Rice V. Cade*, 10 La Ann 288 (1836), LSCR.

therefore, black river workers "provided a vital link in information and news for the free black community along the river."[143]

Domestic labor also provided opportunities for black working people to contribute to the grapevine. African American domestic workers were often privy to the private discussions of white households, enjoyed access to potential teachers and reading materials, and had the opportunity to pass on and discuss this information with others. Eliza Potter, the free black hairdresser whose observations of life in antebellum New Orleans we have already encountered, described the situation most clearly. In her autobiography, Potter provided a detailed account of how the white household functioned as a workplace, and outlined the ways in which black working women could use their positions within the household as a source of news and information. On one occasion, Potter was able to sit in on a private conversation between her white female employer and a young gentleman, in the former's bedroom, because the two wealthy whites could not believe that a black woman from outside Louisiana would understand French and were quite happy to speak candidly in her presence.[144] Marie Laveau, the famous free black "Voudou Queen" of New Orleans, was rumored to have used her work as a hairdresser to gather the intimate secrets of and blackmail her wealthy white clients. In other versions of this story, Laveau extorted information through "her network of spies among the servants of the

[143] George S. Pabis, *Daily Life Along the Mississippi* (Westport, CT., and London: Greenwood Press, 2007), 103.
[144] Potter, *Hairdresser's Experience in High Life*, 163-164.

elite."[145] Doubtless Eliza Potter and Marie Laveau were just two of many women of color whose work in the household provided opportunities to eavesdrop and overhear.

The mobile black working people of the river economies helped undoubtedly brought the first expression of radical abolitionism into communities of color on the lower Mississippi. White abolitionist Benjamin Lundy described numerous dealings with African Americans from this distinct social layer during his organizing efforts in the early 1830s. On a steamboat just outside Cincinnati, for example, a black steward provided Benjamin Lundy with "a file of the [antislavery journal] 'Emancipator.'" Given their relative earning power, these black working people could also make significant financial contributions to the movement. In April 1834, a group of black steamboat workers provided the poverty-stricken Lundy with what he called "as much as was necessary to supply my immediate wants."[146] Even in New Orleans, people of color from this social group contributed to abolitionist causes. While visiting the Crescent City on his way to Mexico in June 1834, Lundy discussed abolitionist organizing efforts with a free man of color named M. B. Evans, who worked as a hairdresser.[147]

**Running Away**

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[145] Herbert Asbury, *The French Quarter: An Informal History of the New Orleans Underworld* (New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 1936 [repr. 2003]), 266; Carolyn Morrow Long, "Marie Laveau: A Nineteenth-Century Voudou Priestess," *Louisiana History* 46, no. 3, (Summer, 2005), 278.
[146] Benjamin Lundy, *The Life, Travels, and Opinions of Benjamin Lundy* (Philadelphia: Parrish, 1847), 110.
[147] Lundy, *Life, Travels, and Opinions*, 113.

As one of the most visible and widespread forms of slave resistance, the act of running away has received great deal attention from historians.[148] Scholars tend to differentiate between "running away," which entailed a full-blown, permanent escape to the North or to life in a maroon settlement, and "truancy," which involved a short period of absence, followed by a "voluntary" return to the plantation or workplace. It is in the difference between these two forms of protest—permanent versus temporary absenteeism—that we can see some of the key gender dynamics within slave resistance. Women tended to represent a very small minority of those slaves who succeeded in a permanent escape.[149] As many scholars have noted, black women saw their role in maintaining slave families and communities as an enormous obstacle to permanent flight from slavery. African American mothers also came under pressure from their families and friends not to abandon their children, presenting another factor militating against escape attempts by black women.[150]

The desire to return home or reunite with family members was likely one of the most common causes of running away. This tendency must have been particularly acute in New Orleans, the destination for many slaves sold away from homes and families in the older slave states of the Upper South or brought to the city's slave

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[148] On the US, see John Hope Franklin and Lore Schweninger, *Runaway Slaves: Rebels on the Plantation* (London and New York: Oxford University Press, 2000); Gerald W. Mullin, *Flight and Rebellion: Slave Resistance in Eighteenth-Century Virginia* (London and New York: Oxford University Press, 1974).

[149] Franklin and Schweninger, *Runaway Slaves*, 211. Of all the southern states, Louisiana had the largest proportion of black women among those who achieved permanent escape. 29 percent of Louisiana's fugitive slaves were women.

[150] Camp, *Closer to Freedom*, 36-37; Jacqueline Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work, and the Family, from Slavery to the Present* (New York: Basic Books, 1985), 21; Deborah Gray White, *Ar'n't I a Woman? Female Slaves in the Plantation South* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1985), 70-74.

markets from elsewhere in the Old Southwest. A New Orleans fugitive named Robert, for example, "had just arrived from Richmond, Va.," according to a runaway advertisement, and his master thought it "probable he has made his way on some steamboat for Cincinnati."[151] In some cases, the fugitive clearly retained a strong desire to return home even after years in New Orleans. Eisey had been sold away from Augusta, La., seven years earlier when she ran away in 1836, but her owner believed "she will probably endeavor to return."[152] Other slaves escaped in order to reunite with loved ones from the countryside around New Orleans. His owner advertised that the "American griffon" Caesar, who had been in New Orleans "about 18 months" when he ran away in 1830, was "accompanied by a negress who belongs to a planter near the city and who has been a runaway since about the same time."[153] Some enslaved men and women simply fled one part of the city for another, such as Fanny, forty years old when she turned fugitive in 1830, whose owner advertised that he "supposed that she is in the upper fauborg, where her husband resides."[154]

Another major reason for running away was resentment at the violence of masters and employers, or fear about the potential for future punishment. Many runaway slave advertisements identified the fugitive as carrying the physical marks of brutal coercion. Dick, a sixteen year-old runaway from 1836 was apparently notable for "bumps and risings on his face and about his wrists," the latter of which may well

[151] *New Orleans Commercial Bulletin*, May 6, 1836.
[152] *New Orleans Commercial Bulletin*, June 9, 1836.
[153] *New Orleans Bee*, March 27, 1830.
[154] *New Orleans Bee*, May 5, 1830.

have come from manacles or other restraints.[155] Henry Noe, who escaped in 1836, was advertised as identifiable because "his right eye is sore."[156] Dick and Henry could easily have been fleeing further manifestations of the brutality that seemed already to have marked their bodies. In the 1850s, Isaac Throgmorton ran away at the mere prospect of such violence, deciding to flee after he noted the greater level of brutality faced by slaves in Louisiana compared to his native Kentucky and beginning to fear his new master's family.[157]

Some black women and men used running away as a method for negotiating the conditions of their labor. On a plantation, there was little question that the overwhelming majority of slaves would end up working in the fields. In a city like New Orleans, however, there were many more types of employment available, and some African Americans used short bouts of escape as a way of expressing a preference for one or the other. In 1830, a slave named Nancy apparently did just that. Usually employed as an ice-cream seller in the city streets, her owner reported, Nancy repeatedly fled to take refuge "in a Dutch butcher's house, where she had been working for two months."[158] According to court testimony from a white witness, a slave called John Scott used similar tactics, continually escaping because his master wanted him to drive a dray in the city while Scott "preferred working on steam

[155] *New Orleans Commercial Bulletin*, June 29, 1836.
[156] *New Orleans Bee*, June 17, 1830.
[157] Blassingame, *Slave Testimony*, 434.
[158] *New Orleans Bee*, July 5, 1830.

boats."[159] These fugitives did not intend to run away for good, but saw a brief absence as a useful way of expressing their employment preferences to their owners.

While some runaway slaves were attempting to flee New Orleans in order to reconnect with friends and family elsewhere, others used running away as a way of avoiding having to leave the city. Most working people of color understood that life was at least somewhat easier in urban centers than it was on the brutal plantations of the rural South, and strove to resist being sold to the country. As noted earlier, James Maguire was a skilled slave hairdresser who told abolitionist interviewer Henry Bibb that he came to fear possible sexual advances from his white mistress. When he eventually refused to spend any more time alone in the lady's bedroom, "she declared that she would have him sold onto a cotton plantation," Maguire related. Understanding that this would lead to a significant curtailment of his freedom of movement, the hairdresser decided to flee New Orleans, and the Underground Railroad spirited him away to freedom in Canada, where he gave his interview in 1851.[160] The threat of sale into the countryside probably terrified many black working people who had become used to the relative independence of life in New Orleans. The master who reported in 1836 that his slave John "left me from an apprehension of being sold into the country" was probably experiencing a common problem.[161] Simply put, when they had a choice in matter, slaves tended to prefer life in the city to life in the countryside.

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[159] "Testimony of Matthem Maker," *McMaster v. Beckwith*, No. 2017, 2 La 329 (1831), LSCR.
[160] Blassingame, *Slave Testimony*, 274-275.
[161] *New Orleans Commercial Bulletin*, June 9, 1836.

For similar reasons, New Orleans attracted runaway slaves from elsewhere in the South. The city's newspapers were full of advertisements from rural masters seeking fugitives they suspected of having taken refuge among the urban black community. William, thought to be "lurking about the city" in the summer of 1836, had escaped his owner's plantation on Bayou Boeuf, southwest of New Orleans.[162] Dick, a fugitive from the Pearl River region, had been seen hiding out in the city a month earlier.[163] So many runaways flocked to New Orleans in the 1830s that the mayor, Denis Prieur, felt obliged to mention the issue in his 1834 message to the City Council, complaining of "a great number of runaway slaves, with which our city is infested, and of which it has become the receptacle."[164] The problem of fugitives continued to plague city authorities throughout the antebellum period: as late as 1858 and 1859, New Orleans police were arresting dozens of runaways every month.[165]

As we have already seen, labor practices like self-hire had blurred the lines between freedom and slavery in New Orleans, particularly on the waterfront. Some slaves took advantage of this when they made their bids for freedom. It was likely easier for skilled slaves than for those who did not know a trade. Thus Harry, a trained carpenter who escaped in 1836, "will no doubt endeavor to pass himself off as free," worried his owner.[166] The slave woman Francis certainly took advantage of the confusion regarding her status, according to one runaway advertisement. "To some

[162] *New Orleans Commercial Bulletin*, June 6, 1836.
[163] *New Orleans Commercial Bulletin*, May 6, 1836.
[164] *New Orleans Bee*, November 18, 1834.
[165] Wade, *Slavery in the Cities*, 219.
[166] *New Orleans Commercial Bulletin*, June 6, 1836.

persons she says she is free," her owner noted in 1836, "and to others she is out at days works [sic]."[167] The widespread use of unusual labor practices in the urban economy made it easier for slaves not just to escape, but also to support themselves while absent from their masters. Jack had been "wandering about the city for the last few months" in the summer of 1836, and his owner thought it probable that the enterprising fugitive "works by the day, passing himself off as hiring out his time."[168]

Some runaways found that forged paperwork could be a ticket to freedom. In the urban environment, slaves almost certainly had much greater access to literate sympathizers. Free people of color would have been the most likely allies of a slave who hoped to obtain a forged pass. According to his published narrative, the New Orleans slave James Fisher came to believe he "had as good a right a right as other people to choose where I would go," and therefore purchased free papers from a free man of color and used them to book passage on a steamboat bound for Philadelphia in 1838.[169] Another slave, Peter, acquired his forged papers from an unknown source. They must have been convincing fakes, for, according to the testimony of a white witness, Peter passed for free among all who knew him when he worked on the levee and on the steamboats in the 1830s, and even exhibited free papers on at least one occasion.[170]

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[167] *New Orleans Commercial Bulletin*, May 10, 1836.
[168] *New Orleans Commercial Bulletin*, June 24, 1836.
[169] Blassingame, *Slave Testimony*, 231.
[170] "Testimony of Walter Crowell," *Emmerling v. Beebe*, No. 3642, 15 La Ann 251 (1840), LSCR.

Fugitive slaves could sometimes rely on assistance from sympathetic whites in their escape attempts. The large number of non-slaveholding whites in antebellum New Orleans gave runaways one potential source of support. When Isaac escaped in early 1830, his owner thought it likely that the slave had been "enticed away by a white man."[171] In some cases, rival employers may have helped a slave escape his or her master. One slaveholder thought that the fugitive Richard was being "harbored or employed by some white man in some part of the city," or had been "carried off by some person."[172] In 1857, a slaveowner named Sharpley Owen went to court to claim damages from one Gersham Brown, a white man who lived on Island No. 95 in the Mississippi River. Owen's three slaves Tom, Brunswick, and John has escaped his plantation on a skiff before Brown captured them and forced them to help him cut firewood for sale to passing steamboats. Although Brown clearly intended to profit from the three fugitives, he did not return them to their master, and helped all three escape when Owen came calling with a posse.[173]

Hundreds or thousands of slaves must have escaped from New Orleans on the city's maritime and river-borne trade routes during the antebellum period. In 1849, the captain of a Mississippi steamer remarked that he had been forced to remove an average of one runaway per year from his boat in more than a decade on the river.[174] If the same was true for every captain, dozens of slaves must have tried this route to freedom every year. Many of these fugitives were long-time residents of New

[171] *New Orleans Bee*, February 26, 1830.
[172] *New Orleans Commercial Bulletin*, June 16, 1836.
[173] *Sharpley Owen v. Gersham Brown et al*, No. 4927, 12 La Ann 172 (1857), LSCR.
[174] "Testimony of John Kercheval," *Botts v Cochrane*, No. 1013, 4 La Ann 35 (1849), LSCR.

Orleans, but others were from plantations and communities far beyond the municipal boundaries. Informed about the city's crucial strategic location by the grapevine, slaves from Louisiana and across the Deep South saw New Orleans as a promising jumping-off point for an escape attempt. Even while living in Montgomery, Alabama, Sella Martin had decided that "New Orleans was the place I desired to reach, that I might conceal myself on some steamboat, and come up the Mississippi."[175] Kidnapped into slavery and sold in the markets of New Orleans in the early 1840s, Solomon Northup hoped to be purchased by a resident of the city because "I conceived it would not be difficult to make my escape from New-Orleans on some northern vessel."[176]

African American steamboat workers and sailors were therefore well positioned to assist runaways hoping to escape from New Orleans. Slave narratives and court cases reveal many examples of these workers helping fugitives to escape detection and feeding them while they hid below decks. When the slave Edmond escaped from a steamer running between Vicksburg and New Orleans in the 1850s, a white man named Hamilton blamed a black member of the crew. Hamilton claimed to have "told the negro watchman not to let the boy go ashore—that he was afraid that instead of trying to prevent the boy's escape, he was aiding him to get away."[177] Whether the black watchman was an accomplice or a scapegoat is impossible to know, but Hamilton's suspicion suggests that African American maritime workers

[175] Blassingame, *Slave Testimony*, 723.
[176] Solomon Northup, *Twelve Years a Slave* (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 1970), 80.
[177] "Testimony of R. Y. Northern," *Sarah Hill v. James White*, No. 4489, 11 La Ann 170 (1856), LSCR.

had a reputation for aiding fugitives. The reputation was deserved. When Tom Wilson described his escape from the brutal overseer on the New Orleans levee, he reported that "some of the coloured crew of the American cotton ship Metropolis took me on board, and hid me away among the bales." Somehow Wilson was able to remain out of sight until the ship reached Liverpool, where he disembarked and told his story to a local newspaper.[178] John P. Parker experienced similar generosity when he tried to escape New Orleans on the steamboat *Magnolia*, headed for Memphis, in the early 1840s. Having successfully stowed away in the cotton hold for several days, Parker—who had packed no supplies for his escape attempt—began to suffer from severe dehydration. Luckily for him, a black deck hand took pity on the young fugitive and provided him with coffee during the voyage.[179]

Some black river workers may have been part of relatively formal Underground Railroad structures operating along the Mississippi and its tributaries. Charles Brown worked on the St. Louis to New Orleans steamboat as a barber in the 1830s, before taking up a life of crime with infamous black "river rascal" Madison Henderson. Brown apparently claimed that the "Abolition Society" had recruited him precisely because he labored on the river, and that, in the movement, "his principal business was to run away slaves" on Mississippi steamers.[180] Not all African

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[178] Blassingame, *Slave Testimony*, 339-340.
[179] Stuart Seely Sprague (ed.), *His Promised Land: The Autobiography of John P. Parker, Former Slave and Conductor on the Underground Railroad* (W.W. Norton and Co.: New York and London, 1996), 43-44.
[180] A. B. Chambers (ed.), *Trials and Confessions of Madison Henderson, alias Blanchard, Alfred Amos Warrick, James W. Seward, and Charles Brown, Murderers of Jesse Baker and*

Americans agreed on the merits of the antislavery movement. Free black hairdresser Eliza Potter, who lived in Cincinnati, Natchez, and New Orleans during the 1830s, stated in her autobiography that "I don't like abolitionists, nor any that bear that name, as I have seen so much injustice and wrong, and actual speculation done in that name, that I hate to hear it."[181] This attitude did not imply support for slavery however. Remarking that "I could not recognize the right of *one human being to own another*," Potter helped a male slave escape from Louisville to Canada. The hairdresser paid a price for her actions: she spent three months in a Louisville jail and was only released after a barnstorming performance in court.[182]

Not all fugitives attempted to flee to the North. Some simply fled to the inaccessible swamps and forests surrounding New Orleans, and hid out on their own or in one of the maroon communities that emerged there. The swamps were certainly inhospitable—full of wild animals and other hidden dangers—but, as Tom Wilson succinctly put it, many fugitives "felt safer among the alligators than among the white men."[183] In 1861, the slave Octave Johnson, a native of New Orleans living on a plantation in St. James Parish, fled the prospect of a severe beating and "ran away to the woods, where I remained for a year and half." Living in the wilds, Johnson was part of a maroon settlement that grew to include thirty people, including ten women. The maroons lived by stealing the livestock of local planters and trading with

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*Jacob Weaver, as Given by Themselves; and a Likeness of Each, Taken in Jail Shortly after Their Arrest* (St. Louis: Chambers and Knapp, 1841), 24.
[181] Potter, *A Hairdresser's Experience in High Life*, 249.
[182] Potter, *A Hairdresser's Experience in High Life*, 16-19.
[183] Blassingame, *Slave Testimony*, 340

plantation slaves. They adopted some ingenious practices to make their refuge more hospitable, including burning cypress leaves to keep mosquitoes at bay, and escaped slave-catchers by leading their hounds into a bayou full of hungry alligators.[184] Even those maroons who suffered recapture sometimes refused to be deterred. In the 1850s, James H. Riggin sued Bernard Kendig because the latter had sold him a slave, Dick, who was "a habitual runaway," according to a white witness. Dick escaped to the woods outside New Orleans in 1855 and stayed there for 3 months, living in a shack where he eventually fell ill and died.[185]

During the 1830s, a maroon leader known as Squire (also rendered "Squier") became a major thorn in the side of the New Orleans elite. Squire's story challenges historians to separate fact from fiction. Under the alias Bras-Coupé, Squire featured as a character in the 1908 novel *The Grandissimes* by New Orleans author and chronicler of Creole culture, George Washington Cable. In Cable's story, Bras-Coupé figures as a tragic, noble figure, an African prince who flees to the solitude of the cypress swamp behind New Orleans.[186] Bras-Coupé became a legendary figure in the city's black community and a major symbol of resistance to white authority. According to the stories, he was a huge Creole man of color, and one of the most admired dancers at Congo Square before he escaped to the cypress swamp and lost

[184] Blassingame, *Slave Testimony*, 394-395
[185] *James H. Riggin v. Bernard Kendig*, No. 4718, 12 La Ann 451 (1857), LSCR.
[186] George Washington Cable, *The Grandissimes* (New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1908); Bryan Wagner, "Disarmed and Dangerous: The Strange Career of Bras-Coupé," *Representations,* no. 92 (Autumn, 2005): 125-128.

his arm as punishment for running away.[187] According to numerous newspaper reports in the 1830s, the real Squire led a band of maroons in the swamps outside New Orleans, and undertook frequent raids on the suburbs from 1834 to 1837. In the summer of 1836, for example, maroons from the cypress swamp "attacked and plundered the house of a widow named Shea, on the new Canal." When laborers on the canal attempted to intervene, they found themselves outgunned and "had to desist."[188] Squire's reign of terror only came to an end a year later, in 1837, when a squadron of soldiers brought his body back to the city and displayed it in public; many masters forced their slaves to troop past the grisly trophy in order to demonstrate the futility of resistance.[189]

## "A Constant State of Alarm"

The growing black population of New Orleans seemed ready to explode in the first few weeks of 1830. In the late 1820s and early 1830s, thousands of out-of-state slaves were pouring into the city's markets from sellers in the declining agricultural regions of the Chesapeake in particular. In early 1830, one British traveler noted that "within the last two months, 5000 negroes have been sold here."[190] Eighteen months later, a summary of slave ships docking at New Orleans found that almost four

[187] Asbury, *The French Quarter*, 244-247.
[188] *The Liberator*, July 2, 1836.
[189] Herbert Aptheker, *American Negro Slave Revolts* (New York: International Publishers, 1943 [repr. 1983]), 329-330; Asbury, *The French Quarter*, 247.
[190] S. A. O'Ferrall, *A Ramble of Six Thousand Miles Through the United States of America* (London, 1832), 197.

hundred slaves, mostly from Virginia, were arriving in the city every week.[191] More than just the sheer number of new slaves arriving in the city, their potentially rebellious nature began to cause grave concern in New Orleans. In 1826, slaves on board the *Decatur*, traveling between Baltimore and New Orleans, had revolted, seized control of the ship, and steered for Haiti, before being recaptured.[192] And in December 1829, residents of the Crescent City had discovered that a schooner, the *Lafayette*, carrying almost two hundred slaves to the city from Norfolk, Virginia had experienced a major mutiny and almost been commandeered by black rebels. That same month, New Orleans authorities discovered a similar plot on another brig, and barely managed to avert another mutiny through decisive action.[193]

The publication and distribution of David Walker's *Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World* in Boston in September 1829 contributed to the fraught atmosphere in New Orleans. Walker, a free man of color from the Carolinas who had moved to Boston and started his own business, exemplified the growing politicization and radicalism of the northern free black population. In the 1820s, he had been involved in publication of *Freedom's Journal*, the first black newspaper in the North. *Freedom's Journal* proved to be a vigorous opponent of gradualism and colonization as trends in the antislavery movement and Walker stuck to this line when he penned

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[191] *Niles Weekly Register*, November 26, 1831.
[192] Junius P. Rodriguez (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Slave Resistance and Rebellion* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2007), 552.
[193] *Niles Weekly Register*, January 9, 1830; see also John Randolph Spears, *The American Slave Trade: An Account of its Origin, Growth, and Suppression* (Port Washington, NY: Kennikat Press, 1967 [1900]), 175; Peter P. Hinks, *To Awaken My Afflicted Brethren: David Walker and the Problem of Antebellum Slave Resistance* (University Park, Penn.: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997), 149-150.

his incendiary pamphlet in 1829. The *Appeal* contained a strong defense of black pride and a call for armed resistance to slavery and equal rights for Black Americans. Walker had worked as a sailor, and used the network of mobile black maritime workers to circulate the *Appeal* in southern port cities. On March 8, 1830, New Orleans authorities arrested four African Americans for allegedly possessing and loaning out an unspecified number of copies of the *Appeal*. Among the accused were Robert Smith and Samuel Dundass, free men of color, and two slaves, all four of whom were literate and who apparently failed to provide satisfactory explanations of how the pamphlet came into their hands.[194]

The days and weeks after the discovery of Walker's pamphlet in March witnessed an atmosphere of extreme tension, as a wave of arson attacks swept the city. As one English observer noted while visiting New Orleans in the spring of 1830, "the evils of this infernal system [slavery] are beginning to re-act upon the Christians, who are latterly kept in a constant state of alarm, fearing the number and disposition of the blacks, which threaten at no distant period to overwhelm the South with some dreadful calamity." The same author witnessed "three incendiary fires" during his time in the city, which destroyed "several thousand bales of cotton."[195] In February, the *New Orleans Bee* lamented that "incendiaries still infest our city" after a serious fire destroyed a ropewalk on Marigny Street, causing thousands of dollars in

[194] Hinks, *To Awaken My Afflicted Brethren*. For the *Appeal's* appearance in New Orleans, see Hinks, 149-150.
[195] O'Ferrall, *A Ramble of Six Thousand Miles*, 196.

damage.[196] On March 12, a slave named Jean Baptiste was apprehended in the act of setting a fire in a New Orleans shop, and executed soon after.[197] Less than a month later, however, another large conflagration broke out in Custom House Street, destroying the premises of the *Mercantile Advertiser* newspaper.[198] Whether Walker's pamphlet directly inspired these attacks, the coincidence was enough to panic at least a substantial portion of the white population of New Orleans in the early months of 1830.

State and local authorities moved swiftly to combat the threat of abolitionism and slave insurrection in New Orleans. In February1830, the Louisiana state legislature had begun considering a number of security measures, including a law to prevent the importation of any more slaves into the state.[199] On March 16, just a week after Walker's *Appeal* had appeared in New Orleans, the state government approved a bill to "to prevent free persons of color from entering into this state." The new law took aim at the large numbers of free black people who had entered New Orleans since 1825, and gave such persons two months to leave Louisiana or face one year's imprisonment at hard labor. The law specified special penalties for black maritime workers who failed to depart Louisiana with the same vessel on which they arrived and took aim at "any white persons…convicted of being the author, printer, or publisher of any written or printed paper…with the intent to disturb the peace…in relation to the slaves…or to diminish the respect which is commanded to the free

[196] *New Orleans Bee*, February 17, 1830.
[197] *Niles Weekly Register*, April 24, 1830; Hinks, *To Awaken My Afflicted Brethren*, 150.
[198] *New Orleans Bee*, April 1, 1830.
[199] *New Orleans Bee*, February 22, 1830.

people of colour for the whites." Another law, also passed March 16, reiterated the penalties for any resident of Louisiana who "shall write, print, publish, or distribute any thing having a tendency to produce discontent among the free coloured population of the state" and forbade the teaching of slaves to read and write. Finally, on the very same day, the legislature passed "An Act to Amend the Black Code," which outlawed the independent economic activity of slaves, banned their consumption of alcohol and presence in grog shops and cabarets, and put new restrictions on the rights of free black retailers of liquor.[200]

Furthermore, apparently responding to the panic in early 1830, state authorities dispatched troops to New Orleans in order to keep the peace. On April 15, the *New Orleans Bee* reported that "three companies of the 2d Battalion of the 4th Regt. of the U.S. [Army]," comprising several hundred troops, left Baton Rouge in order to garrison New Orleans as "requested by the Executive of the State." Although the *Bee* reported that residents of Baton Rouge were sad to see the troops leave, white residents of New Orleans were probably happy for the extra security.[201] These troops were joined in revue later in the month by forces from the Louisiana Legion, a Creole militia company that had fought alongside Jackson against the British in 1815 and had been reconstituted as a military regiment in 1829. The *Bee* remarked that "nothing can contribute more to inspire confidence in the citizens than the certainty that the means are at all times ready…to keep in awe our intestine enemies." With the

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[200] *A Digest of the Ordinances, Resolutions, By-Laws and Regulations of the Corporation of New Orleans and a Collection of the Laws of the Legislature Relative to the Said City* (New Orleans: Gaston Brusle, 1836), 535-557.
[201] *New Orleans Bee*, April 15, 1830.

army and militia forces combined, New Orleans was now garrisoned by over one thousand men-at-arms, and the U.S. Army companies would remain in the city until the end of May.[202]

It is not clear that these troops were responding to a genuine threat of slave insurrection in the first half of 1830. Rumors of a slave rebellion had certainly been circulating in Louisiana for several months, although local newspapers generally avoided any reference to the prospect of an uprising. In March 1829, northern newspaper *Niles Weekly Register* did report "a rising of the slaves" on the Mississippi "coast" about forty miles outside New Orleans, and claimed white Louisianans had hanged two of the ringleaders.[203] At the height of the panic, in April 1830, the same newspaper reported another apparent insurrection in Opelousas, a town in the cotton district some 130 miles west of New Orleans. According to the *Niles Weekly Register*, disturbance in Opelousas involved both black and white rebels: it led to the deaths of nineteen African Americans and five whites during the rising itself, and then the execution of a further fifteen black participants. The *Niles Weekly Register* also reported a plot "among some of the slaves, for killing all the whites" in New Orleans in late March, and claimed that a slave named Zac had been executed for murdering his master.[204]

Even as word of these incidents spread along the lower Mississippi, some local whites criticized the heavy-handed response of the authorities in New Orleans.

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[202] *New Orleans Bee*, March 20, 1829, April 24 and May 22, 1830.
[203] *Niles Weekly Register*, March 21, 1829.
[204] *Niles Weekly Register*, April 24, 1830; Hinks, *To Awaken My Afflicted Brethren*, 150.

In early 1830, a French immigrant journalist named Milo Mower began publication of *Le Liberal*, a newspaper clearly influenced by the rising tide of Romantic radicalism in the Francophone Atlantic. In March, Mower took aim at the Louisiana legislature, then meeting at the capitol in Donaldsonville to consider the aforementioned law expelling free people of color from the state. Criticizing the repression of the local free black population and proclaiming his newspaper's intention to "defend the rights of man," Mower soon attracted the attention of local authorities and faced accusations he had advocated the abolition of slavery and invoked the "horrors" of St. Domingue. Although the editor and his allies hastily pointed out they did not favor emancipation, and merely wanted to defend the rights of free people of color, *Le Liberal* was clearly one of the main targets of the new state laws banning "incendiary" written materials. As the newspaper moved in a more radical direction, demanding voting rights for Louisiana's free black men, its days were surely numbered. In August 1830, Mower was arrested and charged under the new laws. *Le Liberal* ceased publication less than nine months after its debut on the New Orleans literary scene.[205]

**The Decline of Urban Slavery**

"Nothing has surprised me more in New-Orleans than the small number of the colored population," wrote one northern visitor to the city on the eve of the Civil War. "The levee…was thronged with laborers, but they were nearly all Germans or

[205] Bell, *Afro-Creole Protest Tradition*, 91-94; O'Ferrall, *A Ramble of Six Thousand Miles*, 197-200; Stuart, *Three Years in North America*, 208-210. Extracts from *Le Liberal* (no copies of the paper remain extant) were frequently published in the *Genius of Universal Emancipation*: see *Genius*, March-September 1830.

Irish."[206] This observer was pointing to a very real feature of life in New Orleans in the two decades before the Civil War: the absolute and relative decline of the African American population in these years. The black population of New Orleans had stood at more than 17,000 in 1830—well over half of the city's total population of 30,000. The number of African Americans in New Orleans peaked in absolute terms in 1840, when 19,000 free people of color and 23,000 slaves called the city home. By 1840, the white population was already growing much more quickly than the black population, and had in fact increased by 500 percent during the 1830s alone. Nevertheless, African Americans still made up about 40 percent of the population of New Orleans in 1840. The situation was very different just a decade later. By 1850, the free black population had fallen by more than half, to less than 10,000, and the number of slaves had fallen by about a quarter. The decline was much less severe in the 1850s, but by 1860 African Americans made up just one in seven of the city's almost 170,000 residents.[207]

How do we explain the changes in the black population of New Orleans in the two decades before the Civil War? There is some evidence to suggest that the elite classes of New Orleans deliberately drove slaves and free people of color out of the city because they feared the emergence of a politicized black community in their midst. Richard Wade made this argument in *Slavery in the Cities*. Wade did admit that unusual labor practices such as self-hire and living out "offered enough latitude

[206] John S. C. Abbott, *South and North; or, Impression Received during a Trip to Cuba and the South* (New York: Abbey and Abbott, 1860), 73.
[207] Wade, *Slavery in the Cities*, 326.

to frustrate, absord, or deflect any serious insurrectionary movement" and that, therefore, "a concerted revolt against slavery was actually less likely in a city than in the countryside."[208] Nevertheless, Wade argued, the decline of the black population in New Orleans and other southern cities in the late antebellum period can be attributed to problems of labor discipline and the emergence of sophisticated urban black communities. When slaves and free people of color "gathered by themselves, beyond the eye of masters and police, in homes, churches, or grog shops, the 'peculiar institution' itself was jeopardized," Wade wrote.[209] Even if urban life did mitigate against black insurrectionary activity, it also encouraged the development of an embryonic African American civil society and therefore threatened the integrity of the system as a whole. For Wade, the hostility of the white elite toward the urban black population explained why, by the eve of the Civil War, "the 'free air of the city' was being increasingly denied to a higer and higher proportion of blacks."[210]

Wade's thesis on the decline of urban slavery has provoked much debate among scholars, with Claudia Goldin's *Urban Slavery in the American South* providing the most important dissenting view. Goldin started from the assumption that problems of labor discipline could only be said to have led to the decline of urban slavery if it could be demonstrated that they increased the labor costs of city-dwelling owners and employers—through the costs of policing and so on. Finding that any such "additional costs…amounted to only a small percentage of the yearly hire rate"

[208] Wade, *Slavery in the Cities*, 241.
[209] Wade, *Slavery in the Cities*, 244.
[210] Wade, *Slavery in the Cities*, 280.

for slaves, Goldin concluded "The issue of control…was clearly not important in impeding the progress of urban slavery."[211] More recently, John Ashworth has challenged Goldin's contentions and made a strong case that "problems of control impeded the process of urbanization." In other words, slaveowners were so concerned about the crisis of slave discipline in cities like New Orleans that they consciously avoided the growth of towns in the antebellum South. Ashworth cites opposition from white artisans and laborers, the increased likelihood of escape, and slave resistance as factors driving slaveholder opposition to urban development in the Old South. He suggests that what we have called "unusual labor practices" created political or ideological challenges for the defenders of slavery and whie supremacy. "Hiring out, living out, and especially self-hire," Ashworth states, "resembled…a wage labor system and were therefore hard to reconcile with the proslavery argument, which derived much of its power from an assault upon the relationship between employer and wage laborer."[212]

Wade and Ashworth may be accurate in suggesting that elite concerns over labor discipline were a factor in the decline of the urban population in the late antebellum period. We have already seen many examples of both the peculiar character of race and labor relations in New Orleans and the elite anxieties these changes provoked. A Louisiana planter made the point as clearly as anyone when he

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[211] Claudia Goldin, *Urban Slavery in the American South, 1820-1860: A Quantitative History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976), 123.
[212] John Ashworth, *Slavery, Capitalism, and Politics in the Antebellum Republic: Volume 1: Commerce and Compromise, 1820-1850* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 501-505.

noted that, in towns like New Orleans, "slaves become dissipated, acquire the worst habits" and that, therefore, slavery "does not thrive with master or slave when transplanted to cities."[213] Did attitudes like this lead to slaveowners consciously selling their slaves into the countryside? When northern visitor John Abbott asked about the surprising lack of African Americans on the streets and levees of New Orleans in 1860, one acquaintance attributed the decline of the black population partly to problems of labor discipline in an urban environment: "it was found not well to have [slaves] associated with free laborers, as they acquired bad notions and restless habits."[214] Some slaveholders may indeed have moved their slaves out of New Orleans in order to avoid the problems of control inherent in the urban environment.

Moreover, from the 1830s state and municipal authorities repeatedly passed repressive legislation targeting those elements of the black urban population they saw as most dangerous. The late antebellum period saw increasing efforts to prevent the growth of the free black population across the urban South, and in New Orleans in particular. Before the 1850s, the Crescent City had one of the most liberal attitudes toward manumission of any place in the slaveholding South, but restrictions became more common as the struggle over slavery intensified at the national level. A 1830 state law on manumission required the newly free person to leave Louisiana within a month, and in 1852 the state government took the right to approve manumissions out of the hands of municipal authorities altogether. In yet another law, passed in 1857

[213] Quoted in Wade, *Slavery in the Cities*, 245.
[214] Abbott, *South and North*, 74.

Louisiana forbade manumissions under any circumstances, and two years later the state passed legislation allowing free people of color to choose an owner and return to slavery.[215] Not surprisingly, black sailors and river workers also faced repressive state legislation. Beginning in the 1840s, the state government ordered New Orleans authorities to arrest all out-of-state maritime workers and hold them under guard until their ship or steamboat left Louisiana. From 1852, all out-of-state African American workers were required to have a special pass to seek employment on the levee or on vessels.[216] The slave code of 1857 took aim at the most extreme manifestations of unusual labor practices, slave sociability, and the activities of black sailors and river workers in particular.[217]

The raft of repressive legislation passed in the late antebellum period would have made visiting or living in New Orleans more challenging for free and enslaved people of color. These laws made it difficult to enter the city and hard to find work, and negated some of the benefits of life in the urban environment. Nevertheless, it remains difficult to see this legislation as the only factor in driving down the African American population of New Orleans in the late antebellum period. The "pull" of commercial agriculture almost certainly equalled the "push" of urban discipline problems in this regard. Claudia Goldin's quantitative approach suggests that urban emlpoyers could replace an enslaved workforce with a workforce made up of cheap

[215] Wade, *Slavery in the Cities*, 264-265.
[216] Richard Tansey, "Out-of-State Free Blacks in Late Antebellum New Orleans," *Louisiana History* 22, no, 4 (Autumn, 1981): 372-3.
[217] Henry J. Levy, *The Laws and General Ordinances of the City of New Orleans* (New Orleans: E.C. Wharton, 1857), 257-273.

immigrant labor in a way that simply was not possible in the southern countryside. In such circumstances, the high prices for plantation hands must have seemed tempting for urban slaveholders, and, as Goldin notes, "slaves were pulled out of the urban areas by the increase in the demand for Southern agricultural staples."[218] Indeed, the same source who had informed northern traveler John Abbott about the problems of slave discipline in New Orleans in 1860 also cited the high prices for plantation hands as an important reason for the decline of urban slavery. "Slaves were becoming so exceedingly profitable upon the plantations, that large numbers have been sold from the city for that purpose," the man told Abbott.[219] Although Wade suggested that the exodus of male slaves in particular from southern cities demonstrated the centrality of the fear of resistance as a factor in the decline of the urban black population, it ultimately seems just as likely that black men were in particular demand among the owners of booming cotton and sugar plantations.[220]

Moreover, job competition and racial hostility from Irish and German immigrants may have been just as significant as were elite fears over labor discipline for the decline of the urban black population in the late antebellum period. Richard Tansey has argued that although the ruling elite of New Orleans was quite happy to persecute free people of color throughout the antebellum period, the goal behind restrictive legislation was to create a docile workforce for the owners and captains of ships and steamboats, and not to remove the black population altogether. In this

[218] Goldin, *Urban Slavery*, 125.
[219] Abbott, *North and South*, 74.
[220] Wade, *Slavery in the Cities*, 264.

context, Tansey suggests, "the arrival of Irish and German immigrants during the 1840s had a more serious impact on New Orleans free blacks" than fears of abolitionism or insurrection.[221] Tansey cites at least two examples of white workers protesting the employment of black labor on the levee and on steamboats.[222] The relatively small amount of scholarship on free white working people in antebellum South does suggest that Irish and German labor provided competition for black labor in the urban economy. It also seems plausible that politicized white workers, actively hostile to the employment of slaves and free people of color, drove at least some African American working people out of cities like New Orleans.[223] Unfortunately, the rise of plebian white supremacy in late antebellum New Orleans still awaits a modern treatment, and it lies outside the scope of this study. The study of the urban South in the antebellum period would greatly benefit from further research in this neglected field.

**Conclusion**

With Eliza Potter's help, we have come to understand some important aspects of the political awakening of African American working people in antebellum New Orleans. We have seen how the experiences of labor, race, and gender in the urban-

[221] Tansey, "Out-of-State Free Blacks," 380.
[222] Tansey, "Out-of-State Free Blacks," 374.
[223] See Earl F. Niehaus, *The Irish in New Orleans, 1800-1860* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1965); Leon Cyprian Soulé, *The Know Nothing Party in New Orleans: A Reappraisal* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana Historical Association, 1962). Much more recently, Frank Towers has produced a study of "free labor" politics among urban working men in the antebellum South, although his focus is largely on Baltimore and mentions New Orleans only in passing. See Towers, *The Urban South and the Coming of the Civil War*.

commercial economy could become the basis for an unusually well developed and sophisticated community among working people of color. At the same time, however, we have found that the black enlightenment is perhaps not as "easily understood" as Potter claimed. The civil society of black subalterns emerged in the shadows, partly because black people understood the need to hide their incipient political culture from the prying eyes of owners and employers, but also partly because white eyes simply could not see what was happening. Like the white couple who refused to believe Potter could understand French, and thus allowed her to overhear their conversations, many owners and employers of black labor simply could not take seriously the possibility of black political consciousness. For both of these reasons, historians face the challenge of documenting a process that remained very much unseen by those most likely to have left written records of their lives in antebellum New Orleans.

It is equally important to note the very real, objective limits placed on the process of black political awakening in antebellum New Orleans. As we have seen, brutal repression was a feature of everyday life for African American working people, even under circumstances in which the bonds of slavery had been somewhat weakened. From the terror of the chain gang to the viciousness of individual owners, black women and men faced the constant threat of violence as they struggled to build independent lives, strong families, and an autonomous community. When the white power structure came to fear that the process of black enlightenment had gone too far, it was more than capable of summoning the power of the state apparatus to turn back the tide. The troop movements of the 1830s demonstrate an aspect of this reality; so,

too, do the measures taken against *Le Liberal*, and the laws against free people of color enacted later in the antebellum period. Quite obviously, therefore, African Americans enjoyed virtually no political rights in antebellum New Orleans, a fact that hampered tremendously their ability to construct a thriving political community. The grapevine and other institutions of subaltern civil society allowed the beginnings of a process of generalization among black working people, but only the beginnings. For the black enlightenment to blossom more fully, a much greater degree of political freedom would be needed—a situation that would only arise with the arrival of powerful new allies for the black community.

## Chapter Three

## "Worked for a Mistress as Long as I Want To":

## Black Working People and the Union Army in Occupied New Orleans

In March of 1863, white northern army officer Jonathan Johnson wrote to his wife about a conversation he had had with the black woman who did his laundry. Johnson was stationed at Camp Parapet, a Union military base in the suburbs of New Orleans, and was fond of regaling his wife with suggestive stories about the African American women who worked in the camp. Johnson began this particular story by describing how, when he offered to take his black washerwoman north with him, she was quick to ask whether he had a wife. Johnson explained that he did, and the washerwoman stated her lack of desire to live in a white woman's house, telling Johnson "I have worked for a mistress as long as I want to. I want to live by myself." Johnson followed up by offering to give the woman her own house, but she immediately understood the sexual undertones in his offer. "I want a man to live with all the time and not be doing as some do out here, - white men with black women." Finally, one of Johnson's fellow officers asked the woman if "she would not be better off with her master than going around after washing" because at least her owner "provided for her and she had nothing to care for." But the washerwoman was adamant that she much preferred the toil of freedom. "I had a great deal rather work

hard and be my own mistress, for what I earn now is my own and I can do with it as I like," she told the two white men. [1]

The interaction Johnson describes tells us a great deal about the relationship between black working people and the Union Army in occupied New Orleans. With powerful new allies at hand, this black woman was acting in ways that were literally self-emancipatory. She had won her freedom, and found a way to make a living, in a manner that simply would not have been possible without the assistance of the northern military. In the Union camp, the washerwoman felt free enough to express a vision of the future in which she had her own home, worked for herself, and made her own decisions about romantic and sexual relationships. By doing the laundry of white officers, moreover, the woman was making a small but significant contribution to the northern war effort. At the same time, however, Johnson's story reveals some of the tensions in such an alliance. By working in such a male environment, the washerwoman faced the threat of unwanted sexual advances from white men. She ran the risk that men like Johnson would mock, misunderstand, or hurt her. Despite the dangers, thousands of black working people acted like this washerwoman in the weeks and months after northern troops first came to occupy New Orleans. The Union Army needed allies if it was to consolidate and extend its foothold on the lower Mississippi; black working people recognized the newcomers as potential partners in the struggle against slavery. The interaction between Johnson and the

[1] Jonathan H. Johnson Letter, March 6, 1863, in Alden Chase Brett (ed.), *The Letters and Diary of Captain Jonathan Huntington Johnson: Written During His Service with Company D - 15th Regiment New Hampshire Volunteers from October 1862 through August 1863 while Part of the Banks Expedition* (Alden Chase Brett, 1961), 83.

washerwoman symbolized an emerging social and political alliance, with all its risks and ambiguities.

The urban-commercial society of New Orleans was particularly conducive to the emergence of such an alliance. For one thing, the city had great appeal to northern military strategists. Thanks to its role as the most important commercial center in the Deep South, the Crescent City would make an invaluable headquarters for the blockade of the Confederate coastline and a useful beachhead for an invasion of the rebel heartland. Control of the Mississippi trade would help to strangle the Confederate economy and allow the federal government to restart commerce for its own benefit. Union troops entered New Orleans in April 1862, not much more than a year after the outbreak of the Civil War, and brought with them the potential for major social and political changes. But New Orleans became a crucible for other reasons, too. As we have seen, the city's urban-commercial environment had facilitated the emergence of groups of black working people with the social weight and political sophistication to challenge the power of the southern elite. When northern troops arrived in New Orleans, these working people of color made themselves into valuable allies of the occupation. When the Union leadership seemed reluctant to embrace a partnership, moreover, black women and men had the ability to assert their interests more forcefully. The actions of black working people thus played a major role in pushing the Union leadership to adopt radical measures like emancipation and the enlistment of black troops.

The present chapter shows how the interests of the Union Army and black working people began to converge during the occupation of New Orleans. It begins with a brief overview of Union military strategy as it pertained to New Orleans, and shows why control of the city seemed so central to northern military fortunes on the Gulf Coast and beyond. Once northern boots touched the streets of New Orleans, a combination of military necessity and the agency of enslaved African Americans began to undermine the stability of slavery in the occupied city and its environs, leading to a near-insurrectionary situation in and around the city. Although no mass rebellion took place, African American men did soon take up arms against the planter class. The central portion of this chapter traces the ways in which black men's eagerness to fight and Union troop shortages led to large numbers of black working men from New Orleans joining the northern army. At the same time, many black women identified the benefits of an alliance with the occupying forces and began laboring in the new economy of northern military camps. By 1863, these processes had placed enormous stresses and strains on the system of slavery in southern Louisiana.

In attempting to understand this process I have drawn heavily on the work of scholars who emphasize strife within the Confederacy as a major reason for its defeat. This is certainly not the consensus position among historians. Prominent military historian Gary Gallagher, for example, has emphasized the relative unity of white southerners during the Civil War, and pointed to the contingency of battlefield tactics

as the reason for Union success.[2] On the other side of this debate, however, stand historians like Armstead Robinson, whose *Bitter Fruits of Bondage: The Demise of Slavery and the Collapse of the Confederacy* (2005) shows how the collapse of slavery in the Mississippi Valley exacerbated tensions between slaveholding and non-slaveholding white southerners, leading the latter group to withdraw much of its support for the war effort.[3] William Freehling has made a similar argument in multiple works and stressed the role of "anti-Confederate southerners" in the defeat of the slaveholders' republic.[4] While Robinson and Freehling focus on the fissures of class and race in the Confederacy, a number of other historians have examined the problem of gender as cause of Confederate disunity. Although historians have debated the extent to which southern women absorbed the Confederate "patriotism" of the Civil War years, recent work suggests that, disillusioned by poverty and slave disloyalty, many southern women turned against the southern war effort and thus helped to undermine the Confederate cause. As Stephanie McCurry has argued, for example, "In the heart of their own national territory the mass white southern women

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[2] See, for example, Gary W. Gallagher, *The Confederate War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997). For a sense of the recent debate around the causes of Confederate defeat, see Gallagher and Joan W. Waugh (eds.), *War Within a War: Controversy and Conflict over the American Civil War* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2009).

[3] Armstead L. Robinson, *Bitter Fruits of Bondage: The Demise of Slavery and the Collapse of the Confederacy, 1861-1865* (Charlottesville, VA and London: University of Virginia Press, 2005).

[4] William W. Freehling, *The South vs. the South: How Anti-Confederate Southerners Shaped the Course of the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001) and *The Reintegration of American History: Slavery and the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).

emerged as formidable adversaries of their government in the long struggle over the military policies of the C.S.A."[5]

Any study of the Civil War period is fortunate to build on an incredibly rich and diverse body of literature on the history of emancipation. The most important works on emancipation in Louisiana and New Orleans tend to emphasize the conservatism of the Union leadership, and portray the end of slavery as having come about despite, and not because of, northern policy.[6] A somewhat different perspective emerges in the more recent work of the Freedmen and Southern Society Project (FSSP), based at the University of Maryland. As well as compiling and publishing thousands of the most important primary sources for the study of emancipation in the *Freedom* series,[7] these scholars have produced some of the best analytical work in the field. The essays in the companion volume *Slaves No More*, for example, draw on the

[5] Stephanie McCurry, *Confederate Reckoning: Power and Politics in the Civil War South* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2010), 4. See also, Drew Gilpin Faust, "Altars of Sacrifice: Confederate Women and the Narratives of War," in Catherine Clinton and Nina Silber (eds.), *Divided Houses: Gender and the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992) and Faust, *Mothers of Invention: Women of the Slaveholding South in the American Civil War* (New York: Random House, 1997); Nina Silber, *Gender and the Sectional Conflict* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 37-69. For an analysis that emphasizes the "patriotism" of Confederate women, see George C. Rable, *Civil Wars: Women and the Crisis of Southern Nationalism* (Urbana and Chicago, University of Illinois Press, 1989), esp. Chapter 7.

[6] C. Peter Ripley, *Slaves and Freedmen in Civil War Louisiana* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1976); Louis Gerteis, *From Contraband to Freeman: Federal Policy Toward Southern Blacks, 1861-1865* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1973); William F. Messner, *Freedmen and Free Labor Ideology: Louisiana, 1862-1865* (Lafayette, LA: University of Southwestern Louisiana Press, 1978).

[7] Ira Berlin, Leslie Rowland, Steven Miller *et al*., *Freedom: A Documentary History of Emancipation, 5 Volumes* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982-1993).

FSSP documents to present emancipation as a complex and dynamic phenomenon, driven by both military necessity and the agency of enslaved African Americans.[8]

**Union Military Strategy and the Occupation of New Orleans**

Union military strategy would be one of the major factors driving social and political change in New Orleans throughout the Civil War years. This strategy evolved on a relatively ad hoc basis over the course of the war, and emerged from a number of competing imperatives in northern politics. In the early months of the conflict, northerners were divided on the correct course for the war effort. Some hoped to crush the Confederates in a single decisive battle, while others thought that a strong blockade would secure a relatively bloodless victory for the Union. The invasion of New Orleans, which began in the spring of 1862, and indeed northern strategy throughout the occupation of southern Louisiana, drew on elements of both of these competing visions—it was intended to both control trade and destroy Confederate armies. Union strategy lacked blueprints, however, and could not exist in a vacuum. It was always subject to changes based on conditions on the ground, and shifted in response to pressure from the outside, whether from rebel troops or rebellious slaves.

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[8] Ira Berlin, Barbara J. Fields, Steven F. Miller, Joseph P. Reidy, and Leslie S. Rowland, *Slaves No More: Three Essays on Emancipation and the Civil War* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992). See also Berlin, Reidy, and Rowland, *Freedom's Soldiers: The Black Military Experience in the Civil War* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998). For other examples of work from these historians, see Barbara J. Fields, *Slavery and Freedom on the Middle Ground: Maryland during the Nineteenth Century* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1985); Joseph P. Reidy, *From Slavery to Agrarian Capitalism in the Cotton Plantation South: Central Georgia, 1800-1880* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1992).

General Winfield Scott became the first Union leader to elaborate a serious strategy for northern victory in the Civil War. Scott had come to prominence through his leadership during the Mexican-American War in the 1840s; by 1861, however, he had begun to suffer from the effects of poor health and advancing age. Nevertheless, as an experienced army commander and a former Whig presidential candidate, Scott was well placed to understand the intersection of political and military strategy inherent in any civil war. He felt that conquering the vast Confederate territory would prove tremendously difficult, but also believed that southern plantation society suffered from major problems in terms of self-sufficiency and food production. With this in mind, the aging general proposed in May 1861 an intense blockade of the southern coastline and a military expedition down the Mississippi River. He hoped that this would cause major economic dislocations in the Confederacy, demonstrate the South's inability to secure its own independence, and split the trans-Mississippi states of Arkansas, Texas, and Louisiana from the rest of the Confederacy. Probably Scott understood that this strategy would exacerbate political divisions within the Confederacy while simultaneously avoiding the sort of massive bloodshed that might threaten the tenuous unity of the northern people behind the war effort.[9]

Scott's proposal divided northerners in early summer of 1861. Lincoln and some of his ablest generals seem to have been sympathetic to a strategy that, like Scott's, might allow the North to win the war with minimum bloodshed and minimum disruption to southern society. Many other northerners rejected Scott's proposal as

[9] Archer Jones, *Civil War Command and Strategy: The Process of Victory and Defeat* (New York: Free Press, 1992), 20-22.

too timid, however, and derisively named it "the anaconda plan" after the snake that slowly—too slowly, in this case—suffocates its prey. With a Confederate army gathering at the Manassas railroad junction, just twenty-five miles from Washington, in July, and Jefferson Davis's government yet to reach the new rebel capital at Richmond, northern newspapers like the *New York Tribune* demanded swift and decisive action to end the war before it had begun. Other commentators pointed to General Scott's Virginia birth and slyly suggested that he was allowing southern sympathies to cloud his judgment. Northerners with strong abolitionist sympathies also joined the chorus of voices calling for an all-out war against the slaveholders' republic. Union strategy, as it emerged in the early months of the war, would reflect all of these divergent viewpoints.[10]

The Union invasion of New Orleans evolved out of ideas contained in these combined political and military imperatives. Union naval forces engaged in the blockade of southern ports needed bases of their own in order to refuel (in the case of steamers) and take on provisions. Furthermore, as Benjamin Butler later remembered, Lincoln "was anxious that a fleet should go up the [Mississippi] river and open that great avenue of transportation." If Union forces could take control of the river, they could re-open trade with the Midwestern states and prevent the development of politically damaging economic problems in the northern heartland.[11] At the same

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[10] Jones, *Civil War Command and Strategy*, 21-25; James McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 333-335.

[11] Benjamin F. Butler, *Butler's Book: A Review of His Legal, Political, and Military Career* (Boston: A. M. Thayer and Co., 1892), 324.

time, the presence of several thousand Union troops on the Gulf Coast would threaten to pin down Confederate forces in the region, and prevent rebels from heading north to help defend against an invasion of Tennessee. In this sense, therefore, the invasion of New Orleans would also contribute to a military strategy of isolating, confronting, and hopefully destroying Confederate armies simultaneously on a number of different fronts. Even without the benefit of formal training in military strategy, Abraham Lincoln had come to believe that northern victory would only come about if his generals were able to utilize their superior numbers to attack "different points, at the *same* time."[12] The Union capture of New Orleans would thus advance both the political and the military aspects of Lincoln's overall plan for victory.

Lincoln intended the capture of New Orleans and the lower Mississippi Valley to function as one front in a double-pronged offensive in the first half of 1862. The main thrust in this attack came from the north; beginning in February, Ulysses S. Grant led federal land and naval forces to a series of impressive victories that ended the Confederate threat to Kentucky, drove the rebels out of western Tennessee, and opened the Mississippi as far south as Memphis. Grant's forces seized Forts Donelson and Henry at the end of the winter, giving them control of the Cumberland and Tennessee Rivers, and then drove south, scoring a strategic victory at the bloody Battle of Shiloh (Pittsburg Landing) in early April 1862. Almost simultaneously, a combined force of Union infantry and gunboats captured another Confederate river stronghold—Island No. 10, in the Mississippi River on the Tennessee-Missouri

[12] McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom*, 395.

border. While Union forces pushed the Confederate Army out of Tennessee, the northern navy continued its success on the Mississippi by taking Fort Pillow and Memphis in early June. The river was now open all the way south to the next rebel stronghold at Vicksburg.[13]

The southern prong of Lincoln's pincer required far fewer troops than Grant's rampage through Tennessee, but made even better use of northern naval strength. In February, Flag-Officer David Glasgow Farragut took control of a squadron including nine sloops, fourteen gunboats, and nineteen mortar schooners. To provide land support for Farragut's flotilla, 15,000 northern soldiers under the command of Major General Benjamin Butler boarded troop transports at New York and headed to Ship Island, a sandy landmass at the mouth of the Mississippi, where they arrived between December 1861 and March 1862. In late April, Farragut took his ships up the river, with Butler's infantry following behind. On the night of April 24-25, Farragut snuck his task force past Forts Jackson and Phillip, 65 miles downriver from New Orleans and, despite suffering heavy damage, reached New Orleans the next day and anchored off the wharf. Butler's troop transports found it more difficult to circumvent the Confederate defenses, but took control of the forts after a mutiny among the Confederate garrisons there on April 28. By May 1, Butler and Farragut were able to raise the Union flag over the biggest city, and most important port, in all the slave states.[14]

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[13] McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom*, 392-419.
[14] See Chapter XVI, "Operations in West Florida, Southern Alabama, Southern Mississippi, and Louisiana, Sep 1, 1861-May 12, 1862," in *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of*

Control of the Crescent City did not end Union strategic objectives in the Lower Mississippi Valley, of course. With the capture of New Orleans, northern forces had established a significant, but small and tenuous, beachhead on the Gulf Coast. They remained surrounded by potential threats. Although Confederate forces under General Mansfield Lovell had abandoned New Orleans rather than face the invading Yankees, and were in state of extreme demoralization and disintegration in the following weeks,[15] Butler could never be sure that his 15,000 troops would be enough to hold New Orleans should the enemy attempt a counterattack. Furthermore, while Farragut's steamers enjoyed almost uncontested control of the Mississippi as far north as Vicksburg, much of Louisiana's interior remained in the hands of Confederate troops and irregulars. The Confederate state government under Governor Thomas O. Moore maintained its operations, first at Opelousas and then at Shreveport, and remained a possible military threat. Finally, Union forces in New Orleans were aware that France, under Napoleon III, was playing an increasingly meddlesome role in neighboring Mexico, presenting yet another potential challenge, this time from the west. For the rest of the Civil War, Union forces would attempt to use New Orleans as a strong point from which to consolidate control of the

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*the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies, Volume VI* (Washington, D.C Government Publishing Office, 1882); C. P. Weaver (ed.), *Thank God My Regiment an African One: The Civil War Diary of Colonel Nathan W. Daniels* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1998), 1.

[15] For a recent account of Lovell's travails after the evacuation of New Orleans, see Michael D. Pierson, *Mutiny at Fort Jackson: The Untold Story of the Fall of New Orleans* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2008), Chapter 4. Pierson's findings regarding the unwillingness to fight of Lovell's troops—a large proportion of who were residents of New Orleans—has important implications for our understanding of internal social conflict as a cause of Confederate defeat.

Mississippi, extend their presence in Louisiana and Texas, and face down the French in Mexico.

**The General's Strike**

Union military strategy alone would not decide the outcome of the war on the lower Mississippi, let alone the fate of slavery and related social and political questions. The intentions of Lincoln and his representatives on the ground in New Orleans came face-to-face with local social and political realities in the spring and summer of 1862. Military and political strategy altered these realities, of course, but they were themselves altered in the process. This dynamic emerged most clearly in the encounter between the Yankee invaders and the black popular classes of New Orleans. In order to achieve its stated objectives, the occupying army would need support and assistance from at least some residents of the city, and working people seemed like the likeliest allies. African Americans, meanwhile, responded to the presence of an occupying army in the context of their own aspirations, and took advantage of the unprecedented political space created by the federal presence to advance their own perceived interests. Sometimes these interests seemed to align with the needs of the struggle against the Confederacy, and sometimes they did not. In either case, they influenced the course of Union policy and helped to decide the outcome of the conflict. When Union military strategy and the interests of local working people interacted in occupied New Orleans, they combined to produce an extraordinary social and political upheaval.

The most dramatic unintended consequence of the northern invasion was the disintegration of slavery in New Orleans and its agricultural hinterland. This process was not fated to occur simply because northern soldiers appeared in the city, and it did not happen all at once. For one thing, despite his role in pioneering the Union policy of "confiscating" enslaved African Americans as "contraband of war" while serving in Virginia, Benjamin Butler adopted an extremely cautious and pragmatic approach to slavery in southern Louisiana. He clashed repeatedly with subordinate officers who tried to implement antislavery measures, and even ordered his troops to return the fugitive slaves of "loyal" owners. But Butler was never in total control of the situation, and he could not prevent the collapse of slavery. The first, and most important, reason for Butler's helplessness was the determination of working people of color to be free. From the moment northern troops arrived in New Orleans, enslaved African Americans sought their assistance as potential allies in the struggle to be free. The second dynamic involved the demands of Union military necessity. By the late summer and early fall of 1862, even Butler understood that his strategic aims would require the assistance of working people of color, and that, whether or not he enlisted their help, black Louisianans intended to fight for their freedom. By the time Butler left his post in December, slavery had become a moribund institution in southern Louisiana.

For enslaved people of color in and around New Orleans, the arrival of federal troops in April 1862 signified the beginning of a new stage in the struggle for freedom. Black Louisianans certainly understood the significance of the northern

invasion, and paid the closest attention to the actions of the Yankee troops. According to one white Union solider, "the banks of the [Mississippi] river were lined" with curious slaves, "staring…at the Yankees" as they arrived to occupy the Crescent City in May.[16] As federal troops under Butler deployed in New Orleans and its suburbs in the days and weeks following the occupation, hundreds of black men, women, and children began to arrive at their lines. Some of these fugitives came from miles away. Octave Johnson had spent eighteen months living as a maroon in the swamps near Baton Rouge before the Union invasion. Johnson would later tell an interviewer that, on hearing word of the Yankee presence downriver, he "escaped and came to Camp Parapet," a military base just outside New Orleans.[17] A white solider, serving in the Eighth Vermont Regiment and headquartered in Algiers in June of 1862, noted that "large numbers of blacks, who had run away from their masters, crowded into the camps" of the Union forces. According to this witness, the escaping slaves had a very clear sense of the stakes in the northern occupation: they believed that Lincoln and the Republicans would "deliver their race from bondage, and that escape into the Union lines was the first step on the road to freedom."[18]

Benjamin Butler held to a different view of the role of northern forces in southern Louisiana. Although he had helped to pioneer the Union policy of "confiscating" slaves as "contraband of war" while serving in Virginia, the

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[16] George H. Carpenter, *History of the Eighth Regiment Vermont Volunteers* (Boston: Deland and Barta, 1886), 33.
[17] John W. Blassingame (ed.), *Slave Testimony: Two Centuries of Letters, Speeches, Interviews, and Autobiographies* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1977), 394-95.
[18] Carpenter, *Eighth Vermont*, 41.

Massachusetts officer adopted a much more cautious approach on the Gulf Coast. On May 1, the first day of the Union presence in New Orleans, Butler issued a proclamation designed to reassure loyal slaveholders of his commitment to the rule of law. "All rights of property, of whatever kind, will be held inviolate," Butler promised, "subject only to the laws of the United States."[19] One week into the occupation, Butler clarified his position on the question of runaway slaves in a letter to General John W. Phelps, commanding officer at Camp Parapet. "If I have any use for the services" of a particular fugitive, Butler stated "I employ him without any scruple – If I do not, I do not harbor him."[20] As if to underline his pragmatic approach to the momentous question of slavery and freedom, Butler the very next day ordered Phelps to return the slaves of two local planters "and adding others if need be to their force" so that the levee could be repaired and valuable plantation land protected from flooding.[21] At the end of May, Butler informed Secretary of War Edwin Stanton of his policy with regards to the fugitive slaves of southern Louisiana: he was prepared to seize the slaves of rebel masters as "contraband of war" if he could use them productively, but "I have directed all not employed to be sent out of my lines, leaving them subject to the ordinary laws of the community in that behalf."[22]

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[19] Butler, *Butler's Book,* 380.
[20] Maj. Gen. B.F. Butler to Gen. Phelps, 9 May 1862, Vol. 1 DG, Letters Sent, Ser. 1738, Dept. of the Gulf, RG 393 Pt. 1, National Archives [Freedmen and Southern Society Project, University of Maryland, College Park, Maryland (hereafter, FSSP) C-1054].
[21] Maj. Gen. B.F. Butler to Gen. Phelps, 10 May 1862, Vol. 1 DG, Letters Sent, Ser. 1738, Dept. of the Gulf, RG 393 Pt. 1, National Archives [FSSP C-1055].
[22] Maj. Gen. Benjamin F. Butler to Edwin McMasters Stanton, May 25, 1862, in Butler, *Private and Official Correspondence of Gen. Benjamin F. Butler, During the Period of the Civil War, vol. 1*, (Norwood, MA: Plimpton Press, 1917), 516.

The first challenge to Butler's pragmatic policy came as early as May, and began at Camp Parapet, a military installation located in Carrollton, a suburb of New Orleans about seven miles upriver of the city center. Confederate forces had built Parapet to defend against a Union attack from the north, but abandoned it without a fight when Butler's expedition arrived from the opposite direction. Once the occupation began, Union forces took over the fortifications and strengthened them in anticipation of a possible rebel counterattack. The northern soldiers based at Camp Parapet found that their new headquarters in Carrollton were located in a suburban community where farms and sugar plantations abutted the urban environment of New Orleans. Thanks to its location, this Union outpost became a logical destination for the large numbers of slaves fleeing rural Louisiana and seeking refuge behind Union lines in the occupied city. The Yankee soldiers at Camp Parapet therefore had to deal with a constant flow of black fugitives from the moment they arrived at their new headquarters in the first week of May. On the morning of May 19, for example, a slave couple named Sam and Mary woke up before dawn, appropriated a cart and mule from their master, and drove the two miles to Camp Parapet with a load of chickens, clothes, and furniture.[23] This determined black couple was just part of the flood that would help transform northern military policy at Camp Parapet.

In Camp Parapet's commanding officer, Brigadier General John W. Phelps, these black runaways found a determined ally. Hailing from Vermont, Phelps held strong antislavery beliefs and had no intention of implementing Butler's cautious

[23] W. Mithoff to Maj. Gen. Benjamin F. Butler, May 21, 1862, in Butler, *Private and Official Correspondence*, 509.

policy. Phelps's convictions must have seemed most alien to the slaveholding elite of southern Louisiana. One local planter noted that the Vermont general held "views on the slavery question…different from any other I ever heard or heard of."[24] When planters came to Parapet in search of their fugitive workforce, Phelps turned them away. By May 23, so many fugitives had sought refuge at Camp Parapet that Butler was moved to write and order Phelps to exclude from his lines "all unemployed persons, black and white."[25] Phelps did the opposite: in the days following Butler's instructions, he authorized his troops to roam beyond Union lines and encourage more slaves to leave the plantations. "If on any of the Plantations here a negro is punished when he most deserves it," claimed one of Phelps' fellow officers on May 27, "the fact becoming known at General Phelps' camp, a party of soldiers are sent immediately to liberate them, and with orders to bring them to Camp." As a consequence of black determination and Phelps's policy, as many as one hundred and fifty slaves found refuge at Camp Parapet in just the first month of the Union occupation, and fifty more were arriving every week.[26]

Butler knew that his subordinate intended to make the events at Camp Parapet a test case for Union military policy, and did all he could to restrain Phelps' radicalism. In a June 18 letter to Secretary of War Stanton, Butler acknowledged Phelps's qualities as a good commander and brave soldier, but maintained that, unless

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[24] Ibid.
[25] Maj. Gen. Benjamin F. Butler to Brig. Gen. John W. Phelps, May 23, 1862, in Butler, *Private and Official Correspondence*, 514.
[26] Capt. Edward Page, Jr. to Maj. Gen. Benjamin F. Butler, May 27, 1862, in Butler, *Private and Official Correspondence*, 524; Ripley, *Slaves and Freedmen*, 32.

the government intended to embark on a revolutionary war against slavery, "the services of Gen. Phelps are worse than useless."[27] Towards the end of July, Butler was still complaining about Phelps's policy of sheltering runaway slaves from their owners. Clearly exasperated, he wrote to Phelps on July 23 asking whether it was "not best that a boy of thirteen who has not discretion enough, one would suppose, to know how to take care of himself, be allowed to go back to his Mistress."[28] With Phelps holding firm, Butler had by the end of July decided to send two envoys—Christian Roselius, a local German-American lawyer and Unionist, and military governor of Louisiana General George F. Shepley—to consult with President Lincoln about whose was the correct policy towards fugitive slaves.[29]

Even as Benjamin Butler sought official sanction for his cautious policy towards slavery, events on the ground drove the Union towards a war of emancipation. For one thing, many of the New Englanders in Butler's occupation force seem to have shared John Phelps' distaste for slavery. A member of the Eighth Vermont Regiment, stationed at Algiers, recalled that the soldiers of that unit chose to "render every reasonable aid to any colored brother whom they found groping his way to freedom." On one occasion early in the occupation, men from this unit refused orders when their officers chastised them for helping one maltreated slave escape

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[27] Maj. Gen. Benjamin F. Butler to Edwin McMasters Stanton, June 18, 1862, in Butler, *Private and Official Correspondence*, 613.
[28] Maj. Gen. Benjamin F. Butler to Brig. Gen. John W. Phelps, July 23, 1862, in Butler, *Private and Official Correspondence*, *vol. 2*, 101.
[29] Maj. Gen. Benjamin F. Butler to Abraham Lincoln, July 30, 1862, in Butler, *Private and Official Correspondence*, *vol. 2*, 123; Ripley, *Slaves and Freedmen*, 31.

from his violent owner.[30] In May 1862, a group of Union sailors on a steamboat heading upriver took on board four "contrabands" who "had been 4 days without much of anything to eat." When the sailors asked the fugitives if they would like to return to their master, the escaped slaves "said they would sooner jump into the river."[31] Northern military personnel with antislavery sympathies undoubtedly played a significant part in the process by which slavery began to fall apart in New Orleans and its environs.

More often, however, Union forces welcomed "contrabands" into their lines for less ideological reasons. The occupying army required a massive amount of labor power just to keep its soldiers alive, not to mention its fortifications maintained, levees repaired, and so on. Black working people were the most obvious source of labor for these requirements. The Thirteenth Massachusetts Regiment, for example, needed four African American laundresses for each company, just to keep the troops in clean clothes.[32] When the Eighth Vermont Regiment suffered an outbreak of sickness while stationed at Algiers in the summer of 1862, the regiment found it necessary to advertise for the services of "three or four colored cooks." Word of the openings spread through the local countryside, and, according to the regimental historian, "on the following Sunday morning the approaches to the camp were found to be full of colored people, all desiring to offer their services as cooks." Even those

[30] Carpenter, *Eighth Vermont*, 41-42.
[31] Freeman Foster letter, May 15, 1862, in Foster, Freeman Letters 1862, Mss. 3170, Louisiana and Lower Mississippi Valley Collections, LSU Libraries, Baton Rouge, La (hereafter, LLMVC).
[32] Ripley, *Slaves and Freedmen*, 40.

who failed to find work in the camp apparently demonstrated no "intention of returning to the places from whence they came."[33] Episodes like this revealed the growing connection between the presence of Union troops and the ability of black people to break free from slavery.

Over the course of the summer, the desire of enslaved people of color to reach freedom assumed an insurrectionary character. In June, a group of more than one hundred slaves armed with knives attempted to force their way into New Orleans, and clashed violently with municipal police. A similar outbreak occurred a few weeks later, and this time federal troops were required to thwart the fugitives.[34] By July, Benjamin Butler lived in fear of an imminent uprising among the African Americans crowding New Orleans and its suburbs. "We shall have a negro insurrection here I fancy," Butler told his wife on July 25. "If something is not done soon, God help us all."[35] A correspondent from the *New York Times* agreed. "There is an uneasy feeling among the slaves," he reported on August 1. "They are undoubtedly becoming insubordinate, and I cannot think that another sixty days can pass without some sort of demonstration."[36] Almost four weeks later, on August 26, the same correspondent noted that the parishes of Plaquemines and St. Bernard, just down the river from New Orleans, had been "for many days past, in a state of semi-insurrection."[37] Later that summer, troops from Company H of the Eighth Vermont Regiment had to intervene

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[33] Carpenter, *Eighth Vermont*, 42-43.
[34] Ripley, *Slaves and Freedmen*, 28.
[35] Maj. Gen. Benjamin F. Butler to Sarah Hildreth Butler, July 25, 1862, in Butler, *Private and Official Correspondence*, *vol. 2*, 109.
[36] *New York Times*, August 1, 1862.
[37] *New York Times*, August 26, 1862.

to prevent an uprising brewing among the slaves on a plantation some ten miles from New Orleans.[38]

There can be little doubt that the experiences of the Union Army in and around New Orleans played a tremendous role in shaping the federal government's changing policy toward slavery during the summer of 1862. As northern troops moved deeper into the Confederacy and faced both new military challenges and a sudden flood of black runaways, a debate opened up in Washington on the correct course for Republican policy toward emancipation. In August 1861, Congress had already passed, and Lincoln signed, the First Confiscation Act, which gave Union forces the legal right to seize any slaves used in the service of the Confederacy.[39] Events in and around New Orleans suggested this law might not be enough, however. As the debate raged, Radical Republicans in Washington kept a close eye on the situation in occupied southern Louisiana and used Butler's experiences there to guide their attitude toward emancipation. Secretary of the Treasury Salmon Chase received detailed reports from Treasury Agents in New Orleans, for example, and must have noted that their view of slavery was changing. In May 1862, for example, one of Chase's correspondents had stated his belief that "the South can be conquered without abolishing slavery in the Gulf States or elsewhere."[40] By July 19, the same agent had changed his mind. "I begin to incline to the opinion that the Abolition of Slavery is

[38] Carpenter, *Eighth Vermont*, 58.
[39] For the fullest discussion of the First Confiscation Act yet published, see James Oakes, *Freedom National: The Destruction of Slavery in the United States, 1861-1865* (New York and London: W.W. Norton and Co., 2013), 106-144.
[40] George Stanton Denison to Salmon Portland Chase, May, 1862, in Salmon P. Chase, *Diary and Correspondence of Salmon P. Chase* (American Historical Association, 1903), 308.

necessary, as a means of terminating the war," he told Chase.[41] On July 17, two and a half months after Butler's invasion of New Orleans, Congress passed the Second Confiscation Act and the Militia Act. With these new laws, the Republicans declared free any slave held by a disloyal owner, and authorized the president to use black labor for the military suppression of the Confederacy.[42]

Once again, however, the mere fact of a changed northern policy was not enough to change facts on the ground. The Militia Act had opened wide the door to the enlistment of black troops in occupied New Orleans, but Benjamin Butler remained unconvinced, and it would take further initiative from below to make a reality of Washington's intentions. A new wave of pressure in precisely this direction began when a group of free men of color approached the Union leadership in New Orleans and made clear their desire to fight. According to Rudolphe Lucien Desdunes, the great chronicler of Afro-Creole culture, the leaders of the Confederate Native Guards had met with Butler soon after his arrival in New Orleans, and had parted from him promising to consider their feelings towards the federal government. At some point in late July or early August, this elite group delegated Henry Rey to speak once more with Union leadership in Louisiana and offer their services to the northern cause.[43] Apparently, they chose to contact Brigadier General Phelps first, as he reported in a letter to General Butler on August 2. "Several parties" of free men of

[41] George Stanton Denison to Salmon Portland Chase, July 19, 1862, in Chase, *Diary and Correspondence of Salmon P. Chase*, 310.
[42] Oakes, *Freedom National*, 224-255, 361.
[43] Rudolphe Lucien Desdunes, *Our People and Our History* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1911 [repr. 1973]), 118-119.

color had approached Phelps in late July, he told Butler, offering to raise a regiment of one thousand men for service in the Union cause.[44] The black men who approached Phelps had almost certainly heard about the Militia Act and Lincoln's executive order, issued on July 22, authorizing Secretary of War Stanton to begin the mobilization of troops "of African descent," and saw this as the moment to pledge fidelity to the Union war effort.

It was rapidly becoming clear that people of color intended to fight for their freedom in occupied southern Louisiana, whether through an insurrectionary movement or through service in the Union Army. Unsurprisingly, Brigadier General Phelps was the first northern officer to recognize this reality and act decisively. On July 30 he wrote to Butler requesting "requisitions for arms, accoutrements, clothing, camp and garrison equipage, etc., for three Regiments of Africans which I propose to raise for the defence of this point." To justify his decision, Phelps pointed to the imminent threat of insurrection in the countryside around New Orleans.

> Society in the South seems to be on the point of dissolution, and the best way of preventing the African from becoming instruments in a general state of anarchy is to enlist him in the cause of the Republic. If we reject his services, any petty military Chieftain, by offering him freedom can have them for the purpose of robbery and plunder. It is for the interest of the South as well as for the North that the African should be permitted to offer his block for the Temple of Freedom.

[44] Brig. Gen. John W. Phelps to Maj. Gen. Benjamin F. Butler, August 2, 1862, in Butler, *Private and Official Correspondence*, *vol. 2*, 146.

Phelps went on to explain that he had already organized three hundred male fugitives into five companies, and that the new black soldiers were "willing and ready to be put to the test. They are willing to submit to anything rather than slavery."[45]

Even at this stage, however, Butler seemed determined to resist the revolutionary trajectory of the war in Louisiana. On August 2, he wrote to Phelps and his subordinate at Camp Parapet to "desist from the formation of any Negro Military Organization." Butler explained that, in his estimation, government policy still forbade Phelps's policy of freeing and arming of slaves, and maintained that his power to raise local forces was "expressly limited to white soldiers."[46] In the face of Butler's continued intransigence, on August 2 Phelps tendered his resignation and returned to Vermont.[47] As his treatment of Phelps shows, Butler continued to ignore the fact that he now had permission to raise "Home Guard" units from the whole of the local male population in order to strengthen his forces.[48] Instead, Butler chose to focus his recruitment efforts on the white and immigrant working-class communities of New Orleans. A good number of men from these communities did join the Union Army in southern Louisiana, but the pool of potential recruits quickly ran dry.[49] In October 1862, for example, a Colonel Charles Paine, stationed in New Orleans, wrote

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[45] Brig. Gen. John W. Phelps to Maj. Gen. Benjamin F. Butler, July 30, 1862, in Butler, *Private and Official Correspondence*, *vol. 2*, 125-126.
[46] Maj. Gen. Benjamin F. Butler to Brig. Gen. John W. Phelps, August 2, 1862, in Butler, *Private and Official Correspondence*, *vol. 2*, 143.
[47] Brig. Gen. John W. Phelps to Maj. Gen. Benjamin F. Butler, August 2, 1862, in Butler, *Private and Official Correspondence*, *vol. 2*, 146.
[48] Edwin McMasters Stanton to Maj. Gen. Benjamin F. Butler, June 23, 1862, in Butler, *Private and Official Correspondence*, *vol. 1,* 626-627.
[49] James G. Hollandsworth. Jr., *The Louisiana Native Guards: The Black Military Experience During the Civil War* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1995), 14-15.

to his superiors informing him that it was "almost impossible for the Recruiting Officers…to get recruits." This correspondent believed that the white working men who might have joined the Second Louisiana had found employment elsewhere. "I consider the reason of the present impossibility of obtaining recruits to be the fact that so many of the unemployed [white] laborers" had found work on local plantations "in place of negroes who have run away."[50]

Butler's final conversion to the use of African American troops came under threat of a Confederate attack on New Orleans. In early August, Confederate troops under Major General John C. Breckinridge mounted a surprise raid on the Union encampment at Baton Rouge. Although the federals managed to repulse the attack, the ferocity of the rebel assault seems to have taken them by surprise. One northern participant in the fighting at Baton Rouge wrote to his family that the combatants "fought in the woods for five hours, and it was a bloody fight. The smoke was so thick it was impossible to distinguish the enemy except when in close contact." Colonel Williams of the Seventh Vermont Regiment, the overall commanding officer of Union forces at Baton Rouge, died during the fighting, along with ninety of his men.[51] In the aftermath of the raid, Benjamin Butler became convinced that Breckinridge planned to sneak south along the river with the remnants of the

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[50] Col. C.J. Paine to Maj. G.C. Strong, 22 Oct. 1862, #712 (vol. 11/12), Letters Received, Ser. 1756, Dept. of the Gulf, RG 393 Pt. 1 [FSSP C-510]

[51] Letter from Henry Warren Howe, August 6, 1862, in Howe, *Passages from the Life of Henry Warren Howe, Consisting of Diary and Letters Written During the Civil War, 1816-1865. A Condensed History of the Thirtieth Massachusetts Regiment and Its Flags, Together with the Genealogies of the Different Branches of the Family*. (Lowell, MA: Courier-Citizen Co. Printers, 1899), 124; Maj. Gen. Benjamin F. Butler to Edwin McMasters Stanton, August 9, 1862, in Butler, *Private and Official Correspondence*, *vol. 2*, 168-170.

Confederate forces from Shiloh, and lay siege to New Orleans.[52] The threat of an imminent attack finally convinced Butler of the need for military assistance from African American men. In the event of an attack, he told Secretary of War Stanton on August 14, "I shall call on Africa to intervene, and I do not think I shall call in vain." Butler stated his intention to begin mustering into service the free men of color who had earlier served in the Native Guards.[53]

On August 16, 1862, therefore, Benjamin Butler issued an order for the enlistment of free men of color in Louisiana, and by November he could call on three regiments of Native Guards. These new units were very different from the Native Guards of the Confederacy, however. On the surface, it suited Butler to maintain the charade that his new troops came from the free black elite of antebellum New Orleans, and he jokingly reassured the Secretary of War on September 1 that "the darkest…will be about the complexion of the late Mr. [Daniel] Webster." The Union general hoped that he could preemptively deflect any criticism of his new policy by claiming to employ only those light-skinned men of color who had been free before the war and had already served under the Confederacy.[54] In reality, though, James Hollandsworth's authoritative study of the Native Guards concludes that "only 11 percent of the 1st Regiment of Butler's Native Guards had served in" the Confederate

[52] Maj. Gen. Benjamin F. Butler to Edwin McMasters Stanton, August 16, 1862, in Butler, *Private and Official Correspondence*, *vol. 2*, 194.
[53] Maj. Gen. Benjamin F. Butler to Edwin McMasters Stanton, August 14, 1862, in Butler, *Private and Official Correspondence*, *vol. 2*, 191-192.
[54] Maj. Gen. Benjamin F. Butler to Edwin McMasters Stanton, September 1, 1862, in Butler, *Private and Official Correspondence*, *vol. 2*, 243-244.

Native Guard units.[55] The vast majority of recruits to the new regiments were, in fact, fugitive slaves. Butler's recruiters apparently chose not to enquire too closely about the pre-war status of the new recruits, allowing, as one Treasury agent described, "the boldest and finest fugitives" to join what was nominally a "Free Colored Brigade."[56]

Given the determination of enslaved people of color to be free, and the contribution of black men and women to the Union war effort in the Mississippi Valley, slavery continued to disintegrate over the course of the summer of 1862. Slaves found ways to win their freedom even when they were employed in occupations vital for the success of the federal administration of New Orleans, like the Gas Works. Three black men—Robert Harrison, Robert Morgan, and Joe Lewis—twice escaped from the New Orleans Gas Works and made their way to Camp Parapet in order to seek shelter from Union troops there. Following their second escape attempt, on September 6, General Phelps found "two of them…loaded with chains and one of them…badly maimed."[57] Unfortunately for these three men, however, the Gas Works had come under the control of the Provost Marshal, apparently due to the "insubordination prevailing among the slaves, who formed a large majority of the laborers."[58] Colonel French, the Provost Marshal, decided that the Union forces needed Morgan, Lewis, and Harrison "for public service," and Butler ordered Phelps

[55] Hollandsworth, *Louisiana Native Guards*, 18.
[56] George Stanton Denison to Salmon Porter Chase, September 1, 1862, in Chase, *Diary and Correspondence of Salmon P. Chase*, 312-313; Chase to Maj. Gen. Benjamin F. Butler, September 23, 1862, in Butler, *Private and Official Correspondence*, *vol. 2*, 323-324.
[57] Brig. Gen John W. Phelps to Capt. R. S. Davis, September 6, 1862, #26 (v. 11/12), Letters Received, Series 1756, Dept. of the Gulf, RG 393 Pt. 1, National Archives [FSSP C-508].
[58] W. W. Mercer to Maj. Gen. Benjamin F. Butler, September 9, 1862, #506 (v. 11/12), Letters Received, Series 1756, Dept. of the Gulf, RG 393 Pt. 1, National Archives [FSSP C-508].

to return the men to the Gas Works on September 8.[59] Despite the determination of Union officers and Louisiana slaveholders, however, black resistance such as that of the Gas Works laborers had rendered slavery an unviable system of labor in the area around New Orleans. By October, planters from the occupied sugar parishes recognized this new reality and developed a system of wages for agricultural workers—part of a desperate attempt to keep black laborers on the plantations.[60]

Under the pressure of these circumstances, Lincoln's policy towards slavery began to shift. He faced constant pressure from his left flank. Even in September, congressional Radicals had remained frustrated with the president's apparent unwillingness to launch a war of emancipation. Citing rumors that Butler was to be relieved of command, perhaps because of his increasing radicalism on the question of emancipation, on September 5 Radical leader Thaddeus Stevens complained about "the continued refusal to receive Negro soldiers" and stated the need for Lincoln to "treat [the Civil War] as a radical revolution, and remodel our institutions."[61] By this point, however, Lincoln was already deeply invested in the idea of emancipation. He had begun to consider measures to end slavery as early as June, and began discussions with the Radicals the following month. Until September, when Lincoln issued the preliminary Emancipation Proclamation, the policy was still very much in flux, however, and events on the ground in New Orleans could still alter the

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[59] Capt. R. S. Davis to Brig. Gen. John W. Phelps, September 8., 1862, vol. 2 DG, p. 312, Letters Sent, Series 1738, Dept. of the Gulf, RG 393 Pt. 1, National Archives [FSSP C-508].
[60] Ripley, *Slaves and Freedmen*, 44-45.
[61] Thaddeus Stevens to Simon Stevens, September 5, 1862, in Stevens, *The Selected Papers of Thaddeus Stevens, Volume 1: January 1814-March 1865* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1997), 323.

president's course. As Hans Trefousse notes, "Ben Butler resolved the question" of whether Lincoln should call for the enlistment of black troops when he mustered the Louisiana Native Guards in August.[62] The final version of the Proclamation, which Lincoln issued on January 1, 1863, contained both elements of compromise and far-reaching reforms. It freed all slaves in rebel-held territory and authorized the enlistment of black troops, but left slavery intact in occupied areas like southern Louisiana.[63]

By the time Lincoln issued his proclamation, the destruction of slavery in and around New Orleans was far advanced, and society was in a state of profound instability. Nothing signaled this state of affairs better than the insurrection panic that emerged at the end of 1862. With the Emancipation Proclamation set to go into effect on January 1, reports emerged that the black population of southern Louisiana planned to rise up and ensure that they, too, shared in the promise of freedom. At Christmas, a group of anonymous white "ladies" claimed to have become "hearers to a plan which has been formed by negroes to massacre indiscriminately Northerners, Southerners, women and children."[64] Most of the fear seems to have derived from a plan by an organization called the Union Association to hold a procession and banquet to mark the Proclamation and raise money for "the poor people in the

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[62] Hans L. Trefousse, *The Radical Republicans: Lincoln's Vanguard for Racial Justice* (New York: Knopf, 1969), 222-225.
[63] On the significance of the Proclamation, see Oakes, *Freedom National*, 340-392; Berlin *et al*., *Slaves No More*, 49-51.
[64] "A Number of Ladies" to Maj. Gen. N. P. Banks, December 24, 1862, A-54 (1862), Letters Received by the Provost Marshal General, Series 1390, State of Louisiana, Provost Marshal Fields Orgs., RG 393 Pt. 4, National Archives [FSSP C-824].

Camp," especially black women and children.[65] In late December, several terrified local whites wrote to Union commanders and begged for protection from what they were certain was the beginning of a bloody uprising.[66] "Many are in great alarm," Julia LeGrand wrote in her diary as the New Year approached.[67] Rumors of an uprising surfaced as far north as St. James Parish.[68] In January, one Union soldier based in New Orleans reported to his family that he had "been patrolling down the river, thirty miles, with a squad of men, offering protection to those planters who might desire it in anticipation of any trouble which could occur from the negroes at Christmas or New Year."[69]

Within less than nine months of the northern invasion, the presence of Union troops and the actions of black working people had combined to cause massive damage to the integrity of the slave system in and around New Orleans. From a policy of barring fugitives from Union lines, Benjamin Butler had evolved toward a position of arming black men and sending them to fight against their former masters. He did

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[65] J. M. Marshall and Henry Clay to Maj. Gen. N. P. Banks, December 22, 1862, M-62 (1862), Letters Received, Series 1956, Field Records—Banks Expedition, Dept. of the Gulf, RG 393 Pt. 1, National Archives [FSSP C-824].

[66] Anonymous to Col. Clark, December 24, 1862, A-54 (1862), Letters Received by the Provost Marshal General, Series 1390, State of Louisiana, Provost Marshal Fields Orgs., RG 393 Pt. 4, National Archives [FSSP C-824]; E. M. Ivens to Maj. Gen. N. P. Banks, December 20, 1862 and Lt. C. A. Hartwell to Lt. Col. R. B. Irwin, December 22, 1862, both filed as H-53 (1862), Letters Received, Series 1956, Field Records—Banks Expedition, Dept. of the Gulf, RG 393 Pt. 1, National Archives [FSSP C-824]; T. D. Hailes to Lt. Col. R. B. Irwin, December 20, 1862, H-65 (1862), Letters Received, Series 1956, Field Records—Banks Expedition, Dept. of the Gulf, RG 393 Pt. 1, National Archives [FSSP C-824].

[67] Julia LeGrand, *Journal of Julia LeGrand: New Orleans, 1862-1863* (Richmond, VA: Everret Waddey Co., 1911), 58-60.

[68] Letter from "So and So" (Anonymous), np., January 2, 1863, A-31 (1863), Letters Received, Series 1756, Dept. of the Gulf, RG 393 Pt. 1 [C-521].

[69] Letter from Henry Warren Howe, January 1, 1863, in Howe, *Passages from the Life of Henry Warren Howe*, 130-131.

so in the context of a near-insurrectionary situation in the countryside around New Orleans, pressure from free men of color, and the threat of Confederate counterattack. The regiments of black working men that came to be known as the Louisiana Native Guards were, as we will see below, one of the most dramatic products of this period. The experiences of Butler in Louisiana clearly shaped Abraham Lincoln's evolving view of the slavery question, and contributed to the President's decision to release the Emancipation Proclamation in the fall of 1862. New Orleans had become the crucible of an emerging alliance between the federal government and the enslaved African Americans of the South.

**New Orleans Model Army**

For the moment, the main dynamic driving emancipation remained the emerging alliance between the Union Army and African American working people. In 1862 and 1863, the Louisiana Native Guards became the first and most visible representatives of this dynamic. These three regiments of black men represented the radical direction in which black agency and military necessity had pushed the Union war effort, and they were also stamped with the mark of urban society. The rank-and-file of the Native Guards came from the contraband camps and the streets of New Orleans. Unlike their counterparts who served later in the war, moreover, these black privates served under black officers who were usually artisans or small business owners. The regiments therefore symbolized the ability of black urban working people to connect the needs of the federal government with the aspirations of the

great mass of black southerners. The Native Guards served in a number of important Union campaigns, including the siege of Port Hudson in 1863. While they experienced great hardship, including the virulent racism of white officers and enlisted men, African American men often found the experience of soldiering to be a profoundly radicalizing experience. They contributed to the death of slavery and resisted the prejudice of their supposed allies, and thereby continued to build a sense of collective consciousness and confidence.

Once Benjamin Butler became convinced of the need for black troops, he jumped into the process of recruitment with both feet—and stirred up a political hornets' nest in the process. Searching for fresh recruits, Butler fixed his gaze on slaves belonging to New Orleans' large foreign population. The Union general believed that foreign nationals manifested particular hostility to the northern war effort, and were deeply implicated in attempts to break the blockade.[70] He also learned that it was illegal for citizens of either Britain or France to own slaves in foreign countries, explaining to Secretary of State William Seward in October 1862 that the French "Code Civile forbids the acquisition of such property."[71] With this in mind, Butler had by the end of August ordered foreign nationals to register their country of origin with the occupation forces, and promptly confiscated the slaves of those who admitted British or French citizenship. This method, which even the

[70] See, for example, Benjamin F. Butler to Edwin McMasters Stanton, October 12 and October 21, 1862, *Private and Official Correspondence of Gen. Benjamin F. Butler, vol. 2*, 361-368.
[71] Benjamin F. Butler to William H. Seward, October 24, 1862, *Private and Official Correspondence of Gen. Benjamin F. Butler, vol. 2*, 398-399.

British consul later acknowledged was perfectly legal, provided a huge boost to recruitment to the Native Guards. The slaves who thus obtained their freedom formed the bulk of recruits to the 2nd and 3rd Regiments.[72]

The rank-and-file soldiers of the Native Guards regiments were urban workingmen and fugitive slaves. Butler may have portrayed the new regiments as made up of the same elite men of color as had joined the Confederate militia, but relatively few of those who had served in the Confederate units came forward to fight for the Union. Instead, African American men from the urban popular classes filled out the ranks of the first black Union regiments. Joseph Wilson, who served in the Native Guards, estimated that at least half of the men in the 1st Regiment were fugitive slaves,[73] and the 2nd and 3rd Regiments contained an even larger proportion of men who had recently escaped from slavery. These were overwhelmingly working men: in Company E, for example, 60 percent of recruits had worked in the skilled trades before the war, while the remaining 40 percent had been common laborers.[74] While they went by the name of "free colored regiments," these were in fact groups of armed runaway slaves, recruited and trained in occupied New Orleans.

Unlike the black Union regiments raised later in the war, the Louisiana Native Guards had black line officers. The men of color who served as lieutenants and captains in these regiments came from New Orleans' free black community. Some, like Francis Dumas, were products of the local free black elite. Educated in Paris and

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[72] Donald E. Everett, "Ben Butler and the Louisiana Native Guards, 1861-1862," *The Journal of Southern History* 24, no. 2 (May, 1958): 216.
[73] Joseph T. Wilson, *The Black Phalanx* (New York: Arno Press, 1968), 195.
[74] Hollandsworth, *Louisiana Native Guards*, 21-24.

able to speak five languages, Dumas owned a clothing store and had become extremely wealthy. When war broke out, the clothing merchant emancipated his slaves and invited them to join him in fighting for the Union. Dumas accepted a captaincy in the 1st Native Guards before being promoted to major in the 2nd Regiment. Most of the captains and lieutenants in the Native Guards had somewhat more modest origins, and came from what James Hollandsworth calls "the ranks of city's working elite." Some were prosperous Afro-Creole artisans, like Capt. Andre Cailloux of the 1st Native Guards, who had worked as a cigar maker, or Lt. Emile Detiege of the same regiment, who was a bricklayer.[75] The workingmen of the western river towns were well represented in the Native Guards officer corps, too. P.B.S. Pinchback, a former steamboat steward and future governor of Louisiana, was a captain in the 2nd Regiment.[76] William B. Barrett had attended school with Pinchback in Cincinnati and worked on the steamboats as a barber: like his friend, Barrett served as a captain in the 2nd Regiment.[77] James Lewis, another pre-war acquaintance of Pinchback, had grown up in Louisiana and worked on the river—he received a captain's commission in the 1st Regiment.[78] John H. Crowder, a lieutenant in the 1st Regiment, had moved to New Orleans from Louisville as child and gone to

[75] Wilson, *Black Phalanx*, 169; Hollandsworth, *Louisiana Native Guards,* 26-27.
[76] Haskins, *The First Black Governor: Pinkney Benton Stewart Pinchback* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1973 [repr. 1996]), 23-24.
[77] Eric Foner, *Freedom's Lawmakers: A Directory of Black Officeholders During Reconstruction* (Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1993), 13.
[78] Foner, *Freedom's Lawmakers*, 132-133.

work on the steamboats at the age of 8, eventually rising to the lofty position of steward.[79]

The Native Guards had their first taste of action during the campaign against Confederate forces in the Bayou Lafourche region in late October. Butler wanted to get the black troops out of New Orleans to defuse racial tensions in the city, and also hoped to rout Confederate forces to the west. While General Godfrey Weitzel took 3,000 troops up the Mississippi to Donaldsonville and then marched south along the Bayou, the 1st Native Guards and the white 8th Vermont Regiment under Colonel Stephen Thomas would march along the railroad from New Orleans to Opelousas. As they marched, the men from these two regiments paused to repair the dilapidated tracks, even kneeling to pull weeds and replace missing rails. On the night of October 28, after several days of this grueling labor, the 1st Native Guards and 8th Vermont approached the railroad station at Des Allemands, where they expected to find a significant Confederate force. They formed up for battle, listened to what Colonel Thomas hoped was a stirring speech—and found that the rebels had abandoned the post not long before.

Although the 1st Native Guards had held its nerve in the face of imminent combat, Butler preferred to use the regiments for manual labor. After the abortive battle at Des Allemands, the Union commander ordered the regiment to continue along the railroad to Brashear City (now called Morgan City) on Berwick Bay,

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[79] Joseph T. Glatthaar and John H. Crowder," The Civil War through the Eyes of a Sixteen-Year-Old Black Officer: The Letters of Lieutenant John H. Crowder," *Louisiana History* 35, no. 2 (Spring 1994).

clearing and repairing the tracks as they went. The 1st Native Guards thus spent the next several weeks rebuilding bridges and restoring culverts.[80] The 2nd Regiment soon joined their comrades on the railroad, leaving New Orleans on October 30 and making camp just outside the city at Boutte Station, where they spent two months carrying out further repairs.[81] The 3rd Native Guards took on an even more menial task when Butler ordered them to help bring in the sugar harvest in the Teche country, which was threatened by a heavy frost and a major labor shortage.[82]

Army service presented black men from New Orleans with many opportunities to become direct participants in the destruction of slavery. When African American troops left New Orleans and entered the Louisiana countryside, they did so as part of what was rapidly becoming an army of emancipation. During the Lafourche campaign in the fall of 1862, John Crowder, the sixteen-year-old lieutenant in the 1st Native Guards, fell in love with a slave girl called Liser, and decided to help her and her mother make a new life for themselves in New Orleans. Crowder sent the two freedwomen to live with his mother in the Crescent City, where he hoped Liser would learn to sew, "cultivate her mind and learn…the propriety of a Lady."[83] On other occasions men from the Native Guards took more drastic action. In January 1863, a white planter just outside New Orleans complained that "a picket of the Native Guards colored men" had caused twelve of his twenty slaves to flee. The

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[80] Hollandsworth, *Louisiana Native Guards*, 35.
[81] Weaver, *My Regiment*, 17.
[82] Mary F. Berry, "Negro Troops in Blue and Gray: The Louisiana Native Guards, 1861-1863," *Louisiana History* 8, no. 2 (Spring 1967): 179.
[83] John H. Crowder to his mother, undated (November 1862?), in Glatthaar and Crowder, "Letters of Lieutenant John H. Crowder," 208.

African American soldiers had, furthermore, "seized the person of my driver, tied him and flogged him."[84]

These black working men from New Orleans made a significant contribution to Lincoln's strategic objectives when they participated in the siege and eventual capture of Port Hudson in the spring and early summer of 1863. Along with Vicksburg, itself surrounded by Union forces under Ulysses S. Grant, this was the last Confederate stronghold on the Mississippi, and its capture was therefore crucial to the reopening of river trade. In the final week of May, the 1st and 3rd Native Guards ended a long period of inactivity at their camp in Baton Rouge, and joined some 20,000 other Union troops under Major General Banks in an attack on Port Hudson.[85] On May 27, Banks ordered his troops to begin an all-out assault on the 7,000 rebel troops defending the fortifications. The 1st and 3rd Native Guards, whose white commanding officer Brigadier General William Dwight, Jr. prepared for the battle by getting fall-down drunk, were given orders to attack the strongest point on the rebel line, and paid a terrible price. They charged through one thicket of willow trees and then across 600 yards of open ground in full view of massed Confederate artillery. The losses were terrible: thirty-four enlisted men killed, and 130 wounded, without inflicting a single casualty on the enemy. The 1st Regiment suffered the loss of

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[84] Francis Fazande to Maj. Gen. N.P. Banks, January 2, 1863, F-52 (1863), Letters Received, Series 1756, Dept. of the Gulf, RG 393 Pt. 1, National Archives [FSSP C-534].
[85] Major General Nathaniel Banks had replaced Butler as Commander of the Department of the Gulf in December 1862. His tenure in New Orleans is discussed in more detail in Chapter 4, below.

Captain Andre Cailloux and sixteen-year-old Lt. John H. Crowder, both killed in the suicidal assault.[86]

Beginning in early 1863, Major General Banks engaged in an all-out purge of African American officers in the Native Guards regiments, even as black men died under his incompetent leadership. Banks would later justify his behavior on the basis that black captains and lieutenants could not adequately lead their men, but the real reasons were rooted in the prejudices of the general and his white fellow officers. As early as February 1863, Banks encouraged many of the black officers in the 3rd Native Guard to resign after refusing to defend them from racist white Union troops.[87] After Port Hudson, the Commander of the Department of the Gulf accelerated his campaign, writing to President Lincoln that the black officers were "unsuited for this duty."[88] Some of Banks' targets refused to be cowed. Just five weeks before he died in the assault of Port Hudson, Lt. John H. Crowder of the 1st Regiment wrote to his mother "I do not intend to resign, nor will I resign unless I am the only black officer in the Service."[89] In order to overcome any such resistance, Banks ordered that all black officers would a face a review board at which they would have to demonstrate their knowledge of military affairs. In some cases the black officers found themselves under review by white officers they outranked. By the end of the summer of 1863, most black officers had resigned rather than face the humiliating review process. One

[86] Wilson, *Black Phalanx*, 212-219..
[87] Hollandsworth, *Louisiana Native Guards*, 43-44.
[88] Hollandsworth, *Louisiana Native Guards*, 71.
[89] John H. Crowder to his mother, April 23, 1863, in Glatthaar and Crowder, "Letters of Lieutenant John H. Crowder," 211-212.

of the last to go was Captain P.B.S. Pinchback of the 2nd Regiment, who eventually wrote to Banks that he found "all the officers inimical to me." Pinchback resigned on September 10, and although he later tried to gain a commission in a company of black cavalry he raised, no more African American men would serve as officers in the Civil War.[90]

Banks' purge symbolized the endemic, sometimes violent, racism that black working people faced in their encounters with the Union Army. Colonel Nathan Daniels, a white officer in command of the 2nd Native Guards, recorded several such incidents in his diaries of life with black troops on Ship Island. On March 18, 1863, Daniels recorded a scuffle between white sailors from the gunboat *Jackson* and black sentries from the 2nd Regiment.[91] According to Joseph Wilson, who served with the regiment and later wrote an important history of black Union troops, several white sailors were killed in this outbreak, although Col. Daniels did not mention any such bloodshed in his diary.[92] Whatever the outcome of the conflict in March, the white sailors of the *Jackson* soon had opportunity to take their revenge. On April 9, Daniels took two companies of the 2nd Native Guards on a reconnaissance mission to Pascagoula, Mississippi, where they clashed with a group of Confederate defenders. Daniels praised the bravery of the Native Guards in this small, fierce engagement, in which they lost two killed and four wounded.[93] As the black troops carried out a fighting withdrawal from the town, however, and waited to be evacuated from the

[90] Haskins, *Pinchback*, 24-29.
[91] Weaver, *My Regiment*, 57-58.
[92] Wilson, *Black Phalanx*, 207-208.
[93] Weaver, *My Regiment*, 40-42, 79-81.

wharf, the *Jackson*—allegedly present to provide support for the foray into Pascagoula—fired a shell directly into their midst, killing five and wounding seven. "Our own Gun boat did us more injury than all the enemy combined," Col. Daniels noted sadly.[94]

In some instances, black enlisted men took collective action against the racism and inequality of army life. Beginning in the summer of 1863, the Union Army leadership reversed its earlier course of paying black soldiers the same as their white counterparts, and cut their wages from $13 to $7. This action touched off a storm of protest from black soldiers. In September 1864, a white officer in a black regiment noted that the failure to pay his troops had "caused insubordination that has required very severe measures to check." Some of the black enlisted men in this regiment, the 14th Rhode Island Heavy Artillery (Colored), refused to answer their names during an inspection and received punishments including time in a Union prison camp.[95] As Joseph Glatthaar has noted, these protests against unequal pay provided the first experience of coordinated political action for many black working men, and would leave a legacy for the course of Reconstruction.[96]

Ironically, the most dramatic incident of black soldiers' resistance to the racism of their white officers took place at Fort Jackson, the scene of a mutiny among working-class white Confederate soldiers during the fall of New Orleans. In December 1863, African American soldiers from the 4th Regiment of the Corps

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[94] Ibid., 42, 81-82.
[95] William H. Chenery, *The Fourteenth Regiment Rhode Island Heavy Artillery (Colored) in the War to Preserve the Union, 1861-1865* (Providence, RI: Snow and Farnham, 1898), 66
[96] Glatthaar, *Forged in Battle*, 173-174.

D'Afrique made up the garrison at this fortification. Like the Native Guards, most of the enlisted men in this regiment had recently escaped from slavery. They were under the command of white Lieutenant Augustus C. Benedict, a notorious martinet who specialized in inventing unusual punishments for the black men in his unit. Benedict often ordered his men to be flogged, had them tied up by their thumbs, or beat them himself without any apparent provocation. The men of the 4th Regiment endured Benedict's tyranny for some time, but eventually reached their breaking point. On December 9, 1863, the white commanding officer took a horsewhip to two men from the regimental band. In response to this latest provocation, half of men in the regiment seized weapons, freed their imprisoned comrades from the stockade, and flooded out into Fort Jackson's parade ground. There they menaced several white officers with their bayonets and threatened to kill Lieutenant Colonel Benedict. Although he had never been afraid to torture helpless black soldiers, Benedict attempted to flee at the first sign of resistance to his cruelty, and begged a passing steamboat captain to take him away from Fort Jackson. Ultimately, however, the mutiny ended without any loss of life; Benedict was court-martialed and drummed out of the service, while a handful of black enlisted men spent time in prison for their part in the rebellion.[97]

As the war dragged on through 1863, however, Major General Banks moved to strengthen white control over black troops in the Union Army. Having purged the black officers from the Native Guards, he moved to dramatically expand the number

[97] Fred Harvey Harrington, "The Fort Jackson Mutiny," *Journal of Negro History* 27, no. 4 (October 1942): 420-431.

of African American soldiers in the Department of the Gulf and to place them under the command of whites. To this end, on May 1 Banks proposed the formation of the Corps D'Afrique, which would eventually consist of eighteen regiments, including infantry, cavalry, and artillery. The new units would be smaller than was usual in the Union Army, with regiments of 500 (rather than 1000) and companies of 50 (rather than 100). Banks apparently hoped that these changes would give his trusted white officers more chance of training the black troops.[98] Typical of the Republican general's heavy-handed approach to relations with the black community, recruitment to the Corps D'Afrique was often both forceful and controversial.[99] Even local whites had cause to complain about the level of recruitment. Thus, in August of 1863, Banks received a letter from a white employee of the New Canal Company, complaining that "a squad came down from Camp Parrapet [sic] and took away two of our men."[100] Another local white businessman complained that his black manservant had been "seized by a squad of negro soldiers" while on an errand.[101] By the end of

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[98] Elias Porter Pellet, *History of the 114th Regiment, New York State Volunteers* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2005), 117.

[99] Lt. Col. J.S. Bangs, Jr. to Lt. Col. R.B. Irwin, February 9, 1864, B-239 (1864), Letters Received, Series 1756, Dept. of the Gulf, RG 393 Pt. 1, National Archives [FSSP C-557]; T.W. Conway to Maj. G.B. Drake, August 15, 1864, C-793 (1864), Letters Received, Series 1756, Dept. of the Gulf, RG 393 Pt. 1, National Archives [FSSP C-557]; Maj. S. Hamblen to Maj. G.B. Drake, August 17, 1864, H-925 (1864), Letters Received, Series 1756, Dept. of the Gulf, RG 393 Pt. 1, National Archives [FSSP C-557]; Maj. G.B. Drake to Brig. Gen. T.W. Sherman, August 17, 1864, vol. 8 DG, p. 40, Letters Sent, Series 1758, Dept. of the Gulf, RG 393 Pt. 1, National Archives [FSSP C-557].

[100] Jules A. Blanc to Maj. Gen. N.P. Banks, 11 Aug. 1863, B-216 (1863), Letters Received, Ser. 1920, Civil Affairs, Dept. of the Gulf, RG 393 Pt. 1, National Archives [FSSP C-687].

[101] .T. Buddeck to Maj. Gen. N.P. Banks, 5 Aug. 1863, B-222 (1863), Letters Received, Ser. 1920, Civil Affairs, Dept. of the Gulf, RG 393 Pt. 1, National Archives [FSSP C-688].

August, Banks' recruitment strategy had paid dividends: the Corps D'Afrique included some 15,000 black troops.[102]

White soldiers serving in Louisiana had varied reactions to the black troops of the Native Guards and Corps D'Afrique. In May 1863, a Union soldier called Sam White wrote about how impressed he was with the black regiments forming at Brashear City. "They will make tip top soldiers," he stated, "better than white ones ever dared to be."[103] Another white Union soldier was less optimistic about the prospects for African American troops after witnessing their arrival at Baton Rouge. "God help poor darkey if the Rebbels gets holt of any of them [sic]," he wrote.[104] Reflecting on the conduct of the Native Guards at Port Hudson, one white regimental historian noted that "their gallantry was cordially acknowledged by their white comrades."[105] Captain Charles Boothby clearly changed his views of black troops after working closely with them in occupied Louisiana. In January 1863, Boothby had written of his disdain for African American troops in a letter to his father. "The raising of the two regiments [of Native Guards] has not been of any benefit to the Union cause," he complained. "Negro troops are a perfect humbug," Boothby continued. "The officers are colored slightly and they have but little discipline over

[102] James M. McPherson, *The Negro's Civil War: How American Negroes Felt and Acted During the War for the Union* (New York: Vintage Books, 1965), 169-170.
[103] Sam White Letter, May 22, 1863, in Civil War Soldiers Letters, 1863, Mss. 3188, LLMVC.
[104] Henry Johnston to Henry Reynor, January 28, 1863, Johnston, Henry Letter 1863, Mss. 2466, LLMVC.
[105] Chenery, *Fourteenth Regiment Rhode Island Heavy Artillery*, 88.

the men."[106] A year later, however, Boothby had changed his mind. "Some of them learn remarkably fast," he told his brother.[107]

By the spring of 1863, the federal government had begun to catch up with the situation on the ground in Louisiana and other occupied territories. In May, the War Department established a Bureau of Colored Troops to maximize enlistment of African American soldiers. The Native Guards had helped to prompt this decision. As the historians of the Freedmen and Southern Society project note, "well-publicized battlefield achievements by black regiments at Port Hudson and Milliken's Bend, Louisiana," had contributed to change in public sentiment regarding the use of African American troops.[108] In 1864, the regiments of the Corps D'Afrique merged with the new United States Colored Troops (USCT). The units originally designated the 1st, 2nd, and 3rd Louisiana Native Guards became the 73rd, 74th, and 75th Infantry, USCT.[109] Over 24,000 black men from Louisiana would eventually serve in uniform, more than a quarter of all black troops recruited in the South.[110] When the Native Guards dissolved into the Corps D'Afrique, and ultimately the USCT, these regiments lost their uniquely urban and working-class character. But the black working men who had served in the Guards had already made a major contribution to Union military policy. Their eagerness to fight had pushed Benjamin Butler toward a

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[106] Charles W. Boothby Letter, January 15, 1863, Box 1, Folder 7, Boothby, Charles W. Papers, Mss. 4847, LLMVC.
[107] Charles W. Boothby Letter, January 16, 1864, Box 1, Folder 8, Boothby, Charles W. Papers, Mss. 4847, LLMVC.
[108] Berlin *et al., Slaves No More*, 200-201.
[109] Hollandsworth, *Louisiana Native Guards*, 96.
[110] Berlin *et al., Slaves No More*, 203.

policy of arming black men, which, in turn, helped shape federal government procedure. Their bravery in battle had prepared the public mind for black enlistment on a large scale. Just as importantly, however, the early structure of the Native Guards had shown how urban working people could form a link between the northern government and the black working people of the southern countryside.

**Black Women and the Camp Economy**

We would be seriously mistaken to begin and end our understanding of the black military experience with the exploits of African American men in uniform. Such a focus does a particular disservice to the many African American women who joined the war against the Confederacy. Excluded from military service by the gender ideology of the period, black working women nevertheless faced the same imperatives as their husbands, sons, and brothers. They knew that the best way to win freedom, and make a living as a free person, was to provide some sort of service for the occupying Union forces. Again, their place in the war effort would be shaped by the gendered division of labor in nineteenth-century North America, and by the needs of the Union Army. Most women of color would therefore find themselves working for the Union Army in roles that would have been very familiar from their lives under the old regime: cook, nurse, or washerwoman, for example. Others resorted to some sort of commercial sexual relationship with black or white Union soldiers—another continuity with life in pre-war New Orleans. These elements of continuity caused some white observers to mock the Union sympathies of black working women. And

yet, unlike these white observers, many women of color understood that these familiar roles could, in the context of civil war and social chaos, become the key to self-emancipation and simple survival. When these women labored to build the camp economy, they became a factor in Union strategic success.

Black working women had their own reasons for seeking employment in the Union camps. Many of the first African American women to work in the camps were the wives and relatives of black soldiers, who had followed their husbands, sought a job with the Yankees to feed their families, or come to the camp fleeing harassment at the hands of hostile whites. As Susie King Taylor noted of the situation in the South Carolina Sea Islands, "The first colored troops did not receive any pay for eighteen months….[T]heir wives were obliged to support themselves and children by washing for the officers of the gunboats and the soldiers, and making cakes and pies which they sold to the boys in camp."[111] The wives of the Louisiana Native Guards faced the same poverty and insecurity. In October 1862, Colonel Stafford of the 1st Regiment complained that the wives of his black troops "cannot pay their rent until the men get some pay" and faced constant "annoyances."[112] Just days later, Stafford reported that the mother of Auguste Perrauld, a private in Company B of the 1st Native Guards, had been "arrested and put in the Police Jail" because her owner was indignant about

[111] Susie King Taylor, *Reminiscences of My Life in Camp: An African American Woman's Civil War Memoir* (Athens, GA, and London: University of Georgia Press, 2006), 15-16.
[112] Colonel S.D. Stafford to Maj. Gen. B.F. Butler, October 14, 1862, S-19 (vol. 10/13 DG 1862, Letters Received, Series 1756, Dept. of the Gulf, RG 393 Pt. 1, National Archives [FSSP C-502].

Auguste's Union sympathies.[113] Faced with similar economic and political hardships, many wives of black soldiers chose to seek out the relative security of Union encampments.

Just like many of their male counterparts, a large number of black working women found themselves performing onerous manual labor in and around New Orleans. The occupying federal troops needed trenches and ramparts to defend their positions from Confederate raids, while the Union strategy of reestablishing the plantation economy necessitated the rebuilding of levees. While stationed at Baton Rouge, white northern officer Henry Howe remarked that black women were at work digging trenches for Union forces who had just come under attack from Confederate troops.[114] In January 1863, another white officer stationed at Kenner, just outside New Orleans, described the terrible living and working conditions of the black men and women assigned to work on the levee. "Many of the women are in an even worse condition than the men as regards clothing," he noted. "From 5 to 16 work daily on the levee, more would if they had shoes."[115] Regardless of their gender, therefore, many black working people found the shovel was an indispensable part of labor in the service of the Union.

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[113] Colonel S.D. Stafford to Maj. Gen. G.C. Strong, October 23, 1862, #716 (vol. 11/12 DG) 1862, Letters Received, Series 1756, Dept. of the Gulf, RG 393 Pt. 1, National Archives [FSSP C-502].
[114] Henry W. Howe Letter, August 9, 1862, in Howe, *Passages from the Life of Henry Warren Howe*, 125-126.
[115] Ira Berlin et al., *Free At Last: A Documentary History of Slavery, Freedom, and the Civil War* (New York: New Press, 1992), 185.

Other black workingwomen served Union forces in ways that were more thoroughly gendered. Perhaps unsurprisingly, washing clothes became the most common occupation for African American women who labored for the northern army. Laundry had been the most familiar occupation to African American women in slavery times, and it remained so during the war years. Keith Wilson has described black laundresses as "the most numerous and most socially significant" group of working women in the camp economy. The camp washerwomen were, Wilson remarks, "a resourceful group of women employing their traditional skills in order to survive."[116] White Captain Jonathan Johnson of the 15th New Hampshire Volunteers remarked on the ubiquity of black laundresses at Camp Parapet, telling his wife in a March 1863 letter that women of color "come around for washing as thick as hope."[117] Nursing was another common military occupation for black women. White Union soldier Horace Burnham helped to take of sick officers while he was himself convalescing in the spring of 1863. "There are three or four niggers to do the work and I have to see that it is done properly," he told his sister.[118] On the Mississippi River, a number of African American women served as nurses aboard the extraordinary warship *USS Red Rover*. This boat had been a commercial side-wheeler before the Confederate Navy purchased it with the intention of creating a floating barracks. Captured by Union forces after the Battle of Island No. 10 in the spring of

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[116] Keith P. Wilson, *Campfires of Freedom: The Camp Life of Black Soldiers during the Civil War* (Kent, OH, and London: Kent State University Press, 2002), 204.
[117] Jonathan H. Johnson Letter, March 6, 1863, in Johnson, *The Letters and Diary of Captain Jonathan Huntington Johnson,* 83.
[118] Horace Burnham Letter, April 30, 1863, in Burnham, Howard and Horace Letters, Mss. 1181, LLMVC.

1862, the *Red Rover* found a new life as a hospital ship. Women of color served on the ship as chambermaids, laundresses, and nurses—roles they might have played on similar vessels during the antebellum period.[119]

Many black women seem to have supported themselves by working as independent vendors and selling various goods to the northern occupying forces. Those women of color who sold foodstuffs seem to have been particularly welcome in Union camps as their wares supplemented the soldiers' sometimes-paltry diet. As historian Ella Forbes notes, the cooking of black women vendors was "prized because the fare the troops received was often so meager and unpalatable." In at least one instance, moreover, the culinary skills of an African American cook were enough to convince a previously racist white Union soldier that "blacks were not so bad after all," according to Forbes.[120] These black female vendors became a common sight in the camps in New Orleans and its environs. While stationed at the defenses of New Orleans in December 1862, for example, Jonathan Johnson wrote to his wife that African American "women and children swarm about the Camp with oranges and cakes to sell."[121] The vendors sold more than just food, however. While visiting New Orleans during the early days of the occupation, one white northern soldier noted that

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[119] Steven Louis Roca, "Presence and Precedents: The USS Red Rover during the American Civil War," *Civil War History* 44, no. 2 (June 1998).
[120] Ella Forbes, *African American Women during the Civil War* (New York and London: Garland, 1998), 55.
[121] Jonathan H. Johnson Letter, December 24, 1862, in Johnson, *The Letters and Diary of Captain Jonathan Huntington Johnson,* 30.

black women were selling bunches of magnolias in the streets for "one bit each," and wrote to his family that he would like to send them a bouquet.[122]

Black working women in New Orleans and its immediate environs engaged in a broad spectrum of intimate relationships with white soldiers. Certainly many white Union soldiers demonstrated an erotic fascination with the black women who worked in their camps. In a December 1862 letter, for example, Jonathan Johnson remarked that one of his comrades was "somewhat taken" with a light-skinned female "contraband" in their camp.[123] A few months later Johnson felt it necessary to reassure his wife that she could "rest easy on the account of my washer woman, as I have not the least inclination to kiss her or have any likeness of her taken or anything else of that kind."[124] While this particular Union officer protested just a little too much, others clearly entered into intimate relationships with black camp women. Keith Wilson relates the case of Captain William Knapp, a white officer serving with black troops in southern Louisiana, who "carried on a romantic relationship for some time with a mulatto laundress in his regiment."[125]

Given that the overwhelming majority of our information about the camp economy comes from the perspective of white men, it is very difficult to disentangle the complex threads of race, class, and power inherent in these relationships. Where a

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[122] Henry W. Howe Letter, May 18, 1862, in Howe, *Passages from the Life of Henry Warren Howe*, 121.
[123] Jonathan H. Johnson Letter, December 27, 1862, in Johnson, *The Letters and Diary of Captain Jonathan Huntington Johnson,* 32.
[124] Jonathan H. Johnson Letter, April 10, 1863, in Johnson, *The Letters and Diary of Captain Jonathan Huntington Johnson,* 103-104.
[125] Wilson, *Campfires of Freedom*, 205.

white northern man saw a consensual romantic liaison, for example, an African American woman might well have seen a coercive or commercial relationship. In the antebellum period, black workingwomen had entered relationships with white men out of economic necessity as well as genuine affection; the same was undoubtedly true during the Civil War. Thus, Margaret, "a charming, beautiful Creole woman, with not enough dark blood in her veins to bust their surface," took up with the white Colonel Nathan Daniels of the 2nd Native Guards in April 1863 in order to win her freedom from a plantation in western Louisiana and find a home in New Orleans. The Union officer had his photograph taken with the young woman and promised to pay for her to attend school in New York.[126] At the other end of the spectrum were the purely commercial relations between prostitutes and their clients. In an essay on prostitution in Civil War Richmond, E. Susan Barber makes the link "between the prevalence of prostitution and the availability of nearby garrisons of soldiers or sailors."[127] This was certainly true in New Orleans and its environs, where a large number of black women seem to have engaged in commercial sexual relations with Union troops.[128]

Clearly, such relationships were extremely dangerous territory for African

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[126] Weaver, *My Regiment*, 100.
[127] E. Susan Barber, "Depraved and Abandoned Women: Prostitution in Richmond, Virginia, across the Civil War," in Susanna Delfino and Michele Gillespie (eds.), *Neither Lady Nor Slave: Working Women of the Old South* (Chapel Hill, NC and London: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 155.
[128] See, for example: Lt. William Dougherty to Capt. L.E. Granger, August 27, 1865; E. Trefargnier *et al*. to Lt. William Dougherty, August 24, 1865; J.G. Le Breton et al. to Maj. Gen. Hurlbut, April 19, 1865; and Capt. G.A. Spink to Capt. B.B. Campbell, September 3, 1865: all filed as L-142 (1865), Letters Received, Series 1757, Dept. of Louisiana, RG 393 Pt. 1 [FSSP C-649].

American women. A black woman who came to rely on a white Union soldier for financial support faced the possibility that he would abandon her at a moment's notice. Just weeks after having his picture taken with the "beautiful" Margaret, for example, Colonel Daniels decided to abandon his former lover at a house on Rampart St. in New Orleans, telling his diary that "there is danger in her connection—and she must be content with what I have already done for her."[129] Abandonment was a relatively minor risk compared to the ever-present threat of sexual violence in the camps. As E. Susan Barber and Charles F. Ritter have shown, the fear of sexual violence loomed large in the lives of many women in the occupied South.[130] According to Keith Wilson, for example, the aforementioned Captain Knapp found his relationship with the "mulatto laundress" in jeopardy "when his friends…tried to force themselves upon other laundresses."[131]

The endemic sexual abuse of black women by white Union soldiers was a major source of discontent among African American men in the occupying army. Keith Wilson describes how black men from the 3rd Infantry Regiment of the Corps D'Afrique (formerly the 3rd Native Guards) rioted at Port Hudson when one of their white officers attempted to rape a black laundress who was married to one of the black enlisted men.[132] Wilson also argues that white officers' sexual harassment of

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[129] Weaver, *My Regiment*, 122.
[130] E. Susan Barber and Charles F. Ritter, "'Physical Abuse…and Rough Handling': Race, Gender, and Sexual Justice in the Occupied South," in LeeAnn Whites and Alecia P. Long (eds.), *Occupied Women:Gender, Military Occupation, and the American Civil War* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 2012), 49-67.
[131] Wilson, *Campfires of Freedom*, 205.
[132] Wilson, *Campfires of Freedom*, 205-206.

black laundresses may have played a part in the dramatic mutiny by African American soldiers at Fort Jackson in December 1863.[133] In his discussion of the mutiny, Fred Harrington notes that "four [white] captains and two [white] lieutenants were arrested for forcing their way into the dwelling quarters of the Negro laundresses attached to their command."[134] When, in the aftermath of the mutiny, Brigadier General William Dwight wrote to Nathaniel Banks calling for the removal of the violent Colonel Drew, he cited the "low and vile licentiousness among the officers" and the "outrage towards the women of their race which could not fail to be known to these [African American] soldiers."[135]

In this context, it is hardly surprising that some observers felt that black workingwomen fared no better under the Union Army than they had under the old regime. Julia LeGrand Waitz, a pro-Confederate white diarist who lived in New Orleans during the occupation, wrote that African American "servants are all caught up and forced by federal soldiers to work on the fortifications and plantations." She clearly felt that her own former slave would not be able to cope with these conditions: "I pity poor Julie Ann," Waitz wrote. "I wonder what death she will die! She has never known real hardship."[136] Some time later, the same author noted, "The insolent negroes who have been boasting of Yankee support are very much crest-fallen and ashamed. One…threatened to have a gentleman arrested last week; this week she is

[133] Ibid.
[134] Harrington, "The Fort Jackson Mutiny," 425.
[135] Quoted in Harrington, "The Fort Jackson Mutiny," 430.
[136] Diary of Julia LeGrand, March, 1863, in LeGrand, *The Journal of Julia LeGrand,* 216-217.

powerless."[137] A white Union soldier seemed to agree with this assessment. In the fall of 1862 he reported witnessing "half a dozen female contrabands bouncing about on the boxes" of a Union artillery regiment's wagon train. They were, he stated, "exerting their best energies to preserve some officers crockery-ware from a general smash." This white soldier was not impressed. "So much for the blessings of freedom with female contrabands," he mused. "They better stay at home."[138]

These observers failed to understand what was all too obvious for many black workingwomen—for all their violent prejudice, the Yankee invaders had the power to intervene between owner and slave in a manner that was unprecedented in the history of New Orleans. African American women therefore consciously sought the help of the Union Army in their attempts to free themselves or their loved ones from slavery. The anonymous black author of a letter to Major General Banks in early 1863 demonstrated this when he or she asked the northern commander "if you would please to Have a colored woman by the name of Jane Turner Released, who has been Arrested because her Master's other woman left home" and Turner could not or would not say where she had gone.[139] The sort of rescue this writer requested could lead to both freedom and a source of income and security. One white Union soldier, stationed at Camp Parapet, described in May 1862 how his regiment's black laundresses had been sold away from the city just before the northern invasion, but

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[137] Diary of Julia LeGrand, March, 1863, in LeGrand, *The Journal of Julia LeGrand,* 229-230.
[138] Charles W. Boothby Letter, September 19, 1862, Box 1, Folder 6, Boothby, Charles W. Papers, 1861-1898, Mss. 4847, LLMVC.
[139] Anonymous to Maj. Gen. N.P. Banks, January 14, 1863, A-7 (1863), Letters Received, Series 1756, Dept. of the Gulf, RG 393 Pt. 1 [FSSP C-520].

later escaped when a band of Union soldiers raided the countryside near Baton Rouge. The two women had come "to cook and wash for the Officers" at Camp Parapet, where the white soldiers "built them a little shanty, and surrounded it with a high fence."[140]

For still other black workingwomen, cooperation with the Union Army was a means of keeping their families together. Virinda, who had worked in New Orleans as a hairdresser before the war, won her freedom "on account of information she gave about concealed arms." In October 1863, she used the New Orleans Provost Court to sue for access to her child, who had remained in the household of her former owner while Virinda apparently worked for the occupation forces. Although a northern officer told the court that the former hairdresser was "entitled to the custody of her children," Virinda's daughter apparently preferred to stay in the more economically secure white household. Virinda nevertheless gained the right to visit her daughter twice a week.[141] Other black women gained more substantial improvements in the strength of their families. By cooperating with the Union Army, the wives of some African American soldiers won the support of Union officers for the legal recognition of their marriages, and thus to right to claim benefits in the case of the husband's

[140] John Henry Jenks Letter, May 22, 1862, in Nina Silber and Mary Beth Sievens (eds.), *Yankee Correspondence: Civil War Letters Between New England Soldiers and the Home Front* (Charlottesville and London: University Press of Virginia, 1996), 89.
[141] Custody Claim of Virinda, 3 October, 1863, Case #341, Vol. 241 DG, Proceedings of the Provost Court, Ser. 1683, Provost Court of New Orleans, Provost Marshal Field Orgs., RG 393 Pt. 4, National Archives [FSSP C-1018].

death.[142]

When these black workingwomen worked with the occupying army to win their freedom and strengthen their families, they also challenged the racist ideas of white northern soldiers. Not long after his arrival in New Orleans in January 1863, Captain Jonathan Johnson wrote to his wife expressing the familiar stereotypes of African American women: referring to a character in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, he called one woman "the best specimen of a Topsy" he had ever seen, and described her behavior in childlike terms.[143] Less than two months later, however, in March, Johnson met an elderly black woman who had entered the camp to look for her two daughters. Although she had not seen her children in fourteen years, the woman "believed that the Lord would so order things that they would yet be free and she would yet see them." Johnson was clearly moved. In contrast to his earlier views, the white officer now told his wife "the talk that the slaves are an inferior race and only fit to be slaves…is an exploded idea. They are only inferior as they are made so by circumstances. Educate them, and they would be able to take their proper place among the nations of the earth."[144]

It remains exceptionally difficult to quantify the contribution these African American women made to the success of northern arms in the Lower Mississippi theater of the Civil War. We cannot, for example, make a simple tally of battles won

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[142] Job. G. Bass to Maj. Gen. N.P. Banks, 17 June 1864, B-771 (1864), Letters Received, Ser. 1756, Dept. of the Gulf, RG 393 Pt. 1, National Archives [FSSP C-558].
[143] Jonathan H. Johnson Letter, January 14, 1863, in Johnson, *The Letters and Diary of Captain Jonathan Huntington Johnson,* 45.
[144] Jonathan H. Johnson Letter, March 2, 1863, in Johnson, *The Letters and Diary of Captain Jonathan Huntington Johnson,* 77-78.

and lives lost, as we perhaps might for the black men who wore the Union blue. This does not lessen the significance of the part black workingwomen played in the military struggle against the Confederacy. As well as passing on information about Confederate sympathizers in New Orleans, they provided the services crucial in the maintenance of an occupying army, both in terms of tangible goods and services such as cooking or washing, and in terms of morale among male soldiers. There is even less doubt about the significance of this relationship for the lives of black workingwomen themselves. By cooperating with the Union Army, women of color could win their freedom from slavery, find shelter from the hostility of local whites, and secure at least a minimal level of subsistence for themselves and their families. Oftentimes, black women faced violence from male soldiers that spurred comparisons with life under slavery. They nevertheless came to understand that the representatives of the Union could be powerful allies in the struggle against their former masters.

**Conclusion**

For a number of reasons, New Orleans became a particularly important location for the development of the alliance between the Republican-controlled federal government and the black population of the South. As the largest city in the Confederacy, and one of the most important commercial centers in all of North America, New Orleans presented an appealing strategic target for the northern military. It was also conveniently located to play a role in the attempted blockade of southern trade. For these reasons, New Orleans became one of the first parts of the

Deep South to experience northern occupation, and thus became a testing ground for federal policy toward slavery. At the same time, the distinctive nature of social relations in New Orleans also made it fertile ground for the growth of this political alliance. Urban society had facilitated the political awakening of black working people in the antebellum period, giving African American women and men a stronger sense of their collective interests than was possible in the southern countryside. This dynamic will become even more apparent in the next chapter, when we examine the attempts at political reconstruction in New Orleans. But it was visible as soon as Union troops arrived in New Orleans in the spring of 1862. From the moment Yankee soldiers set foot in New Orleans, men and women of the black popular classes used the occupation as a way of advancing their own interests. In so doing, they assisted the Union cause while simultaneously pushing their northern partners in a more radical direction.

## Chapter Four

## "We Stood before the Nation":

## New Orleans and the Politics of Emancipation, 1863-1865

In early December of 1864, the trial of Michael Gleason propelled the *New Orleans Tribune* onto the stage of national politics. Gleason, an Irish immigrant, had been on trial for the murder of a thirteen-year-old black boy named Johnny Hamilton. In front of several witnesses, Gleason had pushed Hamilton into the Mississippi River and prevented black onlookers from saving the drowning boy. Nevertheless, when the case came to trial in early December of 1864, an all-white jury acquitted Gleason of murder. There the story might have ended, if not for the attention of Jean-Charles Houzeau. Houzeau, a Belgian radical and refugee from the Revolutions of 1848, had taken over as editor of the black-owned *Tribune* a month before Gleason's acquittal, and had been searching for a way to expand the newspaper's appeal beyond its core readership of Francophone free men of color. He now determined to make the case into a symbol for the question of black civil rights in the post-slavery South. As the Belgian editor would later remember, his impassioned editorial on the case of Johnny Hamilton, titled "Is There Any Justice for the Black?" put the *Tribune* "in the spotlight not simply before the city of New Orleans but before the entire thirty million inhabitants of the nation." In Washington, Republican politician William "Pig Iron" Kelley quoted extensively from Houzeau's editorial during a debate in the House of Representatives in February of 1865, in a speech that established Kelley as one of the

leading Radicals in Congress. "From this day on," Houzeau wrote of the Hamilton case and its aftermath, "we stood before the nation."[1]

Houzeau's account of the Hamilton case has a dual significance for the study of the politics of freedom in New Orleans. It shows how the occupation of New Orleans pushed the city to the forefront of northern public consciousness and made events there one of the most important wartime "rehearsals for Reconstruction," to use Willie Lee Rose's classic phrase.[2] With federal troops in command of New Orleans, the progress of both emancipation and political reconstruction in the city would have a major impact on politics at the national level. And yet the story of the Hamilton case also reveals subtler but not less important processes at work in the development of politics at the grassroots. It was highly significant that the *New Orleans Tribune*, previously the mouthpiece of the French-speaking Afro-Creole elite, chose to take up Hamilton's case and make it into a cause célèbre. The paper's role in the incident revealed Jean-Charles Houzeau's strategy of using the *Tribune* as the axis of an alliance between freeborn black people, the recently emancipated former slaves, and the Radical wing of the Republican Party. Such a coalition had the potential to be a major force in the struggles over labor and civil rights currently underway in occupied New Orleans.

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[1] Jean-Charles Houzeau, *My Passage at the New Orleans Tribune: A Memoir of the Civil War Era*, ed. David C. Rankin, trans. Gerard F. Denault (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1984), 85-87.
[2] Willie Lee Rose, *Rehearsal for Reconstruction: The Port Royal Experiment* (New York, Vintage Books, 1964).

Events in occupied New Orleans invite historians to reconsider the relationship between national political priorities and local developments in the evolution of Republican policy toward both emancipation and reconstruction. The recent work of James Oakes has done a great deal to correct misconceptions regarding the Republican view of slavery and freedom, and to put to rest the mistaken view of Abraham Lincoln as a "reluctant emancipator."[3] Nevertheless, as we have already seen in this study, Republican policy evolved haltingly, and the decisive factor seems in many cases to have been pressure from below—the determination of black women and men to be free, and to join the military struggle against the Confederacy. Under these circumstances, events in occupied territory could have a disproportionate impact on the thinking of Lincoln and other policymakers in Washington. One such "rehearsal" took place in the Sea Islands of coastal Georgia and South Carolina, where an early northern occupation allowed thousands of slaves to take over and farm the abandoned plantations of their owners in what became known as the "Port Royal Experiment."[4] Of course, Reconstruction policy did not in fact evolve in the radical direction suggested by events in the Sea Islands. Indeed, as Peyton McCrary has suggested, New Orleans may have been both more representative and more influential than the Sea Islands as a test run for northern policy in the post-Confederate South. Thus Lincoln's attitude toward developments in Louisiana reflected both the president's instinctive moderation and pragmatism and

[3] James Oakes, *Freedom National: The Destruction of Slavery in the United States, 1861-1865* (New York and London: W.W. Norton and Co., 2013).
[4] Rose, *Rehearsal for Reconstruction*.

also his ability to move in a more radical direction when the situation required it. "Both the President and his critics regarded the Louisiana 'experiment' as the crucial test case for his approach to reconstruction," McCrary writes.[5]

The limelight cast on New Orleans by events like the Hamilton case illuminated contradictory processes at work in the occupied city during the three years from the northern invasion in April 1862 until the end of the war in April 1865. In the first instance, the trial run for political reconstruction that began in 1863 illuminated many of the assumptions of the Republican-controlled federal government, in both its local and national manifestations. It showed how army officers and politicians imagined the course of reconstruction could run, and with which groups of southerners they could build an anti-Confederate alliance. In New Orleans, this meant an extended courtship between federal authorities and men and women from the white popular classes. At the same time, however, the early debut of debates over reconstruction opened up space for oppositional forces to put forward their own agenda and exert serious pressure on the development of Republican policy. Afro-Creole intellectuals, radical whites, and especially the former slaves all had their own visions of a city without slavery, and they would now have the opportunity to advance their ideas in the glare of public attention. In order to advance their vision of a more radical Reconstruction, however, these forces would need to achieve unity and organizational coherence. Could a cohesive movement emerge from the struggle against the Republican plan for a "white Reconstruction" and for a

[5] Peyton McCrary, *Abraham Lincoln and Reconstruction: The Louisiana Experiment* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1978), xi.

more thoroughgoing solution to the labor question? Would it be possible for these diverse social and political actors to gather behind a single program and in a single organization? How would such an alliance come into being, and what stance would it adopt in relation to the Republican Party?

**Defining Freedom**

While the Civil War raged on the battlefields of the Southwest in 1863 and 1864, the struggle over the content of freedom raged in the streets and workplaces of New Orleans. Slavery was in disarray and thousands of former slaves were participating in military operations against the Confederacy. But post-slavery New Orleans took shape only as part of an ongoing, multi-sided struggle to define the meaning of free labor. This process began at the grassroots, with the daily interactions and contestations between working people of color, their former owners, and the Union Army. White employers remained determined to maintain a pool of docile, disciplined black labor, and Nathaniel Banks, the commander of Union forces on the Gulf Coast, had his own vision of the city's future labor system. Black working people, meanwhile, defined their idea of freedom's meaning against and alongside these opposing conceptions, and articulated them in genres as diverse as religious sermons and anti-Confederate songs.

Even as slavery disintegrated, working people of color continued to skirmish with their employers over the contours of a new labor system. Slavery remained formally intact in New Orleans even after the Emancipation Proclamation went into

effect in January of 1863, but labor relations were subject to a new degree of negotiation between slaves, their owners, and the Union Army. The example of the New Orleans Gas Works shows how this three-sided struggle played out. In February 1863, a group of African American men wrote to General Banks about their situation. They had worked at the Gas Works until November the previous year, when the management "being dissatisfied with us, told us to go and look for work elsewhere." Probably for the first time in their lives, the men were now free workers on the labor market, and they sought out new employers. For the next couple of months, they worked for the Union Army, in a "Tobacco ware-house" but were arrested at the end of January for not having the correct papers, and confined to the workhouse as vagrants.[6] Even as the men sought to define a new identity as free workers, therefore, local authorities were attempting to enforce a regime of labor discipline. The struggle could frustrate the interests of employers, too. A few months after these black men complained to Banks, in August of 1863, a representative of the Gas Works wrote to Banks pleading that he place the company under protection, as it had lost "within the last four months, thirty one fine hands, that have been induced to leave, or have been forcibly taken away."[7]

By early 1863, the Union Army had become the most important employer of former slaves in New Orleans, and struggles began to emerge between the military

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[6] Isaac White et al. to Maj. Gen. N.P. Banks, February 23, 1863, W-43 (1863), Letters Received, Series 1920, Civil Affairs, Dept. of the Gulf, RG 393 Pt. 1, National Archives [Freedmen and and Southern Society Project, University of Maryland, College Park, Maryland (hereafter, FSSP) C-508].

[7] G.C. Duncan to Maj. Gen. N.P. Banks, August 7, 1863, D (1863), Letters Received, Series 1845, Provost Marshal, Dept. of the Gulf, RG 393 Pt. 1, National Archives [FSSP C-508].

authorities and the working people of color they employed. Black laborers even proved willing to withdraw their labor from the war effort when they felt dissatisfied with their treatment as workers. In March 1863, for example, a group of African American camp laborers apparently refused to accompany a white regiment departing Carrollton en route to Baton Rouge. One white soldier probably understated their feelings on the matter when he mentioned that the black workers "felt bad because they did not get any pay."[8] Another case, in the spring of 1865, involved a group of black laborers reluctant to leave New Orleans. In the early spring of 1865, the local Provost Marshal Court tried three black teamsters named Stephen Cusack, George Washington, and B. Thompson "for deserting their teams." The men had apparently been happy to work for the Union Army while their unit remained in New Orleans, but once it received marching orders, they "thought to get away and hire out again so they could remain in the city."[9]

As Thavolia Glymph has shown, the Civil War produced a particularly bitter struggle between slave-owning white women and their black female domestic servants.[10] While her work focuses on the plantation household, the same process was certainly underway in the white households of New Orleans. In March 1863, for example, an enslaved African American woman wrote to Major General Banks to

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[8] F.A. Belcher Letter, March 12, 1863, in Civil War Soldiers Letters, 1863, Mss. 3188, Louisiana and Lower Mississippi Valley Collections, Hill Memorial Library, Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge, Louisiana (hereafter, LLMVC).

[9] Proceedings of the Provost Court: U.S. vs. Stephen Cusack, George Washington, and B. Thompson, 25 Mar. 1865, L-88 (1865), Letters Received, Ser. 1756, Dept. of the Gulf, RG 393 Pt. 1, National Archives [FSSP C-572].

[10] Thavolia Glymph, *Out of the House of Bondage: The Transformation of the Plantation Household* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

inform him that her mistress was threatening her with the workhouse if she could not make ten dollars a month by hiring her time.[11] White pro-Confederate diarist Julia LeGrand charted the collapse of deference in the relations between white mistresses and their black female servants. In March 1863 she noted that "Mary, the servant, was, *I think*, excited by liquor the other day, and broke out upon her mistress in the most insolent manner."[12] White employers sometimes resorted to force in order to claim the labor of black domestic workers. In January 1863, a white woman called Mrs. Bullitt brought a group of four "policemen" with her when she went to reclaim her female slave, whom she had earlier thrown out into the street.[13] Few black women were safe from this sort of forcible return to slavery. One outraged white northern soldier complained in April 1863 that "nearly every day the wife of some [black] Soldier is spirited away" and returned to slavery in the countryside.[14]

This turmoil only grew as thousands of fugitive slaves flocked to New Orleans from the plantation districts. As Steven Hahn has noted, "the black population of many southern towns and cities increased dramatically between 1860 and 1870…as rural freedpeople…sought out the advantages that urban places appeared to offer."

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[11] Edith Jones to Maj. Gen. N.P. Banks, 4 March 1863, J-21 (1863), Letters Received, Series 1920, Civil Affairs, Dept. of the Gulf, RG 393 Pt. 1, National Archives [FSSP C-705].
[12] Diary of Julia LeGrand, March, 1863, in Julia LeGrand, *Journal of Julia LeGrand: New Orleans, 1862-1863* (Richmond, VA: Everret Waddey Co., 1911), 256, 260-264.
[13] Moses Townsley to Maj. Gen. N.P. Banks, 15 Jan. 1863, T-3 (1863), Letters Received, Series 1920, Civil Affairs, Dept. of the Gulf, RG 393 Pt. 1, National Archives [FSSP C-720].
[14] Col. C.W. Drew to Brig. Gen. Bowen, April 7, 1863, D (1863), Letters Received, Series 1845, Provost Marshal, Dept. of the Gulf, RG 393 Pt. 1, National Archives [FSSP C-522]. See also, Brig. Gen. Bowen to Capt. S.W. Sawyer, April 7, 1863, Vol. 296 DG, p. 485, Press Copies of Letters Sent, Series 1839, Provost Marshal, Dept. of the Gulf, RG 393 Pt. 1, National Archives [FSSP C-522] and "Justice" to Maj. Gen. N.P. Banks, April 3, 1863, A-38 (1863), Letters Received, Series 1756, Dept. of the Gulf, RG 393 Pt. 1, National Archives [FSSP C-522].

This was certainly true in and around New Orleans, where tens of thousands came looking for what Hahn describes as "more diverse opportunities for employment, denser concentrations of other black folk, less surveillance from former slaveowners, and the presence of federal troops."[15] On November 9, 1863, a Union sailor wrote that, in New Orleans, "immense rows of…houses are…occupied by contrabands."[16] By August 1864, one observer wrote, some "eighteen hundred to two thousand colored men" had congregated in the swamps behind Gretna and Algiers, just across the river from the city proper. Another "three to five thousand" had taken refuge in the swamps on the other side of New Orleans, around the settlements of Kenner and Carrollton and along the shore of Lake Pontchatrain, while "three or four thousand" had moved into the city itself.[17] The presence of at least twelve thousand black refugees in and around the city created a major dilemma for the Union authorities, and also for local planters, who worried about the "idleness" of the contrabands, and their disruptive impact on the labor discipline of local slaves.[18]

These newly urbanized communities of black working people became the setting for a major religious revival in 1862 and 1863. As W.E.B. DuBois noted in *Black Reconstruction*, many African Americans interpreted emancipation as "the

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[15] Steven Hahn, *A Nation Under Our feet: Black Political Struggles in the Rural South from Slavery to the Great Migration* (Cambridge, MA and London: Belknap Press of Harvard University, 2003), 119.
[16] Union Sailor Letter, November 9, 1863, Mss. 4890, LLMVC.
[17] S.B. Bevans to Col. Hanks, August 2, 1864, B-144 (1864), Letters Received, Series 1920, Civil Affairs, Dept. of the Gulf, RG 393 Pt. 1 [FSSP C-726].
[18] See G.B. Drake to T.W. Sherman, August 15, 1864 and Sherman to Drake, August 17, 1864, both filed as S-136 (1864), Letters Received, Series 1920, Civil Affairs, Dept. of the Gulf, RG 393 Pt. 1 [FSSP C-726], and G.B. Drake to Thomas Conway, October 3, 1864, Vol. 8 DG, p. 325, Letters Sent, Series 1738, Dept. of the Gulf, RG 393 Pt. 1 [FSSP C-726].

Coming of the Lord."[19] In the chaos of war and social upheaval, black religion burst out of the shadows in the most spectacular manner. In the summer of 1862, white men from the Eighth Vermont Volunteers noted that the "several thousand contrabands" in their camp "held nightly religious meetings" in the warehouses where they were quartered.[20] Some white soldiers took it upon themselves to attempt to lead these services, such as "Father" Charles Blake of the Eighth Vermont, who "frequently preached to the colored people" while his unit was stationed at Algiers in the spring and summer of 1862.[21] In other cases, black working people assumed control of their own worship. Captain Jonathan Johnson described how an elderly black man, who had "received more than one thousand lashes from his masters for preaching and praying" under the old regime, led a large prayer meeting at one Union camp in March 1863.[22] Black women played a very active part in these revival meetings. After attending another meeting later that same month, Johnson described an "old lady who went around among the younger women and told them to go forward. Five or six went, and one was 'converted.'"[23] Not only Christians experienced this revival. In December 1862, white diarist Julia LeGrand noted rumors

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[19] W.E.B. DuBois, *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860-1880* (New York: Free Press, 1935), 87.
[20] George H. Carpenter, *History of the Eighth Regiment Vermont Volunteers* (Boston: Deland and Barta, 1886), 47.
[21] Carpenter, *Eighth Vermont*, 67.
[22] Jonathan H. Johnson Letter, March 2, 1863, in Alden Chase Brett (ed.), *The Letters and Diary of Captain Jonathan Huntington Johnson: Written During His Service with Company D - 15th Regiment New Hampshire Volunteers from October 1862 through August 1863 while Part of the Banks Expedition* (Alden Chase Brett, 1961), 76-77.
[23] Jonathan H. Johnson Letter, March 26, 1863, in Chase (ed.), *The Letters and Diary of Captain Jonathan Huntington Johnson,* 95.

of an increase in activity among black practitioners of Voodoo.[24] The African-inflected dancing at Congo Square, which had all but halted in the years before the Civil War, briefly regained some of its former vibrancy during the Union occupation.[25]

General Banks had a decidedly less millennial understanding of the new regime, and hoped to institute a labor system that would conciliate the sugar planters of southern Louisiana. In January of 1863 a group of planters from Terrebonne Parish had written to Banks expressing their despair at the labor situation in the sugar region:

> Many of the negroes led astray by designing persons, believe that the plantations & everything on them belong to them, the negroes quit work, go & come when they see fit–Ride off at night the mules that have been at work all day - travel on the rail road– They congregate in large numbers on deserted plantations– All these things are done against the will & in defiance of the orders of their masters.–In Some instances negro Soldiers partially armed have been allowed to visit the plantations from which they inlisted– In a word we are in a State of anarchy.–The time has come when preperations for planting & cultivating the crops of 1863 should be made.– But without teams, & the ability to command the labour of our negroes, nothing can be done.[26]

Banks, who had been in Baton Rouge, returned to New Orleans at the end of January 1863 and determined to take unilateral action to solve the labor crisis in the countryside. Issued on January 30, 1863, Banks's "General Order No. 12" established a "free labor" system for the portions of Louisiana under Union control. Banks

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[24] Diary of Julia LeGrand, December, 1862, in LeGrand, *The Journal of Julia LeGrand,* 57-58.
[25] Jerah Johnson, "New Orleans's Congo Square: An Urban Setting for Early Afro-American Culture Formation," *Louisiana History* 32, no. 2 (Spring, 1991): 152.
[26] W. J. Minor et al. to Maj. Gen. Banks, 14 Jan. 1862 [1863], M-108 1863, Letters Received, ser. 1920, Civil Affairs, Department of the Gulf, U.S. Army Continental Commands, Record Group 393 Pt. 1, National Archives.

mandated that the planters would give their black laborers food, clothing, shelter, and either a share of the crop or a pre-determined wage. In return, Banks promised that the Union military would maintain labor discipline on the plantations and even force the contrabands out of New Orleans and its suburbs and back to their points of origin.[27]

For the black migrant population of New Orleans, the new labor system meant a reign of terror and coerced labor. In the wake of General Order No. 12, the white municipal police force returned to its antebellum role as an enforcer of labor discipline, and acted forcefully to try to recreate the norms of the pre-war years. Within hours of Banks's announcement, Union authorities were receiving complaints about the police. On January 30, 1863, for example, a Union officer informed Banks that "a contraband named Adam Mobley, reported…that his wife and daughter had been seized by two City Policemen, in Gretna, and forcibly returned to their masters in New Orleans," while on February 23 a group of African American men, former employees of the New Orleans Gas Works, complained of their own arbitrary arrest and detention.[28] Sometimes the white police used brutal violence during these kidnappings. One white Union officer wrote to Banks on August 5 about the forcible recruitment of a young man of color named Peter. A squad of white police officers barged into his home and announced their intention that Peter would join the Union

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[27] On General Order No. 12, see McCrary, *Abraham Lincoln and Reconstruction,* 115-120.
[28] Lt. Col. L. Colborn to Maj. Gen. N.P. Banks, 30 Jan. 1863, C-129 (1863), Letters Received, Ser. 1756, Dept. of the Gulf, RG 393 Pt. 1 National Archives [FSSP C-527]; Isaac White et al. to Maj. Gen. N.P. Banks, February 23, 1863, W-43 (1863), Letters Received, Series 1920, Civil Affairs, Dept. of the Gulf, RG 393 Pt. 1, National Archives [FSSP C-508].

Army. When Peter refused to go, "he was immediately set upon and cruelly beaten by the squad, one of them using a knife upon him and wounding him in three different places."[29] Even the new composition of the police force reflected its continuity with the days of the slave patrol. In January 1863, a white Unionist man and former police officer wrote to Banks complaining that he and other Unionists had been discharged from the police force and replaced with Confederate sympathizers.[30] African American troops also served in these recruiting squads, however, and they too were guilty of using excessive force on some occasions.[31] Because of Banks' determination to force the contraband population out of the city and either on to the plantations or into the army, important enterprises such as the Quartermaster's Department began to suffer from a shortage of labor by the summer of 1863.[32]

The labor question remained largely unresolved by the summer of 1863, therefore. Thanks to the actions of black slaves and the requirements of the northern war effort, slavery had all but disintegrated. But the system that replaced it retained a large measure of coercion. Black men and women continued to fight for their own vision of a city without slavery, and their efforts made New Orleans's households and workplaces the sites of bitter contestation. Tens of thousands of former slaves flocked

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[29] Lt. G.H. Hanks to Maj. Gen. N.P. Banks, August 5, 1863, H-91 (1863), Letters Received, Series 1920, Civil Affairs, Dept. of the Gulf, RG 393 Pt. 1, National Archives [FSSP C-533].
[30] B. Cassar to Maj. Gen. N.P. Banks, 5 Jan. 1863, C-68 (1863), Letters Received, Ser. 1756, Dept. of the Gulf, RG 393 Pt. 1, National Archives [FSSP C-525].
[31] See, for example, Brig. Gen. W.H. Emory to Col. R.G. Irwin, August 13, 1863 E-141 (1863) Letters Received, Series 1756, Dept. of the Gulf, RG 393 Pt. 1, National Archives [FSSP C-533].
[32] Capt. J. Mahler to Lt. Col. J.G. Chandler, August 1, 1863, M-375 (863) Letters Received, Series 1756, Dept. of the Gulf, RG 393 Pt. 1, National Archives [FSSP C-533]; Col. S. B. Holabird to Lt. Col. Irwin, 4 Aug. 1863, H-479 (1863), Letters Received, Ser. 1756, Dept. of the Gulf, RG 393 Pt. 1, National Archives [FSSP C-539].

to New Orleans from the surrounding countryside, plunging the city into a religious and political ferment without precedent in southern history. But the Union leadership, and Nathaniel Banks in particular, remained committed to a cautious and moderate policy of social and political change. Rather than allow the rapid and wholesale reordering of southern society, Banks tried to keep a tight leash on the birth of a "free labor" system.

**White Unionism**

While black working people continued to contest the nature of post-slavery labor relations, women and men of the white popular classes were developing their own relationships to the northern occupiers. In New Orleans, few white working people had supported secession with any great enthusiasm, and—unlike the white elite—they had made relatively little effort to oppose the Union occupation. On the contrary: given the city's economic paralysis, many white working men and women proved eager to work for the northern army in a variety of ways. Union leaders sought eagerly to capitalize on this pool of potential support. Benjamin Butler provided material aid to the white poor of New Orleans, recruited white working men into the Union Army, and used his rough-and-tumble, populist rule of the city to divide potential white opposition along class lines. For their part, white working people cooperated with the Yankee invaders for a number of reasons. Some had simply never abandoned their Unionist—and occasionally, antislavery—political sympathies.

Others saw cooperation with the Union Army as a way to feed themselves and their families.

In part, the Union leadership's search for allies among New Orleans' white working people had its origins in the assumptions of "free labor ideology." As Eric Foner has shown, the worldview of the Republican Party held that southern slavery had a particularly negative impact on non-slaveholding white people, depriving them of the respect due to the producing classes and denying them the possibility of social mobility.[33] In the late 1850s, Republicans seized on the work of North Carolinian yeoman Hinton R. Helper, whose 1857 book *The Impending Crisis of the South* argued that slavery hindered economic development south of the Mason-Dixon Line, and kept non-slaveholding whites in a condition of poverty and ignorance. During the presidential election of 1860, northern Republicans used Helper's book as campaign propaganda, while the southern elite worried about its call for poor whites to "assert their rights and liberties" and to "strike for Freedom in the South."[34] Although Helper's views did not represent those of the majority of non-slaveholding southern whites, Republicans allowed themselves to believe that the slave states contained a deep pool of potential support for free labor ideology. Throughout the spring of 1862, such beliefs gathered support from a steady stream of newspaper reports claiming widespread support for the Union, and even mass anti-Confederate activism, amongst

[33] Eric Foner, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men: The Ideology of the Republican Party Before the Civil War* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), especially Chapter 2, "The Republican Critique of the South," 40-73.
[34] Hinton Rowan Helper, *The Impending Crisis of the South* (New York: Burdick Bros., 1857), 153.

the white working men of New Orleans.[35] Although these claims were undoubtedly exaggerated, they shaped the Union leadership's decision to seek an alliance with the white popular classes of the occupied Crescent City

During the April 1862 assault on New Orleans, the Union leadership witnessed firsthand the reluctance to fight for the Confederacy among some immigrant and white native-born working men. Northern forces had been able to seize the city so easily the city partly thanks to a major April 27 mutiny among the German and Irish working-class Confederate soldiers garrisoning Fort Jackson, some 65 miles downriver from New Orleans. By mid-April, the northern flotilla had steamed up the Mississippi from its base on Ship Island, and was laying siege to Forts Jackson and Phillip, which constituted the major Confederate stronghold for the defense of New Orleans. From April 18 to April 24, federal gunboats shelled the forts with mortars, but, although Admiral Farragut was able to move 17 of his warships past the defenses and moor them on the levee at New Orleans, Benjamin Butler could not bring his lightly-armored troop transports past the rebel guns, and the city therefore remained in Confederate hands. The Union forces seemed to be facing a long stalemate, until the rank-and-file soldiers in Fort Jackson took matters into their own hands on the night of April 27. Mostly working-class Irish and German Americans from New Orleans, members of the 1st Louisiana Heavy Artillery ("Louisiana Regulars") and Company I of the 22nd Louisiana Volunteers ("The German Jagers") turned on their officers, spiked the guns, and turned Fort Jackson

[35] Michael D. Pierson, *Mutiny at Fort Jackson: The Untold Story of the Fall of New Orleans* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 46-49.

over to the Yankees, in what was the largest single mutiny of the Civil War. As Michael Pierson has argued, moreover, these soldiers mutinied because they were strongly sympathetic to the Union and increasingly hostile to the Confederacy.[36]

Even before the events at Fort Jackson, however, another bloody episode had demonstrated the Union sympathies of many immigrant working people in New Orleans. As noted above, Admiral Farragut had managed to sneak much of his armada past Forts Jackson and Phillip on April 24, and brought his ships alongside the New Orleans wharf with little further resistance. On April 25, crowds of city dwellers thronged the levee in order to catch a glimpse of the northern invaders. While many of these observers were clearly Confederate sympathizers, others waved the American flag and cheered the arrival of the Union forces. Such an open demonstration of pro-northern sentiments enraged the city's white elite, however. At about 4 o'clock that afternoon, a group of horsemen charged the levee and opened fire on the Unionist revelers, killing as many as several dozen men, women, and children, most of whom appear to have been German American. Even with the fall of New Orleans imminent, white working-class Unionism remained a dangerous business.[37]

In New Orleans itself, much white working-class Unionism seems to have derived from the politics of necessity. Many men, women, and children from the white popular classes lived in utter destitution, and even on the brink of starvation, in the spring of 1862. Secession and the blockade had destroyed the city's trade,

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[36] Pierson, *Mutiny at Fort Jackson*, 17-20, 67-96.
[37] *New Orleans Bee*, April 26, 1862; Pierson, *Mutiny at Fort Jackson*, 1-4.

throwing thousands of white working people out of work. When Union forces arrived in the city at the beginning of May, Benjamin Butler took stock of the situation and sought to rectify what he later remembered as "the absolutely starving condition of the people of New Orleans."[38] Butler may well have had less humanitarian reasons for his generosity, for deprivation could be a powerful source of resentment toward secession and sympathy for the Union. "As the class of working-men and mechanics, on whom it is pressing most heavily, I am persuaded are well disposed to the Union, I may have to take other measures to feed these," Butler remarked in the first week of the Union occupation.[39]

Keen to cultivate goodwill among the white poor, Butler used captured rebel stores and northern provisions to feed tens of thousands of poor white men, women, and children in the first week of the occupation, and the Union forces remained a vital source of direct assistance for such people throughout the war.[40] Desirous of preventing a yellow fever epidemic and providing jobs, moreover, Butler employed thousands of white working men to clean up the streets of New Orleans in the summer of 1863. In August, he levied a heavy tax on Confederate bondholders and cotton factors in the city, and used the money to hire more white laborers. These new city employees earned $1.50 a day, just enough to keep many white working-class

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[38] Benjamin F. Butler, *Butler's Book: A Review of His Legal, Political, and Military Career* (Boston: A. M. Thayer and Co., 1892), 387.
[39] Maj. Gen. Benjamin F. Butler to Edwin McMasters Stanton, May 8, 1862, in Butler, *Private and Official Correspondence of Gen. Benjamin F. Butler, During the Period of the Civil War, vol. 1*, (Norwood, MA: Plimpton Press, 1917), 454.
[40] Butler, *Butler's Book*, pp. 393-394; Roger W. Shugg, *Origins of Class Struggle in Louisiana* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 1939 [repr. 1968]), 185.

families from starvation and homelessness. Butler's plan was not only successful in preventing the spread of disease—it also won him admirers and allies among the white working poor of New Orleans.[41]

In a series of populist public utterances and actions, Butler played to this new working-class constituency and attempted to mobilize popular resentment against the Confederacy. He frequently characterized the white poor as the loyal victims of an unscrupulous and uncaring secessionist elite. On May 9, the Massachusetts general publicized his "General Order No. 25," concerning the crisis of subsistence for much of New Orleans's white population. Butler noted "the deplorable state of destitution and hunger of the mechanics and working classes of this city" and maintained that such hunger "does not pinch the wealthy and influential, the leaders of the rebellion, who have gotten up this war."[42] In August, when he extended the public works projects, Butler issued General Order No. 55, establishing a tax on cotton factors to pay the wages of several thousand white laborers. "Those who have brought upon this city this stagnation of business…should, as far as they are able, relieve those distresses," Butler stated, blaming supporters of the Confederacy for white working-class misery.[43] As Roger Shugg has noted, Butler clearly intended "to separate the classes and court the good will of the majority."[44]

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[41] Butler, *Butler's Book*, 394-413; Shugg, *Origins of Class Struggle in Louisiana*, 186-187.
[42] Butler, *Butler's Book*, 392.
[43] Letter from Capt. Robert S. Davis, August 4, 1862, in Butler, *Private and Official Correspondence vol.2,* 152-153.
[44] Shugg, *Origins of Class Struggle in Louisiana*, 187.

Probably the most infamous example of Butler's government of New Orleans came in the form of his May 15 "General Order No. 28"—the infamous "Woman Order." During the early weeks of the Union occupation, northern troops had encountered a great deal of hostility from members of the urban elite. Butler had faced down an angry mob on the first day of his presence in the city, and had had reason to be thankful for the prompt action of the Sixth Maine battery, which came to his aid and dispersed the angry civilians with a show of cannon.[45] Following this episode, and Butler's decision to hang a man named Mumford for tearing down the Union flag on June 7, Union forces faced little in the way of physical aggression from men of the white elite. Wealthy white women were a different story, however. Raised in the chivalrous tradition of Deep South planter society, the wives and daughters of the ruling class seemed to think their gender would protect them from punishment by the occupation troops, and went out of their way to harass and insult the northern invaders in the streets. "Pretty soon," Butler recalled, "complaints of treatment from women of all states and conditions and degrees of life came pouring in upon me."[46] Butler took action when a white woman emptied the contents of her chamber pot out of her window and onto the head of Flag-Officer David Farragut, commander of the Union naval fleet at New Orleans, in early May. Butler's "General Order No. 28" of May 15 proclaimed that "when any female shall, by word gesture, or movement,

[45] Butler, *Butler's Book*, 375-377.
[46] Butler, *Butler's Book*, 415.

insult or show contempt for any officer or soldier of the United States, she shall be regarded and held liable to be treated as a woman of the town plying her avocation."[47]

What became known as the "Woman Order" provides a fascinating view of the contending class and gender imperatives at play in Butler's political outlook. It also reveals how the upheaval in Civil War New Orleans had impacted relations between men and women. As Drew Gilpin Faust, among others, has demonstrated, the travails of war had profoundly affected gender relations in the Confederacy. Women from all classes had been forced to take on roles, unthinkable in the antebellum period, as breadwinners and political actors.[48] The prominence of white women in the resistance to northern occupation provides evidence of this tendency. In this context we must recognize that Butler's "Woman Order" represented the attempt of an occupying military power to squelch civilian dissent. It was in essence an act of political terror, and the threat of rape clearly lay behind it. Butler was telling white ruling-class women that, if they persisted in their actions they would be treated as prostitutes—in other words, presumably, they would be made sexually available to Union soldiers. Although there is no evidence that northern soldiers acted on this threat in any sort of coordinated way, Butler's threats used the fear of sexual violence to push white women back out of the public sphere. And while the policy may have been directed at the women of the white elite, it also threatened white working-class and African American women. In large part, therefore, Butler's threat reinforced the

[47] Butler, *Butler's Book*, 417-418.
[48] Drew Gilpin Faust, *Mothers of Invention: Women in the Slaveholding South in the American Civil War* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1996).

reactionary and patriarchal assumptions of the southern status quo. At the same time, however, the "Woman Order" also fit with Butler's populist turn toward the white working people of New Orleans. Many white working-class women were, in fact, working as prostitutes and providing sexual services for northern soldiers in the occupying army. In effect, Butler had chosen to strip elite white women of some of their class privileges and reduce them to the level of their plebian counterparts. It was a deeply symbolic act of class leveling.[49]

Many white workingmen responded to Butler's populist strategy by joining the Union army in New Orleans. After two weeks in the city, Butler reported that many white working-class Unionists were volunteering to fight. "Large numbers of Union men, American, German, and French have desired to enlist in our service," he told the Secretary of War on May 16, 1862. "I have directed the Regiments to fill themselves up with these recruits. I can enlist a Regiment or more here."[50] Some white workingmen joined existing units. Writing to his family on May 13, 1863, a Union soldier from Massachusetts noted that "we enlisted twenty-five men in our regiment to-day."[51] By the middle of July 1862, Butler had made good progress in his

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[49] Some of Butler's subordinates worried that the "Woman Order" contained an implicit threat of sexual violence—"if you act like prostitutes, we will rape you"—but it is not clear that this was Butler's intention. Faust, *Mothers of Invention,* 207-212. For a recent reassessment of the Woman Order, see Alecia P. Long, "(Mis)Remembering General Order No. 28: Benjamin Butler, The Woman Order, and Historical Memory," in LeeAnn Whites and Alecia P. Long (eds.), *Occupied Women:Gender, Military Occupation, and the American Civil War* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 2012), 17-33.

[50] Maj. Gen. Benjamin F. Butler to Edwin McMasters Stanton, May 16, 1862, in Butler, *Private and Official Correspondence vol.1,* 494.

[51] Letter from Henry Warren Howe, May 13, 1862, in Henry Warren Howe, *Passages from the Life of Henry Warren Howe, Consisting of Diary and Letters Written During the Civil War, 1816-1865. A Condensed History of the Thirtieth Massachusetts Regiment and Its*

aim of recruiting five thousand "Louisiana Volunteers," and suggested to the Secretary of War that these troops might serve well in combat as long as they were moved out of New Orleans.[52] The First and Second Louisiana Infantry Regiments, which had their origins in this summer recruiting drive among white working-class Unionists, served with Union forces at the Battle of Hudson among other actions.[53]

White women also found work providing services for the northern occupation force. According to the letters of Jonathan Johnson, a Captain in the 15th New Hampshire Volunteers, white working women became an integral part of the Union camp economy in the New Orleans suburbs. "There is one Irish woman of whom we buy our milk," Johnson told his wife, "and she also does our washing. She does it very well and the milk is very good."[54] Other white women brought wares a little stronger than milk. "Women peddlers frequent the camp," Henry Howe informed his family, "and some of them bring liquor to the men."[55] In the city, some white women rented rooms to visiting Union officers, while others turned to prostitution in order to support themselves and their families. Speaking of such women, Jonathan Johnson noted that, in New Orleans, they were "as thick as fleas on a dog. You find them in

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*Flags, Together with the Genealogies of the Different Branches of the Family*. (Lowell, MA: Courier-Citizen Co. Printers, 1899), 120.

[52] Maj. Gen. Benjamin F. Butler to Edwin McMasters Stanton, July 15, 1862, in Butler, *Private and Official Correspondence vol.2,* 66.

[53] Donald S. Frazier, "'The Carnival of Death': The Cavalry Battle at Cheneyville, Louisiana, May 20, 1863," *Louisiana History* 42, no. 2 (Spring, 2001).

[54] Jonathan Huntington Johnson to N. Johnson, January 14, 1863, in Brett (ed.), *The Letters and Diary of Captain Jonathan Huntington Johnson*, 43-44.

[55] Letter from Henry William Howe, May 23, 1864, in *Passages from the Life of Henry Warren Howe*, 156.

almost every house."[56] Among the northern soldiers, certain New Orleans neighborhoods acquired a reputation for commercial sex. Thus, after one visit, Johnson wrote to his wife that "the French Section of the City is given over to prostitution, as almost every house is a brothel."[57]

Cooperation with the occupying forces could be a dangerous business for white working people. Most obviously, white working men who served in the Union Army ran the risk of death, injury, and disease while under arms. White men from New Orleans faced an even greater threat from Confederate forces than their northern comrades: they could face particularly harsh treatment if caught by the enemy. Such was the fate of seven German American men who joined the 8th Vermont Volunteers when that regiment arrived in southern Louisiana and were among Union soldiers who surrendered at Confederate raiders at Bayou des Allemands, a village to the south of New Orleans, in September 1862. Having avoided the Confederate draft, the Germans were arrested as "deserters, tried at a court martial, and executed by firing squad.[58] Though they largely avoided the dangers of the battlefield, white working women also took a number of risks by cooperating with Union forces. Sometimes, the threats came from pro-Confederate neighbors. In August 1862, for example, a white woman called Mrs. Busch wrote to Colonel French, Provost Marshal of the Union forces in New Orleans, and asked for protection. Mrs. Busch, a widow with two

[56] Jonathan Huntington Johnson to N. Johnson, January 10, 1863, in Brett (ed.), *The Letters and Diary of Captain Jonathan Huntington Johnson*, 39-40.
[57] Jonathan Huntington Johnson to N. Johnson, February 26, 1863, in Brett (ed.), *The Letters and Diary of Captain Jonathan Huntington Johnson*, 72.
[58] Carpenter, *Eighth Vermont*, 63-66.

young children, had been "molested for expressing myself for the Union," she told French.[59] With their husbands away from the city and with no means of support in an economically precarious climate, the wives of white men serving in the Union Army often faced poverty and possible homelessness.[60]

Union troops could pose another threat to white working women. Female vendors in Union camps could become victims of rough treatment or violence at the hands of male soldiers. In May 1864, Henry Howe, a Lieutenant in the 30th Massachusetts, caught one poor Irish woman selling whiskey to the men under his command. Suspecting the woman of hiding more bottles about her person, and ignoring her protestations, Howe "found a negro wench to search her, and two more bottles were hung on her, so I sent her to the calaboose."[61] In a letter written that same month, Captain Jonathan Johnson hinted that these "searches" might have been an opportunity for Union soldiers to manhandle and humiliate the white women who worked in the camps. He noted that at least one group of northern soldiers "had some sport over" searching two women suspected of smuggling whiskey to the troops. One

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[59] Mrs. M.M. Busch to Col. J.H. French, 25 May 1862, B-7 (1862), Letters Received by the Provost Marshal General, Ser. 1390, State of LA, Pro. Mar. Field Orgs., RG 393 Pt. 4, National Archives [FSSP C-955].

[60] Mary Briggs to Col. J.H. French, 3 July 1862, B-32 (1862), Letters Received by the Provost Marshal General, Ser. 1390, State of Louisiana, Provost Marshal Field Orgs., RG 393 Pt. 4, National Archives [FSSP C-957]; Mrs. P.A. Lockett to Col. J.H. French, 20 Nov. 1862, L-34 (1862), Letters Received by the Provost Marshal General, Ser. 1390, State of LA, Provost Marshal Field Orgs, RG 393 Pt. 4, National Archives [FSSP C-966].

[61] Letter from Henry Warren Howe, May 23, 1864, in Howe, *Passages from the Life of Henry Warren Howe*, 156.

of the women later told Johnson that "some of the Officers had got the name of" doing what he described as "searching and handling over women."[62]

In the face of such risks, some white Unionists clearly drew on strong political commitments in order to endure the dangers of collaboration. Some of the correspondence between white residents of New Orleans and the northern occupation forces suggests that Unionism occasionally shaded into resentment of wealthy planters and perhaps even antislavery views. Thus, on July 26, 1862, one white Unionist wrote to Provost Marshal General Colonel French regarding the continued operation of slave catchers in New Orleans. After providing detailed information about the operation, this correspondent told Colonel French, "I hope this will enable you to bring these villains to justice."[63] Another white Unionist wrote to Benjamin Butler on October 4 of the same year informing him that one of New Orleans' wealthiest and most ardently secessionist slaveholding women was planning to flee to Cuba with her slaves. "There is not a woman in this city that has done more in aiding the rebellion than she has," this anonymous correspondent revealed. This pro-Confederate woman was claiming, furthermore, that her "servants" were "willing" to accompany their mistress to the Caribbean, even though this was a "falsehood."[64]

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[62] Jonathan Huntington Johnson to N. Johnson, May 14, 1864, in Brett (ed.), *The Letters and Diary of Captain Jonathan Huntington Johnson*, 138-139.

[63] "A Loyal Citizen" to Col. J.H. French, July 26, 1862, A-25 (1862), Letters Received by the Provost Marshall General, Ser. 1390, State of Louisiana, Provost Marshall Field Orgs., RG 393 Pt. 4, National Archives [FSSP C-952].

[64] Anonymous to Maj. Gen. B.F. Butler, Oct. 4, 1862, A-39 (1862), Letters Received by the Provost Marshall General, Ser. 1390, State of Louisiana, Provost Marshall Field Orgs., RG 393 Pt. 4, National Archives [FSSP C-953].

Both of these white Unionists demonstrated a real hostility to the slaveholders and an apparent sympathy for the end of slavery.

**White Reconstruction?**

Whatever the cause of their Union sympathies, Benjamin Butler eagerly accepted the support of white working people. For the North, an alliance with white working people meant more than recruiting soldiers and employing camp laborers. The possibility of a partnership with urban white workers would become the centerpiece of the initial Republican strategy for the political rehabilitation of Louisiana in 1863 and 1864, and the early Unionist movement in New Orleans was a coalition of white working men, intellectuals, and professionals. In the statewide elections and constitutional convention of 1864, moderate white Unionists, who opposed black rights and benefitted from the patronage of Nathaniel Banks, came to dominate the local political scene. The strategy of white reconstruction would not go unchallenged, however. Beginning in early 1864, New Orleans also produced a growing interracial Radical movement with links to black working people in the countryside. Pressure from the Radicals would ultimately unsettle the federal relationship with white Unionists and open up new coalitional possibilities.

The Republican leadership was exceptionally keen to establish a loyal government in occupied Louisiana from the moment northern troops first set foot in New Orleans in the spring of 1862. Such an achievement would justify claims that secession had been the act of a minority, and did not represent the views of all

southerners. Beginning just weeks after they arrived in the city in May 1862, the Union leadership in Washington and New Orleans looked towards white Unionists as the basis for political reconstruction. General George F. Shepley figured prominently in Lincoln's early attempts to build a loyal state government in Louisiana. In civilian life, the Dartmouth-educated Shepley had worked as a lawyer in Maine and befriended Benjamin Butler through their mutual involvement in New England Democratic Party politics. This connection brought Shepley to Louisiana in May 1862. Butler had entered into a war of words with John Monroe, the mayor of New Orleans, over the infamous "Woman Order" of May 15 and what the General perceived as the latter's invitation for the French Navy to attack Union forces in the city.[65] Butler therefore removed Monroe from his post and appointed Shepley as military commandant of the city on May 20.[66]

Under Shepley's watchful eye, unionist politics gradually began to emerge from the shadows. The movement held its first public meeting in New Orleans on May 31, 1862, at the Lyceum Hall, and within a week the new Union Association had adopted a constitution and an organizational structure.[67] Its first president was Anthony Fernandez, a French-speaking white businessman who had been born and raised in New Orleans and who had ties to the Afro-Creole community through his

[65] Benjamin F. Butler to John T. Monroe, May 16, 1862; John T. Monroe to Benjamin F. Butler, May 16, 1862; John T. Monroe to Benjamin F. Butler, May 17, 1862, in Butler, *Private and Official Correspondence vol. 1*, 496-499.
[66] Gerald M. Capers, *Occupied City: New Orleans under the Federals, 1862-1865* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1965), 69-70.
[67] McCrary, *Abraham Lincoln and Reconstruction*, 95-96.

involvement in the local freemasons.[68] Among the earliest supporters of the Union Association was Benjamin F. Flanders, a native of New Hampshire who had lived in New Orleans for many years and worked for the New Orleans and Opelousas Railroad. Driven from Confederate New Orleans because of his unionist views, Flanders returned in the early summer of 1862 and immediately became active in the Union Association.[69] Flanders was joined by other middle-class white unionists like Dr. Maximillian F. Bonzano, a German-American unionist who opposed slavery to the extent that he had "purchased and emancipated several negroes during the last few years."[70]

After some success in developing a new municipal administration for the city, Shepley in July accepted a promotion from Lincoln and assumed a role as military governor of Louisiana.[71] In October, Shepley received word from Washington that the President was keen for congressional elections to be held in Louisiana as soon as possible, and set a date of December 3, 1862, for the voting to take place.[72] Only two of Louisiana's congressional districts were under firm enough Union control to hold a viable election: the first district, which included the French Quarter and immigrant

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[68] Caryn Cossé Bell, *Revolution, Romanticism, and the Afro-Creole Protest Tradition in Louisiana, 1718-1868* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1997), 183, 246-248.
[69] George Stanton Denison to Salmon Portland Chase, June 28, 1862, in Salmon P. Chase, *Diary and Correspondence of Salmon P. Chase* (Washington, D.C.:American Historical Association, 1903), 307-308.
[70] George Stanton Denison to Salmon Portland Chase, June 28, 1862, in Chase, *Diary and Correspondence of Salmon P. Chase*, 308.
[71] Capers, *Occupied City*, 91.
[72] McCrary, *Abraham Lincoln and Reconstruction*, p. 98. Lincoln seems to have been using a carrot-and-stick method here: if Louisianans would rouse themselves to create a free-state government before the Emancipation Proclamation went into effect on January 1, 1863, then the occupied portions of the state would be exempt from the abolition of slavery. See McCrary, 95.

neighborhoods of New Orleans; and the Second District, composed of the American part of the city and some of the suburbs and nearby plantation districts.[73] In the first district, Benjamin Flanders trounced his opponent, former Congressman John E. Bouligny, while the second district saw a narrower victory for German-American lawyer Michael Hahn. The total number of votes cast, which of course included only white men, was almost 7,500: more than half the number of ballots cast in the last pre-war election in these districts.[74] In the aftermath of this election, Louisiana seemed to be moving quickly towards political reconstruction.

The arrival of Nathaniel Banks as the new Commander of the Department of the Gulf in the immediate aftermath of the December elections caused a sharp break in the development of political reconstruction. Banks decided to break with the policy of his predecessor Butler, whom he felt had gone too far in the direction of antagonizing the "loyal" planters of southern Louisiana. As we have already seen, Banks set out his vision of free labor in General Order No. 12 on January 30, 1863, and it tended to favor the planters and promote labor discipline in the occupied portions of the state. "Banks' policy seems to be conciliatory and hesitating," wrote Treasury Agent George Denison to Secretary Salmon P. Chase on February 12, 1863. "Perhaps he is a conservative!"[75] The result was a sudden surge in confidence among pro-slavery and pro-Confederate elements in the population of New Orleans. Two weeks later, the same correspondent noted the changing political mood in New

[73] McCrary, *Abraham Lincoln and Reconstruction*, 98-99.
[74] Capers, *Occupied City*, 91-92.
[75] George Stanton Denison to Salmon Portland Chase, February 12, 1863, in Chase, *Diary and Correspondence of Salmon P. Chase,* 358-360.

Orleans. "This is less a Union City now than when Gen. Banks came here," Denison wrote on February 26. "There is more manifestation of disloyalty than at any time during the Summer. And the reason is that no punishment, or insufficient punishment, follows offenses."[76]

Frustrated with the new commanding officer, the Union Association decided to push for a constitutional convention. Like George Denison, leading members of the Union Association began to question Banks's commitment to establishing a loyal state government as early as February 1863, and decided to demand a convention to draft a new state constitution. At a meeting on March 6, members of the Association complained "it is now ten months since the federal forces came to Louisiana, and no effort has been made to establish a State Government." They voted unanimously to establish a committee dedicated to organizing a constitutional convention.[77] A month later, members of the Union Association received word that the president looked favorably on their plan. At a meeting in the Lyceum Hall on April 12, Association members heard a letter from Michael Hahn, who was serving as one of Louisiana's Congressmen in Washington. Lincoln "heartily approved" of the Association's work, Hahn wrote.[78] Lincoln clearly hoped that a new state constitution would abolish slavery throughout Louisiana, including in those areas previously exempted from the Emancipation Proclamation, and "adopt some practical system by which the two

[76] George Stanton Denison to Salmon Portland Chase, February 26, 1863, in Chase, *Diary and Correspondence of Salmon P. Chase,* 362.
[77] Emily Hazen Reed, *Life of A.P. Dostie; or, The Conflict of New Orleans* (New York: W.P. Tomlinson, 1968), 83.
[78] Ibid.

races could gradually live themselves out of their old relation to each other."[79] In the late spring and early summer, the Union Association received General Shepley's permission to appoint commissioners and begin the registration of potential voters.[80]

This new direction brought to the fore Thomas J. Durant, a radical white lawyer who was to make a huge impression on the course of political reconstruction in New Orleans. Durant had come to New Orleans from his native Pennsylvania as a young man in the early 1830s, and was publishing a newspaper by the time he was twenty. Durant found great success as a lawyer in New Orleans, even as he moved towards increasingly radical politics. In the 1840s he worked with the pro-labor wing of the local Democratic Party but eventually fell under the influence of utopian socialists like Albert Brisbane, Robert Dale Owen, and, especially, the French theorist Charles Fourier. Durant was evidently attracted to Fourier's idea that society could be reordered along the lines of voluntary association through the creation of "phalanxes," although the New Orleans lawyer thought that the Democratic Party could be the vehicle for gradual implementation of this plan. Durant quickly radicalized under the impact of war and revolution in occupied New Orleans; he became close friends with Benjamin Butler, and moved into the leadership of the Union Association in 1862. When Flanders and Hahn left for Washington following their electoral victories December, the radical lawyer became the undisputed leader of

[79] Abraham Lincoln to Major General Nathaniel Banks, August 5, 1863, Box 1, Folder 5, Flanders, Benjamin F. Papers, Mss. 671, LLMVC.
[80] McCrary, *Abraham Lincoln and Reconstruction*, 130-131.

the white Unionist movement.[81] In June 1863, General Shepley appointed him attorney general of Louisiana, and gave him the authority to organize the registration of voters for a constitutional convention.[82]

The preparations for the constitutional convention in the summer of 1863 created a political space for the mobilization of New Orleans's white workingmen and spurred the emergence of an organization called the Working Men's National Union League. At a "Grand Mass Meeting" of the League, held on the night of July 11 to celebrate Union victories at Vicksburg and Port Hudson, a number of speakers drew attention to the antagonism between white workingmen and the planter elite of the old regime. "Among the large slave holders, a poor white man, no matter what may be his moral or intellectual worth, is not looked upon with as much respect as a slave belonging to a rich nabob," claimed Judge Fisk, who gave the first speech.[83] Following the rally, League continued to direct the populist anger of white workingmen into demands for a state constitutional convention. Thomas Earhart, the League's President, wrote to the Union Army leadership on July 25 and made the case for a rapid transformation of the Louisiana constitution. He told the northern officers that the League remained "watchfull [sic] and suspicious of certain parties who formerly have and now still aspire and desire to lord it and rule over us." In light of this threat from a resurgent planter class, Earhart stated the League's position that

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[81] Joseph G. Tregle, Jr., "Thomas J. Durant, Utopian Socialism, and the Failure of Presidential Reconstruction in Louisiana," *Journal of Southern History* 45, no. 2 (Nov. 1979): 485-512.
[82] Tregle, "Thomas J. Durant," 504.
[83] "Grand Mass Meeting of the Working Men's National Union League," July 11, 1863, New Orleans Public Library, New Orleans, Louisiana (hereafter, NOPL).

"the only course for the people of this state…consists wholly in the adoption of a new Constitution."[84]

Although the name of League suggests a working-class constituency, and many white workingmen seem to have attended the organization's meetings and rallies, the leadership of the free-state movement remained largely in the hands of a white, male, middle-class leadership. A.P. Dostie, for example, who spoke alongside Judge Fisk at the League's July 11 rally, had worked as a dentist before being forced to leave New Orleans because of his Unionist views. He returned to the city in August of 1862, and within days was addressing Union Association meetings and helping to "revolutionize" the local public school system.[85] Thomas J. Earhart, who headed the Working Men's National Union League, was a lawyer and friend of Thomas Durant.[86] Thanks to the patronage network of Salmon P. Chase, and New Orleans's importance as a major port, treasury agents also played an important role in the Union Association, including Benjamin Flanders, George Denison, and others.[87] Finally, Union Army officers, often from middle-class and professional backgrounds, frequently spoke to Unionist gatherings in New Orleans while claiming to represent

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[84] T. Earhart et al. to Maj. Gen. N.P. Banks, 25 July 1863, E-16 (1863), Letters Received, Ser. 1920, Civil Affairs, Dept. of the Gulf, RG 393 Pt. 1, National Archives [FSSP C-694].
[85] Reed, *Life of A.P. Dostie,* 41-54.
[86] "Grand Mass Meeting of the Working Men's National Union League," July 11, 1863, NOPL; McCrary, *Abraham Lincoln and Reconstruction*, 168.
[87] See Chase, *Diary and Correspondence of Salmon P. Chase.*

the voice of "workingmen."[88] The white Unionist movement was therefore very much a cross-class formation.

**Origins of Urban Radicalism**

New Orleans's free men of color were not content to let political reconstruction remain in the hands of white workingmen and their middle-class leaders. African Americans attended Unionist mass meetings and rallies from the movement's earliest days. Thus, speaking to a meeting of the Working Men's National Union League in the summer of 1863, white radical A.P. Dostie told the "Sons of Africa" that he "rejoiced to see you here in such vast numbers."[89] At some such meetings, black men challenged the patronizing attitudes of white Unionists. In November 1863, P.B.S Pinchback spoke out against a white Texas Unionist who attacked slavery but called on African American men "to be content for the present with achieving their freedom—not to ask for political rights." Pinchback stated that black soldiers at least had earned the full rights of citizenship.[90] Also in November, a group of free men of color petitioned Governor Shepley for the right to vote.[91]

Men from the Afro-Creole elite dominated the leadership of the civil rights movement that emerged in New Orleans in 1863. With a political culture that drew on

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[88] See, for example, the speech of R.K. Smith, a Union Army surgeon, "Grand Mass Meeting of the Working Men's National Union League," July 11, 1863, NOPL.
[89] "Grand Mass Meeting of the Working Men's National Union League," July 11, 1863, NOPL.
[90] McCrary, *Abraham Lincoln and Reconstruction*, 181.
[91] James Haskins, *The First Black Governor: Pinkney Benton Stewart Pinchback* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1973 [repr. 1996]), 31.

the experiences of revolutionary France and Haiti, these educated and prosperous artisans and businessmen were well equipped to initiate a struggle for civil rights. Many of them were light-skinned enough to pass for white, owned significant property, and had ancestors who had fought for the United States at the Battle of New Orleans in 1815. They were not content to accept second-class citizenship now that a revolution was underway, and rallied around a radical new French language newspaper called *L'Union*. Under the control of an elected board of directors, *L'Union* began publication in late 1862 and immediately assailed both slavery and the concomitant persistence of racial prejudice.[92]

The determination of these free men of color began to win support among the most radical of the white Unionist forces in New Orleans in the second half of 1863. Thanks to connections between white Unionist leader Anthony Fernandez and the Afro-Creole elite, the Union Association selected *L'Union* as its official mouthpiece in June 1863.[93] Other white activists also pushed for the Unionist movement to build links with the black population. In late November 1863, white lawyer Thomas Durant spoke to a meeting of the Working Men's National Union League and claimed that, without the votes of these ardent black Unionists, it would be impossible to create a free state government in Louisiana. To the surprise of many, Durant's audience of white workingmen and professionals received his call with tumultuous applause.[94] Durant and his white allies would soon go even further down the road of support for

[92] Houzeau, *My Passage*, 19-20.
[93] Bell, *Afro-Creole Protest Tradition in Louisiana*, 248.
[94] Bell, *Afro-Creole Protest Tradition*, 249-250.

black civil rights. In November 1863, the Union Association changed its name to the Free State General Committee, and on December 15, 1863, organized a day-long convention to demand the final eradication of slavery in occupied Louisiana. The December 15 convention would become a milestone in the creation of an alliance between African American activists and those white Unionists who most militantly opposed slavery. When the convention's committee on credentials refused to seat a number of delegates from two black organizations, Durant threw his personal prestige behind an effort to have the decision overturned. Supported by Anthony Fernandez and Thomas Earhart, he was able to secure a place at the table for the African American delegates.[95]

Once again, however, Nathaniel Banks stepped in and put a halt to the radical evolution of political reconstruction. On December 8, just a week before the Free State General Committee convention, Abraham Lincoln issued his famous "ten-percent" plan. The President's plan called for all pro-Union southerners to take an oath of loyalty to the national government, after which they would regain all of their rights "except as to slaves." Once the number of oath-takers in any one state reached 10 percent of the number of voters in the 1860 elections, these loyal southerners could establish a state government.[96] General Banks immediately sought to take advantage of Lincoln's apparent desire to expedite the process of political reconstruction. Concerned that the Unionist movement was becoming too radical, and

[95] Louisiana State Convention of the Friends of Freedom, *Proceedings of the Convention of the Friends of Freedom* (New Orleans, 1863).
[96] Eric Foner, *A Short History of Reconstruction* (New York: Harper and Row, 1990), 16-17.

would alienate loyal planters, he asked for, and received, the President's blessing to intervene more forcefully. On January 11, 1864, therefore, Banks issued a proclamation calling for the election of a governor, lieutenant governor, and other state officials on February 22, under the auspices of the antebellum constitution. This timeline was, of course, the exact opposite of Thomas Durant's proposal, which called for a constitutional convention to come before statewide elections. By setting the date of the elections for February, Banks had ensured that voting would take place before African American men could be enfranchised, and guaranteed a decisive split in the free-state movement.[97] On January 13, two days after Banks's proclamation, a disgusted Thomas Durant resigned as attorney general in protest.[98]

The elections to the state government that Banks had called for February 1864 revealed the emergence of two major factions in the Unionist movement. On one side stood the moderates and their gubernatorial candidate Michael Hahn. This group combined a populist appeal to the class anger of white workingmen with open hostility to the idea of black civil rights. Hahn, an immigrant from Bavaria and successful lawyer, outlined one side of this message in a speech during November 1863. The old state constitution privileged the political power of the plantation parishes, Hahn maintained, to the detriment of "the small planters and farmers, the adventurous frontiersmen, the honest mechanics."[99] At the same time, however, as Roger Shugg notes, "other candidates on the Hahn ticket excited racial jealousy" by

[97] McCrary, *Abraham Lincoln and Reconstruction*, 186-207.
[98] Tregle, "Thomas J. Durant," 509-510.
[99] "Speech of Hon. Michael Hahn," November 14, 1863, Patricia D. Klingenstein Library, New York Historical Society, New York, New York (hereafter, NYHSL).

implying that their opponents had "secret designs for Negro suffrage."[100] With a relatively broad social base and the apparent support of both Banks and President Lincoln, the moderates constituted a formidable political current. The radical faction was made up of those white Unionists who had a political relationship with the Black civil rights movement, but it faced an uphill struggle once Banks became involved. The radical candidate for governor was Treasury Agent Benjamin Flanders. But the radicals could make little headway against Hahn's white working-class supporters. The German-American lawyer won in every New Orleans precinct but one, and took 62 percent of the urban vote.[101] Statewide, Hahn secured more than 6,000 votes compared to 2,225 for Flanders and 3,000 for a conservative candidate.[102]

The constitutional convention, which met between April and July 1864, seemed to consolidate the victory of the moderate Unionist faction. For several reasons, white middle-class and working-class men who supported Hahn's moderate Unionists made up the majority of convention delegates. In the first instance, political and military considerations produced a decidedly urban electorate. In March 1864, General Banks had decreed that only white people would be counted in terms of determining the suffrage for the convention, a ruling that immediately deprived rural planters of much of their former political power. This decline in the political weight of the countryside was reinforced by the fact that Union control remained fragile in much of Louisiana, rendering voting all but impossible beyond the city limits. Sixty-

[100] Shugg, *Origins of Class Struggle in Louisiana*, 199.
[101] McCrary, *Abraham Lincoln and Reconstruction,* 240.
[102] Shugg, *Origins of Class Struggle in Louisiana*, 199 n21.

five of the 100 convention delegates were elected from New Orleans, therefore. And thanks to its control of state government, Hahn's faction was able to influence the election of delegates to the convention.[103]

Under the control of Hahn's moderate Unionists, the convention amended the state constitution in a decidedly populist direction during the summer of 1864. It extended the franchise to all white men who had lived in Louisiana for at least one year, changed the basis of representation in the state legislature so that it included only eligible voters, and ended the restrictions on the number of seats for which New Orleans would be eligible. The convention took some genuinely radical positions. As well as abolishing slavery without compensation, the new constitution created a system of progressive income tax, and opened Louisiana's public schools to all children, regardless of race. It also established a maximum working day of nine hours, and a minimum wage of two dollars a day, for employees of public-works programs. The constitution did not, however, make any provision for black male suffrage. Indeed, some of the delegates favored enacting measures that would force all people of color to leave Louisiana. It took pressure from Banks and Hahn, probably acting at Lincoln's urging, to deter convention delegates from explicitly outlawing the possibility of future civil rights legislation.[104]

Between Banks's intervention into the reconstruction process in December 1863 and the beginning of the convention in April 1864, African American activists

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[103] Ibid, 200-201.
[104] Albert P. Bennett, *Debates in the Convention for the Revision and Amendment of the Constitution of the State of Louisiana, April 6, 1864* (New Orleans: W. R. Fish, 1864); Shugg, *Origins of Class Struggle in Louisiana*, 203-206.

in New Orleans attempted to ensure the new constitution would take account of their interests. In December 1863, black men launched a petition demanding the right to vote, and collected the signatures of a thousand African American property owners. By February 1864, the campaign felt ready to dispatch two representatives, Jean-Baptiste Roudanez and Arnold Bertonneau, to visit the president in Washington. Their visit seems to have convinced Lincoln to write Hahn suggesting that the convention should provide for black education and should consider allowing some black men to vote. The actual content of the December 1863 petition demonstrated the challenges of building an interracial radical alliance, however. Although the free black authors of the petition had originally intended to call for universal black male suffrage, they let white allies—including Thomas Durant—persuade them that at this stage it would be better to demand suffrage only for those who had been free before the war. Moreover, the choice of Roudanez and Bertonneau as the movement's public representatives, both of whom came from the ranks of the Afro-Creole elite, showed that the radical movement still rested on a fairly narrow social base.[105]

Although the constitutional convention, which concluded its deliberations in July 1864, seemed to represent another major setback for the radical, interracial wing of the Unionist movement, these forces were in fact growing in strength and sophistication. The *New Orleans Tribune*, which began publication after the close of the convention in the fall of 1864, played a major role in the development of the radical faction. The newspaper had begun life as the French-language *L'Union*,

[105] Bell, *Afro-Creole Protest Tradition*, 250-251; C. Peter Ripley, *Slaves and Freedmen in Civil War Louisiana* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1976), 173-174.

which published its first issue in September 1862. Under the editorial control of Afro-Creole intellectual Paul Trévigne, *L'Union* took a clear stand against slavery from its very first issue, and situated itself in the republican political tradition of the French and Haitian revolutions.[106] The newspaper became the official organ of the Union Association in 1863, and served to bring together black and white radicals. These connections deepened in November 1864 when the black owners of *L'Union,* the brothers Jean-Baptiste and Louis Charles Roudanez, hired Jean-Charles Houzeau as editor. Houzeau, a native of Belgium, had participated in the European revolutions of 1848, before migrating to Texas and becoming part of the antislavery underground there. A talented journalist, pioneering astronomer, and socialist activist, Houzeau encouraged the Afro-Creole intellectuals around *L'Union* to seek a broader audience by expanding the paper's English-language content.[107]

Louis Charles Roudanez, who co-owned the *Tribune* with his brother Jean-Baptiste, typified the radical heritage of the Afro-Creole community in New Orleans. Born in St. James Parish to a French father and a free black mother, he had been educated in New Orleans and was a medical student in Paris during the Revolution of 1848. Studying at the famous Faculté de Médecine de Paris, Roudanez had become close with Jean Baptiste Bouillaud and Philippe Ricord, two of the more radical members of the teaching staff. Bouillaud in particular was close to some of the most left-wing forces in the democratic and republican movement of 1848, including the socialist historian and politician Louis Blanc and leader of the parliamentary

[106] Bell, *Afro-Creole Protest Tradition*, 223-225.
[107] Houzeau, *MyPassage*, 1-24.

*Montagne* faction Alexandre Ledru-Rollin. Having witnessed the tumult of the revolution in France, Roudanez returned to North America to complete his studies at Dartmouth, where he almost certainly came into contact with the radical political culture of 1850s New England.[108]

The *New Orleans Tribune* symbolized the coalitional politics of the emerging radical movement in late 1864. From the beginning of his tenure as editor in November, Houzeau imagined an important leadership role for the Afro-Creole elite of New Orleans, describing this community in his memoirs as "the vanguard of the African population of the United States." The Belgian saw this potential leadership extending in two directions: the free people of color of New Orleans would "tutor" the former slaves in the meaning of freedom, but would also educate the Republican government on "the needs, the ideas, and the dangers of the population of African descent." In order to cohere this alliance, however, the *Tribune* needed to change its orientation. In his memoirs, Houzeau stated his belief in 1864 that, rather than focus solely on the experiences of the Afro-Creole community, the paper ought to "defend the masses of the proscribed race and unite this oppressed population completely around its standard." As part of this process, Houzeau argued as soon as he became editor that the *Tribune* should expand its English content, despite his own lack of experience writing in the language. He also worked tirelessly to convince both the Afro-Creole elite and the former slaves to put aside their mutual mistrust. Later, Houzeau would remember how he had tried to convince the former group that "by

[108] Houzeau, *My Passage*, 27-28.

placing themselves at the head of the freed slaves, these leaders would have an army." At the same time, the *Tribune* paid so much attention to the interests of the former slaves that its editor remembered facing complaints that he "was more interested in the blacks" than the Afro-Creoles.[109]

In early 1865, African American men organized the Louisiana chapter of the National Equal Rights League as another attempt at black political unity. The National Equal Rights League had itself emerged from a series of black-led political conventions across the northern states in the fall of 1864, and counted among its members abolitionist luminary Frederick Douglass. In January 1865, a local affiliate of the League met in New Orleans for the first time and decided to send a representative to Washington to plead the case of black rights in Louisiana. Reflecting the mood of unity, the *Tribune* urged the group to send "a black man" as an emissary to Washington. "We want him to be thoroughly identified with the working of slavery," the paper stated on June1, 1865.[110] The leading members of the League in New Orleans also took up the question of the rights of the freedpeople. On March 21, 1865, black activist James Ingraham wrote to Union authorities complaining about the poor treatment of black workers under Banks's labor system. For most freedpeople, he noted, the system "does not practically differ from slavery," and Banks ought to consider an "enlargement of the liberties of the laborers."[111]

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[109] Houzeau, *My Passage*, 79-83.
[110] *New Orleans Tribune*, May 26 and June 1, 1865.
[111] James H. Ingraham and Dr. A.W. Lewis to Maj. Gen. S.S. Hurlbut, March 21, 1865, I-5, 1865, Letters Received, Ser. 1920, Civil Affairs, Dept. of the Gulf, RG 393, Pt. 1, National Archives [FSSP A-8749].

Although an irate Union officer replied that free men of color should stop "assembling in mass meetings" and "wasting your time in high-sounding Resolutions," he probably overstated the case when he claimed they did "not in any respect represent the 'Emancipated Freedmen' of Louisiana."[112]

**Conclusion**

As the war drew to a close in the spring of 1865, therefore, a multiracial radical movement had begun to emerge in New Orleans. This movement had its roots in the Union leadership's desire to establish a free state government. Lincoln and his advisors had seen New Orleans, with its large concentration of loyal white working men, as the perfect place in which to test the president's reconstruction policy. The mobilization of the Union Association had indeed attracted the support of some white working men. But while Nathaniel Banks had done his best to moderate the demands of New Orleans Unionists, his attempt to bypass the issue of black suffrage had backfired. True, the moderate Michael Hahn had easily won the contest for state governor in 1864, and the new state constitution had taken little notice of growing African American calls for civil rights. But the struggle against the conservatism of Banks, Hahn, and others had given birth to a small, but growing, Radical faction. Under the leadership of the *New Orleans Tribune*, moreover, the Radicals demonstrated the potential for an alliance between the Republican government, urban

[112] Maj. Gen. S.S. Hurlbut to James H. Ingraham and Dr. A.W. Lewis, March 23, 1865, Vol. 9 DG, pp. 327-30, Letters Sent, Ser. 1738, Dept. of the Gulf, RG 393, Pt. 1, National Archives [FSSP A-8749].

intellectuals (both black and white), and African American working people. As we will see, this coalition would prove crucial during Reconstruction.

Radicalism posed the main obstacle to Nathaniel Banks' attempt to hand moderate white Unionists the leading role in the political reconstruction of Louisiana. As a political movement Radicalism was able to challenge Banks because black working people refused to accept a position in the supporting cast of reconstruction. While the Union Army aligned itself with the interests of New Orleans employers, the freedpeople strenuously put forward their own vision of life after slavery. Black men and women demanded the right to control their own labor and began to learn some of the resistance and survival strategies of free working people. As they abandoned unpopular employers, sought new jobs, and demanded protection from local federal authorities, the former slaves built a culture of emancipation that could not fail to affect the growth of Radicalism in New Orleans. This wave of protest from black working people had an impact beyond the Crescent City, moreover. Because the city had loomed so large in Lincoln's military and political strategy, events in New Orleans exerted a considerable influence on the trajectory of national policy. This had already become clear by the end of the war, and it would become even more pronounced during the early years of Reconstruction.

## Chapter Five

## "To Seek Justice Themselves":

## Urban Unrest and the Origins of Radical Reconstruction

On July 3, 1867, General Joseph Mower, Assistant Commissioner of the Freedmen's Bureau in Louisiana wrote to headquarters in Washington describing the connection between the actions of the federal government and grassroots activism among black working people. The passage of the Military Reconstruction Act in March, he stated, had, "created a great deal of excitement among the freedmen…and in some few instances led them into errors." Mower felt that these "errors" had been most pronounced in New Orleans. In the Crescent City, he noted, "politicians have addressed the freedmen in language which they cannot understand, and their harangues have tended to excite them to seek justice themselves." Having been told "they were the equals of the white man," black activists had targeted the city's segregated streetcars with a campaign of direct action and gone on strike against low wages on the waterfront. All in all, the Assistant Commissioner concluded, "it is remarkable an open outbreak between the races has not occurred."[1]

Despite his condescending tone, Mower had identified one of the key dynamics in the coming of Radical Reconstruction to New Orleans. The interplay between action by the federal government and popular mobilization in the city's

[1] Monthly Report for June 1867, Monthly Narrative Reports of Operations and Conditions, Monthly and Annual Reports of Operations, Office of the Assistant Commissioner for Louisiana, M1027, Roll 27, Records of the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, RG 105, National Archives, Washington, D.C. (hereafter, BRFAL).

streets and workplaces characterized the entire period from the end of the Civil War to the election of a Republican state government in 1868 and beyond. This is not to argue that African American working people and the Republican Party marched in lockstep during these years, or that they had reached a consensus on the character of the post-war South. As Mower's comments make clear, tensions and misunderstandings remained common. Nevertheless, the interaction— and at times mutual reinforcement—of the Republican agenda and the hopes and aspirations of the freedpeople in New Orleans drove Reconstruction toward a remarkable experiment in post-emancipation interracial democracy. As we will see, moreover, this dynamic elevated to power a group of black steamboat workers whose influence within the Republican Party highlighted the urban characteristics of political culture in Reconstriction-era Louisiana. In order to understand the origins of Radical Reconstruction in New Orleans, we must trace the popular mobilization and its relationship to the political imperatives of the national and local Republican Party.

A number of historians have assessed the experience of Reconstruction in the urban South. In particular, several scholars have shown how urban and commercial enclaves within the former slave states produced a distinct and influential brand of radicalism during the immediate post-war years. Using the example of black political leader Abraham Galloway, David Cecelski has argued that a unique "subversive politics" emerged out of "black maritime culture" in Reconstruction-era coastal North

Carolina.[2] Peter Rachleff has shown how black industrial workers contributed to a distinctly labor-centered social movement in post-Civil War Richmond, Virginia.[3] In an important recent study of Mobile, Alabama, Michael Fitzgerald examined the ways in which patterns of urban class development caused tensions among black members of the Republican Party and affected the course of Reconstruction politics.[4]

All of these historians have achieved two things that I hope to emulate in this chapter. In the first and most basic sense they have charted the experiences of the urban popular classes during the years of Reconstruction. This complements the much larger body of literature on the lives of rural working people during this period. On a more profound level, however, the historians mentioned above do more than simply narrate the story of urban Reconstruction and insist on the "contribution" of urban working people. They have suggested that working people in the urban and commercial South had a distinctive, even a leading, role to play in the politics of the immediate post-war years; that this section of the popular classes was somehow uniquely positioned and prepared to assert itself decisively into the broader debates and struggles of the emerging southern society. What follows is an attempt to test this hypothesis for the case of New Orleans.

The scale and pace of political transformation during these years was truly remarkable, but the trajectory of change was never smooth. A new, conservative

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[2] David S. Cecelski, *The Waterman's Song: Slavery and Freedom in Maritime North Carolina* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 182.
[3] Peter Rachleff, *Black Labor in Richmond, 1865-1890* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1989).
[4] Michael W. Fitzgerald, *Urban Emancipation: Popular Politics in Reconstruction Mobile 1860-1890* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2002).

governor came in power in Louisiana in early months of 1865 and attempted to build an electoral alliance with returning Confederates. When this political project collided with the hopes and aspirations of the freedpeople and their allies, a wave of political violence swept New Orleans and Louisiana as a whole. Out of this maelstrom arose the Radical state government of Governor Henry Clay Warmoth, which confirmed its hegemony through a series of mass protests and electoral victories in 1867 and 1868. Perhaps most tellingly, a group of black former steamboat workers led by P.B.S. Pinchback would rise to positions of power in the Louisiana Republican Party, symbolizing the distinctively urban characteristics of Reconstruction-era politics in New Orleans. By 1870, just five years after the final abolition of slavery, the Republicans were consolidating their grip on power through the creation of a biracial militia in which black men served as brigadiers and colonels. The combination of action from above and below would produce a whole new phase of fundamental change in New Orleans.

**Presidential Reconstruction in New Orleans**

If war and occupation had begun a process of deep transformation in New Orleans, the advent of Presidential Reconstruction in the spring of 1865 signaled an abrupt change of course. At the national level, Abraham Lincoln's death on April 15 threw a major wrinkle into the development of Reconstruction policy. Lincoln had been moving in the direction of support for black male suffrage by the end of the war, and had recommended that the government of Louisiana consider enfranchising at

least some African American men.[5] Lincoln's successor Andrew Johnson, on the other hand, believed that, whatever the evils of slavery and secession, only white men could rule the South, and moved quickly to pardon former Confederates and restore local self-government in the conquered territories.[6]

In March 1865, Lieutenant Governor James Madison Wells assumed the position of Governor of Louisiana when the former officeholder, Michael Hahn, won the legislature's election for the U.S. Senate. Wells's ascent represented a local version of the transition from Lincoln to Johnson. Hahn, a representative of white immigrant laborers and small businessmen in New Orleans, had led the moderate Unionist faction during the Civil War. Although he had never been a true friend of black civil rights, he had at least been willing to consider Lincoln's plea for limited black male suffrage.[7] Wells, on the other hand, was a cotton and sugar planter from Rapides Parish in central Louisiana. He had been one of Louisiana's most active planter-Unionists during the Civil War, outfitting a anti-Confederate guerilla band led by his son and suffering persecution at the hands of Confederate authorities.[8] Wells came to occupied New Orleans and became an important representative of a potential alliance between urban and rural Unionists.[9] For moderate and conservative white

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[5] See Abraham Lincoln to Michael Hahn, March 13, 1864 in Lincoln, *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, VII (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1953-55), p243, and Lincoln, "Last Public Address," April 11, 1865, *Collected Works of Lincoln*, VIII, 404.
[6] Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution 1863-1877* (New York: Harper and Row, 1988), 179-192.
[7] Roger W. Shugg, *Origins of Class Struggle in Louisiana* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1938 [repr. 1968]), 199-200.
[8] Peyton McCrary, *Abraham Lincoln and Reconstruction: The Louisiana Experiment* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1978), 59.
[9] McCrary, *Abraham Lincoln and Reconstruction*, 219.

Unionists, his connections with the planter class had made Wells a perfect candidate for Lieutenant Governor in the elections of 1864. But if Wells was a staunch Unionist, he was also an opponent of African American rights. At his inauguration on March 4, the new governor noted he would "call to my aid the best and ablest men of the State."[10] As it turned out, this meant that Wells would reach out to returning Confederates and attempt to build a new white supremacist bloc between Democrats and Conservative Unionists.

Wells signaled his intentions with the appointment of Dr. Hugh Kennedy as Mayor of New Orleans in March 1865, a choice that had serious consequences for black working people. According to one commentator, Kennedy was a "strong advocate of the rebellion, a man who favored oppression, who believed in elevating the aristocracy and degrading the laboring classes."[11] Once in office, Kennedy purged Unionists from the municipal police department and appointed Confederate veterans in their places. The result was a wave of police repression against people of color in New Orleans throughout the summer of 1865.[12] The situation in New Orleans was replicated in rural areas of the state: from New Iberia to Baton Rouge, Confederate veterans engaged in a campaign of repression against the freedpeople.[13]

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[10] *New Orleans Bee*, March 6, 1865.
[11] Emily Hazen Reed, *Life of A.P. Dostie, or The Conflict of New Orleans* (New York: W. P. Tomlinson, 1868), 181.
[12] J. Burke to T.W. Conway, August 10, 1865, Registered Letter Received (1865: A-B), Office of the Assistant Commissioner for Louisiana, M1027, Roll 7, RG 105 (BRFAL).
[13] James Emery to T.W. Conway, July 17, 1865, Registered Letter Received (1865: C-F), Office of the Assistant Commissioner for Louisiana, M1027, Roll 8, RG 105 (BRFAL); Col. Frisbie to Capt. Hennessey, July 31, 1865, Registered Letter Received (1865: A-B), Office of the Assistant Commissioner for Louisiana, M1027, Roll 8, RG 105 (BRFAL).

The actions of white police officers soon led to a sharp clash between neo-Confederate elected officials and the federal authorities in New Orleans. First, Major General Banks returned from his campaign against Mobile, and, on May 5, removed Mayor Kennedy from office. When Banks' superior, Edward Canby, accepted Kennedy's protests and restored his position as mayor on June 28, Banks resigned in disgust.[14] Despite the departure of Banks, other federal officials attempted to reign in Kennedy's police force. On July 19, Thomas Conway of the Freedmen's Bureau appointed a special investigator to examine reports of repression and corruption by Kennedy's police force,[15] and on September 24 complained to Governor Wells about the problem.[16] On August 15, meanwhile, Captain Andrew Morse, the Provost Marshal General for Freedmen, wrote to the Mayor of nearby Jefferson City to remind him that "slavery being abolished the laws and regulations which then discriminated between white and colored persons are now null and void." In this context, Morse felt obliged to admonish Mitchell for the actions of his police officers, who had arrested "colored men in their own premises without any just cause."[17]

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[14] Joseph G. Dawson, *Army Generals and Reconstruction: Louisiana 1862-1877* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 1994), 22-23.

[15] Thomas Conway to E.W. Dewees, July 19, 1865, Office of the Assistant Commissioner for Louisiana, Letters Sent, Vol. 15, Ser. 1297, BRFAL, RG 105, National Archives [Freedmen and Southern Society Project, University of Maryland, College Park, Maryland (hereafter, FSSP) A-8635].

[16] J. Madison Wells to T.W. Conway, September 24, 1865, Registered Letter Received (1865: L-Mc), Office of the Assistant Commissioner for Louisiana, M1027, Roll 10, RG 105 (BRFAL).

[17] Capt. Andrew Morse to John Mitchell, 15 Aug. 1865, Office of the Assistant Commissioner for Louisiana, Provost Marshall General of Freedmen, Letters and Endorsements Sent, Vol. 128, p. 2, Series 1365, BRFAL, RG 105, National Archives [FSSP A-8500].

With the assistance of President Johnson, Wells managed to sideline the Freedmen's Bureau and Union army and push ahead with his plans for state elections in November 1865. At the end of May, the Governor visited Washington to discuss his vision for the reconstruction of Louisiana. As James Hogue has suggested, this meeting may well have convinced Johnson of the need to reconcile with former Confederates in order to prevent Radical domination of the South: on May 29, just four days after his conference with Wells, the President presented his Proclamation on Pardon and Amnesty. At the end of September, under pressure from Wells and Kennedy, Johnson removed Conway from his leadership of the Freedmen's Bureau in Louisiana and replaced him with the more pliable Joseph Fullerton.[18] The field was now clear for Wells to press ahead with his electoral ambitions, and the November voting gave an overwhelming victory to the governor and his new allies among returning Confederates. Wells easily won election to continue as Louisiana's chief executive and the new state government would feature such large majorities of Confederate veterans that it came to be known as the "Rebel Legislature."[19]

Almost immediately, the new Louisiana state government set out to codify in law what Mayor Hugh Kennedy had already attempted in practice: a sharp curtailment of the rights of former slaves. On December 13, the Rebel Legislature passed four bills that collectively became known as the Black Codes. Three of the bills aimed to restrict the mobility and bargaining power of black agricultural

[18] James K. Hogue, *Uncivil War: Five New Orleans Street Battles and the Rise and Fall of Radical Reconstruction* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2006), 21-22.
[19] Dawson, *Army Generals and Reconstruction*, 31-32.

workers. The first of these mandated binding, year-long contracts for plantation hands, and insisted that employers had the right to demand service from the whole black family so contracted, including women and children. The second and third bills attempted to restrict the competition between employers by setting out punishments for anyone who attempted to "entice away" a properly contracted laborer. The final of the four bills provided for the "apprenticing" of young African Americans to white employers. Taken together, the four Black Code acts gave local courts and police juries enormous power to regulate the lives and labors of Louisiana freedpeople.[20] And they immediately provoked a strong reaction from local federal authorities. On December 18, General Absalom Baird, who had assumed control of the Freedmen's Bureau in Louisiana after the brief tenure of Joseph Fullerton, wrote to Governor Wells, urging him to forego signing the new laws because they undermined the authority of the Bureau.[21] The local iteration of Presidential Reconstruction had already begun to cause conflict with federal authorities.

**Resistance**

The sharpest clashes were those between returning Confederates and the newly expanded and energized black population of New Orleans, however. The weeks and months immediately following the cessation of hostilities in April 1865 witnessed a huge increase in the size and proportional weight of the African

[20] *New Orleans Bee*, December 15, 1865.
[21] Maj. Gen. Absalom Baird to James M. Wells, December 18, and Baird to O.O. Howard, December 20, 1865, both in Letters Sent, Office of the Assistant Commissioner for Louisiana, M1027, Roll 1, Vol. II, RG 105 (BRFAL).

American population of New Orleans. The number of African Americans living in the city rose from 24,000 in 1860 to over 50,000 in 1870, and from less than 15 percent to more than 25 percent of the total population.[22] These new black urbanites clearly saw the city as home to greater freedom and economic opportunity than the countryside. On July 29, 1865, a white resident of Lafourche Parish wrote to the Freedmen's Bureau to describe "a large and increasing travel on the Railroad to N[ew] Orleans, of colored people," including many young African American women, who the writer hinted were heading to the city to earn "pocket money" as prostitutes.[23] On November 7, the local Freedmen's Bureau agent for Jefferson Parish reported that rural freedpeople had a tendency to "become dissatisfied and leave the plantations and go to the city to work on the levee, on the steamboats, or at anything else where they can obtain higher wages and receive pay more frequently."[24]

The presence of black soldiers and veterans added a potent disorderly element to this expanded African American urban population. Whether they remained stationed at military installations or had been demobilized and returned to their communities, some black soldiers and veterans apparently demonstrated little respect for private property. On August 24, 1865, for example, a group of white planters complained that African American troops stationed at Fort Banks, just outside New Orleans, were "making a thoroughfare through our places, and coming thereon

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[22] Dale A. Somers, "Black and White in New Orleans: A Study in Urban Race Relations," *Journal of Southern History* 40, no. 1 (February, 1974): 21.
[23] W. Fisk to T.W. Conway, July 29, 1865, Registered Letter Received (1865: C-F), Office of the Assistant Commissioner for Louisiana, M1027, Roll 8, RG 105 (BRFAL).
[24] Lt. W. Dougherty to Lt. D.G. Fenno, November 7, 1865, Registered Letter Received (1865: C-F), Office of the Assistant Commissioner for Louisiana, M1027, Roll 8, RG 105 (BRFAL).

without our permission, and against our will."[25] Likewise, on October 15, 1866, a white resident of Jefferson Parish complained that African American troops were "in the habit of stealing from the residents in that vicinity," and would sometimes "tear off the pickets from enclosures and enter the gardens and orchards and take therefrom whatever they may fancy."[26] Even after they left military service, black veterans were a source of disorder. As Freedmen's Bureau agent William Dougherty noted in his monthly report for January 1866, "the freedmen recently discharged from the army" returned to their homes with "erroneous and incongruous notions of liberty," and sometimes convinced other freedpeople to refuse to sign labor contracts.[27]

The expanded black population of New Orleans, and particularly the large numbers of recently demobilized black veterans, provided the rank-and-file of an emerging political movement centered on the radical black-owned newspaper *The New Orleans Tribune*. We have already witnessed the emergence of the *Tribune* faction as the Radical wing of the Unionist movement in occupied New Orleans. A biracial coalition from its inception, this political current included among its members white activists such as Thomas J. Durant, A.P. Dostie, and Jean Charles Houzeau, and African American radicals like Oscar Dunn, James Ingraham, and the Roudanez

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[25] E. Trefagnier *et al*. to Lt. William Dougherty, August 24, 1865, L-142 (1865), Letters Received, Ser. 1757, Department of the Gulf, RG 393 [FSSP C-649]. See also, Lt. William Dougherty to Capt. L.E. Granger, August 27, 1865, L-142 (1865), Letters Received, Ser. 1757, Department of the Gulf, RG 393 [FSSP C-649], and Capt. G.A. Spink to Capt. B.B. Campbell, September 3, 1865, L-142 (1865), Letters Received, Ser. 1757, Department of the Gulf, RG 393 [FSSP C-649].

[26] T.J. Beck to Bvt. Lt. Col. G. Lee, October 15, 1866, B-64, (1866), Letters Received, Ser. 1756, Department. of the Gulf, RG 393 Pt. 1, National Archives [FSSP C-585].

[27] William Dougherty, Inspection Report for Jefferson Parish, January 1866, Assistant Inspector General's Consolidated Reports of Conditions of Freedmen on the Plantations, Office of the Assistant Commissioner for Louisiana, M1027, Roll 28, RG 105 (BRFAL).

brothers. Despite some initial hesitation, the *Tribune* faction had quickly come to embrace emancipation as a Union war aim in Louisiana and had set out to build a political movement demanding full equality for African Americans. With the war over, the group redoubled its efforts.

Durant invited readers of the *Tribune* to attend a strategy session in New Orleans on the night of June 10, 1865. This became the first meeting of a new organization called the Friends of Universal Suffrage, dedicated to fighting for the voting rights of all black men. The attendees voted to create a Central Executive Committee (CEC) with six representatives from each of the city's four municipal districts. A week later, the Friends unanimously approved a slate of twenty-four names for the Central Executive Committee, with Durant as President, and voted that the organization begin "a voluntary registration of Citizens not recognized as voters."[28] The CEC began to create an organizational structure capable of registering potential black and white voters in New Orleans, appointing Commissioners and Clerks from amongst the supporters of the CEC.[29] Finally, in August, the CEC called on all registered supporters of the group to head to the polls on September 16 and elect delegates to a special convention of the Friends of Universal Suffrage, to be held the week beginning Monday, September 25, 1865.[30]

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[28] Convention of the Republican Party of Louisiana, *Proceedings of the Convention of the Republican Party of Louisiana*, *Held at Economy Hall, New Orleans, September 23, 1865; and of the Central Executive Committee of the Friends of Universal Suffrage* (New Orleans: The Tribune, 1865), 1-2.
[29] *Proceedings of the Convention of the Republican Party of Louisiana*, 5-8.
[30] *Proceedings of the Convention of the Republican Party of Louisiana*, 8-9.

The Friends' "territorial convention" held from September 25-28 was a truly interracial gathering. More than three thousand black and white male residents of New Orleans voted on September 16, electing 111 delegates to the convention. Roughly half of the delegates were black men, representing a selection of businessmen, professionals, and prosperous artisans, the great majority of whom had been free before the war.[31] They included newcomers to New Orleans such as Virginia-born Robert Cromwell, who had been an abolitionist and successful physician in antebellum Wisconsin, as well as scions of the Afro-Creole establishment such as Bernard Soulié, a wealthy commission merchant.[32] Three of the delegates representing the English-speaking black community—W.H. Pearne, Robert McCary, Jr., and Lewis Banks—were preachers.[33] Oscar Dunn, who had been one of the seven founding members of the Friends of Universal Suffrage, chaired the CEC's platform committee in the summer of 1865.[34]

The black and white men who served as delegates to the convention wanted to mold their movement into a new political party capable of intervening in the politics of Reconstruction. The convention delegates first debated the possibility of merging with the national Republican Party. White radicals Thomas J. Durant and Benjamin Flanders spoke strongly in favor of the merger, but other speakers dissented. African American delegate Robert H. Isabelle pointed out that the national Republicans had

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[31] *Proceedings of the Convention of the Republican Party of Louisiana*, 11; David C. Rankin, "The Origins of Black Leadership in New Orleans during Reconstruction," *Journal of Southern History* 40, no.3 (August, 1974): 436-440.
[32] Rankin, "Origins of Black Leadership," 426, 431-432.
[33] *Proceedings of the Convention of the Republican Party of Louisiana*, 11.
[34] *Proceedings of the Convention of the Republican Party of Louisiana*, 1-5.

not yet taken a position in favor of black suffrage. Despite these concerns, Durant's resolutions won a majority, and the delegates reconvened as the founding convention of the Republican Party of Louisiana.[35] The debate then shifted to the new party's position on the correct course for Reconstruction. Henry Clay Warmoth, a young white Union Army officer from Illinois, proposed that Louisiana Republicans should draft a new constitution for the state and submit it to Congress for approval. But many delegates spoke against Warmoth's plan, and in favor of a prolonged federal oversight of Louisiana. Such a course, they argued, would give initially unrepentant white supremacists the time to learn to accept black equality. Ultimately, the convention decided to organize an election for a territorial delegate, so that Louisiana Radicals would have a representative in Washington. The meeting unanimously chose Henry Clay Warmoth as its nominee, and adjourned on Thursday, September 28.[36]

New Orleans Republicans felt that the first priority for their movement should be to secure the right to vote for black men, and decided to make the territorial election a testing ground for their theories.[37] In a provocative move, the CEC—now the Central Executive Committee of the Republican Party of Louisiana—called the election for November 6, the same day as the "official" state elections. Of necessity, most of the organizing for the election took place in New Orleans, its suburbs, and rural districts immediately adjacent to the city. But in the weeks between its founding convention at the end of September and the election on November 6, the CEC

[35] *Proceedings of the Convention of the Republican Party of Louisiana*, 13-17.
[36] *Proceedings of the Convention of the Republican Party of Louisiana*, 21-31.
[37] *Proceedings of the Convention of the Republican Party of Louisiana*, 26.

managed to send emissaries into the plantation districts, too. In places like Terrebonne Parish, in the sugar district to the southwest of New Orleans, and in the area surrounding Baton Rouge, activists registered black voters and held political meetings for the freedpeople.[38] The results of the November 6 election were impressive: Henry Clay Warmoth won almost nineteen thousand votes, which was almost as many as James Madison Wells, the Conservative candidate for Governor, won in the official election of the same day. And although more than half of the votes came from New Orleans and its environs, thousands of black men went to the polls in Terrebonne, East Baton Rouge, and other rural parishes.[39]

The most radical Republican activists in New Orleans had political interests that went well beyond the struggle for the vote, however. For more than a year before the territorial election of November 1865, land reform and the confiscation of plantations had formed a crucial part of the program of the *New Orleans Tribune* and its supporters. As early as November 1864, for example, the *Tribune* had argued that real equality could not exist unless the plantation system came to an end.[40] In order to facilitate land redistribution, the *Tribune* proposed a system of self-help banks. Using the small deposits of black working people, these banks would buy land and rent it to "voluntary associations of workers."[41] The first such experiment took place in

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[38] Steven Hahn, *A Nation Under Our Feet: Black Political Struggles in the Rural South from Slavery to the Great Migration* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003), 124-125.
[39] *Proceedings of the Convention of the Republican Party of Louisiana*, 33.
[40] *New Orleans Tribune*, November 29, 1864, and May 6, 1865.
[41] Gilles Vandal, "Black Utopia in Early Reconstruction New Orleans: The People's Bakery as a Case-Study," *Louisiana History* 38, no. 4 (Fall, 1997): 443.

February 1865, when Durant, Dunn, and others founded the Freedman Aid Association. As Gilles Vandal notes, the explicit aim of the Association was to "create labor communes on plantations."[42] Members of the organization met with representatives of the plantation hands from the surrounding and countryside, and seem to have met a positive response. Within a month, the Association had helped to create at least four such "communes" and had plans for many more.[43]

Beginning in the spring of 1865, supporters of the *Tribune* attempted to bring the idea of labor communes into the city itself. They hoped to create worker-run cooperatives in which the employees bought shares and divided the profits among themselves. The first concrete attempt to implement this plan, the Louisiana Association of Workingmen, coincided with the territorial election in November 1865. Better known in New Orleans as the "People's Bakery," the plan required 2,000 working people to purchase shares at $5 each, with the money going to purchase a lot and outfit a bakery. Membership in the Association was open to all, regardless of race or gender. The Radicals hoped that, if the People's Bakery could succeed in selling bread at low rates, the project could spark an expansion of the workers' cooperative movement. The bakery opened in April 1866, but struggled financially and faded within the year. Nevertheless, the project signaled that at least some New Orleans Republicans had a political vision that clearly went beyond free labor ideology.[44]

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[42] Ibid.
[43] C. Peter Ripley, *Slaves and Freedmen in Civil War Louisiana* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1976), 79-83.
[44] Vandal, "Black Utopia," 444-452.

Labor unrest among white workingmen also contributed to the radical political climate of late 1865. Political changes since the end of the war had left white workingmen facing a contradictory situation. As we have already seen, returning Confederates used the summer and fall of 1865 to strengthen their hold over the Louisiana state government, undoing the reforms of the occupation years in the name of white supremacy. The neo-Confederate brand of racial politics did not always redound to the benefit of white working men. In New Orleans, for example, neo-Confederate Mayor Hugh Kennedy used his powers to cut the wages of public employees, sparking resistance in the streets. In May 1865, white workingmen rallied outside City Hall to demand Kennedy's resignation and petitioned Union Army commander Nathaniel Banks to remove conservative municipal officials. That fall, the white labor movement stepped up its pressure on the neo-Confederate state government when it began a petition campaign demanding legislative action to reduce the hours of labor.[45]

The most dramatic expression of the new labor unrest came with a prolonged series of strikes on the New Orleans waterfront in December 1865. As Eric Arnesen demonstrates, these strikes revealed the complex interaction of race and class among Crescent City waterfront workers. The action began when white cotton screwmen struck for higher wages and shorter hours on December 20. These skilled white workers had been the strongest element of city's labor movement in the 1850s, but in the new conditions of post-war New Orleans their actions could have a much broader

[45] Eric Arnesen, *Waterfront Workers of New Orleans: Race, Class, and Politics, 1863-1923* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1991), 7-9.

resonance on the waterfront. The screwmen's strike quickly spread to other sections of the levee workforce. On December 21, black longshoremen joined a procession of striking workers that, according to Arnesen, "effectively halted most work on docked steamships." Other groups of African American waterfront workers struck on December 24 and December 27, using physical coercion to prevent other longshoremen from working during the protests. The strikers were so successful in stopping work on the levee that steamship masters repeatedly called on the Union Army to protect those laborers who wanted to work. While the non-unionized black workers returned to work on December 28 with their demands unmet, the skilled and organized white screwmen won their wage increase when employers capitulated just after the New Year.[46]

By the winter of 1865-66, the unrest in the streets of New Orleans had begun to spread beyond the boundaries of the city and find an echo in the surrounding countryside. The *Tribune* probably played a role in this process: as David Rankin has noted, "It claimed to have an audience among 'the most active' freedmen in rural Louisiana" and became an organizing tool for the local branches of the National Equal Rights League.[47] In January 1866, the Freedmen's Bureau agent in Jefferson Parish reported that rural freedpeople were "delaying to make a permanent contract" unless they could get 50 cents an hour, an idea that the agent believed "originated probably among the freedmen working on the levee in the city who have recently

[46] Arnesen, *Waterfront Workers*, 21-24.
[47] Rankin, "Introduction," in Jean-Charles Houzeau, *My Passage at the New Orleans Tribune: A Memoir of the Civil War Era*, ed. David C. Rankin, trans. Gerard F. Denault (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1984), 39.

been 'striking' for the aforesaid amount."[48] A month later, the same agent reported evidence of an even more direct connection between urban Radicalism and rural unrest. Black plantation hands in Jefferson Parish were, the agent noted, "very doubtful about the propriety" of signing year-long labor contracts. The agent felt this reluctance stemmed from "the advice and action of an organization known as the 'Central Executive Association' under the auspices of which the freedmen of these parishes are directed and in a measure controlled in regard to labor." Apparently, plantation hands informed this agent that they would only go to work "if the 'Committee' agree to it."[49] The agent's concerns suggest that the CEC of the Republican Party functioned like an embryonic trade union for rural freedpeople, and testifies to the ability of urban Radicals to exert an influence on the countryside surrounding New Orleans.

The culmination of the radicalization of late 1865 came during the Christmas Day insurrection panic of that year. As early as the summer of 1865, rumors had begun to circulate connecting the Christmas and New Year holidays with some profound transformation of southern society. On July 29, a Freedmen's Bureau agent in rural Clinton, Louisiana, alleged that "some evil disposed persons about here have informed the negroes that unless they run away and leave their former masters 'before

[48] William Dougherty, Inspection Report for Jefferson Parish, January 1866, Assistant Inspector General's Consolidated Reports of Conditions of Freedmen on the Plantations, Office of the Assistant Commissioner for Louisiana, M1027, Roll 28, RG 105 (BRFAL).
[49] Monthly Report of W.E. Dougherty for Jefferson Parish, February 1866, Inspection Reports of Plantations from Subordinate Officers, Office of the Assistant Commissioner for Louisiana, M1027, Roll 28, RG 105 (BRFAL).

the first of next January' they 'will be slaves for life'."[50] On September 25, an agent in the Louisiana countryside reported that rural freedpeople were refusing to sign labor contracts "in Expectation of having land assigned them by the Government,'" while the white residents of Monroe, Louisiana, blamed black troops for spreading the rumor.[51] By this time, fears that the freedpeople would seize the plantations by force were so widespread that Oliver Howard, the Commissioner of the Freedmen's Bureau, exchanged letters on the subject with Thomas Conway, his subordinate in Louisiana. Although, in a September 23 letter, Conway claimed that there were "no grounds whatever from [sic] any fears on that score," Howard was forced to issue a circular letter on November 11 in order to deny rumors of confiscation.[52]

There is no direct evidence to suggest that the activism of New Orleans Radicals encouraged the rumors of confiscation in late 1865. The Radicals did, as we have seen, exert an influence on at least those rural freedpeople who lived in the immediate vicinity of the city. Furthermore, as Steven Hahn has suggested, the massive migration between town and country in 1865 may well have facilitated the transfer of political news and gossip from cities like New Orleans to the plantation

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[50] G.W. Bridges to Lt. D.G. Fenno, July 29, 1865, Registered Letters Received (1865; A-B), Office of the Assistant Commissioner for Louisiana, M1027, Roll 7, RG 105 (BRFAL).
[51] C.W. Hawes to T.W. Conway, September 25, 1865, Registered Letters Received (1865; G-K), Office of the Assistant Commissioner for Louisiana, M1027, Roll 9, RG 105 (BRFAL); R.W. Jamison *et al*. to Gov. James Madison Wells, October 13, 1865, Registered Letters Received (1865; L-Mc), Office of the Assistant Commissioner for Louisiana, M1027, Roll 10, RG 105 (BRFAL).
[52] T.W. Conway to Maj. Gen. O.O. Howard, September 23, 1865, Letters Sent Vol. 1 (June 1865-April 1869), Office of the Assistant Commissioner for Louisiana, M1027, Roll 1, RG 105 (BRFAL); Maj. Gen. O.O. Howard, Circular Letter, November 11, 1865, Registered Letters Received (1865; R-S), Office of the Assistant Commissioner for Louisiana, M1027, Roll 12, RG 105 (BRFAL).

districts of Louisiana, thus opening up a channel between urban radicals and freedpeople in the countryside.[53] At the very least, we can say for certain that the events of late 1865 highlighted the extent to which, on the issue of land reform at least, the CEC was capable of articulating a radical program with tremendous appeal for rural freedpeople.

**The New Orleans Massacre**

The mass radicalization and mobilization of urban working people ran head-on into the reactionary expectations of returning Confederates, leading to a wave of racial violence that culminated in what became known as the New Orleans Massacre of July 1866. Beginning in the summer of 1865, white supremacist forces targeted the fragile infrastructure of black community institutions. Churches and schools in particular came under repeated attack. On July 17, 1865, Thomas Conway complained to Mayor Kennedy "the Police of the City are breaking up Religious meetings of Colored people."[54] According to Conway, Kennedy's police singled out the Frenchman Street church of John Lewis, an African American preacher who would in September 1865 serve as a delegate to the Friends of Universal Suffrage convention that founded the Louisiana Republican Party.[55] On August 1, a group of black men made their own complaint that, at the end of the service at the African

[53] Hahn, *A Nation Under Our Feet*, 142-143.
[54] Thomas Conway to Mayor Hugh Kennedy, July 17, 1865, La. Asst. Comm., Letters Sent, Vol. 15, p. 161, Series 1297, BRFAL, RG 105, National Archives [FSSP A-8635].
[55] Thomas Conway to Mayor Hugh Kennedy, July 22, 1865, La. Asst. Comm., Letters Sent, Vol. 15, p. 185, Series 1297, BRFAL, RG 105, National Archives [FSSP A-8635].

Methodist Episcopal church, "the Police made their appearance armed with Clubs and holding their watches in their hands and ordering people to disperse."[56] A year later, during the summer of 1866, white terrorists carried out a series of arson attacks against black schools, burning down four churches so that their premises could not be used for the education of African American children.[57]

In this context, by December 1865, Governor Wells began to have second thoughts about his relationship with the Confederate veterans who now dominated the Louisiana state government. He felt, for example, that the Black Codes went too far in restricting the right of former slaves, and would only serve to bring federal power down upon the state once again. On December 18, less than a week after the Black Codes passed the state legislature, Wells wrote to Absalom Baird of the Freedmen's Bureau and explained that he had "already determined in my own mind" that the new laws were "not only impracticable, but unnecessary."[58] Reluctantly, the Governor signed three of the bills into law but he vetoed the fourth, claiming that it violated the Thirteenth Amendment. In the early weeks of 1866, Wells again found himself at loggerheads with the former Confederates he had escorted to their positions of power, first over economic issues and then over the question of whether to hold new

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[56] George Washington *et al.* to Thomas Conway, August 1, 1865, Registered Letters Received (1865: T-Z; 1866: Y-Z), Office of the Assistant Commissioner for Louisiana, M1027, Roll 13, RG 105 (BRFAL).

[57] Annual Narrative Report of Operations and Conditions for 1866, Monthly and Annual Reports of Operations, Office of the Assistant Commissioner for Louisiana, M1027, Roll 27, RG 105 (BRFAL).

[58] James M. Wells to Maj. Gen. A. Baird, December 18, 1865, Registered Letters Received (1865: L-Mc), Office of the Assistant Commissioner for Louisiana, M1027, Roll 10, RG 105 (BRFAL). See also, Maj. Gen. A. Baird to O.O. Howard, December 20, 1865, Letters Sent, Office of the Assistant Commissioner for Louisiana, M1027, Roll 1, Vol. II, RG 105 (BRFAL).

municipal elections in New Orleans. When the Rebel Legislature overrode Wells' veto on the latter issue on February 15, 1866, and forced new municipal elections in Orleans and Jefferson parishes for March, a clear break developed between the conservative Unionist Governor and the former Confederates.[59]

The rift between the governor and the legislature defined their divergent approaches to the idea of a new constitutional convention. Wells abandoned his erstwhile allies with breathtaking speed. In March 1866, he approached the Radical faction led by Durant and Dunn and announced his intention to commence political war against the Rebel Legislature. Wells declared himself ready to reopen the constitutional convention of 1864 and unite with the Radicals in order to disenfranchise former Confederates and put the vote in the hands of black men. On June 26, the serving president of the 1864 convention, Judge Edmund H. Durrell, refused to recall the body, but Wells decided to press ahead with a new convention on July 30 anyway.[60] For their part, the Radicals attempted to mobilize grassroots support in defense of the effort. On Friday July 27, just three days before the convention was due to open, radical white dentist A.P. Dostie addressed a mass meeting of several thousand black and white Republicans, defending the convention, calling for black suffrage, and urging the freedpeople to prepare for armed self-defense.[61] Alarmed by the militant mood among Republicans, meanwhile, the local authorities prepared to repress the convention. Mayor John Monroe wrote to Major

[59] Hogue, *Uncivil War*, 31-33.
[60] Ibid., 35.
[61] Reed, *Life of A.P. Dostie*, pp. 289-298; New Orleans Tribune, "The New Orleans Riot, Its Official History," *Tribune Tracts No. 1* (New Orleans: The Tribune, 1866), 1.

General Baird on July 25 and stating his intention to arrest any anyone involved in efforts to reopen the convention. "It is my intention to disperse this unlawful assembly," Monroe told the federal officer.[62] The stage was set for a violent confrontation.

On the morning of Monday, July 30, a crowd of several hundred black and white protesters gathered outside the Mechanic's Institute and rallied to demand the suffrage for black men. The demonstrators were ignoring a proclamation from Mayor John Monroe, printed in all of the city's newspapers, which declared the convention an illegal assembly, and faced a force of several hundred white policemen and "special deputies" surrounding the convention building. When a column of two hundred black veterans, some of them armed, marched up to the Mechanic's Institute from the French Quarter, scuffles broke out and quickly escalated into a general street battle. White policemen and civilians beat, stabbed, and shot the outnumbered African American veterans, killing many, and then turned their attention to the convention hall. Inside, a small number of black men braved volleys of pistol fire in order to barricade the door, but proved unable to keep out the white attackers. Police burst into the convention hall and set upon the fleeing delegates, killing and injuring several. The violence only abated when General Baird finally mustered his troops and brought them to the Mechanic's Institute at 3 pm.[63]

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[62] Mayor John T. Monroe to Gen. Baird, July 25, 1866, N-67 (1866), Letters Received, Ser. 1757, Dept. of Louisiana, RG 393 Pt. 1 [FSSP C-679].
[63] Tribune, "The New Orleans Riot," 3-7;

If Monroe and his allies had intended to decapitate the local Radical leadership, they could not have asked for more from the New Orleans Massacre. Although estimates vary, we can say for certain that white rioters killed between forty and fifty people, and wounded as many as three hundred. The vast majority of those killed and injured were African American men, but they also included A.P. Dostie, the white dentist who had played such an important role in the development of the Unionist and Republican movements. Dostie died in a hail of half-a-dozen bullets, and was also stabbed with a sword. Michael Hahn, the former Governor and moderate Unionist who had recently thrown in his lot with the radicals, was badly beaten and crippled for life. Thomas J. Durant, probably the single most important white Radical leader, heard the sounds of the massacre from his office two blocks away; he snuck out a back entrance, took a closed carriage to the waterfront, and left New Orleans on a steamboat, never to return.[64]

The events of July 30 in New Orleans, along with similar outbreaks in Charleston and Memphis, are widely regarded as a turning point in the coming of Radical Reconstruction. Donald Reynolds argues that the Massacre "convinced a majority of Northerners that the South was determined…to keep the Negro in a state of semi-slavery."[65] In a similar vein, Gilles Vandal notes "the role it played in the congressional elections of 1866, and…the impetus it gave to the passage of the

[64] Tregle, "Thomas J. Durant," 485.
[65] Donald E. Reynolds, "The New Orleans Riot, Reconsidered," *Louisiana History*, Vol. 5, No. 1 (Winter, 1964), 5.

Reconstruction Acts of March 1867."[66] In other words, the grassroots radicalization of late 1865 and early 1866 provoked the white supremacist authorities of New Orleans to bloodily repress the constitutional convention of July 30, 1866, and this violence in turn stimulated the desire of many northerners to intervene more forcefully in the post-war South.

Nevertheless, the decapitation of the Radical leadership in the New Orleans Massacre would have profound consequences for the development of Reconstruction politics. The destruction of the faction around the *Tribune* ended any hopes of a political alliance between the black movement for civil rights and the white working people of New Orleans. As Eric Arnesen and Caryn Cossé Bell have shown, Thomas Durant and the *Tribune* leadership had been the only forces to seriously advocate such an alliance, and even they did so tepidly. As early as 1863, Durant had "pressed the issue of free black voting rights" at a meeting of the white Workingmen's National Union league, and received a surprisingly warm reception from the craftsmen and professionals in attendance.[67] The *Tribune*, meanwhile, expressed support for the eight-hour movement amongst white workingmen and hoped that an interracial labor coalition might undermine the basis of white supremacism in New Orleans.[68] Even if the radical leadership had remained intact, however, it is far from clear that white working people in New Orleans would have supported Radical Reconstruction. Many white workingmen remained tied to white supremacy through

[66] Gilles Vandal, "The Origins of the New Orleans Riot, Revisited," *Louisiana History*, Vol. 22, No. 2 (Spring, 1981), 135.
[67] Bell, *Afro-Creole Protest Tradition*, 249-250.
[68] Arnesen, *Waterfront Workers*, 24.

the political hegemony of the Democratic Party. As Arnesen has noted, "the Democratic Party succeeded in winning most whites—workers included—to its banner in opposition to the 'black Republicans."[69]

**The Radical Coalition**

The clash between former Confederates and freedpeople in New Orleans played a major role in prompting greater federal involvement in the South. On April 9, 1866, Radical and Moderate Republicans had banded together in Congress to pass the Civil Rights Act. Intended to negate the Black Codes, this law granted citizenship to the former slaves, and the Republicans proved willing to override President Johnson's veto in order to pass it. In the spring of 1866, Moderate Republicans also spearheaded the effort to enshrine civil rights in the Constitution through the Fourteenth Amendment, which Congress sent to the states for ratification on June 18 despite Johnson's opposition. The New Orleans Massacre, along with the riot in Memphis, pushed Moderate Republicans even closer to Congressional Radicals. The fall elections both discredited Johnson and delivered a resounding mandate to the Republicans, and on March 2, 1867 Congress passed the Reconstruction Act, which—supplemented by later Reconstruction Acts—imposed the rule of federal officers on the South and provided for black suffrage.[70]

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[69] Arnesen, *Waterfront Workers*, 31.
[70] Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877* (New York: Harper and Row, 1988), 243-280.

The Reconstruction Acts had an immediate impact in New Orleans. General Philip Sheridan, who in March 1867 became the military governor of Louisiana and Texas in the new Fifth District, used his new authority to sideline the neo-Confederates. On March 27, the northern commander removed from office Mayor John Monroe, Attorney General Andrew Herron, and Judge Edmund Abell, all of whom he blamed for the racial violence of the previous summer. The following day, Sheridan called an immediate halt to all local elections, and began to explore the possibility of registering a new multiracial electorate himself. Despite a lack of advice from further up the chain of command, Sheridan ordered the formation of parish election boards, which began registration of voters for the fall elections in New Orleans on April 12, and across the state on April 21. Sheridan's officials registered both black and white voters, but excluded hundreds of former Confederate officeholders from the rolls. When the New Orleans police tried to interfere with black registration, Sheridan removed Chief of Police Boylan from office.[71]

The sudden shift in local power dynamics brought about by the passage of the Military Reconstruction Acts and Sheridan's unilateral actions gave new strength and confidence to African American activists in New Orleans. Immediately following the passage of the Military Reconstructions Acts in March 1867, black Radicals inaugurated a new campaign against the city's segregated streetcars. Free people of color had resented the system since the antebellum period, and had protested it as

[71] Dawson, *Army Generals and Reconstruction*, 46-49.

early as 1833.[72] During the war years, black officers in the Native Guards had demanded the right to use the same cars as their white comrades. But the campaign of April and May 1867 was far more explosive. The *New Orleans Tribune* commenced agitation on the subject in early April, calling on people of color "to show their hands" if they if they hated segregation.[73] On April 28, an African American man forced his way onto a white streetcar with the attention of being arrested and testing the issue in court. Although the charges were dismissed, others followed his lead. The campaign came to a head on the weekend of May 4-5. On the Saturday morning, a crowd of young black men gathered on Love Street and began harassing the passing streetcars. One man of color boarded a car, seized the reins from the white driver after a short scuffle, and took off down the street with the police in hot pursuit.[74] Clashes between armed black men and the police continued throughout Saturday and into Sunday. As the weekend drew to a close, a huge crowd of black men and women gathered in Congo Square and threatened or commandeered the passing cars. Fearing that the use of military force was inexpedient, the Republican Mayor of New Orleans Edward Heath addressed the crowds himself, and convinced them to disperse. The next day, railroad representatives agreed to end the practice of segregation.[75]

A little over a week later, black protesters again took to the streets. This time, the demonstrators were African American longshoremen, and they were angry about

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[72] Bell, *Afro-Creole Protest Tradition*, 82.
[73] *New Orleans Tribune*, April 9 and 21, 1867.
[74] *New Orleans Tribune*, May 5, 1867.
[75] Roger A. Fischer, "A Pioneer Protest: The New Orleans Street-Car Controversy of 1867," *Journal of Negro History* 53, no. 3 (July, 1968): 223-228.

the behavior of labor contractors on the waterfront. Trouble between black laborers and the "stevedores," or contractors, was a common occurrence on the waterfront. On May 16, a crowd of several hundred black men gathered on the levee and claimed that African American contractors were cheating them out of their wages. The strikers managed to blockade and stop work on two steamers, mobbed a particularly unpopular black contractor, and fought with the police. Once again, Mayor Heath came out in public to placate African American protesters, but this time only the threat of military intervention halted the demonstrations. Strikers came out again the following day and successfully stopped work along much of the levee. Finally, on May 18, federal authorities made a public statement condemning the use of contract labor on the levee, and calling on shipmasters to pay their hands themselves. The employers soon fell into line: militant action had brought yet another victory to the black working people of New Orleans.[76]

The politicization among black working people continued to meet violent repression at the hands of white civilians. On May 31, a group of black men in Kennerville, on the outskirts of New Orleans, complained to the Freedmen's Bureau that "disloyal white persons" were preventing the functioning of their newly formed "political club."[77] White vigilantes also targeted symbols of federal power. In early April, "two or more scoundrels" broke into the office of a Freedmen's Bureau agent in Algiers, and made off with his sword and account book. Even though the agent

[76] *New Orleans Tribune*, May 18, 19, and 20, 1867; Arnesen, *Waterfront Workers*, 29-31.
[77] J.J. Saville to Capt. Sterling, May 31, 1867, Registered Letter Received (1867: S-T), Office of the Assistant Commissioner for Louisiana, M1027, Roll 20, RG 105 (BRFAL).

requested a military guard, the same thing happened again in July.[78] In May, the same agent reported that "10 or 12 ruffians" had committed "the most shameful outrage" at the Hotel of Algiers, breaking all of the parlor furniture because the owner was "a Union man."[79]

Despite white repression, African American men went to the polls for the first time in an official election on September 27 and 28, 1867, to choose delegates for the constitutional convention. White Louisianans had overwhelmingly either been disenfranchised under Military Reconstruction or decided to boycott the election altogether. The results therefore signaled dramatic changes in Louisiana's political landscape. Sheridan's new voter registration system had produced almost 80,000 black and 50,000 white voters, and this new ensured 50 black men were among the 99 delegates to the constitutional convention when it convened on November 23, 1867. The convention guaranteed black men's right to vote and hold office, and instituted an oath for all public officials promising to accept the doctrine of racial equality. It also mandated the desegregation of all public accommodations and the creation of an integrated public school system. Nevertheless, some key planks in the radical program failed to pass. The convention could not agree on a measure calling for the redistribution of plantation lands to the freedpeople, and neither did it undertake a dramatic disenfranchisement of former rebels. Despite the radical victories, the new

[78] R. Folles to Capt. Sterling, April 9 and July 23, 1867, Letters Sent, Agent and Assistant Sub-Assistant Commissioner for Algiers, Louisiana, M1905, Roll 54, Vol. 187, RG 105 (BRFAL).
[79] R. Folles to Maj. Gen. Mower, May 13, 1867, Letters Sent, Agent and Assistant Sub-Assistant Commissioner for Algiers, Louisiana, M1905, Roll 54, Vol. 187, RG 105 (BRFAL).

state constitution would reflect a compromise between the different forces in the Republican coalition.[80]

Louisiana Republicans put both their newly drafted constitution and electoral ticket before the voters on April 16 and 17, 1868, prompting another round of explosive social conflict. In New Orleans, some white employers used the threat of dismissal in an attempt to cow the black electorate. One Freedmen's Bureau agent reported on April 30 that "a great many business men" in Algiers, including the owners of the dry docks and railroad, had fired their black employees "for no other reason than they did not vote according to their employers' wishes at the late election."[81] White resistance proved powerless to stop Republican triumph in the state elections, however. Indeed, the main threat to Republican victory at the polls in April actually came from splits in the party ranks, which we will examine in depth in the next chapter. Henry Clay Warmoth, the young white Union Army officer and lawyer, won election as Governor, and Oscar Dunn became Lieutenant Governor. The Democratic candidate, Henry Allen, had been the Confederate Governor of Louisiana and was still in Mexican exile at the time of the election—he received just 9,000 votes. In the state legislature, thirty-five black men won election to the House of Representatives and seven entered the state Senate.[82]

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[80] Bell, *Afro-Creole Protest Tradition*, pp. 272-273; Shugg, *Origins of Class Struggle in Louisiana*, 221-223.
[81] R. Folles to Capt. Sterling, April 30, 1867, Letters Sent, Agent and Assistant Sub-Assistant Commissioner for Algiers, Louisiana, M1905, Roll 54, Vol. 189, RG 105 (BRFAL).
[82] Henry Clay Warmoth, *War, Politics, and Reconstruction: Stormy Days in Louisiana* (New York: MacMillan, 1930), 59; Charles Vincent, *Black Legislators in Louisiana* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1976), 228-229, 236-237.

**The Making of the Radical State**

The Republican victory in the state elections of spring 1868 did not decisively settle the question of state power, however. It would take the experience of the violent national elections that fall to really give shape to the Radical state machine. While white Louisianans had largely boycotted the election in April, in November they seemed determined to carry the state for the Democratic presidential ticket of Horatio Seymour and Francis P. Blair. At the national level, the race revolved around one question: would the federal government maintain black political power in the former Confederacy, or would white supremacy return to the South? This was the first election in which the Ku Klux Klan would make an impact, as white southerners attempted to achieve victory by preventing black voting.[83]

In New Orleans, and indeed throughout Louisiana, the presidential election of November1868 thus took on the character of an open struggle between black working people and their employers. In part, this reflected the legacy of the spring elections. In June 1868, a Freedmen's Bureau agent in New Orleans reflected that "the heretofore comparatively harmonious actions of the parties seem to have been somewhat disturbed by party spirit in the late elections."[84] A downturn in the city's economy that summer undoubtedly exacerbated these tensions and gave an explosive quality to

[83] For an overview of the violent election of 1868 in Louisiana, see James G. Dauphine, "The Knights of the White Camelia and the Election of 1868: Louisiana's White Terrorists; A Benighting Legacy," *Louisiana History* 30, no. 2 (Spring, 1989).
[84] Monthly Report for Parish of Orleans, Left Bank, June 1, 1868, Monthly and Trimonthly Reports, New Orleans Field Office, M1483, Roll 1, Vol. 402, RG 105 (BRFAL).

the political contest. On July 1, the same Bureau agent quoted above reported that "business is totally paralyzed, the city treasury is empty."[85] For black workers, political and economic struggles converged in the run up to the fall elections as their employers began to impose political loyalty as a condition of employment. The Bureau agent for New Orleans noted on August 1 that African American working people had cause to "complain of having been discharged for political opinions" and that "they can get employment only by pledging their suffrage to the support of the employer's party."[86]

These tensions exploded as the November 2, 1868, election approached. On the night of October 24, black Republicans gathered in their political clubs and began to march through the city to a mass meeting in Congo Square. As they approached the corner of Baronne and Canal Streets, white men hiding in doorways and windows opened fire on the procession, killing four African American men and wounding many more. That night, according to a Freedmen's Bureau agent, white men organized into the Democratic Party-affiliated "Wide Awake Clubs" patrolled the city armed with "double barreled guns, navy revolvers, large knives, and swords." In the hours after the ambush on Canal Street, "difficulties took place in various parts of the city," and at least three more black men were killed, the agent reported.[87] The next day, the Bureau agent in New Orleans admitted his inability to deal with the unrest: as

[85] Monthly Report for Parish of Orleans, Left Bank, July 1, 1868, Monthly and Trimonthly Reports, New Orleans Field Office, M1483, Roll 1, Vol. 402, RG 105 (BRFAL).
[86] Monthly Report for Parish of Orleans, Left Bank, August 1, 1868, Monthly and Trimonthly Reports, New Orleans Field Office, M1483, Roll 1, Vol. 402, RG 105 (BRFAL).
[87] Special Report for Parish of Orleans, Left Bank, October 27, 1868, Monthly and Trimonthly Reports, New Orleans Field Office, M1483, Roll 1, Vol. 402, RG 105 (BRFAL).

"reports of continued outrages come in every hour in the day," the agent declared the "military authorities the only power…able to cope with the lawless disturbers of the peace."[88]

A similar incident had taken place in neighboring Gretna a night earlier, on October 23. When a fire broke out in a store on the corner of Newton and Front Streets, a confrontation between a white police officer and two or more black men became the occasion for a gunfight that killed two African American men, and wounded three black and two white men. Another gunfight broke out when two white men emerged from a saloon and shot a black man named Scott in the back, prompting many freedpeople to flee to the woods, arm themselves, and return to Gretna ready to defend themselves.[89] Throughout the night of October 23, gangs of white men, some who had apparently come to Gretna from New Orleans, searched black homes for weapons and robbed the inhabitants when they found none.[90] On October 25, a gang of white men attacked the living quarters of black workers at Harvey Canal, just outside Gretna, and violent outbreaks persisted throughout the area for several days.[91]

The freedpeople were not passive victims of electoral violence during the disturbances in October 1868. Black workers also used extra-parliamentary tactics to

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[88] Special Report for Parish of Orleans, Left Bank, October 28, 1868, Monthly and Trimonthly Reports, New Orleans Field Office, M1483, Roll 1, Vol. 402, RG 105 (BRFAL).
[89] Isaac Statham to Lt. Lee, October 25, 1868, Letters Sent (September-November 1868), Agent and Assistant Sub-Assistant Commissioner for Algiers, Louisiana, M1905, Roll 54, Vol. 190, RG 105 (BRFAL).
[90] Isaac Statham to Lt. Lee, November 11, 1868, Letters Sent (September-November 1868), Agent and Assistant Sub-Assistant Commissioner for Algiers, Louisiana, M1905, Roll 54, Vol. 190, RG 105 (BRFAL).
[91] Trimonthly Report for Algiers, Louisiana, October 21-31, 1868, Letters Sent (September-November 1868), Agent and Assistant Sub-Assistant Commissioner for Algiers, Louisiana, M1905, Roll 54, Vol. 190, RG 105 (BRFAL).

advance their electoral agenda, and often mobilized for armed self-defense. As early as mid-September, black working people on the plantations outside New Orleans were threatening to strike *en masse* if their employers did not "vote the Radical Republican ticket."[92] In the days following the initial Wide Awake assault on their procession in New Orleans on the night of October 24, moreover, freedpeople fought back across the city, killing two white men in incidents where, as one Freedmen's Bureau agent reported, "colored men may have been the aggressors."[93] As we have already seen, freedpeople in Gretna initially retreated from the superior firepower of white attackers, but then returned to the town with the intention of defending themselves. Moreover, some reports indicated that the race riot in Gretna began when a group of black men attempted to rescue one of their own from the clutches of a white police constable.[94]

Despite evidence of widespread black resistance to white terrorism, racist violence successfully limited the Republican vote in Louisiana in November 1868, and the state's electoral votes went to the Democratic presidential ticket of Seymour and Blair. Some employers attempted to bribe their black workers to vote the Democratic ticket; others followed the example of New Orleans businessmen and discharged those who remained loyal to the Republicans. In St. Bernard Parish, just

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[92] R. Folles to Acting Assistant Adjutant General, September 14, 1868, Letters Sent (September-November 1868), Agent and Assistant Sub-Assistant Commissioner for Algiers, Louisiana, M1905, Roll 54, Vol. 190, RG 105 (BRFAL).
[93] Special Report for Parish of Orleans, Left Bank, October 27, 1868, Monthly and Trimonthly Reports, New Orleans Field Office, M1483, Roll 1, Vol. 402, RG 105 (BRFAL).
[94] Isaac Statham to Lt. Lee, October 25, 1868, Letters Sent (September-November 1868), Agent and Assistant Sub-Assistant Commissioner for Algiers, Louisiana, M1905, Roll 54, Vol. 190, RG 105 (BRFAL).

downriver from New Orleans, an Italian gang known as the "Innocents" went on a murderous rampage against black Republicans. In total, white violence claimed the lives of at least 60 freedpeople in and around New Orleans in the weeks before the election.[95] Under pressure from local Army commander L. H. Rousseau, a Johnson appointee, Governor Warmoth reluctantly advised African American voters to avoid the polls for fear of provoking white violence. Whereas, in the April elections, Warmoth and the Republican state ticket had polled more than 61,000 votes, the Republican presidential ticket of Grant and Colfax received less than 35,000. A group of fifteen rural parishes that had given Warmoth almost 10,000 votes in April gave Grant and Colfax just 10 in November.[96]

The violence of October and November 1868 marked a crucial turning point in the history of the Republican state machine in New Orleans and Louisiana as a whole. It had become clear that the state government would need to dramatically increase its coercive power if black voting rights were to be guaranteed. Warmoth and the Republicans acted accordingly. One crucial piece of legislation was the Voter and Registration Law, which passed the state legislature in March 1870. It conferred extraordinary power on the Governor to administer elections in Louisiana and empowered Warmoth to appoint a statewide chief election officer and recommend the appointment of local registrars in every parish. These registrars would, in turn, determine the location of polling places, choose local commissioners to oversee the

[95] John C. Rodrigue, *Reconstruction in the Cane Fields: From Slavery to Freedom in Louisiana's Sugar Parishes, 1862-1880* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 2001), 98-101.
[96] Warmoth, *War, Politics, and Reconstruction,* 78-79; Hogue, *Uncivil War*, 67.

voting, and provide returns to the state executive. The new law furthermore mandated the creation of a statewide Returning Board, which would enjoy the power to scrutinize all returns, investigate reports of violence or irregularities, and unilaterally throw out the votes of any parish or locality where fraud seemed to have taken place. Since the Returning Board would be comprised of the Governor, Lieutenant Governor, Secretary of State, and two State Senators, it virtually guaranteed that the party in power at the state level would have the power to determine the results of all elections.[97]

The Republican government would also require bodies of armed men to prevent a repeat of the 1868 presidential elections. The Metropolitan Police, one element in this strategy, had been created in 1868 to take control of New Orleans out of the hands of the white supremacist municipal government, but the force did not really come into its own until 1870. The Metropolitans combined the police forces of Orleans, Jefferson, and St. Bernard Parishes into a single force, and placed them under the jurisdiction of a five-person board appointed by the Governor. The first board, appointed by Warmoth, comprised three black and two white members, and featured Oscar Dunn as President. When the Metropolitans failed to protect black Republicans during the disturbances of October and November 1868, Warmoth placed the force under the control of Algernon S. Badger. A white New Englander who had come south as an army officer with Benjamin Butler during the war, Badger proved a highly capable paramilitary commander. By the end of 1870, his first year in

[97] Warmoth, *War, Politics, and Reconstruction*, 87; Hogue, *Uncivil War*, 75-76.

charge, he had developed the Metropolitans into a biracial force of over seven hundred men, including a fleet of armed river boats and a detachment of cavalry.[98]

The State Militia Act of 1870 would prove even more important. It created a statewide biracial paramilitary force with the ability to intervene in rural areas beyond the reach of the Metropolitan Police. Always canny to the importance of patronage appointments, Warmoth placed the militia under the command of former Confederate general James Longstreet. Once a commander in Robert E. Lee's Army of Northern Virginia, Longstreet had embraced Reconstruction and endorsed his old friend Ulysses Grant for President in 1868. Like Badger of the Metropolitans, Longstreet demonstrated a real knack for creating an armed force appropriate to the needs of the Republican state government. Among the brigade commanders were both former Confederates and African American politicians from New Orleans. The latter included James Ingraham, a leader of black Unionists during the federal occupation, as well as Alexander Barber and James Lewis—former steamboat workers about whom we will hear more below. By the end of 1871, the Louisiana State Militia had mustered into service some fifty companies—about 5,000 men—of which almost 80

[98] James Hogue's *Uncivil War: Five New Orleans Street Battles and the Rise and Fall of Radical Reconstruction* provides an exceptionally rich and detailed study of paramilitary politics in Louisiana during Reconstruction—more than a monograph on the workings of various militia forces, it is actually one of the most compelling political histories of the period. I have relied heavily on his work in this paragraph and the one that follows. On the Metropolitan Police, see Hogue, *Uncivil War*, 66-68.

percent had their origins in New Orleans. Like the Metropolitan Police, therefore, the state militia was primarily an urban force.[99]

With Warmoth's new laws in place, the contrast between the elections of 1870 and those of 1868 was stark. In his memoirs, penned decades later, the Republican governor called the 1870 poll "the quietest and fairest election ever held in the State of Louisiana up to that time."[100] Even Ella Lonn, an early chronicler of Reconstruction in Louisiana and certainly no admirer of the Republican state government, called the election of 1870 "remarkable for its peaceful character."[101] The Republicans swept the field, winning all of Louisiana's congressional seats and achieving solid majorities in both houses of the state legislature. The new state government would feature seven black senators and thirty-six black representatives.[102] Crucially for the urban working people of New Orleans, Republicans also carried the municipal elections, with Radical Benjamin Flanders winning the vote for mayor and Republicans seizing every single seat on the city council.

Perhaps the most visible symbol of the Radical state power was the prominence of black legislators at all levels of local government. New Orleans and its suburbs elected more than twenty-five African American men to the Louisiana House

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[99] Hogue, *Uncivil War*, 68-72. For the careers of the black militia officers mentioned here, see Eric Foner, *Freedom's Lawmakers: A Directory of Black Officeholders During Reconstruction* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1993), 11-12, 113-114, 132-133.
[100] Warmoth, *War, Politics, and Reconstruction*, 101.
[101] Ella Lonn, *Reconstruction in Louisiana after 1868* (New York: Russell and Russell, 1918). 70.
[102] Vincent, *Black Legislators*, 231, 236.

of Representatives and seven to the State Senate. A number of these politicians came from relatively wealthy backgrounds. The merchant Aristide Dejoie, for example, came from one of the city's most prominent Afro-Creole families, and represented Orleans Parish in the Louisiana House of Representatives from 1872 to 1874.[103] Joseph Mansion ran a cigar store in New Orleans and served Orleans Parish's fifth district in the Louisiana House from 1868 to 1870.[104] Eugène-Victor Macarty represented the sixth district of Orleans Parish in the State House of Representatives from 1870 to 1872. Born into a wealthy Afro-Creole family, Macarty was a well-known local musician and actor and had studied at the Imperial Conservatory in Paris.[105]

These businessmen from the Afro-Creole elite were a minority among the black men who represented New Orleans in the Radical state government, however. The largest single group of African American legislators came from the ranks of the city's Afro-Creole artisan class, and almost all of them had served as line officers or sergeants in the Native Guards or other black regiments raised in and around New Orleans. Edgar Davis, a cooper, had been among the group of black men who approached Benjamin Butler in the summer of 1862 about the possibility of enlisting African American troops. He represented the fifth district of Orleans Parish in the

[103] Foner, *Freedom's Lawmakers*, 59; Vincent, *Black Legislators*, 146, 233.
[104] Foner, *Freedom's Lawmakers*, 141.
[105] Foner, *Freedom's Lawmakers*, 140.

state House of Representatives from 1870 to 1872.[106] Lazard Rodriguez, a shoemaker with three white French grandparents, briefly served as a captain in the Union Army, and went on to serve Orleans Parish in the state House of Representatives from 1872 to 1874.[107] Julien Monette worked as a tailor. He was a captain in the 6th Louisiana Infantry during the Civil War and then served in the Louisiana state Senate from 1868 to 1870.[108]

It is certainly the case that all of these men stood in a relatively privileged position in relation to the freedpeople they represented. All had been free when the war broke out and a large number had never known slavery at all. Many had several, and some a majority of, white ancestors—a few could have passed for white themselves. Nevertheless, life in a slave society, followed by the experience of war, and emancipation had closed the social distance between African American legislators and their black working-class constituents, at least for the time being. Black men from these social groups—artisans, small business owners, and skilled workingmen—had suffered repression at the hands of antebellum state and municipal authorities, especially in the 1850s. They had been among the earliest volunteers to join the Union war effort in occupied New Orleans, and had in many cases served as line officers in regiments made up of fugitive slaves and freedmen. As the Unionist movement took shape in occupied New Orleans, the most farsighted representatives

[106] Foner, *Freedom's Lawmakers*, 57; James G. Hollandsworth, Jr., *The Louisiana Native Guards: The Black Military Experience during the Civil War* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1995), 17-18; Vincent, *Black Legislators*, 231.
[107] Foner, *Freedom's Lawmakers*, 186; Vincent, *Black Legislators*, 233.
[108] Foner, *Freedom's Lawmakers*, 151; Vincent, *Black Legislators*, 237.

of the black middle classes had come to see their own political fate as inextricably linked to that of the freedpeople. Their election to political office marked the consummation of the alliance between the Republican Party and the black working people of New Orleans.

We must also note the limitations of Radicalism's triumph at the ballot box, however, especially in terms of its significance for the political participation of African American women. As I have demonstrated above, Radicalism had emerged partly from the politics of everyday life for black working people in New Orleans—black women as well as black men. Black women had of course played a crucial role in shaping their community during the antebellum period, and, as we have seen, black working women had made a major contribution to the Union war effort and the coming of emancipation. It was only because of these struggles that Radicalism as an electoral project was even possible. And yet, the turn to electoralism had the dual effects of bureaucratizing the Radical movement, and excluding black women from what would become a main arena of struggle going forward.

Scholars have debated the impact of black male suffrage on black women's political activity in the Civil War era. Jacqueline Jones has argued that the electoral arena remained an exclusively male affair when it came to the southern black community during Reconstruction. African American men, she argues, accepted the idea that the "public" world of electoral politics was the proper preserve of masculine virtues, and that women should confine themselves to the "private" world of the home. "Freedwomen sometimes spoke up forcefully at meetings devoted to specific

community issues," Jones writes, "but they remained outside the formal political process."[109] Other historians have found that the boundaries of electoral politics were rather more permeable than Jones suggests, however. In a study of Reconstruction-era Virginia, Elsa Barkley Brown finds African American women playing a significant role in what might be considered the "formal" politics of the community. "[B]lack Richmonders enacted their understandings of democratic political discourse through mass meetings attended and participated in (including voting) by men, women, and children," Barkley Brown shows. Black women even attended and participated in Republican Party conventions and debates in the state capitol.[110] Similarly, Kate Masur has shown how the black women of Civil War-era Washington, D.C. attended debates in Congress, petitioned male politicians of both races, and generally inserted themselves into the political culture of the nation's capital.[111]

**P.B.S Pinchback and the Contradictions of Urban Radicalism**

Even as the turn to electoral politics began to marginalize the activism of black working women, it elevated to power a group of black male steamboat workers. The rise of P.B.S. Pinchback and his associates, all of who had worked on the Mississippi steamers before the Civil War, represented a coming to pass of some of

[109] Jacqueline Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work, and the Family from Slavery to the Present* (New York: Basic Books, 1985), 66.
[110] Elsa Barkley Brown, "Negotiating and Transforming the Public Sphere: African American Political Life in the Transition from Slavery to Freedom," *Public Culture*, no. 7 (Fall 1994): 109.
[111] Kate Masur, *An Example for All the Land: Emancipation and the Struggles over Equality in Washington, D.C.* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010).

the worst fears of the antebellum urban elite. As we have already seen, the planters and merchants of New Orleans had long been suspicious of black sailors and steamboat workers, and had passed stringent legislation to restrict their presence and activities in the city. Now, with Radicalism ascendant in Louisiana, precisely this group of black working men stood at the head of the Republican state government. But this development, which highlighted the distinctively urban character of Reconstruction in New Orleans and Louisiana, would in fact have contradictory implications for the development of black politics in the 1870s. Pinchback and his friends championed black civil rights and education, and were crucial to the development—and survival—of the Radical state's armed wing. But these former steamboat workers also treated political office as an opportunity for personal gain, dabbled in corruption, and articulated a thoroughly middle-class vision of black empowerment. Their rise symbolized some of the contradictions within urban Radicalism.

The three friends P.B.S. Pinchback, William Barrett, and James Lewis made up the core of this group of former steamboat workers. Born in 1837, Pinkney Benton Stewart Pinchback was the son of a white Mississippi planter and one of his female slaves. Freed by his father, Pinchback attended school in Cincinnati before going to work on the steamboats as a cabin boy, eventually rising to the position of steward.[112] Even at a young age, Pinchback demonstrated a strong self-reliance and a shrewd eye for the main chance. While working on the Mississippi, he fell in with the notorious

[112] For Pinchback's prewar biography, see Elizabeth F. Chittenden, *Profiles in Black and White: Men and Women Who Fought Against Slavery* (New York: Scribner, 1973), 162.

white gambler George Devol, who later claimed to have "instructed him in the mysteries of card-playing" and staked his games with black passengers and crew.[113] Pinchback had befriended William Barrett during his schooldays in Cincinnati. A native of that city, Barrett was, like Pinchback, the son of a white man and a woman of color. When Pinchback took to life on the river, Barrett followed and made a career as a steamboat barber.[114] On the steamers the two friends met James Lewis, another son of a white Mississippi planter and a black woman, who had grown up in Louisiana.[115]

Each of the three friends made their way to New Orleans once Union troops occupied the city in 1862, and became recruiters and line officers for the black Louisiana Native Guard regiments. Pinchback was working on the steamer *Alonzo Childs* when the Yankees arrived on the lower Mississippi; when his captain attempted to flee up the Yazoo River to escape the northern occupation, Pinchback jumped ship and headed for New Orleans.[116] James Lewis was working as steward on the Confederate steamer *Desoto* when he received word of Lincoln's preliminary Emancipation Proclamation in the fall of 1862 and escaped down the river to the Crescent City.[117] In occupied New Orleans, Pinchback was confined to the workhouse for his part in a street brawl before Benjamin Butler when him to help recruit African American men for the Union Army in August 1862. On his release,

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[113] George Devol, *Forty Years a Gambler on the Mississippi* (Cincinnati: Devol and Haines, 1887), 216.
[114] Vincent, *Black Legislators*, 119.
[115] Foner, *Freedom's Lawmakers*, 133; Rankin, "Origins of Black Leadership," 430.
[116] Chittenden, *Profiles*, 162.
[117] Vincent, *Black Legislators*, 7.

Pinchback set up a recruiting station at the corner of Bienville and Villeré streets and subsequently served as captain of the men he enlisted to Company A of the 2nd Louisiana Native Guards.[118] William Barrett recruited, and became captain of, Company B in the same regiment.[119] James Lewis, meanwhile, raised two companies for the 1st Native Guards and became captain of Company K in that regiment.[120] The former steamboat workers recruited and officered companies made up of men who were overwhelmingly fugitives from slavery, rather than free men of color like themselves, demonstrating the ability of Pinchback and his friends to help bind together different components of the Radical alliance.[121]

As officers in the Native Guards, the former steamboat workers found themselves at the center of a war of emancipation in the Mississippi Valley. We have already seen how the presence of African American soldiers encouraged and facilitated the collapse of slavery and in and around New Orleans; Pinchback and his fellow officers witnessed this firsthand. In the fall and winter of 1862, just a few weeks after mustering into the army, the black soldiers of the Native Guards were put to work repairing and guarding the New Orleans, Opelousas, and Great Western Railroad, where their presence attracted so many fugitive slaves that local planters began to fear a potential slave insurrection.[122] In battle, the Native Guards also

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[118] Chittenden, *Profiles*, 162-163; Vincent, *Black Legislators*, 9-10.
[119] C.P. Weaver (ed.), *Thank God My Regiment an African One: The Civil War Diary of Colonel Nathan W. Daniels* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1998), 185; Vincent, *Black Legislators*, 8.
[120] Vincent, *Black Legislators*, 7-8.
[121] See Chapter 3.
[122] Hollandsworth, *Louisiana Native Guards,* 38-39; Weaver, *My Regiment*, 17-18.

contributed to the victory of Union arms. Although Pinchback does not appear to have experienced combat, both Barrett and Lewis led their men into battle. Pinchback's Company A of the 2nd Native Guards was stationed at the isolated Fort Pike, where there was little chance of facing Confederate forces.[123] In the spring of 1863, however, while most of the 2nd Native Guards were stationed on Ship Island, William Barrett led the men of Company B during the successful Union raid on Pascagoula, Mississippi.[124] James Lewis was involved in much more sustained campaigning and combat as part of the 1st Native Guards. Having been stationed at Baton Rouge in the spring, his regiment, along with the 3rd Native Guards, was part of Nathaniel Banks's force during the disastrous assault on Port Hudson in May 1863.[125]

Even as they participated in a war of emancipation, Pinchback, Barrett, and Lewis also experienced the vicious racism that was so central to the African American military experience. The 1st and 2nd Native Guards, in which the three friends served as officers, did not share the lot of the 3rd regiment, which spent its first few months in the field engaged in harvesting the sugar crop.[126] Nevertheless, the Native Guards stationed on the Opelousas railroad and at Ship Island found much of their time occupied by menial tasks such as weeding and digging.[127] Even worse than this drudgery were the episodes of open white violence against black troops and their

[123] Hollandsworth, *Louisiana Native Guards*, 75.
[124] Weaver, *My Regiment*, 79-81.
[125] Hollandsworth, *Louisiana Native Guards*, 48-58.
[126] Ibid., 36.
[127] Ibid, 33.

officers. William Barrett must have been horrified when, having led his men almost unscathed through the raid on Pascagoula, he witnessed several of them die from a shell fired by white sailors on the Union gunboat *Jackson*.[128] Ultimately, the three friends were forced to resign their commissions due to the climate of racial hysteria emanating from white soldiers and officers. Barrett was the first to leave the service, resigning in the summer of 1863 having failed to receive assurances that black officers would be allowed to serve in the new Corps d'Afrique.[129] Pinchback soon followed his friend, resigning in September of 1863 with the complaint that he found "nearly all of the officers inimical to me." He later raised a company of black cavalry regiment but was denied a commission for the unit he had recruited.[130] Of the three friends, James Lewis endured the longest, but he too resigned in disgust following Banks's Red River campaign in 1864.[131]

Having played a crucial role in black military units, former steamboat workers went on to become prominent figures the early stages of the post-war Radical movement in New Orleans. Free men of color tended to lead the initial phase of organizing for black civil rights, and they sometimes based their appeals for equality on the particular wartime experiences of their social group. As early as November 1863, for example, Pinchback spoke publicly for the right of African American

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[128] For a detailed account of this incident, see Chapter 3.
[129] Weaver, *My Regiment*, 114-115.
[130] James Haskins, *The First Black Governor: Pinkney Benton Stewart Pinchback* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1973 [repr. 1996]) 25-29.
[131] William J. Simmons, *Men of Mark: Eminent, Progressive, and Rising* (New York: Arno Press, 1968), 955.

veterans to vote.[132] As we have seen, however, this social layer also played a crucial role in *broadening* the Radical coalition. At the national level, the formation of the National Equal Rights League in 1864 was one example of this trajectory. This new grouping demanded citizenship for all black southerners, including both the formerly free and the recently emancipated. When the group held its first meeting in Louisiana in January1865, former steamboat workers were centrally involved.[133] A newcomer to New Orleans, Alexander Barber, served as the vice-president of the first convention of the Louisiana Equal Rights League. Barber had grown up in Louisville, Kentucky, before working on the steamers in the Mississippi Valley. He would go on to become a crucial ally of Pinchback.[134] William Barrett also served as a delegate at the convention.[135]

In 1867, Pinchback threw his lot in with the Republican Party in New Orleans and launched what would become a quite extraordinary political career. At the end of the Civil War, he and his wife Nina had left Louisiana for Alabama, but they returned to New Orleans in early 1867. In April of that year, Pinchback founded the Fourth Ward Republican Club as his political headquarters.[136] He used the Club as the vehicle for his election to the Louisiana constitutional convention of 1867-68, but it also hosted speeches and lectures by Pinchback allies like Sella Martin and Alexander

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[132] Ripley, *Slaves and Freedmen*, 164.
[133] On the Louisiana Equal Rights League, see John W. Blassingame, *Black New Orleans, 1860-1880* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1973), 56-57; Ripley, *Slaves and Freedmen*, 178-179.
[134] Vincent, *Black Legislators*, 122.
[135] Foner, *Freedom's Lawmakers*, 11, 13.
[136] Haskins, *Pinchback*, 49-50.

Barber.[137] After emerging as a major figure in the Republican Party at the convention, Pinchback won election to the state senate from Orleans Parish in 1868, although he only claimed his seat in the legislature following a disputed vote count.[138] In 1870 two other former steamboat workers joined Pinchback in the state government. William Barrett won election to the state House of Representatives for a single term, and Alexander Barber sat in the state senate from 1870 to 1874.[139]

Former steamboat workers also made a major contribution to the development of the armed capacities of the Radical state. Pinchback, for example, led efforts to shepherd Warmoth's electoral law through the state senate.[140] James Lewis, who had also been a delegate to the constitutional convention, joined the Metropolitan Police as a sergeant in 1869 and soon won promotion to the rank of captain. In 1870, Warmoth recognized Lewis's talents by appointing him colonel of the second regiment of the Louisiana State Militia.[141] As well as serving in the state senate, Alexander Barber established himself as one of Warmoth's most important allies in the armed wing of the Radical government. Thanks to the governor's appointment, he became a brigadier general in the First Division of the Louisiana State Militia, making him one of the first black men to hold the rank of general in an American

[137] See, for example, *Semi-Weekly Louisianan*, May 21 and June 18, 1871
[138] Haskins, *Pinchback*, 61-63.
[139] Vincent, *Black Legislators*, 230, 236.
[140] Haskins, *Pinchback*, 75-77.
[141] Simmons, *Men of Mark*, 956.

militia.[142] Each of these men would find themselves at the center of the armed struggles that engulfed the Radical government during Reconstruction.

For these former steamboat workers, black civil rights and the desegregation of public accommodations became a major goal of their time in government. Pinchback was instrumental in having the equal right to accommodation in public conveyances and places of entertainment enshrined in the Louisiana state constitution of 1868.[143] In his private life, Pinchback was known for socializing in the few integrated hostelries in New Orleans, including Redwitz's beer saloon, and made a point of protesting publicly when denied service.[144] Most famously, perhaps, in 1871 Pinchback sued the Jackson Railroad for $25,000 for refusing to give his family a berth in a Pullman carriage, even after they had paid for their tickets.[145]

Pinchback and his allies also prioritized the cause of black educational achievement. From 1865 to 1870, James Lewis organized schools for the Freedmen's Bureau, often putting his own life at risk by traveling alone in rural Louisiana and braving the fury of those whites who strongly resented any attempts to educate the freedpeople. According to his biographer, Lewis was at one point captured by a group of such whites while working in northern Louisiana, and escaped unharmed only with the help of "some friendly Masons."[146] He also participated in the effort of black preacher John Turner to establish the Louisiana Educational Relief Association,

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[142] Hogue, *Uncivil War,* 70.
[143] Haskins, *Pinchback*, 59.
[144] Blassingame, *Black New Orleans*, 188-189.
[145] *Semi-Weekly Louisianan*, June 25, July 6, July 9, and July 13, 1871.
[146] Simmons, *Men of Mark*, 955.

which provided schools for indigent children.[147] Pinchback shared Lewis's preoccupation with black education. In the mid-1870s, for example, Pinchback engineered the appointment of an African American man, E.J. Edmunds, as professor of mathematics at the Central High School of New Orleans, and then helped Edmunds keep his job in the face of opposition from white students and their parents.[148] Pinchback was still advocating for black education as late as 1880, and in that year successfully led the campaign to establish Southern University "for the education of persons of color."[149]

In order to advance their careers and political agenda, Pinchback, Barber, and Barrett launched their own newspaper, the *Semi-Weekly Louisianan*, in December 1869. Pinchback soon became the sole proprietor.[150] In 1871, Sella Martin joined the *Louisianan* as a journalist.[151] Born in North Carolina, the son of a white man and an enslaved mother, Martin had worked as captain's messenger on steamboats in Alabama, Louisiana, and Mississippi in the 1850s. He eventually escaped from the South and became a famous antislavery preacher and associate of Frederick Douglass.[152] In 1870, Martin arrived in New Orleans after winning appointment as postmaster and joined the staff of Pinchback's new journal. Declaring itself "Republican at all times, and under all circumstances," the *Louisianan* stood behind a

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[147] Blassingame, *Black New Orleans*, 108.
[148] Ibid., 117-118.
[149] Haskins, *Pinchback*, 241.
[150] Ibid., 74-75. See also, Foner, *Freedom's Lawmakers*, 11, 13.
[151] *Semi-Weekly Louisianan*, May 21, 1871.
[152] See Martin's autobiography in John W. Blassingame (ed.), *Slave Testimony: Two Centuries of Letters, Speeches, Interviews, and Autobiographies* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1977), 702-735.

fairly standard Radical program of schools, internal improvements, and labor reform. Unsurprisingly, the paper stated its intention to "urge as a paramount duty the education of our youth."[153] The *Louisianan* commented frequently on efforts to desegregate public accommodations in New Orleans. On May 11, 1871, for example, it commented on the case of Charles Sauvinet, the African American Sheriff of Orleans Parish, who sued a white saloonkeeper for refusing to serve him a drink.[154] A few weeks later, on May 28, the *Louisianan* denounced a Presbyterian Sunday school for excluding black children and called on African American parents to "send your children to schools where no distinction is made on account of color," rather than accept the reality of segregated schooling without a fight.[155]

The *Louisianan* was not Pinchback's only major business venture of the Reconstruction years. In 1869 he became co-owner of Pinchback and Antoine Commission Merchants.[156] Pinchback's new business partner, Caesar "C.C." Antoine, came from the free working elite of antebellum New Orleans and had been a barber before the Civil War.[157] Indeed, according to Pinchback biographer James Haskins, Antoine may have been working as a steamboat barber when the two men first met. Perhaps based on this shared profession and earlier acquaintance, they formed a political alliance during the constitutional convention of 1867.[158] Following the war, Antoine moved to Shreveport, established himself as a grocer and plantation owner,

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[153] *Semi-Weekly Louisianan*, May 11, 1871.
[154] *Semi-Weekly Louisianan*, May 11, 1871; Foner, *Freedom's Lawmakers*, 190.
[155] *Semi-Weekly Louisianan*, May 28, 1871.
[156] Haskins, *Pinchback*, 74.
[157] Foner, *Freedom's Lawmakers*, 8.
[158] Haskins, *Pinchback*, 74.

and won election as the state senator for Caddo Parish from 1868 to 1872. As well as handling the Shreveport side of his business venture with Pinchback, he was one of the initial investors in the *Louisianan*.[159] Indeed, the *Louisianan* promoted Pinchback and Antoine Commission Merchants fairly openly as a project of collective racial uplift, on June 1, 1871, calling on African American farmers and laborers to patronize black merchants because "the success of a colored mercantile house here would redound to their success in the country."[160]

Pinchback and Antoine were joined by Alexander Barber and a number of other black politicians as investors in the ill-fated Mississippi River Packet Company. Incorporated in December 1870, the Packet was intended to cater to black passengers who had trouble persuading white-owned ferries to carry them across the Mississippi.[161] In one sense, the Packet can be seen as akin to Pinchback's suit against the Jackson Railroad, and an extension of his fight to provide quality public accommodation and transportation services for the African American population of New Orleans. Hoping to raise capital in the sum of $500,000 for the project, Pinchback and his fellow investors must have hoped for broad demand in the black community for the Packet's $100 shares.[162] They also hoped for private gain at public expense, however. As a member of the powerful senate committees on Engrossing Bills and Public Works, Pinchback was in a strong position to propose and manage

[159] Foner, *Freedom's Lawmakers*, 8.
[160] *Semi-Weekly Louisianan*, June 1, 1871.
[161] Vincent, *Black Legislators*, 81.
[162] Blassingame, *Black New Orleans*, 72.

legislation that called for major expenditures of state money.[163] Using his political connections, he was able to secure a grant of $25,000 in public money for Mississippi River Packet Company, a company of which he was one of the incorporators.[164] This was not the only example of corruption during Pinchback's time in government. In 1870, he was rumored to have received a bribe of at least $1,000 to support state-backed bonds for the New Orleans, Jackson, and Great Northern Railroad, in which Governor Warmoth was a major investor.[165] Pinchback also faced accusations that, as a park commissioner, he had benefited from city purchases of vacant land.[166]

These former steamboat workers enjoyed a standard of living and social life that was far removed from the experiences of their black working-class constituents. Haskins quotes a *New Orleans Times* reporter who thought Pinchback's "very nice two-story house" on Derbigny Street "might be coveted by any person in moderate circumstances." But while Pinchback's dwelling might have seemed "moderate" by the standards of the white elite of New Orleans, it was something else entirely in comparison to the living standards of African American working people. We need only contrast Pinchback's "fine brussels carpet…handsome curtains…silver ice pitcher and goblets on a salver" with life in the homes of the city's freedpeople to see the gulf in experience.[167] This emerging social chasm also appeared in the chosen leisure activities of these African American politicians. Horseracing, for example,

[163] Haskins, *Pinchback*, 84-85.
[164] Foner, *Freedom's Lawmakers*, 171.
[165] Hogue, *Uncivil War*, 64.
[166] Haskins, *Pinchback*, 86.
[167] Ibid., 54-55.

seems to have been a favored pursuit in Pinchback's circle of former steamboat workers. Pinchback's grandson, the Harlem Renaissance writer Jean Toomer, remembered his grandfather had a "passion for horse racing" and owned several horses of his own.[168] In 1871, C.C. Antoine raced his horse "Nellie" against William Barrett's "Frank" for a handsome purse of $400.[169] The *Louisianan* reported on the social lives of black political leaders and their families, covering, for example, a party held for Pinchback's mother or a picnic orgnanized by James Lewis's wife.[170]

Unsurprisingly, therefore, these former steamboat workers tended to advocate a thoroughly middle-class ideology of advancement for the freedpeople of New Orleans. We have already seen the *Louisianan* promote African American businesses as a means of advancement for all black people. In 1875, James Lewis made a similar rhetorical move when he tied the struggle for black civil rights to the pursuit of wealth. "It is only interest which will drive out prejudice from the minds of whites," he said. "Remember that the roads to prosperity are to be reached only through intelligence, and wealth and industry."[171] Another strand of this ideology tended to emphasize the community of interests between labor and capital, and to deny any inherent conflict between employers and their workers. In the aftermath of the Paris Commune, for example, the *Louisianan* printed a lecture by noted pacifist Elihu Burritt titled "Partnership Between Capital and Labor." In it, Burritt worried about the

[168] Jean Toomer, *The Wayward and the Seeking* (Washington D.C.: Howard University Press, 1980), 25.
[169] Blassingame, *Black New Orleans*, 142.
[170] *Semi-Weekly Louisianan*, May 18 and July 9, 1871
[171] Blassingame, *Black New Orleans*, 66.

growth of "combinations of working-men to protect their rights" which he felt "threaten to upset governments and change the constitution of states." Much better, Burritt concluded, would be a sense of cooperation between capital and labor, "the two great forces upon whose union every country must rely for its material prosperity."[172] This emphasis on social mobility and a partnership in the national interest between labor and capital aligned the *Louisianan* with the mainstream of Radical thought in the 1860s and 1870s.

The *Louisianan* also spoke out against women's rights. As I have noted, Radicalism's turn to electoralism pushed the movement into an arena in which African American women could not easily participate. Clearly, Pinchback and his co-thinkers intended to defend and uphold this exclusion. On May 21, 1871, the *Louisianan* published an article questioning whether women were ready for the right to vote. Women, author Gail Hamilton argued, would not bring a new and better approach to politics. Indeed, "Women, so far as they are already in politics, are doing right over again, and often with a peculiar feminine and fatal facility, the very things which have been done by men, and which ought never to be done at all."[173] A few weeks later, on June 15, the *Louisianan* did publish a short piece asking whether women could possibly be any more easily influenced and corrupted as voters than men already were.[174] Nevertheless, the editorial line of the paper seems to have been to criticize those who, according to an August 3, 1871, article, "would introduce a

[172] *Semi-Weekly Louisianan*, June 22, 1871.
[173] *Semi-Weekly Louisiana*, May 21, 1971.
[174] *Semi-Weekly Louisiana*, June 15, 1871.

certain independence of restraint," between men and women, "a so-called 'equality' which shall be destructive of just distinctions of the sexes" and damage "the clearly defined duties resting on each."[175]

Thanks to charges of corruption and political conservatism, Pinchback and his allies among the former steamboat workers came in for severe criticism from some who knew them. Looking back on Reconstruction from the 1890s, Charles Martinet, a leader of the New Orleans creoles of color, condemned "Pinchback & the like" for their mercenary approach to black liberation. "What have they ever done that has not been of more profit to them than to their race?" he asked. "*They have grown rich in fighting the race's battles*."[176] Jean Toomer, Pinchback's grandson, agreed his grandfather was much more interested in personal gain and political power than the uplift of black New Orleans.

> More than anything else Pinchback saw himself as a winner of a dangerous game. He liked to play the game. He liked to win. This—the reconstruction situation in Louisiana—was the chance his personal ambition had been waiting for. He was not a reformer. He was not primarily a fighter for a general human cause.[177]

Although Toomer clearly admired his grandfather, he certainly did not see Pinchback's career as one of service to the freedpeople of New Orleans.

The rise to power of Pinchback the other former steamboat workers reveals the contradictory character of urban Radicalism. On one level, their prominence justified many of the fears of the antebellum urban white elite. Before the Civil War,

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[175] *Semi-Weekly Louisiana*, August 3, 1871.
[176] C.L. Karcher, "Albion W. Tourgée and Louis A. Martinet: The Cross-Racial Friendship behind Plessy v. Ferguson," *MELUS* 1, no. 38 (2013).
[177] Toomer, *The Wayward and the Seeking*, 25.

municipal authorities had recognized the independence and political sophistication of black steamboat workers in particular, and had attempted to repress them; now, in the shape of Pinchback and his cohort, this social layer had risen to at least a share of power in postbellum Louisiana. These men had, moreover, played a central role in the articulation of the Radical alliance between the white leadership of the Republican Party, the black working people of New Orleans, and the broader population of rural freedpeople in Louisiana. If their political agenda was often self-serving, former steamboat worekrs had also pushed for important civil rights legislation and achieved major steps toward the desegregation of public institutions such as schools. At the same time, however, Pinchback's very real desire for personal enrichment demonstrated a developing process of class stratification within southern Radicalism. He and his allies put forward a worldview that showed the growing gulf between their interests and those of the freedpeople who formed their urban constituency. As we will see in the final chapter, this trajectory threatened the very existence of Radicalism in New Orleans.

**Conclusion**

1870 and 1871 marked the high water mark of Radical Reconstruction in New Orleans and Louisiana. In these years the alliance that had first taken shape during the federal occupation of New Orleans came to power and consolidated its grip on the state. Based in the black popular classes of town and country, it elevated a political class of middle-class white and African American officeholders. But while the

Radical regime never truly became a government of working people, it had its origins in popular mobilization and remained at least partially responsive to the needs of its working class constituents. Indeed, the Radical regime in New Orleans had emerged from the clash between the local manifestation of Presidential Reconstruction and the grassroots militancy of black—and, to a much lesser extent, white—working people. When the Rebel Legislature attempted to put the popular mobilization back in the box, the result was a wave of racial violence culminating in the Massacre of July 1866.

The New Orleans Massacre, and other incidents like it, reopened the question of state power in the former Confederacy. Would returning Rebels resume control of local government and use its machinery to restrict the rights of the freedpeople? In answering that question the national Republican Party moved its alliance with black working people—initially forged during the Civil War—to a qualitatively new level. Through the early 1870s, the federal government would guarantee the rights of the freedpeople, through military intervention if necessary, and would build new state governments that rested on black male suffrage. Urban African Americans, with their higher levels of consciousness and organization, along with their Radical white allies, would form a crucial point of articulation between the Republican Party and the rural black population.

The advent of Congressional Reconstruction in early 1867 reacted back upon the popular movement that had brought it to power. With powerful new allies, black working people in New Orleans felt emboldened to strengthen and deepen their

struggles at the grassroots. The streetcar protests, strikes, and mass demonstrations of 1867 and 1868 revealed the intimate connection between electoral politics and popular militancy at this stage of Reconstruction. Just as the actions of the Republican Party gave confidence to ordinary African American men and women, so too the climate of urban unrest created the context for the thumping electoral victories at the polls.

The Radical coalition remained fragile for two reasons. For one thing, the forces of white supremacism maintained their strength in New Orleans and, especially, rural and small-town Louisiana. Once in power, the Radicals would need the means to defend themselves forcefully. This they partially achieved through the consolidation of the state machine under Henry Clay Warmoth between 1868 and 1871, although the Metropolitan Police and State Militia had yet to be tested in battle. The other source of weakness came from within the coalition itself, however. As the rise of P.B.S. Pinchback and the steamboat aristocracy demonstrated, even the black Republican leaders enjoyed a set of class privileges that distanced them from the working-class base of the party. The Radical alliance clearly contained disparate social forces, some of which were in the very early stages of emergence and self-awareness. Stresses and strains within the Radical bloc would sorely test its ability to remain in power and, as we shall see in the final chapter, would ultimately play a role its downfall.

## Chapter Six

## "Mischief Among the Freedmen":

## Consciousness, Conflict, and the Death of Urban Radicalism

Agent Folles of the Freedmen's Bureau probably did not expect a schoolteacher to be among the obstacles to the smooth running of the Bureau in Algiers, a suburb of New Orleans, in the summer of 1867. As an Assistant Sub-Assistant Commissioner, Folles had responsibility for administering the emergence of a free labor system in one of the city's major suburbs. His duties included settling contracts, dealing with labor disputes, and setting up a system of schools for the former slaves in his district. These were challenging enough tasks on their own, and Folles must have wished he did not also have to deal with Mrs. Williams, a teacher at General Grant School. And yet, in early August, Folles was forced to write to Mrs. Williams and admonish her that "For the last six weeks you have done nothing but raise mischief among the Freedmen." The nature of this "mischief" became clear when the Agent warned Williams about her future conduct: "Hereafter you will not go on any plantation and make speeches to the Freedmen, without you shall have first obtained permission from the owners." Moreover, Folles accused Williams of trying to mobilize the community after he called her to his office. "You told the children to tell their parents that you were dismissed," he complained. Apparently, Williams failed to heed Folles's warning, because less than two weeks later she *was* dismissed from the Bureau's service. "You have endeavored to create mischief among the

freedmen and their employers and overseers," Folles stated in his letter terminating her employment.[1]

Agent Folles's ordeal with the mischievous Mrs. Williams highlights the contradiction at the heart of the Radical project in New Orleans. As a representative of the Freedmen's Bureau, Folles was tasked with easing the transition from slavery to wage labor in Algiers and on the plantations surrounding it. In the free labor vision of the Republican Party of the 1860s, this meant teaching former slaves to be good workers—a process that included setting up schools and encouraging the freedpeople to educate themselves and their children. But the efforts of the Bureau and the other institutions of Radical power in the South did not always have the intended effect. Instead, participation in them sometimes taught the freedpeople a rather different definition of what it meant to be "good workers": confronting employers and overseers, using schools and other community institutions as organizing centers, and mobilizing collectively to improve their lot as wage earners. Writ large, this dynamic spelled trouble for the Radical regime in New Orleans. From the moment Union troops first set foot in southern Louisiana, the success of Republican military and political objectives had rested on the mobilization of black working people like those at General Grant School. Without such a mobilization, Governor Warmoth's government could never have come to power. And yet their role in the success and defense of the Radical regime had given black working people a powerful sense of

[1] R. Folles to Mrs. E. Williams, August 5 and 16, 1867, Letters Sent (April 1867-February 1868), Agent and Assistant Sub-Assistant Commissioner for Algiers, Louisiana, M1905, Roll 54, Vol. 188, Records of the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, RG 105, National Archives, Washington, D.C. (hereafter, BRFAL).

their own interests and the confidence to pursue them through individual and collective action. When such actions brought the freedpeople into conflict with their employers, the Radical state government would be forced to choose sides and, ultimately, take action against its own base. By the mid-1870s, this contradiction had led to the dramatic weakening of Radicalism in New Orleans.

A number of historians have examined the role of class conflict in the downfall of Radicalism. Perhaps mostly famously, David Montgomery's seminal work *Beyond Equality* made a persuasive case that the new economic and social realities of the postwar North played a major role in splitting the Radical coalition. By the late 1860s, Montgomery argued, "Radicalism had been tried and found wanting: by labor reformers because the support it provided working-class needs was at best ambivalent, by manufacturers because it failed to provide an adequate barrier to working-class pretensions."[2] More recently, Heather Cox Richardson's *Death of Reconstruction* has provided strong support for Montgomery's thesis. According to Richardson, Republicans abandoned their support for black civil rights in the South because they became concerned that former slaves, like restive northern workers, expected the government to pass class legislation in their interests rather than rely on the traditional free labor values of thrift, independence, and hard work.[3] In a recent case study that confirms these findings, John Jentz and Richard Schneirov have

[2] David Montgomery, *Beyond Equality: Labor and the Radical Republicans, 1862-1872* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1981 [1967]), 368.
[3] Heather Cox Richardson, *The Death of Reconstruction: Race, Labor, and Politics in the Posty-Civil War North, 1865-1900* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 2001).

shown how "The local Republican Party fractured during the course of the struggle for an Illinois eight-hour-day law and its enforcement by a general strike of Chicago's trade unions."[4]

Just as was happening in northern cities like Chicago, the Radical coalition in New Orleans was beginning to fracture along class lines. Indeed, the alliance had always contained the seeds of its own destruction. Radicalism relied on a base of highly mobilized and politicized black working people. But by drawing the freedpeople into intense political activity, the Radical project also imparted them with confidence and a strong sense of their new role as wage workers. In the early 1870s, this growing class consciousness would lead to bitter struggles between African American workers and their employers in and around New Orleans, forcing the Radical regime to chose sides. The armed apparatus that had defended the Louisiana state government against neo-Confederate attacks was now deployed against striking black workers. At the same time, Radicalism's weak base among the local economic elite, and the increasing conservatism of some Republican leaders, produced vicious factionalism at the top of the party—factionalism that sometimes spilled over into paramilitary violence on the streets of New Orleans. By the time William Pitt Kellogg took over as governor in early 1873, the Radical coalition had become hopelessly weak and divided.

[4] John B. Jentz and Richard Schneirov, *Chicago in the Age of Capital: Class, Politics, and Democracy during the Civil War and Reconstruction* (Urbana, Chicago, and Springfield: University of Illinois Press, 2012), 5.

**The Freedmen's Bureau and the Black Working Class**

The Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, popularly known as the Freedmen's Bureau, formed a crucial part of the infrastructure of the Radical coalition. Created in March 1865 under the jurisdiction of the War Department and then extended over President Johnson's veto a year later, the Bureau was designed to facilitate the transition from slavery to free labor in the post-Confederate South. Because Bureau agents worked in close contact with communities of Black working people, and because they kept voluminous records of these interactions, the records of the Freedmen's Bureau remain an invaluable source for understanding the emergence of the Black working class in New Orleans. They show us not only how representatives of the federal government attempted to create a labor force in the former slaves states, but also the ways in which the freedpeople played a role in their own transformation into free wage workers. Most importantly, the Freedmen's Bureau records demonstrate the interconnectedness of the Radical coalition and the making of the black working class.

The activities of the Freedmen's Bureau reflected the ideological bent of the white northern men who ran it. As Randall Miller states, "Most Republicans believed that the freedmen could best make themselves free men by working for land, rather than looking to the government for handouts."[5] In this context, Bureau agents thought their primary responsibility to the freedpeople was, in the words of Leon Litwack, "to

[5] Randall M. Miller, "Introduction: The Freedmen's Bureau and Reconstruction: An Overview," Paul A. Cimbala and Randall M. Miller (eds.), *The Freedmen's Bureau and Reconstruction: Reconsiderations* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1999), xix.

teach them to be reliable agricultural laborers."[6] Moreover, Mary Farmer-Kaiser has shown how the Bureau "employed the gendered ideologies of the day to restrict [black women's] efforts to control their labor, their children, their households, and their bodies."[7] Nevertheless, we should reject any assessment of the Bureau that emphasizes its disciplinary role in too one-sided a manner. Despite the aims of many Republicans, the actions of the Bureau had unexpected ramifications in the South. As William McFeely noted, for example, the Bureau "banked the fires of the freedmen's aspirations." In this context, black women and men were not the passive recipients of the Bureau's doctrines, but frequently sought to use its structures to advance what they saw as their own interests. McFeely notes that the freedpeople "forced the men of the Bureau to reckon with them."[8] As I hope to show below, therefore, the Bureau's mission to teach the freedpeople to be "good workers" could have unintended consequences.

Before April 1867, the structure of the Bureau in Louisiana consisted of several districts, each composed of from one to three parishes. Each district was under the supervision of a single agent or superintendent. This organization changed following the passage of the Reconstruction Acts in March 1867. From this point on, Louisiana was divided into seven sub-districts, with an army officer serving in each as Sub-Assistant Commissioner. These local officers received their instructions from

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[6] Leon F. Litwack, *Been in the Storm So Long: The Aftermath of Slavery* (New York: Vintage Books, 1980), 379.
[7] Mary Farmer-Kaiser, *Freedwomen and the Freedmen's Bureau: Race, Gender, and Public Policy in the Age of Emancipation* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010), 11.
[8] William S. McFeely, *Yankee Stepfather: General O.O. Howard and the Freedmen* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1968), 3.

the Assistant Commissioner for Louisiana and in turn supervised a number of subordinate Parish Agents. Sub-Assistant Commissioners were required to carry out monthly inspections of the areas under their control and report their findings to the Assistant Commissioner. The Bureau employees with the most direct contact with the freedpeople were, however, the civilian Parish Agents, or Assistant Sub-Assistant Commissioners, whose duties were "to protect the interests of the freedmen," according to Joseph Mower, head of the Bureau in Louisiana in 1867. At the end of the year, this meant "preparing and approving" contracts between employers and black workers. For the rest of the year, Parish Agents inspected workplaces and attempted to resolve "difficulties and complaints where freedmen were concerned," Mower reported.[9]

Bureau agents placed a great deal of emphasis on the sanctity of employment contracts. Much work went into determining what was, and what was not, a fair wage for the labor of a former slave. Thus, on July 8, 1865, Assistant Commissioner for Louisiana Thomas Conway wrote to Commissioner Oliver Howard estimating "a fair rate of compensation for Refugees and Freedmen's labor." Conway put forward a list that was structured by age, gender, and occupation. He felt that plantation hands could expect a wage of $30 or $24 per month for adult men and women respectively, while teenage workers would earn $10 or $7. These wages did not include "quarters, food, clothing [and] medical attendance"—if employers did provide such services,

[9] Major General Joseph A. Mower, Annual Narrative Report of Operations and Condition for 1867, September 30, 1867, Monthly and Annual Reports of Operations, Office of the Assistant Commissioner for Louisiana, M1027, Roll 27, RG 105 (BRFAL).

wages were set at about one-third of the rates listed. Conway also noted that cooks, servants, mechanics, and tradesmen would negotiate their own contracts.[10] On December 20 of the same year, Conway wrote to Howard again, enclosing "a copy of the form of Contract which I have prepared to regulate the labor of the State during the coming year." He noted that he chose to "leave the laborer as far as possible to contract in almost any way that he chooses to do" with the proviso that the Bureau would "keep such supervision over him as will as much as possible protect him from wrong."[11]

Along with supervising the making and signing of labor contracts, Bureau agents worked to ensure that freedpeople avoided the perils of "vagrancy." Under the labor regime that emerged during the wartime occupation of New Orleans, federal officials had been unwilling to tolerate black unemployment. "Blacks either worked on plantations or they were arrested and labored on public works for rations," C. Peter Ripley notes.[12] During Reconstruction, agents of the Freedmen's Bureau adopted a similar set of expectations. On October 25, 1865, for example, the new Assistant Commissioner for Louisiana, Joseph Fullerton, wrote to John Burke, Chief of Police for New Orleans, asking him to arrest the "large numbers of freedmen in this City without any means of support" and send them to the Provost Marshal "who will

[10] Thomas W. Conway to General Oliver O. Howard, July 8, 1865, Letters Sent, Office of the Assistant Commissioner for Louisiana, M1027, Roll 1, Vol. 1, RG 105 (BRFAL).
[11] Thomas W. Conway to General Oliver O. Howard, December 20, 1865, Letters Sent, Office of the Assistant Commissioner for Louisiana, M1027, Roll 1, Vol. 2, RG 105 (BRFAL).
[12] C. Peter Ripley, *Slaves and Freedmen in Civil War Louisiana* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 1976), 91.

secure for them employment."[13] Just days later, on October 28, Fullerton wrote to Burke again, informing him that the Bureau had "appointed a commission to visit all parts of this city" with the intention of finding "all such persons who are vagrants or have no visible means of support."[14] On December 13, 1865, the Provost Marshal wrote to a superior officer asking how to deal with 17 freedpeople "for whom I can provide work on the plantation of a Mr. Lewis." Eight of the group, women whom the Provost Marshal described as "mostly prostitutes," were causing particular trouble as they "refuse[d] to go."[15]

The campaign against "vagrancy" invited Bureau agents to play the role of labor brokers. Doing so involved Parish Agents in helping local employers gain access to sources of black labor, sometimes from quite far away. On March 21, 1867, the Bureau agent in Napoleonville, Assumption Parish, wrote to the office of the Assistant Commissioner asking for permission to visit New Orleans "for the purpose of securing some Freedmen as laborers for the planters of my parish."[16] Agents in the city attempted to play the same role. On April 30, 1868, a Bureau agent in New Orleans noted "about 20 hands have been furnished to planters through this office

[13] Joseph Fullerton to Chief of Police Burke, October 25, 1865, Letters Sent, Office of the Assistant Commissioner for Louisiana, M1027, Roll 1, Vol. 1, RG 105 (BRFAL).
[14] Joseph Fullerton to Chief of Police Burke, October 28, 1865, Letters Sent, Office of the Assistant Commissioner for Louisiana, M1027, Roll 1, Vol. 1, RG 105 (BRFAL).
[15] Brevet Colonel M. A. Rena to Captain Andrew Morse, December 13, 1865, Press Copies of Letters Sent, Provost Marshal General for Freedmen, M1905, Roll 6, Vol. 127, RG 105 (BRFAL).
[16] A.C. Ellis to Captain W.H. Sterling, March 21, 1867, Registered Letters Received (1867: E-G), Office of the Assistant Commissioner for Louisiana, M1027, Roll 15, RG 105 (BRFAL).

within the last ten days."[17] The Bureau sometimes helped to facilitate such transactions on a national scale. On June 29, 1865, a friend of Assistant Commissioner Conway wrote to him from New York, requesting a favor for an acquaintance who was "desirous of obtaining a colored girl to take into his family."[18] Under these conditions, the potential for corruption was strong. During the anti-vagrancy campaign of late 1865, for example, a clerk in the office of the Provost Marshal was accused of having "received twenty dollars…for making a contract and hiring vagrants under charge of [the] Provost Marshal."[19]

The Bureau's preoccupation with contractual relations did not always redound to the disadvantage of black workers, however. In many cases the Bureau helped African American men and women reclaim unpaid wages from employers who were themselves adjusting slowly to the post-slavery social order. In March 1867 a black cook named Harrison James sought assistance from the Bureau in New Orleans to "get his just rights for his labor." James had worked for one Allen Sawyer for more than 3 months without being paid, and needed money "so as to get home to his family."[20] On July 3, 1867, New Orleans Bureau agent Jolissant took the testimony of a man named Robert Ray who had worked at the Planter's Hotel for part of the

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[17] Trimonthly Report for Parish of Orleans, Left Bank, April 30, 1868, Monthly and Trimonthly Reports, New Orleans Field Office, M1483, Roll 1, Vol. 402, RG 105 (BRFAL).
[18] J. Hepburn to Thomas W. Conway, June 29, 1865, Registered Letters Received (1865: C-F), Office of the Assistant Commissioner for Louisiana, M1027, Roll 8, RG 105 (BRFAL).
[19] Captain O. Flagg to Major General Andrew Baird, November 15, 1865, Registered Letters Received (1865: C-F), Office of the Assistant Commissioner for Louisiana, M1027, Roll 8, RG 105 (BRFAL).
[20] Harrison James to Captain J. B. Armstrong, March 6, 1867, Registered Letters Received (1867: H), Office of the Assistant Commissioner for Louisiana, M1027, Roll 16, RG 105 (BRFAL).

summer and was still owed $34 in wages.[21] During a dispute over unpaid wages in Algiers in February 1867, a black woman named Mrs. Francis informed her employer "that if he would not pay me I would go to the Freedmen's Bureau for justice." Although this woman's employer, Mr. Nicholas, apparently responded "to hell with you and the Freedmen's Bureau," he appeared in the local agent's office a few days later and handed over the disputed money.[22]

Bureau agents were sometimes willing to take quite drastic measures in order to recoup the unpaid wages of black workers. On July 8, 1867 the Bureau agent for Orleans Parish wrote to a Mrs. Blunt demanding that she either pay money owed to a black woman called Betty or appear at his office. The agent went so far as to threaten that, if Mrs. Blunt failed to comply, "I will be compelled to send a guard for you, which I wish to avoid."[23] In other cases the Bureau pursued cases of unpaid wages to the extent of seizing the property of uncooperative employers. In October 1865, the Bureau ordered the seizure and sale of the steamboat Monroe in order to reimburse a group of seven Black deckhands who had not been paid for their labor.[24] During another of the frequent disputes between African American waterfront workers and steamboat captains in which the Bureau became involved, a group of Black

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[21] Letter from L. Jolissaint, July 3, 1867, Registered Letters Received (1867: H), Office of the Assistant Commissioner for Louisiana, M1027, Roll 16, RG 105 (BRFAL).
[22] R. Folles to Captain W. H. Sterling, February 13, 1867, Registered Letters Received (1867: E-G), Office of the Assistant Commissioner for Louisiana, M1027, Roll 15, RG 105 (BRFAL). For a number of similar cases, see for example Trimonthly Report for Algiers, Louisiana, October 15-24, 1866, Trimonthly Reports of Operations, Agent and Assistant Sub-Assistant Commissioner for Algiers, Louisiana, M1906, Roll 55, RG 105 (BRFAL).
[23] L. Jolissaint to Mrs. Blunt, July 8, 1867, Registered Letters Received (1867: I-L), Office of the Assistant Commissioner for Louisiana, M1027, Roll 17, RG 105 (BRFAL).
[24] Captain Andrew Morse to Charles Bienvenu, October 25, 1865, Press Copies of Letters Sent, Provost Marshal General for Freedmen, M1905, Roll 6, Vol. 127, RG 105 (BRFAL).

roustabouts walked off the job in May 1867 after their employer unilaterally cut their wages by a quarter-dollar. The Bureau agent for New Orleans commented disapprovingly that the captain was "guilty of breaking his agreement with them," and stated quite matter-of-factly "I think rightfully that the Boat ought to be seized."[25]

**The Bureau and Black Private Life**

As well as the world of employment contracts and labor disputes, Freedmen's Bureau agents frequently found themselves embroiled in the private lives of the black working-class community. The Bureau often intervened in the lives of freedpeople in order to enforce middle-class ideals of family structure, morality, and home life. In many cases, the agents acted in ways that were clearly coercive, elitist, and paternalistic. In other cases, however, the Bureau became a tool for black men and especially women as they strove to build new kinship groups and private lives. Mary Farmer-Kaiser has made this point particularly forcefully in her work on the relationship between black women and the Freedmen's Bureau. "In communities across the South," Farmer-Kaiser writes, "freedwomen turned to the agency and demanded that its agents recognize them as women and that the federal government consider their particular gendered needs."[26] A local Bureau agent might, for example,

[25] A. Murtagh to R. Shannon, May 23, 1867, Letters Sent, New Orleans Field Office, M1483, Roll 1, Vol. 401, RG 105 (BRFAL). For other examples of Bureau involvement in waterfront labor disputes, see W. Tyler to Clerk of the *Henry Ames*, May 30, 1867, Letters Sent, New Orleans Field Office, M1483, Roll 1, Vol. 401, RG 105 (BRFAL) and L. Jolissaint to William Evans, June 13, 1867, Letters Sent, New Orleans Field Office, M1483, Roll 1, Vol. 401, RG 105 (BRFAL).
[26] Farmer-Kaiser, *Freedwomen and the Freedmen's Bureau*, 13.

assist a black woman in regaining custody of her child or forcing an absent father to contribute money to the family economy. Sometimes Black working people simply ignored the values and wishes of the Bureau altogether, and got on with the business of building their own private lives.

The records of the Freedmen's Bureau from in and around New Orleans are filled with the agents' negative commentary on the moral condition of the black working-class community. Agents seem to have been required to take note of, and pass judgment on, the family lives and sexual habits of the freedpeople in their districts, and they often disliked what they saw. On June 11, 1868, for example, one agent wrote that the freedpeople "do not appear to have respect for the marriage relation. Almost all the quarrels that come before me spring from that source."[27] Some agents clearly felt that urban life exacerbated what they saw as the ethical failings of the former slaves. "The moral condition of the Freedmen is fair in the country, but in the towns and their vicinity it is not very good," reported the Bureau's representative in Algiers in November 1868.[28] Likewise, in June 1867, a Bureau report stated that "in Algiers, Gretna, and upon some of the plantations in the vicinity

[27] William Wright to Captain Lucius Warren, June 11, 1868, Registered Letters Received (1868: W), Office of the Assistant Commissioner for Louisiana, M1027, Roll 24, RG 105 (BRFAL).
[28] Isaac Stathem to Major B. Hutchins, November 30, 1868, Letters Sent (November-December 1868), Agent and Assistant Sub-Assistant Commissioner for Algiers, Louisiana, M1905, Roll 54, Vol. 191, RG 105 (BRFAL).

of the city," freedpeople "ignored" the bonds of marriage and "men and women live together only as long as it may be convenient or as it may suit their fancy."[29]

The Bureau also paid close attention to the sanitary conditions of the black working-class community. Their reports are filled with accounts of the cleanliness—or lack thereof—of the freedpeople's living conditions. In May 1867, for example, a doctor named William Cleary made "an inspection of the sanitary condition" of African American neighborhoods in New Orleans. His conclusion was that "the colored people are in a very bad condition." Cleary found "many of them packed in little rooms without pure air, ventilation, or the light of Heaven to shine upon them." He believed that conditions on Canal, Rampart, St. Louis, Broad, and Franklin Streets were the worst: the "sooty" and "dilapidated" dwellings there were "inhabited, chiefly, by depraved creatures who are lost to all that's good."[30] That same month, a parallel inspection in Algiers found tenement houses "having each an open well filled with stagnant water" and "a privy filled and subject to fill with rain water."[31] In Gretna, the situation was similar. An assessment of the situation there in June 1867 discovered "too many occupants of one house and frequently of one room."[32]

At least some representatives of the Bureau made a serious effort to enforce sobriety in the African American community. The Bureau's emphasis on temperance

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[29] Monthly Report for June, 1867, Monthly Narrative Reports of Operations and Conditions, Office of the Assistant Commissioner for Louisiana, M1027, Roll 27, RG 105 (BRFAL).
[30] William Cleary, M.D. to Major General Joseph Mower, May 18, 1867, Registered Letters Received (1867: H), Office of the Assistant Commissioner for Louisiana, M1027, Roll 16, RG 105 (BRFAL).
[31] W. H. Riley to Dr. E. H. Harris, May 24, 1867, Registered Letters Received (1867: H), Office of the Assistant Commissioner for Louisiana, M1027, Roll 16, RG 105 (BRFAL).
[32] W. H. Riley to Dr. E. H. Harris, June 6, 1867, Registered Letters Received (1867: H), Office of the Assistant Commissioner for Louisiana, M1027, Roll 16, RG 105 (BRFAL).

may have emerged from the wartime experience of drunken and troublesome soldiers as much as from the prescriptions of free labor ideology. Thus on July 21, 1865, the Bureau agent in Algiers reported that he had fined "James Jackson a grocery keeper" the sum of $50 "for selling liquor to enlisted men."[33] Three months later, in October 1865, the same agent, William Dougherty, wrote to Bureau headquarters stating "the importance of devising some measure to prohibit the sale of intoxicating liquors to freedmen on plantations." Dougherty felt that alcohol was "a prolific source of disorder and disturbance on most of the plantations" in the countryside surrounding Algiers and Gretna."[34] No doubt Dougherty would have been pleased to learn that, according to Bureau agent J.J. Saville, "temperance societies have been formed in two of the schools" in Carrollton in August 1867, despite the fact that "the tobacco clause in the obligation is an effective barrier against adults entering into the movement."[35]

Bureau agents did more than simply comment on the moral condition of the freedpeople, however—they often involved themselves directly in the family lives of black working-class men and women. In October 1865, for example, Thomas Conway was forced to answer an inquiry from Thomas Durant regarding "the colored

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[33] William Dougherty to Lieutenant Lucius Crooker, July 21, 1865, Unregistered Letters Received, Agent and Assistant Sub-Assistant Commissioner for Algiers, Louisiana, M1905, Roll 55, RG 105 (BRFAL). See also William Dougherty to Lieutenant Lucius Crooker, July 31, 1865, Unregistered Letters Received, Agent and Assistant Sub-Assistant Commissioner for Algiers, Louisiana, M1905, Roll 55, RG 105 (BRFAL).

[34] William Dougherty to Lieutenant D. Fenno, October 27, 1865, Registered Letters Received (1865: C-F), Office of the Assistant Commissioner for Louisiana, M1027, Roll 8, RG 105 (BRFAL).

[35] J. J. Saville to Major General Joseph Mower, August 10, 1867, Registered Letters Received (1867: S-T), Office of the Assistant Commissioner for Louisiana, M1027, Roll 20, RG 105 (BRFAL).

man Hills confined in prison for refusing to marry a colored woman." Although Conway had ordered Hills's release, he informed Durant "that the case might go to the civil courts."[36] In July 1867, a Bureau agent named Saville in Carrollton heard a complaint from a Black man named Norris Bennett who stated that his "wife leaves him and goes to the city…and stays with another man, returns occasionally, gets money of him and again leaves him." Saville suggested that Bennett "try and win her back to duty by kind treatment, but if she persists in her in her course" he should "let her go."[37] In January 1868, an agent named Bruning, also stationed in Carrollton, dealt with a case in which a black man complained that an acquaintance "took his wife from him, and does not give any account of her." Bruning referred the matter to the civil courts.[38]

Once again, however, the potential coerciveness and paternalism of these agents' involvement in black families was only one side of the story. African American women made use of the Bureau in order to advance their own interests in family disputes and, for example, win financial support from absent fathers. Initially, the Bureau seemed reluctant to help black women in this way. Commenting on the case of a black woman named Calla in February 1866, Captain Hayden wrote that

[36] Thomas Conway to Thomas J. Durant, October 10, 1865, Letters Sent, Office of the Assistant Commissioner for Louisiana, M1027, Roll 1, Vol. 1, RG 105 (BRFAL).
[37] Trimonthly Report of Complaints before J. J. Saville, Registered Letters Received (1867: S-T), Office of the Assistant Commissioner for Louisiana, M1027, Roll 20, RG 105 (BRFAL).
[38] Trimonthly Report for Carrollton, Louisiana, January 21-31, 1868, Registered Letters Received (1868: A-L), Office of the Assistant Commissioner for Louisiana, M1027, Roll 22, RG 105 (BRFAL).

"the Bureau has no authority whatever to interfere" in claims for child support.[39] Probably as a result of constant pressure from black women, however, this policy did not hold. On June 11, 1867 the Bureau agent for New Orleans wrote to one Oscar Lauruese ordering him to catch up on tardy child support payments to Celestine Trudeau "or steps will be taken by this Bureau to make you do so."[40] Indeed, the records of the Bureau's operations in and around New Orleans are filled with reports on cases described as "seduction and abandonment."[41] Agents often pursued absent fathers and attempted to force them to support their children. In December 1867, for example, one agent commented on the case of Georgina Singleton. "She has been, I cannot say seduced, but at any rate deceived," by a man named Henry Levy, the agent reported, and Levy had been ordered to appear at the Bureau office in Algiers to answer Singleton's claims "for her support and that of his future offspring."[42] For women of New Orleans' poverty-stricken black working class, these child support payments probably made the difference between life and death for themselves and their children.

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[39] Captain A. Hayden to Captain L. Corrigan, February 20, 1866, Letters Sent, Office of the Assistant Commissioner for Louisiana, M1027, Roll 1, Vol. 2, RG 105 (BRFAL).
[40] L. Jolissaint to Oscar Lauruese, June 11, 1867, Letters Sent, New Orleans Field Office, M1483, Roll 1, Vol. 401, RG 105 (BRFAL).
[41] L. O. Parker to Captain W. W. Tyler, June 27, 1867, Letters Sent, Office of the Assistant Commissioner for Louisiana, M1027, Roll 1, Vol. 3, RG 105 (BRFAL). In addition to the cases cited below, see also Trimonthly Report for New Orleans, April 21-30, 1868, Monthly and Trimonthly Reports, New Orleans Field Office, M1483, Roll 1. Vol. 402, RG 105 (BRFAL), L. Jolissaint to Captain W. Tyler, August 5, 1867, Letters Sent, New Orleans Field Office, M1483, Roll 1, Vol. 401, RG 105 (BRFAL), and Trimonthly Report for Algiers, Louisiana, April 20-30, 1868, Trimonthly Reports of Operations (January 1867-December 1868), Agent and Assistant Sub-Assistant Commissioner for Algiers, Louisiana, M1905, Roll 56, Vol. 193, RG 105 (BRFAL).
[42] L. Jolissaint to Lieutenant J. Miles, undated (December 1867), Letters Sent, New Orleans Field Office, M1483, Roll 1, Vol. 401, RG 105 (BRFAL).

Bureau agents also dealt with many cases of domestic violence. The majority of such incidents concerned male violence against women. Thus a black woman visited the Freedmen's Bureau office in Carrollton in January 1868 to complain that her husband, a man named Johnson, "often ill treats her."[43] In April 1868, Fanny Willis approached the same agent with accusations that a man named Henry Sheridan was guilty of "striking her & tearing her dress to pieces."[44] But agents reported that violence—or the threat of violence—could go both ways in Black households. Thus, in January 1868, a Black man named Hector Louis claimed that his estranged wife "tries to kill him and visits him for that purpose."[45] In other cases, violent disputes took place between different generations of the same family. In April 1868 the same agent handled a case in which a Black woman complained of "hard treatment" at the hands of her daughter and son-in-law. [46]

Custody cases also came before agents of the Freedmen's Bureau in New Orleans and its suburbs. In October 1867, a Bureau agent in New Orleans became

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[43] Trimonthly Report for Carrollton, Louisiana, January 21-31, 1868, Registered Letters Received (1868: A-L), Office of the Assistant Commissioner for Louisiana, M1027, Roll 22, RG 105 (BRFAL).

[44] Trimonthly Report for Carrollton, Louisiana, April 21-30, 1868, Registered Letters Received (1868: A-L), Office of the Assistant Commissioner for Louisiana, M1027, Roll 22, RG 105 (BRFAL). For further cases of male violence against women, see Trimonthly Report for Carrollton, Louisiana, February 21-29, 1868, Registered Letters Received (1868: A-L), Office of the Assistant Commissioner for Louisiana, M1027, Roll 22, RG 105 (BRFAL) and Trimonthly Report for Carrollton, Louisiana, March 1-10, 1868, Registered Letters Received (1868: A-L), Office of the Assistant Commissioner for Louisiana, M1027, Roll 22, RG 105 (BRFAL).

[45] Trimonthly Report for Carrollton, Louisiana, January 1-10, 1868, Registered Letters Received (1868: A-L), Office of the Assistant Commissioner for Louisiana, M1027, Roll 22, RG 105 (BRFAL).

[46] Trimonthly Report for Carrollton, Louisiana, April 1-10, 1868, Registered Letters Received (1868: A-L), Office of the Assistant Commissioner for Louisiana, M1027, Roll 22, RG 105 (BRFAL).

embroiled in a particularly delicate case of this sort. A Black woman named Caroline was attempting to retrieve her thirteen year-old daughter from the home of a another woman named Susan Edwards. Although Edwards was accused of keeping "a house of ill fame," the daughter refused to leave, stating that her mother "did not treat her well."[47] Similarly, in January 1866 the Bureau agent in Algiers dealt with a case in which a Black woman attempted to regain custody of her son from a man named Dodge. The boy refused to leave, claiming that "he was very well cared for and Dodge's son was teaching him to read and write." The agent also alleged that the boy mother was "an inmate of a house of ill fame in New Orleans."[48] In January 1868, a man named David Madison asked the Bureau agent in Carrollton to help him retrieve his five children from his wife Jenny, "Who is now with another man."[49] A few months later, in February 1868, the same agent received a complaint from Alphonso Amos, who alleged that his wife Lizzie Aunty "ran away from him and took his two children."[50]

Ultimately, however, Freedmen's Bureau agents in New Orleans and its suburbs found that black working-class life defied the neat categories of "private" and "public" spheres around which middle-class understandings of the family were

[47] P. White to Lieutenant P. Lee, October 16, 1867, Letters Sent, New Orleans Field Office, M1483, Roll 1, Vol. 401, RG 105 (BRFAL).
[48] Trimonthly Report for Algiers, Louisiana, January 10-20, 1866, Trimonthly Reports of Operations, Agent and Assistant Sub-Assistant Commissioner for Algiers, Louisiana, M1906, Roll 55, RG 105 (BRFAL).
[49] Trimonthly Report for Carrollton, Louisiana, January 1-10, 1868, Registered Letters Received (1868: A-L), Office of the Assistant Commissioner for Louisiana, M1027, Roll 22, RG 105 (BRFAL).
[50] Trimonthly Report for Carrollton, Louisiana, February 1-10, 1868, Registered Letters Received (1868: A-L), Office of the Assistant Commissioner for Louisiana, M1027, Roll 22, RG 105 (BRFAL).

structured. As we have seen, African American wage earners lived in cramped dwellings and tenements, with families, friends, and neighbors all thrown together in close proximity. Issues such as family disputes or quarrels between neighbors that might have been handled privately in the middle-class white households of the North became public matters in the black working-class neighborhoods of New Orleans. In August 1865, for example, Margaret and Harriet Sharpe faced fines of $5 from the Bureau for dealing publicly with dispute with a black man: they were accused of "beating" him and "throwing a quantity of driftwood which he had gathered into the river."[51] On other occasions, the Bureau became the venue for the settling of accounts. In November 1867, Aliss Rose sought the help of the Bureau in order to fend off harassment from her mother Lucy, who "always troubled her in every place she went for the purpose of getting her money."[52] Similarly, on June 14, 1867, the Bureau agent in New Orleans wrote to a "Madam Holms" advising her to "let liquor alone & try to…live in peace with your neighbors."[53]

The Freedmen's Bureau's involvement in black private life highlights the contradictory nature of the relationship between the freedpeople and the Republican-led national government. At times, the agency proved a vital resource for African American women in particular. Its agents assisted in efforts to return black children to

[51] William Dougherty to Captain Louis Granger, August 22, 1865, Unregistered Letters Received, Agent and Sub-Assistant Commissioner for Algiers, Louisiana, M1905, Roll 55, RG 105 (BRFAL).
[52] R. Folles to Lieutenant J. M. Leo, November 15, 1867, Unregistered Letters Received, Agent and Sub-Assistant Commissioner for Algiers, Louisiana, M1905, Roll 55, RG 105 (BRFAL).
[53] L. Jolissaint to Madam Holms, June 14, 1867, Letters Sent, New Orleans Field Office, M1483, Roll 1, Vol. 401, RG 105 (BRFAL).

their parents, intervened in cases of domestic violence, and forced black fathers to assume financial responsibility for their offspring. At the same time, however, the actions of Bureau agents often revealed the gulf in expectations and ideology between white northern men and the black working people in whose lives they became involved. When representatives of the Freedmen's Bureau complained about the lack of sanitation in black homes, fretted about sexual immorality in the black community, or tried to impose temperance in black neighborhoods, they were seeking to impose a white middle-class vision of "good workers" on a population emerging from slavery. As it turned out, though, the freedpeople had their own ideas about the meaning of their new place in society.

**The Emergence of Black Working-Class Consciousness**

The records of the Freedmen's Bureau illuminate the ways in which freedpeople in New Orleans grappled with their new social position as urban wage earners in the late 1860s. Life after slavery certainly was not easy, with unemployment, poverty, and disease becoming ever-present threats for thousands of black working people. Even in these conditions, former slaves did not passively accept their role as wage earners. Some rejected the idea of wage work altogether, while others sought to avoid it as long as possible. Those African Americans who did choose to enter the labor market tended to display a strong preference for the urban, rather than plantation, economy. Overall, the freedpeople seem to have adapted remarkably quickly to the social relationships inherent in the wages system. The

Bureau records from the years 1865-1868 contain many examples of former slaves bargaining over the hours of labor, quitting work to find a preferable employer, and even engaging in strikes and physical confrontations with the boss. In this sense, the awakening of black working people revealed by the Bureau records for New Orleans was a local manifestation of escalating African American labor activism across the South during this phase of Reconstruction.

The black working-class community in and around New Orleans frequently faced conditions of extreme poverty and disease. Unemployment became a particularly major problem in New Orleans in the summer of 1868. In late May, the Bureau agent for the city reported, "a large number of freedpeople in this Parish are out of employment."[54] By July, the same agent had become seriously concerned that the Bureau planned to discontinue its policy of emergency rations for the unemployed and indigent. Remarking that "business is now totally paralyzed," the agent stated his "earnest conviction that numbers will necessarily die of starvation in this city during the remainder of this season unless relief be afforded."[55] In August the agent reported, "the number of applicants for relief increases daily."[56] We have already seen representatives of the Freedmen's Bureau commenting on the poor sanitation in many African American dwellings and neighborhoods. Unemployment and destitution

[54] Trimonthly Report for New Orleans, May 20-31, 1868, Monthly and Trimonthly Reports, New Orleans Field Office, M1483, Roll 1, Vol. 402, RG 105 (BRFAL).
[55] Report of Destitute Persons in New Orleans, July 1, 1868, Monthly and Trimonthly Reports, New Orleans Field Office, M1483, Roll 1, Vol. 402, RG 105 (BRFAL).
[56] Trimonthly Report for New Orleans, August 20-31, 1868, Monthly and Trimonthly Reports, New Orleans Field Office, M1483, Roll 1, Vol. 402, RG 105 (BRFAL).

exacerbated these problems, and sometimes led to epidemics of diseases like cholera.[57]

Even under these conditions, many African American working people failed to agree that a life of laboring for wages was the "natural" outcome of their escape from bondage and chose not to enter the labor market. Some freedpeople manifested this reluctance by choosing to live off the previous year's wages for a time before signing a new contract with their employer. Thus, a Bureau representative in the suburbs of New Orleans reported in January 1868 "the Freedmen on the Plantations…do not seem very anxious to work…owing to the fact to the fact that they have received their final payment for the past year." The agent lamented that these workers "will not work until they spend the last cent they have."[58] Other black workers seem to have felt that the federal government had an obligation to support them. In May 1868 a Freedmen's Bureau agent in Carrollton complained that many freedpeople "feign destitution" and had come to "rely on the Government for

[57] See, for example, R. Folles to Captain A. Hayden, August 24, 1866, Letters Sent (May 1866-September 1867), Agent and Assistant Sub-Assistant Commissioner for Algiers, Louisiana, M1905, Roll 54, Vol. 187, RG 105 (BRFAL), R. Folles to Surgeon E. Griswold, August 24, 1866, Letters Sent (May 1866-September 1867), Agent and Assistant Sub-Assistant Commissioner for Algiers, Louisiana, M1905, Roll 54, Vol. 187, RG 105 (BRFAL), R. Folles, Plantation Report for September, 1866, Letters Sent (May 1866-September 1867), Agent and Assistant Sub-Assistant Commissioner for Algiers, Louisiana, M1905, Roll 54, Vol. 187, RG 105 (BRFAL).

[58] Trimonthly Report for Carrollton, Louisiana, January 21-31, Registered Letters Received (1867: A-L), Office of the Assistant Commissioner for Louisiana, M1027, Roll 22, RG 105 (BRFAL). See also Trimonthly Report for Carrollton, Louisiana, February 21-29, Registered Letters Received (1867: A-L), Office of the Assistant Commissioner for Louisiana, M1027, Roll 22, RG 105 (BRFAL).

support" despite the fact that they were "able to perform manual labor."[59] Although we should be careful not to accept uncritically the perspective of a white northerner on this question, the frequency of such reports does suggest that many African Americans demonstrated a real hesitation to enter the labor market.

Freedmen's Bureau agents often complained that the freedpeople seemed reluctant to leave the city and its suburbs and seek work in the countryside. Even in suburban areas where black workers lived in close proximity to plantation districts, they exhibited a strong dislike for agricultural labor. A representative of the Bureau in Algiers remarked during September 1866 that "colored people in Algiers and Gretna…cannot be induced to work on plantations."[60] Despite high levels of urban poverty and a severe labor shortage in rural areas, freedpeople clearly preferred to remain in the city and its suburbs. In April 1868, therefore, a Freedmen's Bureau agent in New Orleans noted that, although "thousands in this city are out of employment," black men and women demonstrated a consistent "avertions [sic] to going into the country."[61] Even as late as November 1868, the Freedmen's Bureau

[59] Trimonthly Report for Carrollton, Louisiana, May 21-31, 1868, Registered Letters Received (1868: W), Office of the Assistant Commissioner for Louisiana, M1027, Roll 24, RG 105 (BRFAL). See also Trimonthly Report for Carrollton, Louisiana, March 1-10, Registered Letters Received (1867: A-L), Office of the Assistant Commissioner for Louisiana, M1027, Roll 22, RG 105 (BRFAL).
[60] R. Folles to Captain A. Hayden, [nd] September, 1866, Letters Sent (May 1866-September 1867), Agent and Assistant Sub-Assistant Commissioner for Algiers, Louisiana, M1905, Roll 54, Vol. 187, RG 105 (BRFAL).
[61] Trimonthly Report for New Orleans, April 21-30, 1868, Monthly and Trimonthly Reports, New Orleans Field Office, M1483, Roll 1, Vol. 402, RG 105 (BRFAL).

agent in Algiers complained that unemployed black workers could easily find work in the countryside "but are generally averse to leaving the towns."[62]

As wage workers, the freedpeople now found they had an ability they could never have enjoyed under slavery: they could choose to quit work and find a new employer if they found their current situation intolerable. In June 1867, all of the workers on a plantation near New Orleans quit work when they heard their employer was leaving and would be replaced by his mother, who they did not trust to pay them fairly.[63] Black working people doubtless had many reasons for choosing to leave their employer. In May 1868, Mrs. Washington Lewis expressed frustration that her black domestic worker Elizabeth had quit work in the middle of month. In this case, the local Freedmen's Bureau agent found that Elizabeth was not due any wages for the part of the month she had worked because leaving Mrs. Lewis "at her husband's bidding" meant that she had left her job "without any cause."[64] In October 1866, a Bureau agent in the suburbs of New Orleans heard a case in which one Mr. Amida had refused to pay his black employee Aleck Coleman for over three months work because Coleman had left his job having worked less than the year for which Amida

[62] Trimonthly Report for Algiers, Louisiana, November 10-20, Trimonthly Reports of Operations (January 1867-December 1868), Agent and Assistant Sub-Assistant Commissioner for Algiers, Louisiana, M1905, Roll 56, Vol. 193, RG 105 (BRFAL).
[63] Trimonthly Report for Algiers, Louisiana, June 10-20, 1867, Trimonthly Reports of Operations (January 1867-December 1868), Agent and Assistant Sub-Assistant Commissioner for Algiers, Louisiana, M1905, Roll 56, Vol. 192, RG 105 (BRFAL).
[64] Trimonthly Report for Algiers, Louisiana, May 10-20, 1868, Trimonthly Reports of Operations (January 1867-December 1868), Agent and Assistant Sub-Assistant Commissioner for Algiers, Louisiana, M1905, Roll 56, Vol. 193, RG 105 (BRFAL).

needed his services. Coleman caustically replied that "he had never made any agreement to work until the end of the year" and demanded the money owed to him.[65]

Cases like these illustrate another important connection between the role of the Freedmen's Bureau and the making of black working-class consciousness. Under slavery, African Americans had no recourse to any third party when it came to their relationship with those who exploited their labor. Now, thanks to their alliance with the federal government, freedpeople could take their grievances to the Bureau and use it as a tool in negotiations with their employers. The day-to-day records of the Bureau are full of such cases—they probably constituted the bulk of any agent's daily activities. Of particular significance here are the cases in which groups of wage-earning freedpeople collectively approached a Bureau agent in search of redress from an employer. Depending on the nature of the economy in the area over which they provided, Bureau agents tended to deal with particular groups of black workers on a regular basis. In less than a month during the late spring and early summer of 1867, for example, three groups of up to twenty black steamboat workers enlisted the help of the Bureau's New Orleans Field Office to rectify cases of wage theft.[66] Nearby Carrollton bordered the swamps and had a somewhat different workforce than New Orleans. There, groups of black woodcutters and rafters tended to be the ones looking to the Bureau for help dealing with their employers. Six such groups of African

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[65] R. Folles to Capt. A. Hayden, October [nd], 1866, Letters Sent (May 1866-September 1867), Agent and Assistant Sub-Assistant Commissioner for Algiers, Louisiana, M1905, Roll 54, Vol. 187, RG 105 (BRFAL).

[66] A. Murtagh to R. H. Shannon, May 22, 1867, W. Tyler to Clerk of Steamboat "Henry Ames," May 30, 1867, and L. Jolissant to William Evans, June 13, 1867, Letters Sent, New Orleans Field Office, M1483, Roll 1, Vol. 401, RG 105 (BRFAL).

American workingmen approached the Bureau's representative in Carrollton in just a few weeks during the spring of 1868.[67]

Another indication that the freedpeople were adapting to their new social role as wage earners was the increased attention to the hours of labor in the black working-class community. Freedmen's Bureau agents very frequently dealt with cases involving the theft of a watch, revealing the importance that black working people attached to these seemingly innocuous personal effects.[68] Under slavery, Black men and women had labored at the will of their owners, with little or no control over the hours they worked. As wage-earning free workers, however, Black workers were in a position to contest the hours or labor and negotiate when the working day began and when it ended. As we have already seen, moreover, the eight-hour movement had been a source of division between white working men and the New Orleans business elite. Consequently, the personal pocket watch clearly became a prized possession for many African American laborers. As one employer in Algiers apparently complained

[67] Trimonthly Reports for Carrollton, Louisiana, March 21-31, April 1-10, April 10-20, and May 1-10, Registered Letters Received (1867: A-L), Office of the Assistant Commissioner for Louisiana, M1027, Roll 22, RG 105 (BRFAL).

[68] See, for example, Trimonthly Report for Algiers, Louisiana, February 1-10, 1868, Trimonthly Reports of Operations (January 1867-December 1868), Agent and Assistant Sub-Assistant Commissioner for Algiers, Louisiana, M1905, Roll 56, Vol. 193, RG 105 (BRFAL), Trimonthly Report for Carrollton, Louisiana, January 11-20, Registered Letters Received (1867: A-L), Office of the Assistant Commissioner for Louisiana, M1027, Roll 22, RG 105 (BRFAL), Trimonthly Report for Carrollton, Louisiana, January 21-31, Registered Letters Received (1867: A-L), Office of the Assistant Commissioner for Louisiana, M1027, Roll 22, RG 105 (BRFAL), and Trimonthly Report for Carrollton, Louisiana, February 10-20, Registered Letters Received (1867: A-L), Office of the Assistant Commissioner for Louisiana, M1027, Roll 22, RG 105 (BRFAL).

to a Freedmen's Bureau in April 1866, "every negro has a watch and ceases work according to his own time."[69]

The most obvious manifestations of developing working-class consciousness in black New Orleans were the growing number of workplace protests and strikes. Labor unrest frequently broke out on the farms and plantations surrounding the city as black agricultural workers took collective action to address a wide array of grievances. In March 1868, the entire workforce on Orleans Plantation quit work because, according to a Freedmen's Bureau report, "the overseer Mr. Allen cheated them out of their wages." After the intervention of the local Bureau agent and the plantation owner, the hands on Orleans Plantation won a new system of accounting to prevent a repeat of Allen's transgression.[70] Labor conflict also appears to have been particularly chronic on the New Orleans waterfront and on the river. In January 1867, for example, the black deckhands of the steamboat William Butler quit *en masse* and only agreed to return to work when the mate agreed to raise their wages from $40 to $60 per month.[71] In March 1868, trouble erupted between waterfront workers and

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[69] William Dougherty to Captain A. Hayden, April 30, 1866, Inspection Reports of Plantations from Subordinate Officers, Office of the Assitant Commissioner for Louisiana, M1027, Roll 28 RG 105 (BRFAL).

[70] Trimonthly Report for Algiers, Louisiana, March 1-10, 1868, Trimonthly Reports of Operations (January 1867-December 1868), Agent and Assistant Sub-Assistant Commissioner for Algiers, Louisiana, M1905, Roll 56, Vol. 193, RG 105 (BRFAL). Allen became a major thorn in the side of the Bureau agent in Algiers, frequently provoking labor strife through his harsh language towards the freedpeople on Orleans Parish. See Trimonthly Report for Algiers, Louisiana, May 1-10, 1868, Trimonthly Reports of Operations (January 1867-December 1868), Agent and Assistant Sub-Assistant Commissioner for Algiers, Louisiana, M1905, Roll 56, Vol. 193, RG 105 (BRFAL).

[71] Trimonthly Report for Algiers, Louisiana, August 10-20, 1867, Trimonthly Reports of Operations (January 1867-December 1868), Agent and Assistant Sub-Assistant Commissioner for Algiers, Louisiana, M1905, Roll 56, Vol. 192, RG 105 (BRFAL).

labor contractors in New Orleans in a case that "created some excitement" according to the local Bureau agent. Sixty-four black and seven white laborers threatened violence against their employers, the levee contractors Archer Hinton and John Chase, and claimed unpaid wages of "about $1.00 each." Municipal police took the two contractors into custody "to save them from being mobbed" and they were only released after the intervention of the Freedmen's Bureau.[72]

The black working people of New Orleans were not alone in their drive toward collective action and independent organization. Strikes and the formation of unions became a feature of black working-class life in many southern towns and cities during the early years of Reconstruction. In the summer of 1866, for example, black washerwomen in Jackson, Mississippi, organized a union and went on strike for higher wages.[73] Much of the labor unrest in this period came in southern port cities. Black waterfront workers organized a Protective Union Association and struck the docks in Charleston in 1867, 1868, and twice in 1869. In 1869 these longshoremen were joined on strike by tailors and painters, and in 1873 they sparked a series of mass strikes in Charleston and its hinterland, drawing in thousands of black workers from local rice and lumber mills, phosphate works, and other workplaces.[74] In 1868, black longshoremen in Pensacola formed a Workingmen's Association, which in 1873 led a militant protest against job competition from itinerant Canadian

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[72] Trimonthly Report for Parish of Orleans, Left Bank, March 31, 1868, Monthly and Trimonthly Reports, New Orleans Field Office, M1483, Roll 1, Vol. 402, RG 105 (BRFAL).
[73] Tera Hunter, *To 'Joy My Freedom: Southern Black Women's Lives and Labors after the Civil War* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 1997), 75-76.
[74] William C. Hine, "Black Organized Labor in Reconstruction Charleston," *Labor History* 25, no. 4 (Fall, 1984).

lumberjacks, an action that resulted in armed African American working men occupying the city for several days. Elsewhere in Florida, black longshoremen in Fernandina and Jacksonville built their own Workingman's Associations, and unions also emerged amongst Black lumber mill workers and plantation hands. African American workers struck Jacksonville's lumber mills in 1873, and the following year black longshoremen in Key West were involved in violent confrontations with non-union Bahamian immigrants.[75]

**Organizing Community**

A number of community institutions undergirded the political awakening of black working people in this period, and they extended well beyond the workplace. In a classic work on the black experience in postbellum Richmond, Peter Rachleff highlighted the extraordinary achievements of former slaves in maintaining such institutions under exceptionally challenging circumstances. "With limited resources and in an atmosphere of continual social conflict," Rachleff wrote, "Richmond Afro-Americans built an impressive community."[76] The same was certainly true in New Orleans. From Republican clubs to churches, black working people organized a wide array of community institutions to sustain themselves in the difficult transition from slavery to freedom and come to terms with their new position in urban society.

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[75] Jerrell H. Shofner, "The Pensacola Workingman's Association: A Militant Negro Labor Union during Reconstruction," *Labor History* 13, no. 4 (Fall, 1972) and Shofner, "Militant Negro Laborers in Reconstruction Florida," *Journal of Southern History* 39, no. 3 (Aug., 1973).

[76] Peter Rachleff, *Black Labor in Richmond, 1865-1890* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1989), 13.

In the late 1860s, black working people in and around New Orleans created a network of political clubs and benevolent societies attached to churches, schools, and the local Republican Party. Such groups could play a wide variety of roles in the African American community. By November 1866, three church-affiliated benevolent societies had emerged in Algiers and Gretna; the local Bureau agent, who took credit for their formation, noted that "these societies help the poor and needy, and bury the dead" as well as organizing educational activities.[77] Such groups sometimes attracted unwanted attention from local whites. In May 1867, the members of an African American political club in Kennerville complained to the Bureau that "disloyal white persons threaten to prevent their meetings." The local Bureau agent apparently confirmed their right to continue meeting, but warned members of the club to "avoid any disorder, and the carrying of concealed weapons."[78] John Rodrigue has shown how the freedpeople sometimes used their clubs and societies as embryonic trade unions. On a sugar plantation in St. Mary Parish, about 100 miles west of New Orleans, Republican-affiliated political clubs allowed the freedpeople to act collectively and even organize strikes to defend their members against politically motivated firings in April 1868.[79]

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[77] R. Folles to Capt. A. Hayden, November 12, 1866, Letters Sent (May 1866-September 1867), Agent and Assistant Sub-Assistant Commissioner for Algiers, Louisiana, M1905, Roll 54, Vol. 187, RG 105 (BRFAL).
[78] J.J. Saville to Capt. Sterling, May 31, 1867, Registered Letter Received (1867: S-T), Office of the Assistant Commissioner for Louisiana, M1027, Roll 20, RG 105 (BRFAL).
[79] John C. Rodrigue, *Reconstruction in the Cane Fields: From Slavery to Free Labor in Louisiana's Sugar Parishes, 1862-1880* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2001), 97-98.

Education became a major demand of the black working-class community during the period of Freedmen's Bureau involvement. Until the end of January 1866, the Bureau provided free education, using federal funds to hire teachers, rent buildings, and provide supplies for the students. By the end of 1865, the Bureau in Louisiana was spending $20,000 per month on its Educational Department alone. Beginning in February 1866, the Bureau closed its free schools and created a system of tuition payments in New Orleans, its suburbs, and some of the state's larger towns. The Bureau levied $1 or $1.50 per month payments directly from the wages of black parents, a tax that desperately few families could afford. The system of taxation was controversial because the levy came only from the wages of plantation hands, while freedpeople working on the levee or chopping wood, for example, did not pay. Nevertheless, by November 1866, the parishes of Orleans and Jefferson supported "six Government and five private schools" with an enrollment of about five hundred pupils.[80] In November 1867 most of the eighteen public schools, and their 3,145 students in New Orleans came under the jurisdiction of the municipal School Board, although the Bureau did continue to support schools at the Orphans' Home and the Baptist Institute.[81]

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[80] Annual Narrative Report of Operations and Conditions in Louisiana, 1866, Monthly and Annual Reports of Operations, Office of the Assistant Commissioner for Louisiana, M1027, Roll 27, RG 105 (BRFAL); R. Folles to Capt. A. Hayden, November 12, 1866, Letters Sent (May 1866-September 1867), Agent and Assistant Sub-Assistant Commissioner for Algiers, Louisiana, M1905, Roll 54, Vol. 187, RG 105 (BRFAL).

[81] Annual Narrative Report of Operations and Conditions in Louisiana, 1868, Monthly and Annual Reports of Operations, Office of the Assistant Commissioner for Louisiana, M1027, Roll 27, RG 105 (BRFAL).

Despite the financial burden of education, black working-class parents made schooling their children a major priority. African American workers came to expect that employers would provide a school and even accommodation for a teacher. If their employer did not concede to these demands, noted one Bureau agent in 1867, "the freedmen would contract to labor where these inducements were offered."[82] Major General Joseph Mower, head of Bureau operations in Louisiana during 1867, explained the importance freedpeople attached to education. "They regard Education as all important to improve their condition, and secure the benefits extended to them through the elective franchise," he reported in the fall of 1867.[83] Representatives of the Bureau operating at the local level often noted a similar dynamic. In December 1867, the agent in Carrollton noted that the "condition of the schools is very promising" because African American "parents are anxious to have their children educated."[84] Two months later, in February 1868, the same agent remarked that black parents "give all that they can" for the education of their children.[85]

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[82] Annual Narrative Report of Operations and Conditions in Louisiana, 1867, Monthly and Annual Reports of Operations, Office of the Assistant Commissioner for Louisiana, M1027, Roll 27, RG 105 (BRFAL).
[83] Annual Narrative Report of Operations and Conditions in Louisiana, 1867, Monthly and Annual Reports of Operations, Office of the Assistant Commissioner for Louisiana, M1027, Roll 27, RG 105 (BRFAL).
[84] Trimonthly Report for Carrollton, Louisiana, December 20-31, 1867, Registered Letters Received (1868: A-L), Office of the Assistant Commissioner for Louisiana, M1027, Roll 22, RG 105 (BRFAL).
[85] Trimonthly Report for Carrollton, Louisiana, February 1-10, 1868, Registered Letters Received (1868: A-L), Office of the Assistant Commissioner for Louisiana, M1027, Roll 22, RG 105 (BRFAL). See also, Trimonthly Report for Carrollton, Louisiana, May 21-31, 1868, Registered Letters Received (1868: W), Office of the Assistant Commissioner for Louisiana, M1027, Roll 24, RG 105 (BRFAL).

Nevertheless, black schools in and around New Orleans faced some very serious challenges. Lack of funding proved to be the most serious obstacle to the educational aspirations of the freedpeople. Freedmen's Bureau officials frequently complained that "Freedmen do not take enough interest in…schools," as one agent stated it in May 1868.[86] The real reason for this apparent lack of interest was not a disregard for the importance of education among black working people, however. Rather, the tenuous economic circumstances of former slaves living in the city and its environs often prevented them from paying to keep the schools open. In February 1868, the Bureau agent in Algiers reported "A great many freedmen are out of employment and have no money to pay tuition for their children."[87] Even where the funds did exist to keep a given school open, its facilities were often primitive, to say the least. On April 16, 1868, for example, one Bureau agent was forced to write to headquarters making an urgent request for books for the General Grant School.[88] Some school buildings were so ramshackle that even inclement weather could force the closure of schools and prevent black children from attending classes.[89]

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[86] Trimonthly Report for Algiers, Louisiana, May 1-10, 1868, Trimonthly Reports of Operations (January 1867-December 1868), Agent and Assistant Sub-Assistant Commissioner for Algiers, Louisiana, M1905, Roll 56, Vol. 193, RG 105 (BRFAL).
[87] Trimonthly Report for Algiers, Louisiana, February 1-10, 1868, Trimonthly Reports of Operations (January 1867-December 1868), Agent and Assistant Sub-Assistant Commissioner for Algiers, Louisiana, M1905, Roll 56, Vol. 193, RG 105 (BRFAL).
[88] R. Folles to Brevet Major F. R. Chase, April 16, 1868, Letters Sent (March-September 1868), Agent and Assistant Sub-Assistant Commissioner for Algiers, Louisiana, M1905, Roll 54, Vol. 189, RG 105 (BRFAL).
[89] See, for example, Trimonthly Report for Carrollton, Louisiana, June 1-10, 1868, Registered Letters Received (1868: W), Office of the Assistant Commissioner for Louisiana, M1027, Roll 24, RG 105 (BRFAL) and Trimonthly Report for Carrollton, Louisiana, June 20-30, 1868, Registered Letters Received (1868: W), Office of the Assistant Commissioner for Louisiana, M1027, Roll 24, RG 105 (BRFAL).

Black working people also had to face the unremitting hostility of local whites toward the establishment of their schools. In New Orleans and its suburbs, whites expressed their rage through attacks on students, teachers, and the schools themselves. As early as 1866, Freedmen's Bureau reports described how "acts of personal violence and insults were committed on the teachers, school houses were burned and pupils beaten and frightened."[90] On October 20, 1866, an agent in Algiers noted "children attending school are very frequently shamefully beaten on the streets by unprincipled grown boys and white men."[91] Nor did local whites learn to accept the reality of black educational endeavor after the transition to Congressional Reconstruction. In May 1868, one Bureau representative noted the "white people in Algiers, Gretna and vicinity are greatly prejudiced against Educating Freedmen" to the extent that they threatened and harassed teachers on the street and vandalized the St. Mary's school "with all sorts of improper pictures."[92]

Under these circumstances, the establishment of a desegregated public school system in New Orleans in the early 1870s was one of the most remarkable achievements of Radical Reconstruction—not just in Louisiana, but in the whole of

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[90] Annual Narrative Report of Operations and Conditions in Louisiana, 1866, Monthly and Annual Reports of Operations, Office of the Assistant Commissioner for Louisiana, M1027, Roll 27, RG 105 (BRFAL). See also, Trimonthly Report for Algiers, Louisiana, April 10-20, 1867, Trimonthly Reports of Operations (January 1867-December 1868), Agent and Assistant Sub-Assistant Commissioner for Algiers, Louisiana, M1905, Roll 56, Vol. 192, RG 105 (BRFAL).

[91] R. Folles to Capt. Sterling, October 20, 1866, Letters Sent (May 1866-September 1867), Agent and Assistant Sub-Assistant Commissioner for Algiers, Louisiana, M1905, Roll 54, Vol. 187, RG 105 (BRFAL).

[92] Trimonthly Report for Algiers, Louisiana, May 1-10, 1868, Trimonthly Reports of Operations (January 1867-December 1868), Agent and Assistant Sub-Assistant Commissioner for Algiers, Louisiana, M1905, Roll 56, Vol. 193, RG 105 (BRFAL).

the post-war South. It was one thing that the constitutional convention of 1867 had mandated mixed schools; it was something else entirely to turn a paper directive into a lived for reality for the black schoolchildren of New Orleans. Certainly, whites demonstrated a great deal of hostility to desegregation when it was first attempted in the late 1860s.[93] And yet, under State Superintendant of Education Thomas Conway and city superintendant Charles Boothby, at least twenty-one schools had a mixed student body in the early 1870s—a third of all the public schools in New Orleans. As many as one thousand African American and several thousand white children attended these institutions, mostly in the city's Second and Third Districts, and the mixed schools were always among the most prestigious and successful in Reconstruction-era New Orleans. Louis Harlan explicitly attributed the triumph of school desegregation to the strength of the Radical alliance, which he characterized as "a political coalition…between the rural Negro majority, the urban Negro minority, and northern Republicans in control of federal and state governments."[94] Such extensive educational desegregation would not again exist in the South until the Civil Rights Movement a century later.[95]

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[93] See, for example, Trimonthly Report for Algiers, Louisiana, September 10-20, 1868, Trimonthly Reports of Operations (January 1867-December 1868), Agent and Assistant Sub-Assistant Commissioner for Algiers, Louisiana, M1905, Roll 56, Vol. 193, RG 105 (BRFAL) and R. Folles to Capt. H. H. Pierce, September 1, 1868, Letters Sent (March-September 1868), Agent and Assistant Sub-Assistant Commissioner for Algiers, Louisiana, M1905, Roll 54, Vol. 189, RG 105 (BRFAL).

[94] Louis R. Harlan, "Desegregation in New Orleans Public Schools During Reconstruction," *American Historical Review* 67, no. 3 (Apr., 1962).

[95] William Preston Vaughn*, Schools for All: The Blacks and Public Education in the South, 1865-1877* (Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 1974), Chapter 4.

The teachers in these schools endured great hardship in order to realize the black working-class demand for education. Thanks to the path-breaking work of Ronald Butchart, we now have an accurate picture of the men and women who taught in the black schools of the Reconstruction-era South. Contrary to the prevailing wisdom, these teachers were not, on the whole, "youthful, white single women from New England."[96] In reality, black women and men were disproportionately represented among the teachers in the freedpeople's schools, lending credence to Butchart's observation that the Reconstruction-era education movement was "emphatically a work performed by African Americans for their own emancipation."[97] As we have already seen, teachers often fell victim to white terrorism. They also frequently endured poverty and low pay in order to bring education to the freedpeople. In July 1868, the Bureau representative in Carrollton noted that the schools in his district suffered because the teachers "are teaching without any compensation, the result of which is very apparent."[98] On September 5, 1868, the Bureau agent in Algiers noted that teachers "receive barely anything except the small amount received from the Bureau" due to the inability of the local black community to afford tuition costs.[99]

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[96] Ronald E. Butchart, *Schooling the Freedpeople: Teaching, Learning, and the Struggle for Black Freedom* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), xi.
[97] Ibid., 19.
[98] Trimonthly Report for Carrollton, Louisiana, July 21-31, 1868, Registered Letters Received (1868: W), Office of the Assistant Commissioner for Louisiana, M1027, Roll 24, RG 105 (BRFAL).
[99] R. Folles to Brevet Capt. H.H. Pierce, September 5, 1868, Letters Sent (March-September 1868), Agent and Assistant Sub-Assistant Commissioner for Algiers, Louisiana, M1905, Roll 54, Vol. 189, RG 105 (BRFAL).

Like the new schoolhouses, black churches played a major role in the making of working-class black New Orleans. As we have already seen, the Jubilee atmosphere in the city during the Civil War and the collapse of slavery had often been accompanied by powerful religious revivals among black working people.[100] This religious awakening deepened and crystallized during Reconstruction. African Americans seceded from white churches across the South in huge numbers in the years after emancipation, established thousands of new congregations served by black preachers.[101] In this context, the new churches became central institutions in the black working-class community. As historian of black Christianity Albert Raboteau noted, "the church was the center of social, economic, educational and political activity" for African American southerners.[102] Clarence Walker has argued that, while some black religious leaders preached a doctrine of thrift and social uplift that had little relevance for many black working people, religious institutions could still provide a space for radicalization. "Black religion was not an opiate," Walker writes, "in certain instances the church provided an arena for the politization [sic] of the freedmen."[103]

As independent community institutions, black churches are mentioned much less frequently than schools in the records of the Freedmen's Bureau. Nevertheless, representatives of the Bureau did have cause to comment on the flourishing of black

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[100] See Chapter 3.
[101] Litwack, *Been in the Storm So Long*, 466-471.
[102] Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 320.
[103] Clarence E. Walker, *A Rock in a Weary Land: The African Methodist Episcopal Church During the Civil War and Reconstruction* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1982), 3.

Christianity in the early years of Reconstruction. In August 1867, the Assistant Commissioner for Louisiana noted that the freedpeople were "ardently devoted to religion." This devotion was being manifested in the construction of numerous new institutions. "Churches are being built, Sunday schools established," the Assistant Commissioner remarked.[104] Bureau representatives were not always sure what to think about the sudden emergence of black religiosity. "They have about 20 or more churches in this city," wrote the Bureau's agent in New Orleans on June 1, 1868. "Some…are having a good influences while the members of others are so noisy in their meetings that the neighborhoods in which the churches are located, are frequently much disturbed."[105] Nevertheless, the Assistant Commissioner clearly felt that the piety of black working people contrasted very favorably with that of the white population. "The morality of the freedmen, their observance of the Sabbath and their general disposition to be quiet and orderly is superior to that of the whites immediately around them," he stated in September 1867.[106]

Black churches in and around New Orleans came under attack from whites throughout the Reconstruction period. During Presidential Reconstruction, between April 1865 and March 1867, this repression received the sanction of the white authorities. In July 1865, for example, one AME congregation experienced constant

[104] Monthly Report for August, 1867, Monthly Narrative Reports of Operations and Conditions, Office of the Assistant Commissioner for Louisiana, M1027, Roll 27, RG 105 (BRFAL).
[105] Trimonthly Report for Parish of Orleans, Left Bank, June 1, 1868, Monthly and Trimonthly Reports, New Orleans Field Office, M1483, Roll 1, Vol. 402, RG 105 (BRFAL).
[106] Monthly Report for September, 1867, Monthly Narrative Reports of Operations and Conditions, Office of the Assistant Commissioner for Louisiana, M1027, Roll 27, RG 105 (BRFAL).

harassment from white policemen. Officers barged into a school building where a service was taking place "armed with clubs and holding their watches…and ordering the people to disperse." On another occasion, black churchgoers "were shot at by those representing the Police" as they tried to leave the building.[107] These were not isolated incidents. Several black churches came under attack that summer, particularly if they were also being used to house schools for the freedpeople. "Four colored churches...were burned and attempts made to fire several other buildings," the Freedmen's Bureau reported in its annual report for 1866. "One church nearly finished at a cost of about $1,000 was completely demolished in one night, because a colored school was to have been opened in it the next week."[108] African American churchgoers were prepared to mobilize to defend their newfound religious freedom against white persecution. On December 25, 1865, Thomas Conway received a letter warning him of "a serious disturbance" among freedpeople who "do not seem willing to be molested or imposed upon so much" were prevented from "attending Church."[109]

In this second chapter of this study, we analyzed the emergence of a hidden "black enlightenment" in antebellum New Orleans—a subaltern civil society dwelling in the shadows of the streets, marketplaces, and washtubs of the Crescent City. Under

[107] Petition to "Superintendant Bureau of Freedmen," August 1, 1865, Registered Letters Received (1865: T-Z, 1866: Y-Z), Office of the Assistant Commissioner for Louisiana, M1027, Roll 13, RG 105 (BRFAL).
[108] Annual Narrative Report of Operations and Conditions in Louisiana, 1866, Monthly and Annual Reports of Operations, Office of the Assistant Commissioner for Louisiana, M1027, Roll 27, RG 105 (BRFAL).
[109] Jas Shepherd, Norris Barney *et al* to Thomas W. Conway, December 25, 1865, Registered Letters Received (1865: M-R), Office of the Assistant Commissioner for Louisiana, M1027, Roll 11, RG 105 (BRFAL).

slavery, black working people had been forced to keep their class and community institutions out of sight, for fear of attracting the attention of their owners and employers. Even under these circumstances, however, institutions such as the grapevine had made a powerful contribution to the political awakening of men and women from the African American popular classes. Now, with a more formal sort of black politics emerging from slavery's shadow, and with the war and emancipation providing a legacy of radicalization, these community institutions were able to blossom. Political clubs, secret societies, schools, and churches provided the material basis for the persistence and development of black political awareness. It was through these structures that black working people became conscious of their economic and political interests in the new social order, and began to act collectively in line with their perceived interests. As the 1870s progressed, however, the collective action of black working people would have to contend with the increasing conservatism of the Radical government.

**Radical Strikebreaking**

In the early 1870s, the black working-class community came into conflict with the Radical government it had helped create. In a number of major strikes on the city's waterfront and on nearby plantation districts between 1872 and 1874, African American workers found they faced opposition not only from their employers, but also from the Metropolitan Police and Louisiana State Militia. Black longshoremen and sugar workers were among the best-organized and most confident sections of the

workforce during the early years of Reconstruction, and their walk outs were dramatic and militant affairs that included not only picketing but also forceful attempts to enforce the strike and prevent scabbing. As we have already seen, Radical leaders had tolerated—and even defended—black labor militancy during the wave of urban unrest associated with the coming of Presidential Reconstruction. In the early 1870s they took a different course, proclaiming attacks on strikebreakers to be an infringement of the right to work, and using the armed wing of the Radical state machine to end the practice. In these episodes we can clearly see the class divisions opening up within the Radical coalition.

The longshoremen were one of the most militant and organized sections of the black working class in the postbellum period. As we have seen in earlier chapters, the waterfront had long been an important locus of African American politics in New Orleans, with a tradition of radical independent politics going back to the slavery years. I have suggested, moreover, that strike action by black dockworkers contributed to the mood of urban unrest in the years immediately following the war and thus played a role in the origins of Radical Reconstruction. Alongside this powerful organizing tradition, African American longshoremen enjoyed a certain degree of bargaining power, particularly during the years of economic recovery from 1868 to 1873. Despite long-term changes in the regional economy, due in part to the rise of railroads as an alternative to steamboat transportation, waterfront workers stood at the heart of the economy of Reconstruction-era New Orleans. As Eric Arnesen notes, “the waterfront remained the center of the city’s commercial life” in

this period, meaning "workers on the city's docks constituted the vital link in the transportation process."[110] These factors would combine to give black longshoremen a strong basis from which to pursue their interests under the Radical government.

Dock laborers were thus among the first groups of African American working people to form stable trade unions in Reconstruction New Orleans. Earlier black labor actions seem to have been relatively spontaneous, or to have taken place in close conjunction with the rise of the Republican Party. The general mood of radicalization and resistance to Presidential Reconstruction had clearly played a major role in the waterfront strikes of the winter of 1865, for example, as well as the plantation actions that followed in their wake. And the actions of black longshoremen in 1867 came as part of a wave of mobilization closely connected to the victory of Radicalism in the elections that spring. With the Radicals in power, however, and a relative economic recovery taking place, African American dock workers had the opportunity to put their organization on a more enduring basis. In April 1872, 200 black men founded the Longshoremen's Protective Union Benevolent Society or "Protective Union," in part to minimize destructive competition with organized white longshoremen.[111] The Protective Union would emerge as the leading force in black labor protest under the Radical government, becoming the vehicle through which these workers attempted to resolve two major challenges: how to relate to organizing efforts by white longshoremen, and how to tackle the system of stevedoring on the docks.

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[110] Eric Arnesen, *Waterfront Workers of New Orleans: Race, Class, and Politics, 1862-1923* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1991), 38.
[111] Herbert R. Northrup, "The New Orleans Longshoremen," *Political Science Quarterly* 57, no. 4 (Dec., 1942): 527.

As they had in the previous period, black longshoremen directed much of their organizing against the stevedoring system on the docks. Again, we have already witnessed explosive conflicts between black dockworkers and the stevedores, or labor brokers, who hired them on behalf of steamboat companies. In the early 1870s, longshoremen had to contend with rising prices and intermittent work, making it vital that they win relatively high wages and some degree of control over the labor supply. Stevedores, on the other hand, strove to lower the prices they paid for dockhands by employing non-union workers such as sailors and increasing the competition between black and white workers.[112] In October of 1872, and again a year later, the Protective Union struck the docks, demanding a wage increase from $2.50 to $4 per day, and the regularization of employment through the signing of contract between dockworkers and stevedores. During both strikes, members of the Protective Union organized mass marches along the levee, harassed recalcitrant employers, and used persuasion—or threats—to bring non-union black longshoremen into the work stoppage.[113]

During these strikes, the workers in the Protective Union discovered they had a new adversary: the Radical government. In 1867, the Radical government had actually intervened on behalf of striking dockworkers, with Republican officials convincing steamboat captains to deal directly with longshoremen rather than using a labor broker. When the Protective Union struck in 1872 and 1873, however, the Metropolitan Police reacted very differently. On October 17, the first day of the

[112] For a discussion of the structural conflicts between longshoremen and labor brokers, see Colin Farrington, *Biracial Unions on Galveston's Waterfront* (Austin, TX: Texas State Historical Society, 2007), 30.
[113] Arnesen, *Waterfront Workers*, 53-58.

waterfront strike of 1872, a group of strikers shot dead a stevedore named Barnes after he attacked them with a hatchet, leading to newspapers blaming the Protective Union for creating a violent disturbance. Mayor Benjamin Flanders, a stalwart of white Radicalism, ordered Captain Badger of the Metropolitans to mobilize 300 well-armed policemen to the waterfront, where they protected steamboat captains, stevedores, and strikebreakers from the men of the Protective Union. When the Protective Union struck over the same issues in October of 1873—demanding $4 per day and a closed shop for union workers—Badger of the Metropolitans promised to respect their right to strike but also vowed to protect any worker who chose to cross the picket lines. In both of these strikes, the Radical government's commitment to protecting strikebreakers prevented the creation of a closed shop on the docks and forced unionized black longshoremen to return to work at their old rates of pay.[114]

Alongside the waterfront workers, plantation hands in the sugar district outside New Orleans formed one of the more powerful and coordinated groups of black working people in this period. Unlike the cotton-growing areas of the Mississippi Valley, the sugar parishes had largely retained gang labor and avoided the emergence of sharecropping. Rather than laboring on rented family farms for a share of the crop, freedpeople on sugar plantations worked collectively, and for wages. Rebecca Scott has concisely described the social power of sugar workers in southern Louisiana: "The density of settlement and the predominance of wage labor…helped to focus economic grievances on matters of wages and working conditions that

[114] Arnesen, *Waterfront Workers*, 53-58.

affected large groups of workers. The continued use of gang labor…provided workers with the possibility of strength in collective action."[115] As John Rodrigue has demonstrated, moreover, sugar workers had learned to leverage their advantages in the labor market. Not only did planters compete for scarce labor, but they also found themselves highly vulnerable to work actions during the crucial harvest season beginning in mid-October. By the early 1870s, therefore, black plantation hands had often managed to drive wages as high as $50 or even $60 per month.[116]

Although black plantation workers did not build enduring labor organizations on the level of the longshoremen's Protective Union, they did frequently exercise their economic muscle with short wage strikes. As was the case on the New Orleans waterfront, black labor activism in the sugar parishes had demonstrated a strong connection between political and economic agitation. In January 1866, black plantation workers had followed their counterparts on the New Orleans docks by taking strike action, apparently under the leadership of the local Republican Party and at a time when many white southerners feared an imminent black insurrection. Rebecca Scott has suggested that local structures of the Republican Party may have continued to form the core of labor organizing in the sugar parishes under the Radical state government.[117] With or without organization, African American sugar workers

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[115] Rebecca J. Scott, *Degrees of Freedom: Louisiana and Cuba After Slavery* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005), 47.
[116] John C. Rodrigue, *Reconstruction in the Cane Fields: From Slavery to Free Labor in Louisiana's Sugar Parishes, 1862-1880* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2001), 140-143; Moon-Ho Jung, *Coolies and Cane: Race, Labor, and Sugar in the Age of Emancipation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008), 160.
[117] Scott, *Degrees of Freedom*, 50, 55.

engaged in frequent wage strikes during the early 1870s.[118] As Rodrigue notes, even the planters' press was forced to recognize the regularity of such work actions. "Newspaper reports, although couched in terms intended to demonstrate the strikes' ineffectiveness, attested to their frequency," he writes.[119]

The financial crisis that began in 1873 forced planters to attempt dramatic cost-cutting measures, and therefore helped detonate a major strike in Terrebonne Parish in January 1874. As Scott notes, "Louisiana planters…were still trying to adjust to the regime of free labor" when the panic hit, and unlike their competitors in Cuba, therefore, "possessed neither the financial resilience nor the mastery of their workforce" necessary to survive the downturn without drastic measures.[120] Faced with plummeting sugar prices, planters sought drastic pay cuts from their workers, and announced at the end of 1873 that monthly wages would fall from $15-20 to $13 per month.[121] On January 5, 1874, several hundred black sugar workers met at a church just outside Houma, Terrebonne Parish, and announced their decision not to work for less than $20 per month, plus rations. They also discussed plans to establish a labor cooperative in order to secure their own land and work collaboratively. In the following days, groups of striking workers marched through the parish and attempted to broaden the action by persuading others to quit work.[122]

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[118] See, for example, Jung, *Coolies and Cane*, 124, 128. The militancy of black cane workers was a major cause of the demand for Chinese labor among Louisiana sugar planters in this period.
[119] Rodrigue, *Reconstruction in the Cane Fields*, 143-150.
[120] Scott, *Degrees of Freedom*, 54.
[121] Rodrigue, *Reconstruction in the Cane Fields*, 162.
[122] Jung, *Coolies and Cane*, 182.

Although the strike remained largely peaceful, the Radical government intervened once again in order to protect strikebreakers and uphold the right of employers to continue work free of harassment. On January 13, a group of strikers approached the plantation of Henry Minor, intent on persuading his hands to join the campaign. When Minor remonstrated with the strikers, they threatened to return in greater numbers and burn down his sugar mill. Alarmed, Minor both summoned a posse led by the black local sheriff and telegraphed Governor Kellogg to request armed assistance. Although the Republican governor seems to have hoped to avoid confrontation with the strikers, on January 15 he sent at least 50 men of the Louisiana State Militia to the sugar parishes, including a unit of 25 cavalry and one piece of artillery. Kellogg's militiamen arrested a number of strike leaders as soon as they arrived in Terrebonne Parish and made clear they would brook no interference with workers who chose not to observe the stoppage. Absent the ability to broaden their movement, by January 20 the striking sugar hands had been forced to concede defeat and they returned to work at the planters' new wage scale.[123]

John Rodrigue and Steven Hahn have both characterized Kellogg's intervention in the 1874 sugar strike as restrained. There is certainly some truth in this formulation. As Rodrigue and Hahn note, local black political power, and the presence of a Republican government in New Orleans, meant that black strikers did not have to fear overwhelming military repression, as they certainly did under slavery

[123] For accounts of the strike, see Rodrigue, *Reconstruction in the Cane Fields*, 162-164; Scott, *Degrees of Freedom*, 54-56; Jung, *Coolies and Cane*, 182-183.

and would again under Jim Crow.[124] Nevertheless, all three of these strikes reveal a crucial point of divergence between black working people and the Radical government. In order to effectively enforce their wage demands, striking workers had to ensure the widest possible observance of the work stoppage. In some cases this involved direct confrontations with strikebreakers and employers. While Radical ideology may have reluctantly conceded the right to strike in the abstract, it certainly did not contain room for strikers to "interfere" with other workers or the business of other employers. The Metropolitans and State Militia therefore intervened in all of these strikes precisely when African American workers were trying to deepen and broaden support for their campaign, and in doing so all but guaranteed the strikes' defeat. In this sense, the strikes of the 1870s demonstrate how the increasing political awareness of black working people had come into conflict with the views of the Radical leadership.

**The Patronage Wars**

As we have seen, participation in the Radical coalition had been a potent incubator of political awareness among the freedpeople. It had helped African American women and men achieve an understanding of their new interests and opportunities as wage earners. In the early 1870s, this increasing confidence had resulted in a number of major strikes and provoked conflict between black workers

[124] Rodrigue, *Reconstruction in the Cane Fields*, 164-165; Steven Hahn, *A Nation Under Our Feet: Black Political Struggles in the Rural South from Slavery to the Great Migration* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003), 351.

and the leadership of the Radical state machine. A similar—but opposed—process of class formation and social stratification was taking place at the top of the Republican Party in New Orleans, in the form of an extremely divisive, and even violent, scramble for office and the fruits of political patronage. In 1871 and 1872, squabbles among Republican leaders would drive a further line of demarcation through the Radical coalition, leaving the state machine teetering on the brink of total collapse.

The question of patronage assumed such significance for Republicans in New Orleans at least in part because southern Radicalism did not enjoy the same social base of support as its northern counterpart. As David Montgomery and Charles Post have shown, northern Radicalism first emerged as the expression of antislavery militancy among some commercial farmers and urban professionals, but began to attain real influence only when it became the political vehicle for the hopes and aspirations of a section of the rising Northern elite. As Post states, with the war dragging on and producing a profound political realignment, "it was the manufacturers who were at the centre of the Radicals' political alliance."[125] These social groups, especially independent commercial farmers and manufacturers, did not enjoy nearly the same political weight in the southern states, however. Indeed, as we have seen, even a major commercial city like New Orleans contained virtually no industrial development. Southern Radicalism could not count on the support of a local leadership drawn from the ranks of rising manufacturers, making patronage all the more important for Republican politicians. Competition for elected office and the

[125] Charles Post, *The American Road to Capitalism: Studies in Class Structure, Economic Development and Political Conflict, 1620-1877* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2012), 259.

fruits of patronage therefore proved a source of violent division within Republican ranks—not just in Louisiana, but in states such as Arkansas as well.[126]

In New Orleans, the Custom House became the main source of patronage, producing a distinct power base within the local Republican Party in the late 1860s and early 1870s. The U.S. Custom House controlled the city's Mississippi port facilities, providing a fair number of relatively well-paid jobs to white Northern *emigrés* and some leading black Radicals. As James Hogue notes, "Because the security of their jobs depended solely on the support of the federal government," Custom House employees "remained largely immune to the effects of social ostracism from whites as well as the pressures of the locally based patronage machine." The white U.S. Marshal for New Orleans, Capt. Stephen Packard, had assumed control of what contemporaries called "the Custom House Ring" by the early 1870s with the support of his brother Christopher, who sat as a Republican in the Louisiana state senate. Alongside the Packards stood James Casey, the white customs collector for the Port of New Orleans, who owed his prominent office to the fact he was President Grant's brother-in-law. This group of white carpetbaggers grouped around the Custom House became increasingly suspicious of Governor Warmoth during the early 1870s, particularly as he seemed determined to abolish the term limits for his office and seek election once again in 1872.[127]

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[126] On the factional struggle among Arkansas Republicans, see Earl F. Woodward, "The Brooks and Baxter War in Arkansas, 1872-1874," *Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 30, no. 4 (Winter, 1971).

[127] James K. Hogue, *Uncivil War: Five New Orleans Street Battles and the Rise and Fall of Radical Reconstruction* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2006), 77.

The most important black Republican associated with the Custom House was Lieutenant Governor Oscar Dunn. Dunn was in many ways the most prominent embodiment of locally-grown New Orleans Radicalism still active in the leadership of the Republican Party. His parents had been slaves owned by James Caldwell, one of the city's wealthiest antebellum businessmen and leading political figures. Like so many urban women of color, his mother Maria Dunn operated a boardinghouse, while her husband James was a skilled carpenter who eventually managed to purchase his own freedom and that of his family. After working as an apprentice plasterer, the young Oscar studied music and became an accomplished violinist and teacher. Actively involved in the organizing efforts of the free African American community in antebellum New Orleans, Dunn carried on his activism during the Civil War period, uniting with Thomas Durant and others to build the Radical wing of the Unionist movement. As such, he was involved in some of the most militant campaigns of the late 1860s, including the campaigns for "labor communes" in the countryside and worker-owned cooperatives in the city.[128] Despite winning election as Warmoth's running mate in 1868, Dunn grew skeptical of the governor's commitment to black civil rights and threw in his lot with the Custom House Ring in 1870 as a way of opposing Warmoth's agenda.[129]

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[128] A.E. Perkins, "Oscar James Dunn," *Phylon* 4, no. 2 (2nd Quarter, 1943); Perkins, "James Henri Burch and Oscar James Dunn in Louisiana," *Journal of Negro History* 22, no. 3 (July, 1937).

[129] Ted Tunnell, *Crucible of Reconstruction: War, Radicalism, and Race in Louisiana, 1862-1877* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1984), 165.

Tensions between white governor and black lieutenant governor had begun to flare as early as 1870, when Dunn began to resent Warmoth's failure to sign a civil rights bill he had drafted. At the Republican state convention in the summer of 1870, Dunn drew on Custom House support to beat Warmoth for election as chair of the State Central Committee. In retribution, Warmoth refused to channel campaign contributions through the party apparatus, lent his support to independent candidates, and conspired with white Democrats in the state legislature to rob Dunn of his patronage powers.[130] Stung by the governor's disloyalty, Dunn and the black and white members of the Custom House Ring now decided on an open challenge to Warmoth's control of the Louisiana Republican Party. In the summer of 1871, the Republican state convention was once again scheduled to meet, tasked with electing a State Central Committee for the following year. Dunn and the Custom House Ring threw themselves into action, determined to win a majority of delegates and consolidate their grip on the Louisiana party's levers of power. Across New Orleans, local Republican Clubs split into hostile factions as supporters of the governor and lieutenant governor scrambled to control the election process.[131]

Faced with the bitter opposition of Dunn and the white Custom House Republicans, Warmoth did, however, continue to enjoy the support of Pinchback and a majority of his allies among the black Republicans. On July 9, 1871, Pinchback's newspaper the *Louisianan* began to denounce the threat of factionalism in the state

[130] Ella Lonn, *Reconstruction in Louisiana after 1868* (New York: Russell and Russell, 1967 [1918]), 74-75.
[131] Lonn, *Reconstruction in Louisiana*, 96-99.

Republican Party.[132] Soon, though, Pinchback's paper declared polemical war on the Custom House Ring and its attempt to seize control of the state convention.[133] Supporters of Casey and Packard were quick to respond to Pinchback's support for Warmoth, and attempted to eliminate the political bases of the former steamboat workers. In late July, Custom House operatives tried to prevent Pinchback from speaking at the Third Ward Republican Club, and a few days later meted out the same treatment to Pinchback allies Alexander Barber and James Lewis.[134]

Given this heated factional struggle over control of the local party apparatus, it was hardly surprising that when convention met on August 9 it was bitterly divided. Many wards and parishes had sent competing delegations. On realizing that morning that Warmoth's supporters seemed to have won a clear majority, the State Central Committee suddenly moved the convention to the Custom House, where Packard's U.S. Marshals would enjoy jurisdiction, and called for the support of a detachment of federal troops. When Warmoth and his allies were denied entry to the Custom House, they adjourned to Turner Hall and declared themselves the legitimate Republican state convention, with Pinchback as president. Back at the Custom House, meanwhile, Packard, Casey, and Dunn had their convention vote to expel Warmoth from the Republican Party. For the moment, the Ring appeared to have the upper hand, and its leaders' connections to the national party did them no harm at all; when the governor sent a delegation to Grant to complain about the actions of federal

[132] *Semi-Weekly Louisianan*, July 9, 1871.
[133] *Semi-Weekly Louisianan*, July 16, 1871.
[134] *Semi-Weekly Louisianan*, July 20 and 27, 1871.

officeholders in New Orleans, the president refused to take any action whatsoever against his brother-in-law. As 1871 drew to a close, Warmoth and Pinchback seemed to be on the losing side of a struggle that had cleaved the Radical leadership in two.[135]

At the end of the year, however, the pendulum of factional advantage swung back toward the governor under the most extraordinary circumstances. On November 22, 1871, Oscar Dunn died at home in his bed. A few days earlier, the lieutenant governor had complained of a mild cold but had continued with both his official duties and factional activities. On November 20, however, Dunn's condition had deteriorated suddenly, an apparent case of pneumonia driving him into a coma from which he never awoke. The unexpected nature of Dunn's demise and the remarkable advantage it suddenly bestowed on Warmoth and Pinchback have given rise to many conspiracy theories in the years since.[136] Regardless of its cause, the lieutenant governor's death prompted Warmoth to move swiftly. He had to: with Dunn out of the picture, Speaker of the House George Carter, a white supporter of the Custom House Ring, was next in line for the governor's chair if Warmoth could be impeached. Everything rested on Warmoth's ability to get an ally in place before his enemies could depose him.[137]

That ally was P.B.S. Pinchback, and Warmoth ordered the State Senate into emergency session on December 6 with the intention of securing the position of

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[135] Joseph G. Dawson, *Army Generals and Reconstruction: Louisiana, 1862-1877* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1982), 109-111; Lonn, *Reconstruction in Louisiana*, 99-105.
[136] Perkins, "Oscar James Dunn," 116-117; Marcus B. Christian, "The Theory of the Poisoning of Oscar J. Dunn," *Phylon* 6, no. 3 (3rd Quarter, 1945).
[137] Lonn, *Reconstruction in Louisiana*, 105-106.

president—and, therefore, lieutenant governor—for his leading black supporter. Despite protestations that the governor's actions violated the constitution, the Custom House Ring joined with white senate Democrats to nominate one of their own, white carpetbagger Theodore Coupland, to stand against Pinchback. After the first round of voting, each candidate had the support of 17 senators, but in the second round Pinchback's longtime friend James Lewis switched sides away from his employers in the Custom House and voted for Warmoth's man. With Pinchback victorious, the governor's supporters immediately voted to adjourn until the state legislature's regular session was scheduled to begin on January 1, 1872.[138]

The first two weeks of 1872 witnessed a dramatic finale to the struggle between Warmoth and his opponents in the Custom House Ring as two rival state governments emerged in New Orleans. When the state legislature convened on January 1, an alliance of Custom House and Democratic Party state senators fled the city on a federal revenue cutter, leaving Pinchback without a quorum. Warmoth's enemies hoped that Speaker of the House Carter would now be able to muster a majority for impeachment, but when he took to the floor on January 3, Warmoth's supporters moved to declare the speaker's chair vacant and a brawl ensued among the legislators present. The next day, U.S. Marshal Packard dispatched groups of armed deputies to arrest the governor and his allies for their part in the disturbance. The marshals managed to seize Warmoth, Pinchback, Superintendant of the Metropolitan Police Algernon Badger, and more than a dozen Republican politicians, including

[138] Hogue, *Uncivil War*, 79.

Alexander Barber. But the Custom House had underestimated the governor's tenacity. Upon posting bail a couple of hours later, Warmoth again called the state legislature into session at the Mechanics' Institute. Without Custom House or Democratic members present, the House declared a quorum, voted a new Speaker, and had the Metropolitans and State Militia immediately begin fortification of the building. Carter and the rump of remaining legislatures moved to the Gem Saloon, a notorious drinking establishment, and declared themselves the legitimate state government.[139]

Warmoth and Pinchback now had the wind in their sails, and they continued to benefit from the tactical ineptitude of their factional enemies. On January 9, one of Packard's deputies shot and killed a Republican state senator named Walter Wheyland during an attempted arrest. Warmoth immediately sent Superintendant Badger and 300 heavily armed Metropolitans to the Gem Saloon, where they evicted the rival legislature. Carter avoided arrest, and his supporters continued to call huge anti-Warmoth rallies over the next several days. Nevertheless, it had become clear to all concerned that the governor was now fully master of the situation, and dissident politicians began returning to the Mechanics' Institute. On January 20, the State Senate finally mustered enough votes to confirm Pinchback as lieutenant governor. For the moment, at least, Warmoth had clung to power—largely thanks to his continued control of the instruments of Radical armed strength in the Metropolitans and State Militia.[140]

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[139] Dawson, *Army Generals and Reconstruction*, 116-118; Hogue, *Uncivil War*, 80-84.
[140] Lonn, *Reconstruction in Louisiana*, 125-134 Dawson, *Army Generals and Reconstruction*, 118-126.

**The Threat of Liberalism**

By the early 1870s, internal social conflict had begun to tear apart the Radical coalition at the national level. The growth of the northern labor movement during the years immediately following the Civil War, and the specter of the Paris Commune across the Atlantic, increased tensions between working men and manufacturers, two important components of the Radical bloc. The coalition could not survive the consequent stresses and strain. As David Montgomery noted,

> Radicalism had been tried and found wanting: by labor reformers because the support it provided working-class needs was at best ambivalent, by manufacturers because it failed to provide an adequate barrier to working-class pretensions, and by professionals and intellectuals because its practical fruits had turned out to be not a harmonious republic of virtue, but a regime of self-perpetuating careerists.[141]

One result was the emergence of the Liberal Republican Party, including a number of former abolitionists and Radicals, which challenged Grant and his "Stalwarts" in the election of 1872 on a platform of hostility to the labor movement, disgust toward perceived corruption, and a demand to end federal involvement in the South.[142]

The growing influence of the railroad interests in southern politics exemplified the growing hegemony of industrial capitalism in the postbellum South, and Governor Warmoth proved a willing ally of these powerful corporations. As James Hogue has written, Warmoth "took a keen personal interest in the

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[141] Montgomery, *Beyond Equality*, 368.
[142] On the Liberal Republicans, see Andrew L. Slap, *The Doom of Reconstruction: The Liberal Republicans in the Civil War Era* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006).

transportation infrastructure" of New Orleans. This is something of an understatement. With Warmoth at the helm between 1868 and 1872, Louisiana embarked on a huge campaign of railroad speculation. Politicians, planters, and merchants united in their desire to link New Orleans with major regions of commercial agriculture around the cities of Houston, Texas, and Jackson, Mississippi. As a consequence, the state government assumed huge debts through the issuance of bonds to finance proposed projects, and helped spark the development of huge investment bubbles in lines that would never even begin construction. Warmoth made sure to profit from these developments. He was an early investor in the New Orleans, Jackson, and Great Northern Railroad, buying stock that he knew would become massively more valuable when the legislature passed state-backed bonds for the project.[143] It was beginning to seem that the young governor saw support for the railroad corporations, and lining his own pockets, as significantly more important than the defense of the interests of the freedpeople.

By 1872, Warmoth's pro-business policies, conservatism on the question of black civil rights, and alienation from the local and national Republican leadership had combined to draw him into the orbit of the Liberal Republican movement. At the national level, Liberals were those Republicans who had become convinced that the growth of governmental power during the Civil War and Reconstruction posed a danger to liberty and sound political economy. Liberals saw themselves as crusaders against the corruption of the Grant administration, opponents of the tariff, and—

[143] Lonn, *Reconstruction in Louisiana*, 34-35, 56-57; Hogue, *Uncivil War*, 63-64.

perhaps above all—advocates of an end to "military government" in the South.[144] But, as John Jentz, Richard Schneirov, and Heather Cox Richardson have shown, Liberals were particularly concerned that assertive working people in the North and the South would attempt to seize governmental power and use it to pass what they viewed as class legislation.[145] In May 1872, Warmoth led a delegation of Louisianans to attend the Liberal Republican convention in Cincinnati, where the assembled delegates nominated the maverick newspaper editor Horace Greeley for president. From a leading proponent of Radical Republicanism, Greeley had by the early 1870s become the most vitriolic of Grant's critics, and, as Richardson has argued, bolstered his attacks on the president with "accusations that the men in control of his reconstruction governments planned to confiscate wealth rather than work for wages."[146]

Meeting the Liberal challenge required old enemies within the Republican camp to consider new attempts at unity in 1872. P.B.S. Pinchback, now the leader of a Republican faction that included many of his allies among the former steamboat workers, seems to have been the driving force behind efforts to heal the party of its former divisions in the summer of 1872. Although dissatisfied with Warmoth's commitment to civil rights, Pinchback clearly admired the governor's force of personality, and initially hoped to convince him to run again as the best possible obstacle to a Democratic campaign. Despite the lieutenant governor's pleas, however,

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[144] Montgomery, *Beyond Equality*, 379-386.
[145] Jentz and Schneirov, *Chicago in the Age of Capital*, 174-176; Richardson, *The Death of Reconstruction*, 95-98.
[146] Richardson, *The Death of Reconstruction*, 101 and 101-103 generally.

Warmoth simply could not forgive either the Custom House Ring or its allies in the Grant administration. After a summer of fruitless maneuvering, Pinchback resigned himself to a new alliance with the Custom House. The ticket emerging from this combination included white carpetbagger William Pitt Kellogg for governor and Pinchback's old friend, black businessman C.C. Antoine, for lieutenant governor. Kellogg was typical of the Custom House Ring. A Vermont-born lawyer, he had parlayed an early acquaintance with Abraham Lincoln into a successful legal career before the Civil War. After a brief stint in the Union Army, rising to the rank of colonel, Kellogg won appointment as federal collector of the Port of New Orleans, where he served until winning election as one of Louisiana's two senators in 1868. In 1872, Kellogg was a consensus candidate, a safe but uninspiring choice to unite the Republicans.[147]

Kellogg's opposition in the 1872 fall election would come from a coalition of Liberal Republicans, Democrats, and a new formation named the Reform Party. Warmoth and his supporters had become so outraged with the Republican hierarchy that they were willing to unite with anyone in opposition to Grant and his local representatives. On June 5, 1872, meanwhile, a group of white former Whigs who opposed both the Republicans and the Democratic machine assembled and formed a new organization named the Reform Party. Having nominated white George Williamson for governor, the Reformers apparently came to the realization that they had little hope of winning office, and offered negotiations with the Democrats in July.

[147] Tunnell, *Crucible of Reconstruction*, 170; Dawson, *Army Generals and Reconstruction*, 129-130.

The latter party clearly held the whip hand in the emerging oppositional alliance. With the Republicans badly divided, Democrats dared to dream of seizing back the Louisiana state government through a straightforward electoral victory. Under these circumstances, and with Reformers and Liberals keen to make common cause, Democrats may have been tempted to nominate a relative moderate in hopes of reaching voters outside their traditional white-supremacist voter base. Instead, in early June, they chose former Confederate officer and notorious racist Col. John McEnery for their candidate. Despite Warmoth's concern that the Fusion ticket ought not to alienate black voters any more than necessary, negotiations between the three parties that concluded on August 28 produced a ticket of McEnery for governor and white Liberal D.B. Penn for lieutenant governor during negotiations.[148]

Although the November elections took place relatively peacefully, both Republicans and Fusionists alleged widespread fraud and claimed victory for their own tickets. On November 14 the statewide Returning Board—tasked with determining the election results but widely seen as being under Warmoth's control—met, and split along party lines. On December 4, the outgoing Governor Warmoth declared victory for the McEnery-Penn ticket and a ordered the state legislature back into session with a Fusionist majority in both houses. The Custom House Ring, however, had been assured of support from President Grant, and on December 6 used a mix of federal troops and Packard's deputy marshals to seize control of the state house. On December 9, the Republican Returning Board thereupon declared the

[148] Lonn, *Reconstruction in Louisiana*, 140-144, 150-154; Dawson, *Army Generals and Reconstruction*, 129-131.

Kellogg-Antoine ticket elected, and certified a small Fusionist majority in the House and a large Republican majority in the Senate. That same day, with the Mechanics' Institute under armed guard, Custom House leaders admitted only those legislators elected according to their own Returning Board. Support from Washington seemed to have given Republicans a decisive advantage.[149]

P.B.S. Pinchback became the figurehead and effective leader of the Republican regime that came to power in early December 1872, and his initial moves against the Fusionists proved successful. As lieutenant governor, he introduced impeachment charges against Warmoth into the state legislature on December 9, and, when they passed the House with a huge majority, was immediately elevated to the position of acting governor. Governor Pinchback now moved purposefully to consolidate Republican control over the state machine. On December 11, he purged from the militia all officers loyal to Warmoth and the Fusionists and appointed his own supporters in their stead, relying especially on Packard's deputy marshals and men from Badger's Metropolitan Police. Warmoth, however, was not without his own bodies of armed men, and militia units under the command of ex-Confederate officers seized two armories and the state arsenal in the name of the Fusionist government. When Pinchback ordered a force of 300 Metropolitans to retake the arsenal on Carondolet Street on December 13, they found the building too heavily defended for a direct assault. Having secured President Grant's support via a hasty exchange of telegrams, however, the acting governor was able to demand the support of federal

[149] Tunnell, *Crucible of Reconstruction*, 171; Dawson, *Army Generals and Reconstruction*, 133-136.

troops stationed in New Orleans under Gen. William H. Emory, and thus force Warmoth's militia to evacuate the installations on December 14.[150]

Pinchback's nominal allies did not share his boldness in dealing with the Fusionist challenge, however; their inaction allowed the crisis to endure, and ultimately devolve into yet another street battle. When the acting governor on January 3 declared his willingness to "use police or other forces to prevent this revolution" in a telegram to the president, Grant vetoed the idea of a decisive strike against the Fusionists. Two governments therefore claimed to be taking office on January 6, 1873, with McEnery claiming to have been elected governor, and Kellogg replacing the much more resolute Pinchback. Grant and Kellogg both preferred to wait and see, hoping that the Fusionist movement would fade away of its own accord. On the contrary, however, Republican inaction merely gave confidence to their enemies, and the Fusionist legislature successfully stymied even the most basic tax-collecting functions of Kellogg's government throughout January and February.[151]

When armed conflict did erupt, therefore, it was at the instigation of the Fusionists and not the tattered Radical regime. On March 5, 1873, a group of two hundred of Warmoth's mutinous militiamen attempted an assault on the arsenal at the Cabildo in Jackson Square. Aware in advance of the Fusionist plan, however, the Metropolitan Police guarding the building felt confident enough to refuse to surrender and dig in to wait for reinforcements. Within less than an hour, Badger arrived on the scene with reinforcements, including an artillery piece, and made a show of force that

[150] Hogue, *Uncivil War*, 97-100; Dawson, *Army Generals and Reconstruction*, 137-139.
[151] Hogue, Uncivil War, 100-103; Dawson, *Army Generals and Reconstruction*, 140-142.

quickly demoralized the Fusionists. When federal troops, too, ordered the Fusionists to disperse, the attempted coup had come to a shuddering halt. The next day, March 6, Badger led a further force of Metropolitians to disperse the now-undefended McEnery legislature, and the Fusionist threat was all but over.[152]

**Conclusion**

Thanks to Pinchback's decisiveness, the Radical government survived the Fusionist challenge, just as it had the turbulence of the earlier struggle with the Custom House. But the events of the 1870s had revealed just how weak the Republican government really was. At the top of the party, the lack of a strong social base for an indigenous Radical movement had led to poisonous factionalism and a frantic scramble for control of patronage appointments. Simultaneously, the growing conservatism of the national Republican Party found partial expression in Warmoth's defection to the Liberal Republicans and consequent support for the reactionary Fusion movement. Pro-business politicians were increasingly disdainful of black civil rights and the need to maintain federal armed power in the South, and were keen that the nation return to a state of affairs in which the interests of railroads and industry could be prioritized. In the context of Louisiana's weak and immature state machine, these developments spilled beyond the bounds of parliamentary competition and assumed the character of paramilitary violence, often using the bases of armed Radicalism as pawns in the struggle.

[152] Hogue, *Uncivil War*, 103-106; Dawson, *Army Generals and Reconstruction*, 143-144.

Just as serious as the divisions at the top of the Republican Party was the emerging class stratification taking place within the Radical coalition. As the records of the Freedmen's Bureau indicate, formerly enslaved women and men were adapting quickly to their new position as wage earners. Mobilized and given confidence by the struggle against Presidential Reconstruction, black working people were rapidly creating a new identity and self-awareness for themselves, learning to leverage their strengths in the labor market, and taking collective action against their employers. African American workers were, moreover, building families and community in a manner that seemed to violate the Republican ideals of separate spheres and the demarcation between public and private life. The implications of these processes became clearest during the major waterfront and plantation strikes of the early 1870s, when black workers' need to enforce compliance with a militant work stoppage came into conflict with Republican views about the sanctity of private property and the right of strikebreakers to continue work. In sum, African American working people and the Radical leadership were beginning to find themselves on opposite sides of the picket line.

Between 1868 and 1870, Radicalism ascendant had created institutions of armed power to defend its state machine against the depredations of neo-Confederate white supremacy. The Metropolitan Police and the Louisiana State Militia rested on Radicalism's strengths as a coalition: with white Union veterans or black former steamboat workers as officers, they put guns in the hands of former slaves and allowed them to defend their freedom by force. Under Warmoth and Pinchback, the

Metropolitans and the Militia played a crucial role in keeping Radicalism in power during the early 1870s. Along with the threat of federal power, they had ensured the victory of the Kellogg-Antoine ticket in the 1872 election. But, crucially, these armed bodies were now being used in intra-party conflicts as well as to defend Radicalism against its external foes. During the Battle of the Cabildo in 1872, units from the Louisiana State Militia had been on opposite sides of the conflict. Some parts of the militia had refused to serve at all, or had disbanded in disgust, confusion, or resignation. Significantly, both the Metropolitan Police and the Louisiana State Militia were now being used to protect strikebreakers and employers from militant action on the part of black workers.

These developments in New Orleans were in line with the trajectory of Republican politics at the national level. The "retreat from Reconstruction" was already well underway by the early 1870s, as politicians and business interests adapted to a new post-war and post-slavery environment. In particular, the Paris Commune and the growing strength of the U.S. labor movement had provoked the northern elite to wonder if Reconstruction had not already gone too far. Was it not the case that Communards, striking workers, and black southerners all demanded government action to attain what they should have been seeking through hard work, thrift, and self-reliance? Did not federal intervention in the South set an unfortunate precedent for the scope of state power to regulate economic and social life? The Liberal Republican movement of 1872, of which Warmoth's support for Fusionism was but a local example, reflected the first signs of an elite reaction against

Congressional Reconstruction and the power of Radical state governments in the South.

The two main components of the Radical coalition were now pulling in opposite directions, and the state machine they had built lay shattered almost beyond repair. Indeed, as we have had cause to remark before, Radicalism had always contained the seeds of its own undoing. In order to achieve its goals—victory over the Confederacy, the end of slavery, defeat of Presidential Reconstruction, and the construction of a new government—Radicalism had relied on the mobilization of black working people. Cooks and washerwomen, steamboat workers and artisans—all had played their part in the making of the Radical coalition. And in so doing, they had transformed themselves, both in terms of their position in society and relationships to other social groups, and in the way they conceived of themselves and their place in the world. The birth of Radicalism had required this political awakening, but it could not accommodate it for long. For, if the interests of black working people had aligned temporarily with those of the Republican Party during the high tide of revolutionary change, they were now coming into conflict. The upper echelons of the Republican Party sought to represent the outlook of bankers and industrialists and looked with profound suspicion on continued working-class mobilization.

Faced with such divisions, the Radical state government based in New Orleans was now in profound danger. Its base was demoralized, and its allies in Washington seemed reluctant to protect it against the very real threat of homegrown white terrorism. In a formal sense, Reconstruction would persist until 1877. But the

alignment of social and political forces that had made Reconstruction possible was already coming to an end in the early 1870s. Radicalism had emerged in a very particular historical moment and, thanks to the efforts of thousands of ordinary black women and men, it could boast of some truly extraordinary achievements. As the 1870s progressed, however, the Radical coalition came to seem increasingly anachronistic. It was becoming impossible for these diverse social groups to unite in an alliance that could deliver genuine change to the South—or any other part of the nation, for that matter. In New Orleans, certainly, Radicalism would not survive the hammer blows of the mid-1870s.

## Epilogue

## "They Will Not Vote at All"

The Radical victory at the Battle of the Cabildo in March 1873 proved short lived. While Kellogg's administration had clung to power in New Orleans, the rest of Louisiana was descending into chaos in the spring and summer of 1873, as white terrorists associated with the Fusion movement, Kellogg's white supremacist opponents in the elections of November 1872, launched a series of violent attacks on bastions of local Radical power. The most dramatic such incident took place in Colfax, on the Red River, in April 1873. As the seat of newly-created Grant Parish, Colfax had become the headquarters of a powerful and confident Radical machine by the early 1870s, albeit one that faced frequent challenges from local white supremacists. A cadre of Union Army veterans, operating under the auspices of the Louisiana State Militia, had become the key to black political power in Grant Parish, and their determined defense of the African American community enraged many whites who wanted to see the end of Radical power in the Louisiana countryside.[1]

In the aftermath of the Battle of the Cabildo, the white population of Grant Parish had determined to overthrow the Radical stronghold at Colfax. During early April 1873, a group of almost 150 white paramilitaries assembled in Grant Parish and

[1] Following decades of scholarly neglect, the Colfax Massacre is now the subject of two monographs.: LeeAnna Keith, *The Colfax Massacre: The Untold Story of Black Power, White Terror, and the Death of Reconstruction* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2008) and Charles Lane, *The Day Freedom Died: The Colfax Massacre, the Supreme Court, and the Betrayal of Reconstruction* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 2008).

prepared to assault the courthouse in Colfax. Made aware of the impending attack by a series of violent incidents throughout the parish, black militiamen constructed earthworks, barricaded the building, and prepared to defend the courthouse. The African American defenders were hopelessly outnumbered and outgunned, however, and stood little chance against the determined white assault when it arrived on the morning of April 13—Easter Sunday. Dozens of black men and a handful of white people died in the fighting, with many of the casualties coming as African American militiamen tried to flee the burning building. The Fusionists then rounded up and executed most of the survivors. Although no definitive count was ever made, the white terrorists killed at least 70, and perhaps as many as 150, of the black defenders over the course of the day.[2]

The judicial response to the Colfax Massacre only served to further weaken the Radical regime in New Orleans. Charles Boothby, the Republican superintendent of education for New Orleans, probably spoke for the hopes of many Radicals when he told his mother "we trust the strong arm of the state and national government will take good care of these rioters."[3] A force of Metropolitans and U.S. Army troops dispatched to Grant Parish were able to apprehend just nine alleged perpetrators of the bloodbath, however. When the defendants were brought to New Orleans to face federal charges, their lawyers denied the constitutionality of the Enforcement Act

[2] For detailed accounts of the fighting at Colfax courthouse, see Keith, *The Colfax Massacre*, 88-110; Lane, *The Day Freedom Died*, 90-109.
[3] Charles W. Boothby to "Dear Mother," April 18, 1873, Charles W. Boothby Papers, 1861-1898, Mss. 4847, Louisiana and Lower Mississippi Valley Collections, Louisiana State University Libraries, Baton Rouge, Louisiana (hereafter, LLMVC).

under which they were being tried, and succeeded in having the case appealed to the federal courts.[4] They were able to do so thanks to the landmark Supreme Court ruling in the Slaughterhouse Cases of February 1873, which limited the ability of the federal government to defend a citizen's civil rights from the discriminatory actions of a state government.[5] Building on that ruling, Justice Joseph Bradley sided with the Colfax defendants in June 1874, quashed their indictments, and questioned the constitutionality of the Enforcement Acts. As Charles Lane notes, Bradley's ruling "effectively suspended federal law enforcement in Louisiana and the rest of the Deep South."[6] The legal victory of the Fusionist defendants became a cause for rejoicing for white enemies of the Radical regime throughout Louisiana.

The trial of the Colfax defendants in the spring of 1874 coincided with the rise of the White Leagues as a major political and military force across Louisiana. Indeed, as James Hogue has written, these two events became intertwined in the popular imagination and served together as the basis for a revivified white supremacist movement in Louisiana. The first newspaper dedicated to the cause of the White Leagues, the *Alexandria Caucasian*, began publication in March 1874, just as the first of the Colfax trials were set to begin in New Orleans. Soon newspapers across the state were joining the *Caucasian* in denouncing the Radical government and calling on white men to take up arms and assemble in mass meetings. Although relatively

[4] Keith, *The Colfax Massacre*, 131-143; Lane, *The Day Freedom Died*, 154-186.
[5] Michael A. Ross, "Justice Miller's Reconstruction: The Slaughter-House Cases, Health Codes, and Civil Rights in New Orleans, 1861-1873," *Journal of Southern History* 64, no. 4 (Nov. 1998).
[6] Lane, *The Day Freedom Died*, 212.

decentralized, the Leagues were little more than an armed wing of a rejuvenated Democratic Party, and they had the very clear aim of destroying Radical power, by force, from the bottom up. In this sense the White Leagues had their first real success when, at the end of July 1874, threats from an armed camp of almost one thousand white paramilitaries forced the resignation of all Republican officeholders in Natchitoches Parish.[7]

The Coushatta Massacre of August 1874 was the White Leagues' first major atrocity. It took place in Red River Parish, just upstream from both Colfax and Natchitoches and another of the new parishes created under Warmoth's governorship. Coushatta, the parish seat, had become the powerbase of Marshall Twitchell, a Vermont Union veteran, Freedmen's Bureau agent, and cotton planter. Twitchell had married into the local planter class, and he and his extended family had at one point seemed capable of bringing both black agricultural workers and white merchants and planters into line behind the Republican banner, and had created what seemed like a formidable political machine in Red River. By 1874, however, the combined effects of an economic downturn and the rise of the White Leagues had turned the white population of Red River Parish against their Republican officeholders. In late August 1874, with Twitchell away in New Orleans in his capacity as a state senator, rumors began to spread of a potential African American insurrection. In the hysteria that followed, on August 27, Twitchell's brother, three of his brothers-in-law, and two

[7] James K. Hogue, *Uncivil War: Five New Orleans Street Battles and the Rise and Fall of Radical Reconstruction* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2006), 124-125; Joe Gray Taylor, *Louisiana Reconstructed, 1863-1877* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1974), 281-285.

close friends and political allies were arrested and murdered by the White League just outside Coushatta.[8]

Coushatta set the stage for the White League's open bid for power in September. Over the course of the summer of 1874, the Crescent City White League had enlisted as many as three thousand men and drilled openly in the streets of New Orleans. Its leadership planned to unleash these forces and overthrow the Radical regime during the November elections, but their men lacked firepower and this weakness forced the League to move into action earlier than expected. In the first two weeks of September, units of the Metropolitan Police had conducted a series of raids intended to deprive the white militia of weapons, and on the evening of September 12 they seized the steamboat *Mississippi*, which was suspected of smuggling weapons to the League. Wary of losing their momentum, the leaders of the White League decided to strike, and blanketed the city in leaflets calling for a "mass meeting"—intended as cover for a paramilitary strike—that would take place on September 14.[9]

On the day of the mass meeting, the White League caught the Radical regime unprepared. As Charles Boothby, who witnessed the day's events, told his father, the Radical armed forces "were badly managed." With thousands of white civilians in the streets for the so-called "mass meeting," Republican officials were unclear about the size and position of armed White League units. General Longstreet of the Louisiana

[8] Ted Tunnell, *Edge of the Sword: The Ordeal of Carpetbagger Marshall H. Twitchell in the Civil War and Reconstruction* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2001), 197-207.
[9] Joseph G. Dawson, *Army Generals and Reconstruction: Louisiana, 1862-1877* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1982), 165-166.

State Militia decided to divided his forces. First, units of Metropolitan Police made their way through the crowds in Jackson Square and blundered into a firefight with entrenched White League troops on Canal Street, leaving General Badger of the Metropolitans seriously wounded. This was a major loss for the Radicals because, as Boothby noted, Badger had long served as the "leading spirit" of the state government's armed forces. As the Metropolitans fell back in confusion, and Longstreet himself was wounded, the militia disintegrated completely. Holed up in the Custom House, Governor Kellogg found he had no one left to defend his regime. The White Leagues' coup had been an overwhelming success, and by the end of the day on September 14, D.B. Penn, the Fusionist candidate for lieutenant governor in 1872, was able to declare himself head of a new, provisional state government.[10]

The Grant administration now had to decide whether it would once again save the Louisiana Radicals. On September 15, the day after the coup, Governor Kellogg wrote to Washington to plead for help. "The state being threatened with domestic violence which the state authorities are unable to suppress, and it being impossible to convene the legislature," Kellogg wrote, "I respectfully ask the assistance of the federal Government."[11] In response, Grant issued a proclamation ordering the crowds of White League supporters to disperse from the streets of New Orleans. The small number of federal troops still stationed in Louisiana arrived in the city from their

[10] Charles Boothby wrote a long, detailed account of the fighting as he saw it: see Charles Boothby to George Boothby, September 25, 1874, Charles W. Boothby Papers, 1861-1898, Mss. 4847, LLMVC. For the best historical account of the "Battle of Liberty Place," see Hogue, *Uncivil War*, 132-137.

[11] Gov. William P. Kellogg to President Ulysses S. Grant, September 15, 1874, William Pitt Kellogg Papers, Mss. 195, LLMVC.

summer quarters on September 17 and oversaw Kellogg's return to the statehouse two days later. Over the next few weeks, Grant dramatically strengthened the military presence in New Orleans, sending three regiments of infantry, an artillery battery, and a flotilla of gunboats to deter further action by the White League. Despite this show of force, however, Grant and the Republicans were losing strength at the national level, weakened by the economic crisis, continuing turmoil in the South, and allegations of corruption in the cabinet.[12]

The November 1874 elections further weakened the Radicals. The situation was clearly tense during the campaign season in Louisiana. As one visitor to the city, "men expect fighting at any moment."[13] As they had in the late 1860s, white employers threatened to fire their black workers if they dared to vote the Radical ticket. Thugs broke up Republican political meetings in a number of places across Louisiana, and threats of lynching were commonplace against both African American and white Radicals. Nevertheless, under the watchful eyes of federal troops, the elections in Louisiana passed off relatively peacefully. When the dust settled, the Radicals had lost their decisive majority in the Louisiana House and were now tied with the Democrats on 53 seats, with five elections still to be decided following disputes. At the national level, Republicans had lost control of the House of Representatives for the first time since before the Civil War.[14]

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[12] Dawson, *Army Generals and Reconstruction*, 176-180.
[13] Anonymous to Mrs. Duncan, December 15, 1874, Anonymous New Orleans Letter, 1874, Mss. 2997, LLMVC.
[14] Ella Lonn, *Reconstruction in Louisiana after 1868* (New York: Russell and Russell, 1967 [1918]), 278-289.

The showdown, though, did not come until the new legislative session opened on January 4, 1875, and it resulted in a decidedly pyrrhic victory for the Radicals. When the House session opened, Democrats seized control of proceedings and declared the five disputed elections to have been decided in their favor, giving them a majority. Not for the first time during Reconstruction, fighting broke out on the floor of the chamber, and the situation was only retrieved for the Republicans when troops under Col. Trobriand occupied the building and ordered the five disputed Democratic representatives to leave. Trobriand's actions created a national scandal, as even many sympathetic to the Radical cause in Louisiana were horrified at the idea of federal troops intervening in state electoral matters.[15] As an ensign with the naval flotilla wrote to his father following the incident at the statehouse, "The action of the forces here has raised such a storm of indignation throughout the country that Congress and the President must hear and heed."[16]

White Republicans at the local and national level responded to the public outcry over the army's intervention at the Louisiana statehouse with the so-called "Wheeler Compromise" of March 1875, a course that would ultimately sacrifice the political strength of black Louisianans. Rep. William Wheeler of New York was the de facto head of the House Committee on Southern Affairs sent to New Orleans in January 1875 by Congress to investigate the murky outcomes of Louisiana's elections since 1872. Wheeler also happened to be a close friend of William Kellogg, and

[15] Dawson, *Army Generals and Reconstruction*, 202-206.
[16] Anonymous to "My Dear Father," January 15, 1875, Anonymous Reconstruction Letters, 1875, Mss. 2997, LLMVC.

therefore readily agreed when the Republican governor offered a solution to the stalemate in New Orleans: Kellogg would accept a Democratic majority in the Louisiana House on the condition that the White Leagues cease their attempts to impeach and overthrow him. The resulting deal, accepted by Congress in March, gave Democrats a 63-48 advantage in the lower house of the state legislature, and meant that African American representation in that body fell from a high of 38 in 1872 to just 20 under the Wheeler plan.[17] To add insult to injury, P.B.S. Pinchback was denied a Senate seat in Washington in February when Republicans failed to mount a serious fight against Democratic obstructionism.[18]

Louisiana Republicans embarked upon the election of 1876 weaker and more divided than they had been at any point since the Civil War. They also found themselves facing their canniest opponent yet. Stephen Packard, the long-term white leader of the Custom House Ring, won nomination as the Republican candidate for governor at the party's convention in July 1876, and somehow persuaded black businessman C.C. Antoine to remain on the ticket as lieutenant governor. But Pinchback, still smarting from his rejection in Washington, refused to campaign for Packard and restricted his activities to supporting individual black Republicans. Packard and Antoine were opposed by a new Democratic leadership, united around the candidacy of General Francis Nicholls, a wounded Confederate veteran from Assumption Parish. Nicholls had played relatively little role in politics before 1876,

[17] Hogue, *Uncivil War*, 154-157.
[18] See "Protest of Members of the House in Relation to the Election of US Senator," September 11, 1876, William Pitt Kellogg Papers, Mss. 195, LLMVC.

and was therefore untainted by either the failures of earlier Democratic campaigns or the violent actions of the White Leagues.[19]

Nicholls may have seemed fairly moderate on the surface, but he was still determined to end Radical rule in Louisiana by fair means or foul. The difference between Nicholls and earlier Democratic leaders was merely that he had determined to take power without provoking a federal intervention. White League attacks certainly did take place during the election. As Charles Boothby told his father on September 28, "In some localities [the White Leagues] prevent colored men from attending the meetings." Nevertheless, Boothby was confident that only mass repression of the black vote could secure a win for the Democrats. "These men vote the Republican ticket or they will not vote at all," he boasted.[20] In general, the presence of federal troops and the tactical savvy of the Nicholls campaign seem to have restricted violent incidents during the election campaign. As had become traditional in Reconstruction-era Louisiana, both Packard and Nicholls declared victory in December 1876, and the outgoing Governor Kellogg ordered the Metropolitan Police to occupy the statehouse in order to make ready for Packard's inauguration on January 1, 1877. Rather than initiate a confrontation with this last redoubt of Radical strength, however, Nicholls on January 8-9 had his White League militia seize every state building and institution in New Orleans except the one

[19] William Ivy Hair, *Bourbonism and Agrarian Protest: Louisiana Politics, 1877-1900* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1969), 3-4.
[20] Charles Boothby to George Boothby, September 28, 1876, Charles W. Boothby Papers, 1861-1898, Mss. 4847, LLMVC.

defended by the Metropolitans. Both sides settled in for an extended siege.[21]

The dependence of Louisiana Radicals on the support of the federal government could hardly have been clearer—Nicholls's militia had taken control of New Orleans without firing a shot, and Packard could rely on only a few dozen armed police officers for his protection. Unfortunately for Packard and his allies, the national Republican Party had reached the end of its willingness to support the southern Radical governments through force of arms. Indeed, with the results of the 1876 presidential election hanging in the balance, the Republican leadership proved absolutely willing to sacrifice the party's last toeholds in the South in return for a continued grip on the reins of power at the national level. Democratic candidate Samuel J. Tilden seemed to have won the popular vote, Republican Rutherford B. Hayes held a narrow lead in the Electoral College. The Democratic majority in the House of Representatives seemed willing to hold up Hayes's confirmation indefinitely without some sort of a compromise. Ultimately, in a deal reached on February 26, 1877, Republicans agreed to withdraw all federal troops from the South in return for the inauguration of President Hayes. There would be no more help for the remaining, beleaguered Radical regimes in Florida, Louisiana, and South Carolina.[22]

Radical rule in Louisiana therefore ended not with a bang, but with a whimper. His pleas for help falling on deaf ears, Packard evacuated the statehouse at

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[21] Hogue, *Uncivil War*, 164-167.

[22] On the election of 1876 and the Compromise of 1877, see Michael F. Holt, *By One Vote: The Disputed Presidential Election of 1876* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2008); William H. Rehnquist, *Centennial Crisis: The Disputed Election of 1876* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2004).

the end of April 1877. Those Republican legislators who had remained loyal to him now slunk off to serve in a state government dominated by the Democrats.[23] On April 18, a disconsolate Charles Boothby described the scene in New Orleans to his father: "With 5000 armed men in the city [Democrats] have forcibly taken possession of every office in the city: my own office was taken possession of by an armed body of men two weeks ago."[24] While Boothby mourned the end of Republican government in New Orleans, most white residents of the city chose to celebrate the coming to power of a Democratic state government, and did so raucously. In the words of William Ivy Hair, when federal troops finally evacuated the Louisnan statehouse on April 24, the streets of the Crescent City "witnessed a Carnival-like revelry which went on all afternoon and into the night." The glee with which most whites greeted the end of Reconstruction and the withdrawal of federal power from New Orleans was hardly auspicious for the black working people of the city and their few remaining white allies.[25]

[23] Hair, *Bourbonism and Agrarian Protest*, 9-12.
[24] Charles Boothby to George Boothby, April 18, 1877, Charles W. Boothby Papers, 1861-1898, Mss. 4847, LLMVC.
[25] Hair, *Bourbonism and Agrarian Protest*, 12-13.

## Conclusion

The rise and fall of what I have called Radicalism—the alliance between the Republican Party and black working people—drove the social and political transformation of New Orleans in the 1860s and 1870s. In 1861, the Republican-controlled federal government had faced the daunting task of conquering and occupying the Confederacy, a smaller and weaker but nonetheless powerful foe. As they made their first inroads into Rebel territory in places like New Orleans, Union troops found they needed, and could rely on, the assistance of African American working people who had their own reasons to oppose the planters' republic. The early months of this alliance spelled doom for the institution of slavery in the occupied regions, as thousands of slaves flocked to Union lines, participated in the war effort, and pushed Republican policy in the direction of emancipation. Military victory merely presented the national government with a fresh set of challenges, however. The seceded states had to be returned to the Union in such as a way as to ensure their governability, loyalty to Washington, and acquiescence in the changes of the war years. Once again, the alliance with black working people proved vital for the Republicans. It was on the basis of black activism that Congressional Reconstruction triumphed in New Orleans, and on the basis of black votes that a Radical state government came into being. The story of how Louisiana's new government came to defend itself by arming and organizing African American working men into the

powerful Metropolitan Police and State Militia is surely one of the most gripping moments in the history of American democracy.

The history of the black working people of New Orleans in the Civil War era thus casts serious doubt on the idea that either Abraham Lincoln freed the slaves "from above" or that the slaves emancipated themselves "from below." Both of these formulations are simultaneously compelling and yet inadequate for the task of explaining historical agency in this period. A more nuanced and persuasive approach to these crucial questions stresses the relationships between the diverse social and political forces active in the 1860s and 1870s; it seeks to understand how their interests (real or perceived) came to align, how alliances and coalitions were articulated and maintained, and how they fell apart. Such a research agenda has the advantage of avoiding the perils of a "great white men" view of history, on the one hand, and an approach that unnecessarily romanticizes the resistance of subordinate social groups, on the other. Most importantly, of course, this approach provides persuasive answers to some of the central questions for students of the Civil War era: Why did the North win the war? Why did the South lose? Who freed the slaves? How do we explain the transition from Presidential to Congressional Reconstruction? What caused the retreat from Reconstruction in the 1970s? "Crescent City Radicals" has attempted to lay out the framework for such a method.

Examining this process from the bottom reveals that a black political awakening began in New Orleans well before the outbreak of the Civil War. The experiences of work, punishment, and family life were the bedrock upon which

African American women and men built a community, a culture of resistance, and an embryonic civil society in the shadows of the city's workplaces and alleyways. Just as importantly, the black community of New Orleans was connected to others around the Atlantic World by a grapevine that involved black sailors and river workers, domestic servants, literate slaves, and sympathetic free people of color. These institutions were vital for the development of black consciousness—they allowed the process of generalization that was central to the formation of a collective worldview among oppressed and exploited people. Black enlightenment was not the same thing as a constant state of rebellion, however. Although there were significant slave insurrection panics in New Orleans in the 1830s, there is little evidence to suggest these corresponded to real attempts at organized uprisings. Indeed, we must probably conclude that the most sophisticated expression of black consciousness and resistance in the antebellum years was the attempt to escape from slavery. The lack of political freedom in the Old South meant that black consciousness could only achieve its fullest development among those urban maroons who made it to the North and built the Underground Railroad and the abolitionist movement.

The arrival of Union soldiers in New Orleans allowed a more expansive development of black consciousness than had been possible under slavery. This was an unintended consequence of the occupation, of course. Northern military strategy did not initially call for a mass mobilization of the black population, and Union officers (with some exceptions) often attempted to prevent such a mobilization from occurring. Nevertheless, the appearance of northern soldiers on the streets of the city

immediately caused a breakdown of labor discipline and weakened the authority of slaveholders dramatically. This development brought thousands of slaves flooding to Union lines. Even more importantly, the new occupying army required the assistance of black working people. It needed spies and informants, cooks, nurses, laborers, and, ultimately, soldiers. Black working people therefore found themselves in an occupied city, in military camps, in army units—places with a degree of political freedom that had no precedent in the antebellum years. The political enlightenment of black working people took a qualitative leap forward under these circumstances, a process that would continue throughout the 1860s and 1870s.

The nature of society in New Orleans lent these processes a distinctively urban character. The urban-commercial economy of the antebellum city had required a deeper commodification of labor power than existed in most of the South. Owners and employers supervised their black laborers less closely than they would have on most farms or plantations and the market played a major role in relations between slaves and masters. This led, in turn, to unusual labor practices such as slave hiring, self-hire, and living out, and to the development of an abnormally autonomous and sophisticated African American community. These features of urban society would continue to have an impact in the war years and beyond. The city was an especially attractive destination for fugitive slaves when northern troops arrived, and the anonymity of urban life probably contributed to the rapid disintegration of slavery. In any case, the nature of black participation in the war effort—the character of black regiments, for example—certainly reflected the specific nature of urban society.

When slavery had been abolished once and for all, New Orleans and the surrounding sugar districts saw the emergence of a predominantly wage-labor economy, which encouraged the development of black working-class organizations such as trade unions. Entering the post-slavery economy as wage workers, rather than sharecroppers, gave the black working people of New Orleans a great deal of social weight in the struggles of the Reconstruction years.

Radicalism had always contained serious tensions, of course. From the very beginning of the northern occupation of New Orleans, many Union officers had proven reluctant to embrace an alliance with black working people. Once African American women and men did join the war effort, they often faced violent racial prejudice and sexual violence, and then had to contend with Nathaniel Banks's plan to reconstruct Louisiana on the basis of a whites-only political movement. These episodes demonstrate that Radicalism was itself an arena of social contestation, and that the Republicans often had to be pushed from below to make the alliance work. But the frictions within Radicalism were not simply between the white elites who dominated the Republican Party and the northern officer class on the one hand, and all black working people on the other. Different groups with the African American popular classes experienced Radicalism differently. Even at the height of Radical strength and dynamism in the late 1860s, for example, the turn to electoral politics had the effect of excluding black women from an important arena of struggle. Once the Radical state government was in place, moreover, it became a vehicle of social

mobility for certain black men to climb out of the popular classes and establish themselves as entrepreneurs or professionals.

These fault lines within the Radical coalition give us a sense of one of the most important reasons for the failure of Reconstruction in the 1870s. An alliance between the different social groups at the center of the radical project simply could not endure beyond a certain point. During the Civil War, slaves and free people of color had shared with the Republican Party an interest in defeating the Confederacy and ending slavery. In the early post-war years, the coalition became stronger still as its component parts united to push back Presidential Reconstruction, the Black Codes, and the neo-Confederate agenda of the Rebel Legislature. Up until this point, and despite the aforementioned tensions that characterized Radicalism from its beginning, the Republicans could tolerate—indeed, they required—the mass mobilization, and consequent radicalization, of black working people. Once Radicalism had succeeded in its main tasks, however, this dynamic began to change. At the national level, the Republican base of rising manufacturers had eliminated the main obstacles to its hegemony in the economic and political spheres, and stood poised for a period of uncontested hegemony. At this point, it began to seem that the main threat no longer came from the planter class of the southern states, but now originated from the rising labor movement in the North and the radicalized freedpeople in the South. In New Orleans, this new reality manifested in the Radical state government's repression of major strikes among black workers and in the increasingly business-centered agenda

of the Republican leadership. With such deep divisions in its ranks, Radicalism could not endure as a ruling bloc in New Orleans.

Radicalism's internal struggles opened the door to a resurgence of white supremacism in the mid-1870s. The factionalism at the top of the Louisiana Republican Party provided the first vehicle for reactionary forces to attempt the overthrow of the Radical state. As Henry Clay Warmoth and his allies feuded with the Custom House Ring, Louisiana Democrats came within a whisker of successfully toppling a regime they saw as illegitimate. Warmoth clung to power during that initial crisis, but the experience soured him on the entire Radical project, and he soon bolted for the Liberal Republicans. This gave the Democrats another weakness to exploit, and the Fusionist movement represented a second moment at which white supremacy almost succeeded in returning to power in Louisiana. This time, Radicalism survived due to the quick thinking and decisive action of former steamboat worker P.B.S. Pinchback, but Radicalism had been fatally compromised. The Kellogg administration had none of Warmoth's doggedness or élan, and the Republican infighting of the previous two years had weakened the enthusiasm of the Radical base quite dramatically. At the national level, a growing conservatism within the Republican Party was one example of a weakening commitment to the use of military force to protect black civil rights in the South. Although the shadow of Radicalism would remain in power in Louisiana until the election of 1876, the alliance was effectively a dead letter.

The death of Radicalism would have profoundly different consequences for the erstwhile allies. For northern Republicans, the coalition had played its part. Manufacturers now enjoyed a firm grip on the levers of power at the national level, and the changes of the Civil War era had removed most of the final obstacles to the domination of industrial capitalism across North America. For the northern elite, therefore, the new challenge was how to co-opt, restrain, or repress the vigorous labor movement that had emerged from the turbulent decades of the 1860s and 1870s. For the black working people of New Orleans, the results of Radicalism's demise would prove much more devastating. Abandoned by the national government in the face of a growing white supremacist tide, African American workers had to contend with the consequences of Redemption with few if any allies. Jim Crow did not spring fully formed from the ruins of Radicalism, of course, and the 1880s represented something of an interregnum. Nevertheless, the further development of black working-class consciousness would take place in an entirely new context and under much more difficult circumstances than it had during the heyday of the Radical alliance.

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