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“We have suffered from oppression also”:  
Black southern women, the Knights of Labor, and Politics.

By

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THESIS

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Abstract:

This essay analyzes the southern organizing efforts of the Knights of Labor, with a focus on Black women within the Order. This essay argues that the overlooked histories of Black women in the US labor movement are necessary to fully understand the Knights of Labor, the political culture of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, and, by extension, our current political and labor culture. By working interdisciplinary and using existing histories of women—both Black and white—within the Knights of Labor, as well as drawing evidence from the papers of Terence Powderly, and the reports of the Knights of Labor’s General Conventions, this essay shows just how Black women engaged with both the culture of the Knights of Labor, and freedpeople’s politics of the South, while proposing ways to engage with this history for future scholars.

The 1887 General Assembly of the Knights of Labor, which took place in Minneapolis, Minnesota, can be seen as the culmination of the struggle over the place of Black women in the Knights. The Assembly welcomed representatives from locals all over the country and helped to progress the Knights' aims in both labor and politics by dispersing aid, setting legislative agendas, and gauging the importance of issues to the membership. The 1887 General Assembly is often overlooked in the history of the Knights of Labor. Coming after 1886, when the Knights of Labor reached their peak, the 1887 General Assembly is often thrown into the narrative of declining Knights power. What has been lost in the sparse retellings of the 1887 General Assembly, however, is the fact one of the Black state representatives at the meeting was a southern Black woman.

Cassie M. Hollensworth—the sole representative to the General Assembly from Arkansas—was a schoolteacher from Pine Bluff. Little is known about Cassie Hollensworth beyond broad biographical information. Hollensworth was most likely a member of Local Assembly 4051, the only Black local in Pine Bluff. This assembly was not exclusive to men, but rather integrated men and women into its organization. This combined local leads us to more questions about Cassie Hollensworth's role within the assembly. There are two possible explanations for Hollensworth being chosen as a representative—either she was a leader within an intergender local, or she simply was on the only one that was willing to travel to the Assembly. Either way, Hollensworth was involved in the normal business of the Assembly.<sup>1</sup>

Hollensworth submitted numerous resolutions throughout the 1887 General Assembly. These included Document No. 96, resolving that the Order encourage members to boycott products that were not union made, encouraging them to “purchase only those goods bearing the Knights of Labor trade marks.”<sup>2</sup> Document No. 329, supporting Local Assembly number 9435,

located in Wynne, Arkansas, which “lost all earthly possessions in a recent fire.”<sup>3</sup> She appears as a signer on document Number 280, supporting newspaper compositors of Minneapolis, as well as numerous roll calls of representatives, and motions passed by unanimous consent.<sup>4</sup>

Hollensworth’s name also appears throughout the minutes and reports from the General Assembly, until she was excused from further business on October 14.

Hollensworth’s position at the General Assembly raises many questions. The largest of these questions is just what was the role of Black women in the Knights of Labor? This and other questions cannot truly be answered with the state of the field as it currently is. How do we move beyond the current state of the field to better understand southern Black women in the Knights of Labor?

Often relegated to a paragraph in contemporary narratives of the late 19th century, the Knights of Labor have slipped from the prominent position that they held in labor history. There was a time in the literature, namely up to the 1970s and 1980s, when labor historians explored how The Knights of Labor engaged with each other, and their engagement with electoral politics. Any overview of the literature that exists on the Knights of Labor, must begin with Norman J. Ware’s *The Labor Movement in the United States 1860-1895: a study in democracy*. Ware, relying upon archival assistance from John W. Hayes, the last Grand Master Workman of the Knights, charts the rise, development, and fall of the Knights.

As one of the first major works written on the Knights, Ware focuses on the leadership of the Knights arguing that the downfall of the organization came from the actions of leaders such as Terence Powderly. Ware’s work was among the first to take the Knights of Labor seriously, rather than casting the organization aside in favor of the American Federation of Labor. Ware, however, was extremely critical of the Knights. Ware decried argued that the Order suffered

from a lack of conviction. The Knights were “in sympathy with everything and involved in nothing.”<sup>5</sup> According to Ware, the Knights were full of contradictions, they “deserted Albert Parsons and allowed him to hang for a crime that he did not commit,” and yet they “welcomed the Negro.”<sup>6</sup> The lack of conviction from the Order led to members becoming impatient and breaking from the Order to engage in politics in the South and North, and anti-Chinese violence in the West. Ware polemically attacks Powderly, writing that members—when they should have ousted him—instead, “with the stupid loyalty of a dog for an abused master” clung to Powderly, who he describes as a “windbag whose place was on the street corner rousing the rabble to concert pitch.”<sup>7</sup>

Despite his clear disapproval of the leadership of the Knights of Labor, Ware does point out that the importance of the Order can be found in how they engendered an understanding of solidarity with the US labor movement. According to Ware, solidarity was, in fact, the sole important contribution of the Knights of Labor. Ware’s stressing of the importance of solidarity allowed for future studies of the Order, that were distinct from his own.

Focusing on solidarity within the Knights allowed future scholars to move beyond leadership and move towards the actions of individual members. Solidarity, as a unionization concept, centers the actions of individual and groups of unionized workers. These individuals and groups—commonly referred to as rank-and-file members, borrowing from language from the military—can often act in ways that are within their best interests, but antithetical to what is commonly accepted within a union structure. A focus on solidarity allows historians to look beyond just the materialistic concerns of organizations, not to mention frees historians from only viewing the actions of leadership as the actions off the union and allows them instead to expand their lens to view the contestations over gender, politics, ideology, religion, and more. This is to

say, the concept of solidarity expands our scope from the few to the many both in terms of numbers and issues.

Leon Fink's *Workingmen's Democracy: The Knights of Labor and American Politics* benefits from Ware's interest in solidarity and helps to move the field beyond arguments focused on leadership. Fink, instead, focuses on the actions of members as they engaged in direct political actions. Using case studies of the political engagement of members of the Knights of Labor in New Hampshire, Vermont, Kansas, Virginia, and Wisconsin, Fink argues how the actions of the Knights—both Executive officials known as “the Order” and those of individual members—can best be viewed among the regional political differences that existed in these regions. To Fink, there is no easy, simple narrative of the Knights engagement with politics. Across the case studies, we see Knights engaging with Democrats and Republicans, depending on the issue they want to advance, and who they see as best to advance it, or starting their own Workingmen or People's Party political organizations to influence politics. Fink's chapter on Richmond serves as an example of how politics, ideology, and social conditions intersected. This chapter explores how a coalition was formed between the Knights of Labor in that city and the biracial coalition of Republicans and Readjusters. This coalition included a heavy emphasis on the role of Black men as they became key to the efforts of this network of labor and politics.<sup>8</sup>

The inclusion of politics and race in the South complicated and threatened the solidarity of the Knights. Black men largely sided with the Republicans and Readjusters, while white men largely supported the racial politics of the Democrats. The analysis of this tension within the southern Knights leads to a more nuanced understanding of how labor and politics intersected in the South. Fink's work highlights how using the concept of solidarity to move from the few to the many complicates our understanding of the Knights as an organization. This complication

allows us to see much more about the Order and the way it influenced debates of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century in ways that simply focusing on the leadership of the Knights cannot. With all the potential external issues that could fracture the Knights solidarity, how did the Knights establish a cohesive organization?

Robert Weir's *Beyond Labor's Veil: The Culture of the Knights of Labor* attempts to answer this question. Weir's work shows how the Knights of Labor interacted with the political culture of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, while also analyzing the culture of the Order itself. Weir argues that the Knights of Labor tried to create an internal Order culture through their newspapers, speeches, conventions, and other means. The goal in doing so was to continue to foster solidarity as the Order expanded to involve disparate groups and ideologies. Weir's focus on culture is for four stated reasons. The first, Weir's work seeks to "highlight the culture and expression of the organization [The Knights of Labor] while it thrived."<sup>9</sup> Weir uses the Knights as a case study of "an organization caught between three systems: its own system, hegemonic bourgeois culture, and emergent mass commercial culture."<sup>10</sup> In trying to deal with these three systems the Knights produced several victories and failures. Weir posits that by analyzing these failures and victories of the Knights that we can learn much about not only the US labor and political culture of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, but also much about how US culture that exists today was formed during the 1880s.

These works, and numerous others, have helped scholars to understand the complexity of the Knights of Labor. Solidarity as a concept has helped to move the subfield forward. Breaking from obscurity to focusing on leadership, to viewing the actions of members, and the impact that attempting to manage solidarity had upon political culture, the literature on the Knights of



Labor—and the issues that the literature covers—has grown magnificently. Despite this growth, there are still portions of the Knights that need to be mined.

One of the aspects of the Knights that has eluded historians is the role Black women played in the Order and their engagement in politics through the Knights. In a 1952 *Journal of Negro History* article historian Sidney Kessler wrote “Negro women either joined assemblies with men, or formed their own organizations.”<sup>11</sup> This has been the extent of the analysis of Black women in the Knights of Labor and has often been repeated in studies. The world of southern Black women’s locals remains largely unexplored.

Understanding Black ladies’ locals will expand our understanding of the way that the Knights of Labor engaged with the political culture of the US in the ways that Robert Weir writes about. Ultimately, according to Weir, this time period—the late 19<sup>th</sup> century—helped to create the US political culture that we live in today. While Melton Alonza McLaurin has shown how the Knights of Labor engaged in politics and organizing throughout the South, and Leon Fink’s *Workingmen’s Democracy* pinpointed the political coalition between Black Virginian Knights and the biracial Readjuster coalition in Richmond, there still exists little literature on Black women’s engagement in politics through the Knights of Labor. Were we to see evidence of southern Black women’s labor union politics in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, we could expand our understanding of the range of political debate in Black political worlds of the time, thus expanding our potential for reimagining their role in the future.

This essay will analyze the southern organizing efforts of the Knights of Labor, with a focus on Black women within the Order. This essay has two parts. In the first part, we will analyze the history of the Knights of Labor, paying special attention to the history of Black laborers and white women in the Order. This period through 1886 allows us to view the growing

influence of Black men in the Order, the actions the Order took to recruit these members, as well as the inclusion and institutional backing that white women received from the Order upon their inclusion. In the second half we pivot to focus on the politics of freedpeople, as seen through Black women's actions. In this section we will analyze Black women's locals, historicize the political actions of Black women in the post war period and, ultimately, read into the silences of the 1886 Knights of Labor Convention to locate the important political work that Black women took during this important event.

This essay will focus on the time period between 1885 and 1887. During this time white supremacist machinations were in full force working to disenfranchise and disempower Black Americans throughout the South, and the US labor movement—specifically through the Knights of Labor—was at its height. In this essay I argue that the overlooked histories of Black women in the US labor movement are necessary to fully understand, the Knights of Labor, the political culture of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, and, by extension, our current political and labor culture. By working interdisciplinary and using existing histories of women within the Knights of Labor, as well as drawing evidence from the papers of Terence Powderly, and the reports of the Knights of Labor's General Conventions, I will show just how Black women engaged with both the culture of the Knights of Labor, and freedpeople's politics of the South.

The Noble and Holy Order of the Knights of Labor was “the first mass organization of the American working class.”<sup>12</sup> The Order was formed in Philadelphia in 1869, by nine white tailors. Among these tailors was Terence Powderly, a “[m]achinist, Greenback-Labor politician, businessman,” and reformer who would become the Mayor of Scranton, Pennsylvania, and the Knights' Grand Master Workman, the chief executive position in the Order, during the most important periods of the order's history.<sup>13</sup> Throughout the 1870s and 1880s the Knights of Labor,

“captured the national imagination as the representatives of a vast field of skilled trade unionists and unskilled factory workers.”<sup>14</sup> In capturing the imagination, and membership of these workers, the Knights created the foundation of the US labor movement.

The Knights of Labor were central to the political culture of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. The Order took positions on issues as diverse as “the abolition of the wage system, convict labor, cooperative production, currency reform, equal rights for women, immigration restriction, land redistribution, race relations, religious hypocrisy, temperancy, and government ownership of transportation and community systems.”<sup>15</sup> There were few, if any, important issues that the Order and members of the Knights of Labor did not engage with. The Knights viewed labor as expansive, focusing not just on working conditions, but almost all aspects of members—and potential members’—lives. The Knights are often viewed as an oddity in the history of the US labor movement because of their expansiveness.

As one historian writes, the Knights of Labor were the “most complex, naive, and incongruous organizations in the history of American labor.”<sup>16</sup> This was for several reasons. One was their initial program that focused on arbitration, education, and cooperation, rather than strikes and raising wages. A second was the Order’s belief that “[l]aborers would save enough from their wages to purchase or establish cooperatives, which would produce profits to be reinvested.”<sup>17</sup> Despite the initial focus of their program, it was an 1885 strike against Jay Gould’s railroad company that led to the Knights gaining widespread popularity. The Knights then modernized their program to include strikes and demands for an eight-hour workday. Following successful strikes and the broadening of their program, the Knights grew exponentially and “dominated the union movement from the late 1870s to the late 1880s.”<sup>18</sup>

The organizing of southern workers into the Knights of Labor produced both a moment of opportunity and crisis for the Order. On one hand, the Knights of Labor had undergone a rapid ascension to become the preeminent labor union in the United States. By 1879 The Knights of Labor had, just ten years after their inception, a total membership of 20,151. Just four years later, in 1883, membership would grow to 51,914.<sup>19</sup> As many as one in five workers during the 1880s was a Knight.<sup>20</sup> At their height in 1886, the Knights of Labor would consist of “more than three-quarters of a million members,” organized into local assemblies of mixed occupations.<sup>21</sup> As historian Robert Weir writes, at their height, the Order was present in “smaller industrial towns, one-industry villages, the Deep South, West Coast port cities, rural backwaters across the continent, and in several foreign nations.”<sup>22</sup>

On the other hand, for years the Knights had been facing the problem of Southern organizing as it related to Black workers. Black workers were often called upon to break labor strikes, as scabs. Since southern Black workers were often prohibited from working in more prominent industries, strike-breaking offered a “first opportunity for entrance into some occupations.”<sup>23</sup> This allowed Black workers to gain experience and stake their claim to jobs that they would usually be excluded from. This entrance for southern Black workers, however, was at the expense of white workers. Commenting on this dynamic, a white Knight was quoted as stating that not organizing Black strikebreakers would end with white workers being “reduced in the social scale to correspond with that of the negro held under by the old slave driving devices.”<sup>24</sup>

Northern Black Knights also sounded a warning against unorganized Black labor. Jeremiah Grandison, a northern Black Knight from Pittsburg, stated at a national labor conference in 1881, that excluding southern Black workers from labor unions would be

“dangerous,” because these workers would, “in an emergency, be employed in positions they could readily qualify themselves to fill”—as strike-breakers. Unorganized southern Black workers, therefore, posed a problem to the labor movement, one that could only be filled by organizing them into the ranks of the Knights. Southern Black workers, however, as labor historian Leon Fink writes, were not so much organized into the order but rather they “adopted the Knights.”<sup>25</sup> The Order made this adoption easier by creating a race neutral membership policy in their early years.

This race neutral policy was articulated in the first issue of the *Journal of United Labor*. The *Journal of United Labor*, associated with the Knights of Labor, was to be the “sole official organ of the Order, and which, under the management of the Grand Secretary, should give, with each issue, the long-desired information.”<sup>26</sup> In the May 15, 1880 issue of the *Journal of United Labor*, the General Secretary wrote that “[t]he (outside) color of a candidate shall not debar him from admission; rather let the coloring of his mind and heart be the test.”<sup>27</sup> This language—which answered the Colored National Labor Union’s call for labor organization to open their doors to members of all races—was used in the early portion of the 1880s to provide reasoning for the organizing of Black locals in the North—of which Ottumwa, Iowa’s local 1637 was the first. As Black southern laborers moved to organize with the Knights, this guidance was used to define their place within Order.<sup>28</sup>

In April 1885, an editor with *John Swinton’s Paper* wrote that there were “hundreds of colored assemblies in the South.”<sup>29</sup> While it is not known exactly how many Black workers joined the Order, the Knights’ general secretary in 1886 estimated that “in a total membership exceeding 700,000,” no fewer than “60,000 were black.”<sup>30</sup> Historian Philip Foner wrote, that in 1886, at the height of the Knights’ popularity, Black workers accounted for “half of Virginia’s

10,000 to 15,000 members, half of the 3,000 Arkansas and 4,000 North Carolina Knights, and a high percentage of the membership in Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Tennessee, and Louisiana.”<sup>31</sup> These numbers would allow the Knights to impose themselves as a political force, where and when they were allowed to.

Interracial union organizing in the South, however, was incredibly hard. As one historian writes, interracial labor organizing was “varied and complex,” at times labor organizations in the south were “openly defiant of the prevailing norms” while at other times they “scrupulously bent to the contours of Jim Crow.”<sup>32</sup> The Knights of Labor were no different. While the Knights of Labor as an Order espoused a vision of labor that encompassed racial equality, Black Knights found themselves in segregated assemblies in the South.<sup>33</sup> While in places, like Virginia, this allowed Black laborers to gain a measure of control in all-Black District Assemblies, the reality was that the labor organizing system in the south often followed the most conservative portions of the social order. Racial animus was not set aside in the interest of labor organizing either.

White Knights looking to organize Black laborers often found themselves stonewalled by white southerners and distrusted by Black laborers. In 1887 in Texarkana, Texas H.W. Sims wrote to Terence Powderly that in the town “the white people have set a decoy and fooled the colored people so much it is simply impossible for a white organizer to organize them.”<sup>34</sup> In 1885 a white organizer in Raleigh, North Carolina wrote to Powderly stating:

You have no idea of what I have to contend with [in] the way of prejudice down here. There is a continual cry of "nigger," "nigger!!" ... I believe that our Order is intended to protect all people who work, the poor ignorant underpaid and overworked as well as the skilled mechanic, and have tried to act up on that principle. And for this alone I have incurred abuse and social ostracism.<sup>35</sup>

The organizing of Black laborers often fell to Black organizers. Black southern laborers, who were all too aware of the racial atmosphere in the south, made it clear that Black laborers would

be best organized by Black organizers. At the Knights of Labor General Assembly in 1885, Black assemblies called for a Black organizer for “each of the old slave states.”<sup>36</sup> The Order obliged by appointing W.J. Campbell of Alabama, and James H. Hill of Washington D.C., both Black, as state organizers. Campbell and Hill helped to establish local assemblies in Huntsville and Montgomery, Alabama, and Washington, D.C. respectively. The appointment of Black organizers to help create Black local assemblies allowed Black southerners to engage with the Knight in a way that white organizers could not: covertly. Black organizers, even as outsiders, would not attract the sort of negative attention that white organizers would. As such, this would allow organizing of Black knights to go relatively smoothly. While this organizing tactic allowed Black local assemblies to be built, it also added a clandestine element to the organizing of Black southern laborers. As we will see later, this organizing tactic, though necessary to ensure the growth of Black local assemblies, had an impact on what we know of Black women’s organizing.

Women were not allowed to join the Knights of Labor until 1881. The first Master Workman of the Order, Uriah Stephens, emphasized the importance of secrecy for the Order at its inception. Stephenson’s fear of exposure led to the widespread exclusion of women from the Order, due to his “sexist view that women could not keep secrets.”<sup>37</sup> This adherence to secrecy led to “a fraternal, unified, secret, exclusive, and mostly male culture,” within the Order.<sup>38</sup> While this exclusion did largely hold, 201 women in mixed occupations in Sacramento formed what eventually became Local Assembly 855 in 1878. Local 855 lasted into the 1880s, though more research is required to find their connection to the larger Order.<sup>39</sup> At the 1879 General Assembly, the Order the Knights voted to put an end to the secrecy surrounding the Order and become public. This publicity removed the obstacles to women joining the Order. In 1881, local

1684, made up of shoe operatives from Philadelphia, formed as the first acknowledged female local in the US.<sup>40</sup>

In the decade of the 1880s female Knights, “chartered over four hundred local assemblies that included women.”<sup>41</sup> An editor of *John Swinton’s Paper* wrote in 1883 that, “[i]n almost every city where the Knights of Labor have an organization the women who work for wages have banded together and formed an assembly.”<sup>42</sup> Of these new local assemblies, two-thirds were “ladies’ locals,” while the rest were mixed assemblies consisting of both women and men.<sup>43</sup> Women’s locals within the Order grew rapidly, from three in 1881, to nine in 1882, 13 in 1884, 46 in 1885 and 121 in 1886.<sup>44</sup> The Knights and their ladies locals even appealed to prominent women’s activists such as Susan B. Anthony, Frances Willard, and Elizabeth Cady Stanton who all joined Knights of Labor local assemblies during this time.<sup>45</sup> With the doors to the Order open to them, white women began to band together to shape their experience in the Knights of Labor.

At the 1885 General Assembly, the Knights created the Committee on Woman’s Work. The committee was composed of Leonora Barry as General Investigator, Nellie Hardison as Treasurer, Mary O’Reilly as Vice-President, and Mary Hanafin as President. At the 1886 Assembly, as requested by the Committee, Leonora Barry would be placed in the field with the aim of investigating “the condition of all working-women,” and to “instruct and educate them in the Order, and organize female Locals when it will not conflict with more important work.”<sup>46</sup> This committee was created with the belief that “there was something needed to arouse the women of our Order to the fact that they were not availing themselves of the opportunities,” that were presented to them.<sup>47</sup>

In the first year of its existence, the Committee on Woman’s Work only sent “circulars to the female and mixed locals.” The responses were “so satisfactory” that the committee was made a more formal and permanent portion of the Order at the 1886 General Assembly in Richmond.<sup>48</sup>



The role of the committee was to investigate the conditions that women labored in, including employers that forced female workers to “barter for women’s honor in exchange for employment given.”<sup>49</sup> According to the committee, the work that they proposed was necessary to bring women into the Order and could “only be done by women.”<sup>50</sup> The committee intended to focus on freeing women “from the remorseless grasp of tyranny and greed the thousands of underpaid women and girls in our large cities, who...ofttimes yield and fall into the yawning chasm of immorality.”<sup>51</sup>

White women in the Knights of Labor found considerable institutional support from the Order, with Leonora Barry becoming one of the largest benefactors. Barry, a member of an Amsterdam, New York assembly that consisted of “all female employees in the city, carpet and hosiery operatives, dressmakers, milliners and music teachers,” found herself elevated as the one of the most important women in the Order.<sup>52</sup> Barry, as the general investigator of Women’s Work, became a member of the General Executive Board of the Order, received a salary, and became an important speaker on the Order’s speaker circuit visiting and speaking with locals throughout the North. “Sister Barry,” as she was referred to by those in the Order, became “to the women of the Order, what Terence Powderly is to the men.”<sup>53</sup> Despite the institutional backing white female Knights did face considerable challenges in their organizing.

These challenges manifested in sexism from male Knights and questions over the place of women in the US labor movement writ large. For one, the Knights of Labor often coded themselves as masculine. The terminology of “workmen” and “brothers” can be found throughout the documents created by the Knights. In a letter reprinted in the Journal of United Labor, Fred Turner, the Knights General Secretary Treasurer, reported on insurance payouts for a list of exclusively female Knights, but he brings his report with the greeting “Dear Sir and

Brother.”<sup>54</sup> As another example, Terence Powderly, in his autobiography, *The Path I Trod* often uses the term “brotherhood” as shorthand for solidarity. In writing about his beginnings with the Knights of Labor, Powderly writes how he was excited to join the organization and that the “germ of brotherhood was just quickening to life in me.”<sup>55</sup> This convergence in thought of solidarity, labor organizing, and gendered language such as “brotherhood,” would lead to male Knights believing that labor organizing, and meetings were a man’s space. This belief manifested itself in the attitudes of male Knights towards sharing space with female Knights.

In 1887, a male Knight from Pennsylvania questioned the place of women in the labor movement. George Bennie wrote to Terence Powderly that “it was never meant that men and women should sit in each other’s company from half past seven at night until eleven o’clock p.m. in an assembly of the Knights of Labor.”<sup>56</sup> Bennie was concerned about the appropriateness of women within these male coded spaces. Powderly replied to Bennie, to reassure him of the importance of women in the Order. Powderly wrote that female Knights do not “unsex” themselves “by going where her father, brother or lover goes in the evening.” He finished stating that “[i]f the assembly is a bad place for a woman to go it is a bad place for the man to go.”<sup>57</sup> Barry and other women leaders in the Order were not unaware of this commentary. An individual writing under the initials “R.J.D.” in the *Journal of United Labor* wrote, “[i]n many Assemblies women are rejected for the sole reason that they are women. Frequently there are a few men who object to women, and even cast black ballots against them. Would it not be well to issue a circular letter informing them that this is unconstitutional?”<sup>58</sup> Much like Powderly’s response to Bennie, an editor of the *Journal* responded:

“If the above complaint is based upon facts, it is certainly wrong, unjust, and unmanly to reject a woman simply because she is a woman. Some of our best Assemblies are composed entirely of women, and in emergencies were truer to their obligation than men. Women need organization as much as men, and there is

no manhood in the person who would deny them that privilege. If there are such men as the sister complains of, they had better take a back seat, for we venture the assertion that the women they reject would make better members than those who reject them.”<sup>59</sup>

While the language in this statement is, arguably, stronger than that used by Powderly, there remains a centering of manhood throughout. Despite the backing of the Order, these questions about a woman’s place within the movement persisted.

Women in the Order were largely trepidatious when it came to becoming officers. As one historian writes while “women often accepted minor leadership roles as secretaries, treasurers, and judges in their local assemblies, few became visible leaders within the movement.”<sup>60</sup> So widespread was the issue of women officers that Powderly often received letters from ladies’ locals asking to appoint men to important officer positions within their assemblies.<sup>61</sup> Powderly received a letter from a female Knight in New York that stated plainly, “[w]e do not think any lady is capable of filling the office.”<sup>62</sup> Despite the institutional backing of the Order, female Knights still found themselves pushing against the boundaries of the labor movement’s established gendered space, and the larger societal understandings of a woman’s place.

Conversely, Southern Black female Knights did not receive the institutional backing that white female Knights did. Despite this their organizing did not suffer. Before 1885, Virginia had just two Black women locals. The locals, both in Richmond, consisted of women working in mixed occupations. Between 1885 and 1887, eight additional locals were started by Black women throughout Virginia. Four in Norfolk, two in Danville, one in Petersburg, and one in Jacksonville. Two of the four locals in Norfolk consisted of women in mixed occupations, while the other two consisted of housekeepers and laundresses. Both locals in Danville contained women in mixed occupations, as did the one local in Petersburg. These locals represented an explosion of Black women’s organizing within the Knights of Labor. This expansion of Black

Women's locals was not just contained to Virginia. Black Women in Florida, Louisiana, and North Carolina all organized local assemblies in 1886, while Black women in Alabama organized the first Black women's local in 1887. Black women found themselves empowered to start, and sustain, ladies' locals throughout the South.

Confluence would have us believe that the Committee on Woman's Work helped to set up at least some of the Black female assemblies that were created between 1885 and 1887. This would be incorrect. The 1886 Knights of Labor General Assembly which took place in Richmond, Virginia, took place from October 4<sup>th</sup> to October 20<sup>th</sup>, 1886, marked the permanent creation of the Committee on Women's Work, and an emphasis being placed on organizing women, however, several Black female local assemblies were already established by that time. Locals 4096 and 3929, both in Richmond were formed in 1885, while the two local assemblies in Danville were reported to have been organized between January 10<sup>th</sup> and March 10<sup>th</sup> of 1886, months before the 1886 Knights of Labor General Assembly would take place.<sup>63</sup> While the Committee on Women's Work could have helped spur on Black women's labor union organizing in areas of the South outside of Virginia, they did not directly affect the number of Black female local assemblies in Virginia.

Relatedly, Leonora Barry's charge from the Committee on Woman's work to organize new women's locals never truly materialized. Barry found that her position limited her to accompanying "various state factory inspectors" and giving the General Assembly reports. Limited in this way, Barry found herself advocating for education on organizing tactics for female Knights' before retiring from her position with the Order in 1889.<sup>64</sup> Further, there exists no evidence that Barry established any local assemblies in her role with the Committee on Woman's Work. Barry wrote in 1888 the women she was to organize feared "being fired," if

they associated with the Knights. Further Barry wrote that she was “obliged to refrain from going through establishments where owners were opposed to our Order lest some of our members be victimized.”<sup>65</sup> With this evidence we can definitively state that, like their male counterparts, Black women were not as much organized into the order as much as they adopted the Knights.

The Knights, as an order, publicly denounced the importance of electoral politics in their movement, though members and locals openly engaged in electoral politics. At the executive level, the Order was very uneasy with the role of politics in the labor movement. In the first issue of the *Journal of United Labor*, the G.E.B. stated “[o]ur Order is above politics, and electioneering for any candidate in the Sanctuary must not be practised. Our Order teaches MAN his duty by educating him on the great question of labor,” further the Order should “Discuss labor in all its interests,” but that should exclude discussion of “particular candidates.”<sup>66</sup> The Order feared the impact that politics could have on the solidarity of members.

The members of the Knights themselves “contained representatives of practically every organized party,” and abstaining from direct political engagement, in the minds of the leaders of the Order, would help to fend off a political schism amongst members.<sup>67</sup> Many of the national leaders of the Order were Greenbackers, while many southern white members were Democrats, and southern Black members were largely Republicans. Despite the apprehension of the Order’s executives, many members and local assemblies did take part in electoral politics, endorsing individual politicians—supporting Democrats, Republicans, as well as Independent and “Workingman Party” candidates.

The Knights grew in most southern states in the 1880s with the exception of South Carolina.<sup>68</sup> We can posit that this happened because of continuing Black political power in South Carolina through the 1880s. Black South Carolinians continued to have political power through

the 1880s, therefore they continued to be able to create more favorable, though not perfect, labor conditions through the 1880s. Therefore, a connection can be made between political power and labor conditions for Black southerners. Virginia then acted as a counterweight to the political power—and lack of union organizing—seen in South Carolina. Black local assemblies sprouted up throughout Virginia as the Readjusters and Republicans power began to wane, showing that these assemblies existed to Black Virginians as a method of obtaining not just favorable labor conditions, but political power as well.

In Virginia during the late 1880s, much of the political power laid at the feet of William Mahone. Mahone was a “Petersburg railroad entrepreneur and former Confederate general” who formed a coalition with white Virginians who broke from the Conservative party known as the Readjusters.<sup>69</sup> These Readjusters allied themselves with Black republicans, and moved to enfranchise Black voters throughout the state in the late 1870s and early 1880s, in a Readjuster-Republican coalition that would control state government from 1877 until the late 1880s, while also sending Mahone to the Senate in 1881. As both the senator from Virginia, as well as the head of what was essentially the state Republican party, Mahone was a target for Knights hoping to affect changes to labor through politics.

In February of 1886 Virginian assemblies of the Knights reached out to Mahone for support of House bill 1914 which would restore “wages in the government printing office.”<sup>70</sup> That month alone, John Schardt the recording secretary of Assembly 3479—a white men’s local made up of laborers in mixed occupations— as well as representatives of assemblies in Norfolk, assembly 4314 (Petersburg), 4702 (cotton screwmen, Norfolk), 4380 (Norfolk), representatives of Petersburg locals 4212, 4822, 4716, 4450, and 4314 all wrote to Mahone asking him to support the bill.<sup>71</sup> These locals, and countless others, engaged directly in politics, lobbying elected

officials to support their cases. This understanding of the Knights as a political force was not limited to just members of the Knights.

Mahone and those around him were very conscious of the Knights of Labor and their political activities. To Mahone and the Readjusters, the Knights represented both potential allies and opponents in their political fights. In 1886, Mahone received many letters commenting on the Knights of Labor. In May, R.T. Walker—a political commentator who frequently wrote to Mahone—wrote about his fear that the Knights of Labor may be looking to back a Democrat in a city council race. He advised Mahone to keep a close eye on this possibility.<sup>72</sup> In October, a constituent wrote to Mahone expressing confusion over voting for the "Knight of Labor" or the other candidate put forth in the race.<sup>73</sup> On March 19, 1886 W.M. Bennett, Jr. wrote to Mahone and mentioned the Knights of Labor as an organization that will surely become a "factor in coming campaigns."<sup>74</sup> Bennett goes on to state that Republicans should look to create a partnership with the Knights, which did eventually come to pass. The Knights in Richmond joined with the Readjuster-Republican coalition in the spring of 1886 to defeat a Democratic prohibition referendum. Some historians have suggested that this Readjuster-Republican-Knights coalition continued through the 1886 Virginia Congressional election where Democrats only held four of ten Congressional seats.

There is no mention in these accounts of the Knights-Readjuster-Republican alliance of Black women. It does not take much, however, to imagine through the connections between Black women's engagement with the Knights, the sizable population of Black Knights in the South, and Black Knights' engagement with political actions, that Black women were involved in these expansive political efforts.

While the 15<sup>th</sup> amendment had granted the franchise to Black men, Black women did not see themselves as cut out from the electoral process. As historian Elsa Barkley Brown writes, for Black women in Virginia, “exclusion from legal enfranchisement did not prevent African American women from shaping the vote and the political decisions. Throughout the late 1860s and 1870s women continued to participate in political meetings in large numbers and to organize political societies.”<sup>75</sup> Black women throughout the south believed that they had an important role to play in electoral politics. Black women in Richmond were, “by law excluded from the formal political arena external to their community. Yet this does not mean that they were not active in that arena,” Black women were active in “the Republican and the constitutional conventions” as “Southern [B]lack men and women debated the issue of women’s suffrage in both the external and internal political arenas.”<sup>76</sup> Though the space of electoral politics in the postwar period was clearly coded as masculine, Black women still exerted influence in this sphere.

Black women, and to some extent Black men, then did not see electoral spaces as exclusively masculine. Black women were “willing to intrude on the masculine sphere of the polling place, they also acted as other male party agents did, using threats and physical force to ensure that the fusionist ticket would be defeated. They exerted communal pressure in public and private ways that, judging from the outpouring of testimony, clearly had an impact at the ballot box.”<sup>77</sup> Black women used this community role to initiate community “sanctions against men who voted Democratic” while some women even “went along to the polls to insure a properly cast ballot.”<sup>78</sup>

The ways that Black women engaged in politics was not just informal community roles, however. As historian Justin Behrend writes, throughout the south Black women acted as “party



agents, using intimidation and coercion to assist in Republican voter mobilization campaigns. Similarly, black political leaders acknowledged their role and drew on Black women's concerted efforts to help win the vote, particularly in elections where black men were swayed by a fusionist ticket or felt coerced to vote a Democratic one."<sup>79</sup> Black women were clearly involved in community and political party work. They engaged in electoral political work in a very hands-on way, helping to guide community votes towards Republicans and crafting political messaging in constitutional conventions.

The combination of racism, sexism, and how scholars have typically written about post-emancipation politics, has led to a thinning of the archive and a silencing of southern Black women. This comes as no surprise to any scholar that studies the history of race, though these issues most certainly are present in the history of Black female Knights. As previously discussed, in certain regions the Knights of Labor needed to organize anonymously. Southern Black laborers specifically needed Black organizers to avoid drawing the ire of white southerners. As viewed in our discussion on white women within the Knights, the place of women within the Order was often contested. Men, believing the labor organizing was a male space exclusively, often denied women entry to assemblies, and viewed their presence in organizing spaces as abnormal. This belief rubbed off on women who often begged off important leadership positions in their assemblies and the larger Order, leaving these assemblies under resourced. There is little reason to believe that the experiences of Black women within the Order differed from this at all.

The history of Black southern women in the Knights of Labor is not one of complete silence, however. Despite the relative silence of Black women's politics within the Order, we do, from time to time, find opportunities to read Black women into the established archive of the Knights. One such opportunity arises with the Knights of Labor General Assembly of 1886 in Richmond,

Virginia.<sup>80</sup> It did not take long for the General Assembly to highlight the battle over politics and race inherent in the Order at the time.

Following opening remarks from Virginia's Democratic Governor Fitzhugh Lee's remarks, Frank Ferrell, a Black Representative from District Assembly 49 in New York took to the stage to reintroduce Terence Powderly. Ferrell—a noted radical and socialist—and the delegates of District Assembly 49 had announced before the Assembly their desire to “make a principled stand against the Southern norms of segregation that they were sure to encounter.”<sup>81</sup> Their hope was that by challenging the southern line, they could force the Knights assembled to take a stand either for or against racism. Ferrell, in reintroducing Powderly, made a statement pointed at the color line that existed both within Virginia and the Order itself. Ferrell stated that “[o]ne of the objects of our Order is the abolition of those distinctions which are maintained by creed or color.”<sup>82</sup> While the General Assembly began with Black and white Knights challenging the racial order of the South, an analysis of race and gender during the Assembly placed outside of the convention halls helps us to understand the role Black women played during the General Assembly.

Organizational gatherings in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century such as these tended to exclude the voices of women. Colored Conventions, gatherings of Black activists that took place throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century, were notorious for excluding Black women from speaking at their meetings, and for excluding them from the minutes of the conventions. While the General Assembly of 1886 is largely no different in this regard, it does allow us to read into the activities of women along the edges of the Assembly. Psyche Williams-Forsen's essay “Where did they eat? Where did they stay? Interpreting the material culture of Black women's domesticity in the context of the

Colored Conventions” gives us a framework for reading the political actions of Black women outside of these assemblies.

Colored Conventions often ignored the contributions of Black women. Many of these women were allowed to attend the conventions, but not engage in the same way that Black men did. Black women, however, did engage with the conventions and the politics of the conventions through other means. One important mean was through food and commensality. As Williams-Forson shows us, Black women often combined domestic labor with social activism.<sup>83</sup> In the case of the Colored Conventions, Black women often brought in those traveling to conventions as boarders. It was common in both urban and rural areas for Black women and families to “take in strangers and nonrelatives,” in exchange for “labor, currency, or other services.”<sup>84</sup> Williams-Forson shows that when this form of accommodation was connected to political gatherings, we can see that “[f]eeding and sheltering were productive forms of political work.”<sup>85</sup> While Black women were providing for boarders, they “may have discussed political issues with those within earshot.”<sup>86</sup> These conversations could be seen as Black women lobbying “husbands, sons, male relatives, and guests” in an effort to encourage men to make important decisions. Williams-Forson sums up the importance of these spaces writing that,

If women could not debate issues on the convention floor, they could certainly do so in their parlors and kitchens or other rooms of their house, during sewing circles, and while selling tickets to reading room events. In this and other ways, women were political actors in their own right and active participants in providing sites of intellectual production.<sup>87</sup>

This framework can be applied to the efforts of Black women during the 1886 Knights of Labor General Assembly.

District Assembly 49, as previously discussed, decided that they would attack the southern color line at the Assembly, announcing their intention to do so before their arrival. The DA made

it clear that if any of their members, including Frank Ferrell, were not allowed equal accommodations that the delegation would “move to rooms in black homes and boardinghouses.” After Ferrell was denied a room at the Murphy Hotel, the delegation, and others from around the country that were in favor of challenging racial segregation, did just that.<sup>88</sup> In this, we can see the importance that travel, and housing had upon political activity.

As a segregated city, Richmond would have offered little in terms of accommodations for any Black Knights traveling into the city. Into this void stepped Black women, especially those associated with the Knights of Labor. In Virginia, there were a total of 25 Black local assemblies in the year 1886, with six in Richmond alone. Assemblies 3939 and 4096, both consisting of Black women, may have shuddered before the convention (these locals disbanded in 1886, though exactly when is unclear), though the members of those locals could still have been involved in accommodating traveling Black members.

Local Assemblies 3808, 3637, 3783, 3822 (all black men’s locals), would have also been involved in creating a network of housing and food to traveling Black Knights.<sup>89</sup> While it is not known definitively how many Black Knights resided in Richmond, historian Melton Alonza McLaurin writes that both District Assemblies in Richmond—“the white District 84 and the black District 92”—claimed a “combined membership of 7,692.”<sup>90</sup> The members of these locals, along with other members of Richmond’s Black community, no doubt, were involved in boarding these traveling Black Knights. Providing food, comfort, and information on Richmond’s color line and politics to those less aware, while also potentially lobbying Black Knights on issues important to them.

We typically overlook these domestic efforts of women—especially those of Black women. There are two frames that we can use to investigate this oversight. Anthropologist Daniel Miller,

in writing of materiality in a global perspective, gives us our first framework: the “humility of things.” Miller expands upon art historian E.H. Gombrich’s ideas of what we see within a frame that catches our attention. Gombrich states that when we encounter common images within the frame of a piece of art, “we simply don’t see it,” because “it seamlessly conveys to us the appropriate mode by which we should encounter that which it frames.”<sup>91</sup> Further, it is when the frame is inappropriate—Gombrich uses the examples of “a Titian framed in Perspex, a Picasso in baroque gilt”—we “are suddenly aware that there is indeed a frame.”<sup>92</sup> Miller extends Gombrich’s concept to materialism and uses his own framework: “the humility of things.”

The humility of things analyzes how we view objects and actions that easily avoid the attention of scholars. As Miller argues, objects and things can escape our attention because they tend to lean towards “presentational form, which cannot be broken up as thought into grammatical sub-units, and as such they appear to have a particularly close relation to emotions, feelings and basic orientations to the world.”<sup>93</sup> In this framework, while we acknowledge the attendance of Black Knights at a General Assembly in a segregated city, we will often overlook how they arrived at the Assembly, and who is housing them. Likewise, we might find reference to food at an event like an Assembly, and acknowledge that *someone* has produced the food, yet we will overlook the politics involved in the labor to produce the food. Our “frame,” as an understanding of society, is not troubled by viewing these actions, and we often do not view them as political. As such we gloss over it. By using the framework of the humility of things, we can understand how, and why, the domestic-political actions of Black women can be overlooked by scholars.

The Black women that boarded and fed Black Knights traveling to the General Assembly were engaging in what was considered acceptable work for women and, most specifically, Black

women. Since their actions were deemed acceptable, and fell into our understanding of the domestic sphere, many of their efforts both at the time and now slips below our radar. As Williams-Forson writes, “we expect food provisioning and lodging to fall within the realm of women’s work, so we tend to see it less as part and parcel of political activity.”<sup>94</sup> To return to Gombrich’s framework, our “frame” of Black women providing lodging and food is not troubled. Rather we overlook these actions because of how we view these actions to fall into the domestic sphere—the space of women’s work. As such, we do not see these women or their actions because “it seamlessly conveys to us the appropriate mode by which we should encounter that which it frames.”<sup>95</sup>

Our “frame” of political activity—while it has been expanded by contemporary historians—still struggles to find a place for the role that domesticity played. As such, we as scholars tend to focus on established spaces where we believe that politics happens—sites of voting, politician and party offices, conventions—and we tend to overlook less traditional spaces where those on the margins would engage in politics, such as the kitchen before daily convention meetings began.

The second way that we can analyze the oversight of the labor of Black women is through the type of labor that they engaged in. While exact numbers are not known, many Black female Knights were domestic laborers. Analysis of the importance of this occupation—in its late 19<sup>th</sup> century context—has long escaped historians.<sup>96</sup> Relatedly, an analysis of how domestic workers engaged in labor and political actions is scant. Historian Sharon Harley writes, regarding Black women as domestic workers, the status of their work often made them seem “unworthy,” in the eyes of many labor historians “of sustained examination.”<sup>97</sup> If we believe that Black women as domestic workers are not worthy of analysis, we will overlook their contributions. Much like

with the humility of things, Black women engaging in domestic work, does not trouble our frame. As such we gloss over the ways that this sort of action could reorient our understanding of political space.

Scholars need to expand our political frame if we are to fully understand the numerous ways that Black women engaged in politics both in and through labor organizations during the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. In doing so we can see Black women engage in expansive forms of political engagement. For one such glimpse, we will return to the 1887 General Assembly of the Knights of Labor and Cassie Hollensworth.

This expansiveness is seen in a statement Cassie Hollensworth gives in solidarity with the people of Ireland. Hollensworth stated that Black people in the South “can sympathize with the oppressed, and those placed in the condition of our people can sympathize doubly with the people of Ireland.” While Hollensworth expresses her support for the people of Ireland, she also uses her statement to focus the attention of the Assembly on the racial oppression of Black people in the US. Hollensworth stated that if the Knights assembled could visit where she lived, they would see that “the condition of the farmers is really worse than it was before—in the days of slavery.” Hollensworth reminded the interracial Knights assembled that “[w]e have suffered from oppression also.”<sup>98</sup> While creating a “bond of union between my people and the people of Ireland,” Hollensworth was using her position to advocate and advance the aims of Black southerners. Further, Hollensworth’s statement opened the potential for future action on behalf of the Order to address the oppression of the Irish, and—by placing Southern Black people on the same footing as the Irish in her statement—the oppression of southern Black people as well.

In thinking—and working—interdisciplinarily, scholars can pull from various subfields and disciplines to answer important questions about Black women’s politics through the Knights of

Labor. Looking to other methodologies and disciplines, such as Black feminist methodologies, Black studies methodologies, African American/Black studies, carceral studies, and social history (among others) can help scholars come closer to understanding how southern Black women engaged with the Knights of Labor.

Historians have viewed Black political engagement in various ways. Harold Forsythe has investigated Black Readjuster-Republican alliances through social networks. Nicole Myers Turner has investigated Black political organization through religion. Jane Dailey through gender and class. Black Knights generally, and Black female Knights more specifically, show us something of the range of political and labor debates in Black political worlds of the time, and thus the potential for reimagining their role in the future.

As members of the first public labor organization, Black women's presence no doubt caused changes that still reverberate in the labor movement. Without an understanding how these women engaged with—and changed—our political culture, we run the risk of never truly knowing ourselves, settling instead for a semi-finished understanding of what our political culture is. It is time for the field of labor history to move beyond Kessler's observation that "Negro women either joined assemblies with men, or formed their own organizations," and look towards how these Black women affected labor and politics in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and beyond.<sup>99</sup>



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- <sup>1</sup> Matthew Hild, *Arkansas's Gilded Age: The Rise, Decline, and Legacy of Populism and Working-Class Protest* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2018), 59.
- <sup>2</sup> General Assembly of the Knights of Labor, *Record of Proceedings of the General Assembly of the Knights of Labor of America. Vol. IV. Commencing with Session at Richmond, Virginia, October 4 to 20, 1886.* (General Assembly of 1887), 1687.
- <sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, 1772.
- <sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, 1742.
- <sup>5</sup> Norman J. Ware, *The Labor Movement in the United States 1860-1895: A Study in Democracy* (Gloucester, Mass: D. Appleton and Company, 1959), xv.
- <sup>6</sup> *Ibid*, xiv.
- <sup>7</sup> *Ibid*, xiv.
- <sup>8</sup> Leon Fink, *Workingmen's Democracy: The Knights of Labor and American Politics*, *The Working Class in American History* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1983), 149-177.
- <sup>9</sup> *Ibid*, 16.
- <sup>10</sup> *Ibid*, 17.
- <sup>11</sup> Sidney H. Kessler, "The Organization of Negroes in the Knights of Labor," *The Journal of Negro History* 37, no. 3 (1952): 259, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2715493>.
- <sup>12</sup> Leon Fink, *Workingmen's Democracy: The Knights of Labor and American Politics*, *The Working Class in American History* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1983), xiii.
- <sup>13</sup> Melton Alonza McLaurin, *The Knights of Labor in the South* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1978), 38-39.
- <sup>14</sup> Susan Levine, *Labor's True Woman: Carpet Weavers, Industrialization, and Labor Reform in the Gilded Age* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1984), 103.
- <sup>15</sup> Robert E. Weir, *Beyond Labor's Veil: The Culture of the Knights of Labor* (University Park, PN: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996), 17.
- <sup>16</sup> Melton Alonza McLaurin, *The Knights of Labor in the South* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1978), 40.
- <sup>17</sup> *Ibid*, 39.
- <sup>18</sup> *Ibid*, 40.
- <sup>19</sup> Philip Sheldon Foner, *Organized Labor and the Black Worker: 1619-1981* (Haymarket Books, 2017), 47.
- <sup>20</sup> Robert E. Weir, *Beyond Labor's Veil: The Culture of the Knights of Labor* (University Park, PN: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996), 16.
- <sup>21</sup> Leon Fink, *Workingmen's Democracy: The Knights of Labor and American Politics*, *The Working Class in American History* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1983), xiii.
- <sup>22</sup> Robert E. Weir, *Beyond Labor's Veil: The Culture of the Knights of Labor* (University Park, PN: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996), 16.
- <sup>23</sup> Sidney H. Kessler, "The Organization of Negroes in the Knights of Labor," *The Journal of Negro History* 37, no. 3 (1952): 253, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2715493>.
- <sup>24</sup> *Journal of the Knights of Labor*. August 7, 1886.
- <sup>25</sup> Leon Fink, *Workingmen's Democracy: The Knights of Labor and American Politics*, *The Working Class in American History* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1983), 169.
- <sup>26</sup> "Salutatory," *Journal of United Labor*. May 15, 1880.
- <sup>27</sup> "Decisions of the G.M.W.," *Journal of United Labor*. May 15, 1880.
- <sup>28</sup> Jonathan Garlock, *The Guide to the Local Assemblies of the Knights of Labor* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1982), 127.
- <sup>29</sup> *John Swinton's Paper*. April 12, 1885.
- <sup>30</sup> Philip Sheldon Foner, *Organized Labor and the Black Worker: 1619-1981* (Chicago, IL: Haymarket Books, 2017), 48.
- <sup>31</sup> *Ibid*, 49.
- <sup>32</sup> Daniel Letwin, *The Challenge of Interracial Unionism: Alabama Coal Miners, 1878-1921* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 3.
- <sup>33</sup> Julius Jacobson, *The Negro and the American Labor Movement* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1968), 133.
- <sup>34</sup> Letter from H.W. Sims to Terence V. Powderly, January 26, 1887, (MS, 1887; Terence V. Powderly Papers, Catholic University, Washington, D.C.).
- <sup>35</sup> Letter from Jno. R. Ray to Terence V. Powderly, June 22, 1885 (MS, 1887; Terence V. Powderly Papers, Catholic University, Washington, D.C.).

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- <sup>36</sup> General Assembly of the Knights of Labor, *Record of Proceedings of the General Assembly of the Knights of Labor of America. Vol. IV. Commencing with Session at Richmond, Virginia, October 4 to 20, 1886.* (General Assembly of 1886), 100.
- <sup>37</sup> Philip Sheldon Foner, *Women and the American Labor Movement: From Colonial Times to the Eve of World War I* (New York: The Free Press, 1979), 185.
- <sup>38</sup> Robert E. Weir, *Beyond Labor's Veil: The Culture of the Knights of Labor* (University Park, PN: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996), xviii.
- <sup>39</sup> Jonathan Garlock, *The Guide to the Local Assemblies of the Knights of Labor* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1982), 24.
- <sup>40</sup> *Ibid*, 452.
- <sup>41</sup> Susan Levine, "Labor's True Woman: Domesticity and Equal Rights in the Knights of Labor," *The Journal of American History* 70, no. 2 (1983): 325, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1900207>.
- <sup>42</sup> *John Swinton's Paper*. April 11, 1886.
- <sup>43</sup> Susan Levine, "Labor's True Woman: Domesticity and Equal Rights in the Knights of Labor," *The Journal of American History* 70, no. 2 (1983): 325, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1900207>.
- <sup>44</sup> Philip Sheldon Foner, *Women and the American Labor Movement: From Colonial Times to the Eve of World War I* (New York: The Free Press, 1979), 186.; Jonathan Garlock, *The Guide to the Local Assemblies of the Knights of Labor* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1982).
- <sup>45</sup> Robert E. Weir, *Beyond Labor's Veil: The Culture of the Knights of Labor* (University Park, PN: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996), 7.
- <sup>46</sup> General Assembly of the Knights of Labor, *Record of Proceedings of the General Assembly of the Knights of Labor of America. Vol. IV. Commencing with Session at Richmond, Virginia, October 4 to 20, 1886.* (General Assembly of 1886), 1857-58.
- <sup>47</sup> General Assembly of the Knights of Labor, *Record of Proceedings of the General Assembly of the Knights of Labor of America. Vol. IV. Commencing with Session at Richmond, Virginia, October 4 to 20, 1886.* (General Assembly of 1886), 163.
- <sup>48</sup> *Ibid*, 1857.
- <sup>49</sup> *Ibid*, 164.
- <sup>50</sup> *Ibid*, 164.
- <sup>51</sup> *Ibid*, 1858.
- <sup>52</sup> Susan Levine, "Labor's True Woman: Domesticity and Equal Rights in the Knights of Labor," *The Journal of American History* 70, no. 2 (1983): 325, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1900207>.
- <sup>53</sup> *Detroit Advance and Labor Leaf*, Dec. 15, 1888.
- <sup>54</sup> "Benefit Insurance Association," *Journal of United Labor*. September 25, 1885.
- <sup>55</sup> Terence Vincent Powderly, *The Path I Trod; the Autobiography of Terence V. Powderly*, Edited by Harry J. Carman, Henry David, and Paul N. Guthrie (New York: Columbia University Press, 1940), 35.
- <sup>56</sup> Letter from George Bennie to Terence V. Powderly, January 24, 1887, (MS, 1887; Terence V. Powderly Papers, Catholic University, Washington, D.C.).
- <sup>57</sup> Letter from Terence V. Powderly to George Bennie, January 28, 1887, (MS, 1887; Terence V. Powderly Papers, Catholic University, Washington, D.C.).
- <sup>58</sup> "A Sister's Complaint," *Journal of United Labor*. September 25, 1885.
- <sup>59</sup> *Ibid*.
- <sup>60</sup> Susan Levine, *Labor's True Woman: Carpet Weavers, Industrialization, and Labor Reform in the Gilded Age* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1984), 112.
- <sup>61</sup> See Letter from Mary St. Brier to Terence V. Powderly, May 5, 1887; Juliet Mitchell and Selestine Collins to Powderly, May 13, 1887, (MS, 1887; Terence V. Powderly Papers, Catholic University, Washington, D.C.)
- <sup>62</sup> Letter from Tillie Falls to Terence V. Powderly, June, 1887, (MS, 1887; Terence V. Powderly Papers, Catholic University, Washington, D.C.)
- <sup>63</sup> *Journal of United Labor*. January 10, March 10, 1886.
- <sup>64</sup> Susan Levine, "Labor's True Woman: Domesticity and Equal Rights in the Knights of Labor," *The Journal of American History* 70, no. 2 (1983): 333, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1900207>.
- <sup>65</sup> Knights of Labor, *Proceedings, 1887*, Leonora M. Barry, "Report of the General Investigator," p. 581.
- <sup>66</sup> *Journal of United Labor*. May 15, 1880.
- <sup>67</sup> Melton Alonza McLaurin, *The Knights of Labor in the South* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1978), 80.

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<sup>68</sup> Between 1885 and 1888, South Carolina had a total of two local assemblies that had Black members. One exclusively Black local assembly (Local 9214 in Central, SC. Comprised of farmers and farm hands/laborers), and one assembly that combined Black and White laborers of all genders (local assembly 8413 in Graniteville, SC). By comparison, during the same period of time Virginia had at least 30 Black local assemblies. See: Jonathan Garlock, *The Guide to the Local Assemblies of the Knights of Labor* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1982), 479-481, 517-527.

<sup>69</sup> Jane Dailey, *Before Jim Crow: The Politics of Race in Postemancipation Virginia* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 27.

<sup>70</sup> John Schardt to William Mahone, Feb. 6, 1886, William Mahone papers, David M. Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Duke University.

<sup>71</sup> Feb. 12, 15, 16, 23, 1886, William Mahone papers, David M. Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Duke University.

<sup>72</sup> R.T. Walker to William Mahone, May 2, 1886, William Mahone papers, David M. Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Duke University.

<sup>73</sup> W.H. Overstreet to William Mahone, October 24, 1886, William Mahone papers, David M. Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Duke University.

<sup>74</sup> W.M. Bennett to William Mahone, March 19, 1886, William Mahone papers, David M. Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Duke University.

<sup>75</sup> Elsa Barkley Brown, "Negotiating and Transforming the Public Sphere: African American Political Life in the Transition from Slavery to Freedom," in *Jumpin' Jim Crow: Southern Politics from Civil War to Civil Rights* (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 2000), 37.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid*, 36.

<sup>77</sup> Justin Behrend, *Reconstructing Democracy: Grassroots Black Politics in the Deep South after the Civil War* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2015), 200.

<sup>78</sup> Elsa Barkley Brown, "Negotiating and Transforming the Public Sphere: African American Political Life in the Transition from Slavery to Freedom," in *Jumpin' Jim Crow: Southern Politics from Civil War to Civil Rights* (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 2000), 37.

<sup>79</sup> Justin Behrend, *Reconstructing Democracy: Grassroots Black Politics in the Deep South after the Civil War* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2015), 201.

<sup>80</sup> The assembly began with Grand Master Workman Powderly introducing Fitzhugh Lee, the Democratic Governor of Virginia. In his remarks to the Knights gathered at Armony Hall, Governor Lee told the crowd that the members of the Order, "belong to both of the great political parties of the day." As such, Governor Lee believed that the Knights should "follow your chief's advice and keep politics out." Instead, he stated, they should "let the contest be as it was originally stated, between capitalists of either political party on the one side, and the Knights of Labor, be they Democrats or Republicans, on the other." There are many issues to be unpacked about Governor Lee's visit to the Assembly, but here we will only focus on two. First, Governor Lee echoes the official public stance of the Order. Governor Lee makes it clear here that the Order needs to be above politics. Rather than siding against one party or another, the Knights need to view themselves as pro-labor and against those who would affect their labor conditions adversely. The second issue is the importance of the Governor of Virginia addressing the assembly at all. While Governor Lee was no doubt invited to speak at the assembly, the appearance of the Governor of Virginia at the convention of an organization that purported to be outside of politics shows just how "inside" they truly were. In addition, Lee goes out of his way to address the fact that members of the Knights were indeed members of various political parties. This shows that Lee understood that: one, the Knights were a political force, and two, that as long as they stayed separated by party, or heeded the Order's call to stay out of politics, their impact could be mitigated. See: General Assembly of the Knights of Labor, *Record of Proceedings of the General Assembly of the Knights of Labor of America. Vol. IV. Commencing with Session at Richmond, Virginia, October 4 to 20, 1886.* (General Assembly of 1886), 3-7.

<sup>81</sup> Joseph Gerteis, *Class and the Color Line: Interracial Class Coalition in the Knights of Labor and the Populist Movement*, Politics, History, and Culture (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 96.

<sup>82</sup> General Assembly of the Knights of Labor, *Record of Proceedings of the General Assembly of the Knights of Labor of America. Vol. IV. Commencing with Session at Richmond, Virginia, October 4 to 20, 1886.* (General Assembly of 1886), 7-8.

<sup>83</sup> Psyche Williams-Forsen, "Where Did They Eat? Where Did They Stay? Interpreting Material Culture of Black Women's Domesticity in the Context of the Colored Conventions," in *The Colored Conventions Movement: Black Organizing in the Nineteenth Century* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2021), 88.

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- <sup>84</sup> Ibid, 91.
- <sup>85</sup> Ibid, 97.
- <sup>86</sup> Ibid, 97.
- <sup>87</sup> Ibid, 97.
- <sup>88</sup> Joseph Gerteis, *Class and the Color Line: Interracial Class Coalition in the Knights of Labor and the Populist Movement*, Politics, History, and Culture (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 96.
- <sup>89</sup> Jonathan Garlock, *The Guide to the Local Assemblies of the Knights of Labor* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1982), 520-22.
- <sup>90</sup> Melton Alonza McLaurin, *The Knights of Labor in the South* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1978), 49-50.
- <sup>91</sup> Daniel Miller, "Materiality: An Introduction," in *Materiality* (New York: Duke University Press, 2020), 5.
- <sup>92</sup> E.H. Gombrich, *The Sense of Order: A Study in the Psychology of Decorative Art*. 2nd ed. (London: Phaidon Press, 1984), 85-108.
- <sup>93</sup> Daniel Miller, *Material Culture and Mass Consumption* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley Blackwell, 1997), 107.
- <sup>94</sup> Psyche Williams-Forsen, "Where Did They Eat? Where Did They Stay? Interpreting Material Culture of Black Women's Domesticity in the Context of the Colored Conventions," in *The Colored Conventions Movement: Black Organizing in the Nineteenth Century* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2021), 87.
- <sup>95</sup> E.H. Gombrich, *The Sense of Order: A Study in the Psychology of Decorative Art*. 2nd ed. (London: Phaidon Press, 1984), 85-108.
- <sup>96</sup> While this has changed, historians still struggle with placing domestic work in the same sphere as politics and labor. Tera Hunter's *To joy my freedom: Southern Black women's lives and labors after the Civil War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), is an example of this melding, though ultimately the work focuses on labor.
- <sup>97</sup> Sharon Harley, "Speaking up: The Politics of Black Women's Labor History," in *Women and Work: Exploring Race, Ethnicity, and Class*, by Elizabeth Higginbotham and Mary Romero (2455 Teller Road, Thousand Oaks California 91320 United States: SAGE Publications, Inc., 1997), 28-29, <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781483327020.n2>.
- <sup>98</sup> General Assembly of the Knights of Labor, *Record of Proceedings of the General Assembly of the Knights of Labor of America. Vol. IV. Commencing with Session at Richmond, Virginia, October 4 to 20, 1886*. (General Assembly of 1887), 1842.
- <sup>99</sup> Sidney H. Kessler, "The Organization of Negroes in the Knights of Labor," *The Journal of Negro History* 37, no. 3 (1952): 253, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2715493>.