

Abolishing Wage Slavery in the Gilded Age: The American Labor Movement's Memory of the Civil War

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As scholars of Civil War memory studies continue to discuss the meanings Americans ascribed to the war, it is worth considering how workers as a group remembered the event. *John Swinton's Paper* provides a useful site for exploring the labor movement's memory of the Civil War. Although twenty years had passed since the close of the war, most issues of the weekly labor newspaper referred to the historic struggle. Published between 1883 and 1887, the New York-based paper existed during the period contemporaries termed "the great uprising of labor."¹ As long-time journalist John Swinton reported on the events of the day—from the crusade for the eight-hour day to workingmen candidates' bids for political office—he offered a critique of and alternative to industrial capitalism. The Civil War figured prominently in this analysis. An examination of the *Paper's* Civil War discourse not only reveals the ways in which a segment of the labor movement remembered the war, but it also illuminates the politics of an important set of labor reformers. Referencing the Civil War helped John Swinton and a circle of reformers represent themselves and working people as the true champions of the Republic.²

Attention to how labor reformers remembered the Civil War contributes to an ongoing debate among historians about the memory of the war in the late nineteenth century. Historians agree that the final two decades of the century witnessed an unprecedented effort to commemorate the war, which pervaded popular culture and led to the establishment of national military parks at or near

formerly languished battlefield sites.³ Some historians emphasize the process of sectional reconciliation, in which the meaning of the Civil War in dominant discourse no longer centered on slavery, but rather on the valor of soldiers from both sides. They point to how Confederate and Union veterans dressed in their respective military uniforms and, nearing the end of their lives, clasped hands on opening days at memorial sites. Other historians address the limits of sectional reconciliation, arguing that veterans and other Americans as a whole did not relinquish their understandings of the war. These scholars argue that many Union veterans continued to remember that the institution of slavery had provoked the conflict.⁴ *John Swinton's Paper* demonstrates that, while labor leaders and allied veterans did highlight the issue of slavery, they imbued it with new meaning related to labor's circumstances in the Gilded Age. They argued that slavery, both chattel and wage, threatened the survival of the Republic. The *Paper* neither subscribed to the reconciliationist memory nor to that which historian David W. Blight has termed "the emancipationist vision."⁵ The emancipationist vision of the Civil War, associated with such individuals as Frederick Douglass, stresses the struggle for black freedom.⁶ John Swinton and many of his collaborators had been ardent abolitionists, but when they turned their attention to class issues after the war, they allowed their concern for African Americans to fall by the wayside. *John Swinton's Paper* illustrates that Americans in the late nineteenth century could emphasize slavery in Civil War remembrance and still neglect the continued plight of African Americans. That the labor movement simultaneously occupied these positions points to the need for a more nuanced approach to studying Civil War remembrance that takes into account the broader politics of a given group or individual.

John Swinton's abolitionist background helps explain the *Paper's* interest in the Civil War. Born in Scotland in 1829, Swinton moved with his family to Montreal before relocating to New York City in 1849. As a journeyman printer in the 1850s, Swinton toured the South, an experience that left a lasting impression on him.⁷ In 1883, Swinton gave a talk in which he recounted witnessing a slave auction in South Carolina. The *New York Times* reported on Swinton's lecture, remarking, "Something had happened in the mind of the young man from the North when that slave sale was over."⁸ Swinton also spent time in antebellum South Carolina, teaching African Americans to read and write at great personal risk. Like John Brown, Swinton moved to Kansas in the mid-1850s to fight against slavery.⁹ Pro-slavery and anti-slavery forces had swarmed the region following the passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act in 1854, which left residents to determine whether the new territories of Kansas and Nebraska would be free or slave.¹⁰ In another lecture, Swinton reminisced about how he and his friends had almost been called to provide a safe haven for Brown and his men in 1858.¹¹ Swinton took pride in his abolitionist past and made it a topic of discussion for the rest of his life.

Swinton's partisanship to the working class can be traced back to the economic depression of 1873.¹² As the editor of Charles A. Dana's *Sun*, Swinton could have simply reported on the Tompkins Square incident of January 1874. Instead, he served on a three-person committee that pressed charges against the police commissioners who were responsible for the attack on the unemployed demonstrators. That same year, Swinton headed a committee representing cigar makers before New York City's Board of Health.¹³ Most contemporary accounts, however, refer to Swinton as a labor editor.¹⁴ In addition to editing the *Sun*, Swinton worked for two other major New York newspapers: Henry J. Raymond's *Times* and Horace Greeley's *Tribune*.¹⁵ His association with these papers and the establishment of his own periodical helps explain why contemporaries tended to emphasize his journalistic career over his labor activism.

John Swinton earned praise from leading figures of his day. Karl Marx, who Swinton interviewed in 1880,¹⁶ believed that Swinton enjoyed enough influence to raise awareness in the United States about a struggle ensuing in Germany.¹⁷ In his biography of Swinton, labor leader Eugene V. Debs declared, "When the history of labor's struggle for emancipation is written, the name of John Swinton will illumine some of its darkest as well as some of its brightest pages."¹⁸ Walt Whitman remarked, "I don't think America has ever realized, perhaps ever will realize, John's greatness—the significance of his work: his dynamic force. I don't suppose John has written anything that will live—yet something else of him will live—something better than things people write."¹⁹ Victor Hugo referred to Swinton as the "great American journalist."²⁰

After years of reporting on labor issues, Swinton launched his own newspaper dedicated to topics concerning working people. *John Swinton's Paper* covered the organizing efforts of the Knights of Labor, engaged the politics of the Greenback Party, and supported Henry George's 1886 New York City mayoral bid. According to Swinton, the *Paper* reached a circulation of tens of thousands at its peak. A year's subscription in 1887 cost one dollar. Swinton struggled to meet the cost of publishing and cited financial reasons for the *Paper's* discontinuation in August 1887.²¹ As letters to the editor indicate, the *Paper's* readers included several veterans and white male workers, as well as some African American laborers, female workers, and wives of veterans. In having published numerous letters to the editor, speeches from labor leaders, and excerpts from other labor newspapers, *John Swinton's Paper* provides a glimpse into the labor movement of the late nineteenth century.

In addition, the articles themselves outline the goals of the labor movement. For instance, an article that appeared recurrently in the first several issues, "Nine Things Needed: A Few Practical Suggestions to Meet the Great Changes in the World," summarized the *Paper's* outlook and demands. *John Swinton's Paper* called for legislation to remedy the "evils" created by the "great changes in the business of the world." Its proposals to deal with the problems of the era included the revival of the income tax; public ownership of railroads, telegraphs, and

mines; laws preventing “the holding of great tracts of our country by corporations and individuals”; and the establishment of “a National Board of Industry” to collect data on issues such as the eight-hour day. Notably, the article included a statement that “each and every one” of the proposals is in the “spirit” of the U.S. Constitution, “the preamble of which announces its purpose to be the ‘promotion of the general welfare.’”²² *John Swinton’s Paper* saw its political program as rooted in the traditions of the American Republic.

The *Paper* promoted its politics by citing precedents from the history of the Republic. For example, the article, “The True American Policy,” advocated for public ownership of railroads by discussing DeWitt Clinton’s construction of the Erie Canal in 1825 during his term as governor of New York. After reporting that Clinton had pressed for internal improvements in addition to the canal, Swinton concluded that “if we had had a few Clintons at the period when the railroad companies parceled out the State of New York among themselves, the State itself might have built its railroads, and hundreds of millions of dollars now in the possession of multi-millionaires might have remained in the hands of the men who produced the wealth.”²³ Swinton agreed with the Knights of Labor’s definition of laborers as those people who produced the wealth of society.²⁴

Labor leaders treated the Civil War as the nation’s great battle to defend the Republic and, therefore, they made the war a central point of reference. “To-day there is a rebellion of Capital against the People as dangerous as the rebellion of Slavery against the Union,” began a speech by the fiery abolitionist James Redpath.²⁵ Labor reformers argued that, just as chattel slavery had once threatened the nation, wage slavery stood poised to destroy the American Republic. In fact, John Swinton viewed the Civil War as a necessary precursor to reforming the wage system. In the preface to his 1894 book, *Striking for Life*, Swinton stated, “We had to abolish [slavery] before we could grapple with any of the other wrongs which must be done away with.” According to Swinton, the issue of “the rights of labor” had preceded the Civil War but had only been “brought to the front” after the war.²⁶

In an effort to portray the labor movement’s struggle as the next chapter in the history of the Republic, *John Swinton’s Paper* likened workers to Union forces. On the front page appeared the lyrics to “The Workers Are Forming an Army,” intended to be sung to the tune of the Civil War song, “Marching through Georgia.” The final verse proclaimed: “The curse of chattel slavery in blood was washed away; the auction block, the master’s lash have left our land for aye; and slavery for wages cannot much longer stay, the workers are forming an army.”²⁷ The song represented workers as the legitimate heirs of the Union army, placing them on the side of moral right.

John Swinton’s Paper also depicted workers as slaves. In the antebellum period, both reformers and slaveholders had used the term “wage slavery” to describe the condition of northern laborers who contracted their work.²⁸ The Civil War reinvigorated the use of slave imagery. “And still we have a form of slavery,

not confined to color, which admits of one class, or several classes, taking from other classes almost everything that makes life enjoyable—nay endurable,” read a letter to the *Paper*.²⁹ Jeffersonian republicanism, which the *Paper* invoked, held economic independence to be the cornerstone of the Republic. The American Republic could not consist of economic dependents or slaves; such individuals could not be entrusted to make independent political decisions because their votes could be bought.³⁰ The *Paper* assumed that its readers understood that slavery and republicanism stood at odds.³¹ In Swinton’s mind, the Civil War had made that clear.

Building on the Civil War analogy, the *Paper* compared monopolists to Confederates. “The Slaveholders have been succeeded by the Bondholders—Legree by Shylock; Gen. Lee by Vanderbilt; Stonewall Jackson by Jay Gould,” said Redpath.³² The abolitionist compared two fictional characters: Shylock, the moneylender from Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice*, and Simon Legree, the greedy slaveholder from Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. Indeed, Stowe’s novel had captured imaginations and stirred anti-slavery sentiment in the antebellum period. Redpath searched for a story that could inspire social struggle in the Gilded Age. In likening railroad magnates Cornelius Vanderbilt and Jay Gould to Confederate generals, Redpath underscored the threat posed by monopolists. This comparison also helped labor leaders critique the Republican Party for letting forces akin to Confederates run amok.

Central to labor leaders’ discussion of the Civil War was a critique of the Republican Party during the Gilded Age. Swinton’s circle believed that monopolists would be powerless without the state forces that defended their interests. Redpath referenced the Civil War when making this point: “The Slave Power was a two-headed monster—a Rebel in the South, a Copperhead in the North. The Money Power, also, has two heads. . . . One head is the Republican Party and the other head is the Democratic Party.”³³ According to Redpath, the government, which consisted of members from both parties, passed laws that helped monopolists and hurt working people.

John Swinton’s Paper also marshaled Civil War history in its treatment of the Republican Party. In one article, Swinton voiced outrage that a participant of the free-soil struggle in Kansas had ended up penniless. Swinton fired, “If the leaders of the Republican party had any pride in its traditions . . . they would not permit this shipwrecked old man to remain in the poorhouse another day.”³⁴ Through allusions to the Civil War, Swinton challenged the Republican Party to be true to its roots.

The *Paper* also used the plight of veterans to stress the travesty of the era and the unfulfilled promises of the Republican Party. In the article “An Old Soldier on the Tramp,” veteran R. C. Weller stated, “I look back and see what I did for my country, when I took my life in my hands and went forth to battle; and for what? . . . Instead of having good times and steady work, I and so many other old soldiers are thrown out.”³⁵ By publishing this article, the *Paper* pointed to the

condition of veterans as proof of the need for another battle to save the Republic. Further, the *Paper* contributed to the national discussion about veteran pensions. The 49th Congress, which ran from March 1885 to March 1887, during Democrat Grover Cleveland's presidency, consisted of a Republican-majority Senate and a Democrat-majority House of Representatives. Congress passed pension legislation to garner support for the protective tariff. Congressmen reserved a portion of the revenue from the protective tariff for Civil War veterans. Meanwhile, Cleveland reviewed many of the pension requests and rejected them as fraudulent.³⁶ It is in this context that labor leaders featured demands for veteran compensation. Veteran Weller requested that Swinton ask Congress "if they can't appropriate \$250,000 toward getting some of our soldiers out West on some of the Government land and help us to make a home and living out of the soil."³⁷

Reformers discussed veterans' circumstances to highlight other issues of the day, such as currency reform. Debates over currency reform gripped the nation in the postwar decades. During the Civil War, paper money, or greenbacks, had become the money of trade and the form of payment for wages. The Greenback Party, most active between 1876 and 1884, opposed the return to a specie-based monetary system, on the basis that it would allow banks and corporations to set the value of labor and products.³⁸ *John Swinton's Paper* supported many of the Greenback Party's campaigns and proposals, as they aimed to limit corporations and protect labor. The politics of the Greenback Party influenced other labor configurations, such as the Union Labor Party, which served as Henry George's coalition in his 1886 mayoral campaign. The platform of the Union Labor Party, reprinted in *John Swinton's Paper*, stated: "In appreciation of the services of the United States soldiers and sailors, we demand for them justice before charity. The purposely depreciated money paid them during the war should be made equal in value to the gold paid the bondholder."³⁹

Swinton searched for Union generals willing to side with labor. His exchange with Civil War General W.T. Sherman illustrates this effort. In 1883, Swinton wrote Sherman a letter inquiring about the veracity of reports that quoted him as saying "that there would soon come an armed contest between Capital and Labor" fought with "shot and shell, gunpowder and cannon." Swinton asked, "But did you ever use any such language? Could it be used by the American soldier whom I cheered eighteen years ago when I saw him in Washington at the head of his triumphant army after 'marching through Georgia?'" He signed the letter, "Yours, in the memories of the old war, John Swinton." Sherman replied smugly, denying that he had ever made the remarks and added, "P.S.—On the Great Question of Conflict between Capital and Labor I know nothing, and must use Spanish to explain my position: 'Dios Sabe [God Knows].'"⁴⁰ Swinton did not let the matter with Sherman rest there; instead he published a letter exposing the material basis for the former general's disregard for the labor movement. The wife of a deceased veteran wrote in to say that she had read with interest the Sherman exchange. She said that her husband had "suffered a thousand times

more in the war than Gen. Sherman” and yet “the Government which pays Gen. Sherman \$17,000 every year gives the poor soldier, crippled for life, only \$8 a month, and, when he dies, gives nothing to his children.”⁴¹ The fact that generals prospered, according to Swinton and his readers, explained why many of them distanced themselves from the labor movement.

The *Paper* launched even harsher invectives against Ulysses S. Grant, as he played more of an active role in the Republican Party than Sherman. Most of the *Paper*'s comments about Sherman had appeared when the nation believed that he might accept the Republican presidential nomination of 1884. As soon as Sherman refused the nomination, mention of him faded from the *Paper*. Grant, on the other hand, did not stay out of politics after the Civil War. Not only did he serve as President during Reconstruction, but he also continued to express his political opinions until his death in 1885. Responding to reports that Grant wanted Congress to extend the presidential term from four to seven years, a contributor to the *Paper* remarked that men like Grant would like to have “elections dispensed with altogether” but “as that can't be done, they endeavor to have people consulted as seldom as possible.”⁴² Another letter to the *Paper* complained about the financial aid that Grant received, while veterans had to depend on charity. The letter stated, “Grant after all his gamblings, has an income which would make the eyes of the best paid mechanic glisten. Make a millionaire of the gambler and a pauper of the producer, seems to be the highest aim of the present generation.”⁴³ The *Paper* cited Grant's corruption as a way of discrediting the Republican Party.

When Grant passed away just a few months later, *John Swinton's Paper* paradoxically published conciliatory pieces honoring him as the general of the Union Army. A poem printed within a month of his death read, “Who marshaled the victorious legions? Who from chaos order brought? That steadfast man. That silent soldier. Now, alas, silent indeed! –Grant!”⁴⁴ The same issue ran an article penned by Swinton himself, which read, “The tributes of respect to the great military captain who has just been laid to rest by the side of our Hudson River have our sympathy. But the insults offered by our servile daily papers to the two millions of soldiers whose united effort and sacrifice restored the Union are intolerable.”⁴⁵ By referring to Grant as the “great military captain,” Swinton memorialized Grant for his service as general and expunged from memory Grant's role as Republican politician. Swinton's memory of Grant only grew fonder with time. Shortly before Swinton's death, in 1901, he published an article reminiscing about the interview he had conducted with Grant during the Civil War.⁴⁶ Gone were any criticisms of Grant. Grant's passing put an end to his relationship with the Republican Party, thus freeing Swinton to reclaim him as a war hero.

John Swinton's Paper often crafted memory of the Civil War around the deceased. The *Paper* claimed Abraham Lincoln for labor's cause. Swinton wrote, “At this time, no doubt, hundreds of our readers are preparing speeches for the Fourth of July. It is fit that all of them should direct the thoughts of their

multitude of hearers to the Declaration of Independence, which ought to be kept forever fresh in universal memory.” Swinton suggested, “Mr. Lincoln referred to the Declaration of Independence in the following striking language, which may give some useful ideas to the orators of the coming Fourth of July.” His quote from Lincoln read: “I think the authors of the notable instrument intended to include all men; but they did not intend to declare all men equal in all respects. They did not mean to say all were equal in color, size, intellect, moral development, or social capacity. They defined with tolerable distinctness in what respects they did consider all men created equal—equal with certain inalienable rights, among which are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.’ This they said, and this they meant.”⁴⁷

Swinton compared labor leader Eugene V. Debs to Abraham Lincoln and, in so doing, redeemed Debs and further established Lincoln’s legacy for laborers. In 1895, Swinton wrote an article comparing the two figures, on the basis that they were both misunderstood during their lives. Swinton described how he had heard both men speak at Cooper Union: Lincoln in 1860 and Debs in 1895. He explained, “Lincoln spoke for man; so spoke Debs. Lincoln spoke for right and progress; so spoke Debs. Lincoln spoke for the freedom of labor; so spoke Debs. Lincoln was the foe of human slavery; so is Debs.” Swinton made clear that his comparison applied to the Lincoln of 1860; Swinton stated, “At the time I have spoken of Lincoln was regarded by millions of people as a cross between a crank and a monster.” Swinton retold of how, while he stood listening to Debs, he thought, “In this new western leader in the struggle for labor’s emancipation, there might be the stuff of a presidential candidate.” He ended the article with the reminder, “Let us not forget Lincoln’s great words, ‘Liberty before property; the man before the dollar.’”⁴⁸ Swinton made Lincoln’s legacy stand at odds with the Republican Party of the Gilded Age.⁴⁹

To be sure, Swinton also invoked Lincoln in order to condemn certain contemporary figures. An article reporting on the annual presidential address stated, “If at any time between 1861 and 1865 Abraham Lincoln had sent to Congress an Annual Message containing no allusion to the war that was raging, and in which over a million men were engaged on the Union side, what would the people have thought of the way he performed his duties to the country? . . . [A]t a time when over a million of men are doing battle with idleness and starvation pay, —here comes Arthur’s Message, we say, without the slightest allusion to the harrowing facts of the industrial situation.”⁵⁰ With this comment, Swinton showed that the Republican President Chester A. Arthur diverged from Lincoln’s tradition of representing the people.

John Brown, another deceased Civil War figure, received a great deal of attention in *John Swinton’s Paper*. Swinton portrayed John Brown as a hero. During the late nineteenth century, the treatment of John Brown as hero, popularized over the course of the Civil War, had been replaced with the South’s image of Brown as a ruthless murderer.⁵¹ Swinton worked to restore Brown’s heroic status

by representing his actions as consistent with the Union's aims in the Civil War. In a speech delivered in 1881, on the twenty-second anniversary of John Brown's death (and reprinted in the *Paper* years later), Swinton characterized Brown's capture of Harpers Ferry as the "challenge to battle, the first shot in the war." Brown emerged in Swinton's speech as the leader in the nation's fight against slavery. "[Brown] was the first man to enter [slavery's] strongholds and smite it with the sword, and we know how quickly the sword that was struck from his hand brought destruction to American slavery."⁵²

Swinton addressed the issue of Brown's use of force, as well as his condemnation by the legal system. He argued that Brown met slavery on "its own terms and its own field, confronting with force a system based upon force." When discussing the legality of Brown's actions, Swinton indicated that Americans needed to be convinced of Brown's righteous legacy. "But hark! I hear the drool of Old Legality that John Brown was condemned and hanged under the authority of Government and law. Ay, it is true. Do we then hold that John Brown was guilty? Nay, nay, nay; but let our guilty system of government and law beware lest his condemnation be its doom."⁵³ Recognizing the power of historical memory, Swinton suggested that remembering that the state killed John Brown might lead to the government's downfall. His overall assessment justified Brown's decision to resort to force and extralegal action in the face of an unconscionable system.

Some articles in the *Paper* made explicit the model offered to labor by John Brown. One piece called for a "John Brown of labor," but worried that such a person would only "be on the job above a week before he would be accused of being an agitator."⁵⁴ Swinton criticized those who referred to Brown when speechifying about revolution. He stated, "Now as I happened to be one of the 'Kansas boys' when John Brown was busy there, I can tell one thing about that stalwart Abolitionist. John Brown was not a man who went about delivering speeches urging *other* men to fight."⁵⁵ In other words, Swinton referenced Brown as a way of encouraging more action and less talk.

Swinton also proposed that two monuments to John Brown be erected, in addition to those already in existence. He envisioned one in New York City as the "gate of the continent" and the other in Charlestown, Virginia, the site of Brown's scaffold, "so that the North and the South and all the world would thus again have a perpetual reminder that here was a man [who] gave himself to battle and death that he might deliver those who were crushed and lost, even black slaves." Swinton reasoned that perhaps, if the country had a "perpetual reminder" of Brown, then it would do better.⁵⁶ In treating monuments as reminders, Swinton demonstrated familiarity with how nations construct collective memories.

Swinton and his friends found a living Civil War hero, General Benjamin Franklin Butler, for the labor cause. Before supporting Butler, the *Paper* had gone through a period in which it was highly critical of him. In February 1884, the *Paper* ran an article, titled "Gen. B. F. Butler Upholds Child Labor in Mills," which reported statements Butler had made in defense of child labor while

serving as governor of Massachusetts.⁵⁷ When, in that same year, Butler declared his candidacy for the office of President on the Greenback and Anti-Monopoly ticket, the *Paper* dropped all criticism of him and offered its full support to the campaign. One article, titled “600 Years Ago: An Extract from ‘John Swinton’s Paper,’” imagined the nation 600 years after Butler’s election. Butler, according to the piece, had secured a just government for laboring people. The article urged those who believe that “the existence of the republic” depends “upon the immediate establishment of such a Government” to vote for Butler.⁵⁸

Butler made a strong case against the Republican Party. In one speech, reprinted in the *Paper*, he enumerated Republican efforts to thwart pro-labor legislation, from a bill for the eight-hour day to one that would have curbed “foreign contract of labor.” Butler remarked, “For the first fifteen years the Republican party did nobly, but during the last twenty years what have they done for the laboring men, who are certainly entitled to some attention, the slaves having been duly cared for?”⁵⁹ That this critique of the Republican Party came from a Union general made it all the more damning.

Two years later, the *Paper* supported another electoral campaign that likewise evoked the Civil War. In 1886, Henry George, known for his “single tax” proposal, ran for mayor of New York City on the United Labor Party ticket. His campaign garnered support from the labor movement, including the “Central Labor Union, the Greenbackers, the Knights of Labor, the Anti-Monopolists, the Socialists, the Land Reformers, the Constitution Club, and the Free-Soil Society—(which last was the title of the little group of Henry George men).”⁶⁰ In a speech reprinted in *John Swinton’s Paper*, George stated, “This movement means the beginning of the end of industrial slavery; it is the beginning of the movement for the emancipation of the masses, for social and political justice to them.”⁶¹ The George campaign promoted its goals by employing slavery imagery.

In addition to publishing journalistic articles that referenced the war, *John Swinton’s Paper* gave a nod to one of the most popular genres of Civil War remembrance in the period: fiction. The six-part series by “Daniel Morgan. Private,” titled “Yarns of War,” traces the experiences of a variety of characters during the Civil War. In one story, Frank, a Union soldier on furlough, goes to a town in West Virginia, where he falls in love with Rachel, a Confederate southern belle unaware of his true identity. When townspeople discover his background, Rachel at first supports plans to hang Frank but, in the end, she sets him free. Frank returns to the North without his sweetheart. Although these stories did not explicitly champion progressive politics, they did stand in sharp contrast to the plantation novels of the day, which celebrated the institution of slavery. Plantation novels advanced the process of sectional reconciliation by absolving the South of blame for having defended slavery.⁶² In contrast to the ubiquitous plantation novel, the “Yarns of War” series further proves that *John Swinton’s Paper* did not subscribe to a reconciliationist memory of the war.

At the same time, the *Paper* did not offer an emancipationist memory of the Civil War. Missing from *John Swinton's Paper's* critique of the Republican Party is any mention of the Republicans' retreat from Reconstruction. In fact, the *Paper* does not discuss the era of Reconstruction or its demise at all. Certainly, such an assessment was possible during this period, as is evidenced by the writings of Frederick Douglass and the articles published in the African American newspaper, the *Christian Recorder*.

John Swinton's Paper showed an uneven interest in the fate of African Americans. In a letter to the editor, a black worker noted that he had yet to see in the *Paper* an invitation "to the colored race to join forces with you in the coming political struggle."⁶³ This letter appeared early, yet it captures the dearth of articles on African Americans throughout the *Paper's* history. Timothy Thomas Fortune's black newspaper, the *New York Freeman*, supported Henry George, and it published many stories about black workers in the same period. Swinton knew of these stories, as he reprinted a few excerpts from the *New York Freeman* in his paper.

The short shrift to African-American workers can be attributed, in part, to the Knights of Labor's difficulties in organizing the South, home to the majority of African Americans at the time. Organizers faced intimidation from vigilante groups and pressure from white chauvinists.⁶⁴ To illustrate the level of violence in the South, a guest writer for *John Swinton's Paper* stated, "But I fairly warn the individual or individuals who may be caught 'spreading the light' among the pauperized field hands of Mississippi. . . . It is not now a felony in law to teach the negro to read, or to bulge his head out with ideas of the rights of man; but any one who proposes to do so in the 'black belt' stands a fair chance of being lynched, and is socially ostracized by the 'superior class,' who avoid a 'nigger teacher' as they would a leper."⁶⁵

The *Paper* did express interest in seeing the South organized. A front-page article, titled "The Ripening South," came from a guest writer, who reported on labor organizing in Virginia. The piece argued that it would take organization to break people's illusions about the current system. Its author used Civil War imagery, stating, "The South is more than a good field for labor agitation; it is ripe for an industrial rebellion. . . . Here, Knights of Labor, is an opportunity to organize an army of wage-workers, black and white, weary of bourbon supremacy and boss rule."⁶⁶ Another letter indicated interest in interracial organizing in the South, with the author writing that Knights of Labor efforts would "bring the white and colored into association to discuss their industrial interests, which would have a tendency to create a good feeling between the two classes."⁶⁷ Overall, however, the *Paper* paid little attention to African Americans.

Much is to be gained both from comparing the labor movement's memory of the war to the main forms of Civil War remembrance and from considering labor reformers on their own terms. The comparison helps reveal key aspects about how labor remembered the war and glaring omissions in that memory.

Unlike reconciliationists, labor reformers wanted Americans to remember that the war had been caused by the Confederacy's defense of slavery. In contrast to emancipationists, John Swinton and his collaborators did not discuss the demise of Reconstruction nor show deep concern for African Americans in the late nineteenth century. To get a fuller picture of labor's memory of the Civil War, however, it is necessary to examine reformers' remembrances in the context of their political ideology. *John Swinton's Paper* shows that Civil War discourse constituted a means through which labor laid claim to the republican mantle. When Knights of Labor activist George McNeill stated that "there is an inevitable and irresistible conflict between the wage-system of labor and the republican system of government," he directly recalled William Seward's "irrepressible conflict" speech on the eve of the Civil War.⁶⁸ Labor leaders believed that the fight against chattel slavery represented just one chapter in the struggle to defend the Republic. They sought to make wage slavery the next battle. The labor movement went to war with slavery, not racism.

NOTES

¹ David Scobey, "Boycotting the Politics Factory: Labor Radicalism and the New York City Mayoral Election of 1886," *Radical History Review* 28–30 (1984): 293.

² For further reading on late nineteenth-century labor ideology, see especially Leon Fink, *Workingmen's Democracy: The Knights of Labor and American Politics* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1983); David Montgomery, *Citizen Worker: The Experience of Workers in the United States with Democracy and the Free Market during the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993); and Richard Schneirov, *Labor and Urban Politics: Class Conflict and the Origins of Modern Liberalism in Chicago, 1864–97* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998).

³ Timothy B. Smith, *The Golden Age of Battlefield Preservation: The Decade of the 1890s and the Establishment of America's First Five Military Parks* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2008); and Karen L. Cox, *Dreaming of Dixie: How the South Was Created in American Popular Culture* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011).

⁴ For historians who emphasize sectional reconciliation, see Nina Silber, *The Romance of Reunion: Northerners and the South, 1865–1900* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993) and David W. Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2001). For historians who highlight the limits of reconciliation, see John R. Neff, *Honoring the Civil War Dead: Commemoration and the Problem of Reconciliation* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2004); Andre M. Fleche, "'Shoulder to Shoulder as Comrades Tried': Black and White Union Veterans and Civil War Memory," *Civil War History* 51 (June 2005): 175–201; Keith M. Harris, "Slavery, Emancipation, and Veterans of the Union Cause: Commemorating Freedom in the Era of Reconciliation, 1885–1915," *Civil War History* 53 (September 2007): 264–290; Caroline E. Janney, "'I Yield to No Man an Iota of My Convictions': Chickamauga and Chattanooga National Military Park and the Limits of Reconciliation," *Journal of the Civil War Era* 2 (September 2012): 394–420.

⁵ Blight, *Race and Reunion*, 2.

⁶ Blight, *Race and Reunion*, 302.

⁷ Sender Garlin, *Three American Radicals: John Swinton, Crusading Editor; Charles P. Steinmetz, Scientist and Socialist; William Dean Howells and the Haymarket Era* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1991), 4–5.

⁸ "John Swinton on Slavery," *New York Times*, February 17, 1883.

⁹ Garlin, *Three American Radicals*, 5.

¹⁰ Eric Foner and John A. Garraty, eds., *The Reader's Companion to American History* (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1991), 609.

¹¹ John Swinton, "John Brown," *Los Angeles Times*, May 6, 1883.

¹² See Rosanne Currarino, *The Labor Question in America: Economic Democracy in the Gilded Age* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2011), 11–12. Currarino states that the "labor question" itself developed in response to the depression of the 1870s. Reformers wondered if democracy could survive industrialism in the United States.

¹³ "Labor Topics," *New York Times*, March 29, 1874; "Local Miscellany," *New York Times*, October 7, 1874.

¹⁴ Most historians refer to Swinton as a labor editor. Historian Leon Fink describes Swinton as a citizen-activist in his article "'Intellectuals' versus 'Workers': Academic Requirements and the Creation of Labor History," *American Historical Review* 96 (April 1991): 395–421.

¹⁵ Garlin, *Three American Radicals*, 4.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 16.

¹⁷ In a letter to Swinton, Marx stated, "I believe that a man of your influence might organize a subscription in the United States. Even if the monetary result were not important, denunciations of Bismarck's new *coup d'état* in public meetings held by you, reported in the American press, reproduced on the other side of the Atlantic, would sorely hit the Pomeranian *hobereau* and be welcomed by all the socialists of Europe." Karl Marx to John Swinton, 4 November 1880, quoted in Garlin, *Three American Radicals*, 18.

¹⁸ Eugene V. Debs, "John Swinton, Radical Editor and Leader," *Pearson's Magazine* (February 1918; repr., Berkeley Heights, NJ: Oriole Press, 1978): 1.

¹⁹ William White, "Whitman and John Swinton: Some Unpublished Correspondence," *American Literature* 39 (January 1968): 548.

²⁰ Debs, "John Swinton," 14.

²¹ "Ups and Downs," *John Swinton's Paper*, August 21, 1887; "1886–1887," *John Swinton's Paper*, January 2, 1887; "Notice," *John Swinton's Paper*, August 7, 1887.

²² "Nine Things Needed: A Few Practical Suggestions to Meet the Great Changes in the World," *John Swinton's Paper*, October 14, 1883.

²³ "The True American Policy," *John Swinton's Paper*, October 11, 1885.

²⁴ The Knights of Labor only excluded lawyers, stockbrokers, bankers, and salon keepers from membership; see Leon Fink, "The New Labor History and the Powers of Historical Pessimism: Consensus, Hegemony, and the Case of the Knights of Labor," *The Journal of American History* 75 (June 1988): 118–119. For further reading on the Knights, see Donald L. Kemmerer and Edward D. Wickersham, "Reasons for the Growth of the Knights of Labor in 1885–1886," *Industrial and Labor Relations Review* 3 (January 1950): 213–220; Claudia Miner, "The 1886 Convention and the Knights of Labor," *Phylon* 44 (1983): 147–159; Fink, *Workingmen's Democracy*; Kim Voss, *The Making of American Exceptionalism: The Knights of Labor and Class Formation in the Nineteenth Century* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993); Robert E. Weir, *Beyond Labor's Veil: The Culture of the Knights of Labor* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996); Joseph Gerteis, *Class and the Color Line: Interracial Class Coalition in the Knights of Labor and the Populist Movement* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007); and Matthew Hild, *Greenbackers, Knights of Labor, and Populists: Farmer-Labor Insurgency in the Late-Nineteenth-Century South* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2007).

²⁵ James Redpath, "Blackmail Knights," *John Swinton's Paper*, December 14, 1884. Redpath and Swinton shared similar life histories. Both men were born in Scotland and migrated to the United States, where they worked as journalists. They became abolitionists and moved to Kansas in the late 1850s to try to prevent that state from permitting slavery. Redpath worked more closely with John Brown than had Swinton. After the Civil War, Redpath organized a lecturing bureau. He supported Henry George's 1886 mayoral campaign. *John Swinton's Paper* reprinted Redpath's speeches. See

John R. McKivigan, *Forgotten Firebrand: James Redpath and the Making of Nineteenth-Century America* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008), x–xi.

²⁶ John Swinton, *Striking for Life: Labor's Side of the Labor Question, The Right of the Workingman to a Fair Living* (1894; repr., Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1970), xii–xiii.

²⁷ Edwin G. Brown, “The Workers Are Forming an Army,” *John Swinton's Paper*, July 31, 1887.

²⁸ Eric Foner, “Workers and Slavery,” in *Working for Democracy: American Workers from the Revolution to the Present*, ed. Paul Buhle and Alan Dawley (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1985), 22.

²⁹ C. N. B., “Mr. Bovee—The Slaves of Servile Prejudices,” *John Swinton's Paper*, November 4, 1883. For a discussion of war language in accounts of labor conflicts after the Civil War, see Troy Rondinone, “‘History Repeats Itself’: The Civil War and the Meaning of Labor Conflict in the Late Nineteenth Century,” *American Quarterly* 59 (June 2007): 397–419.

³⁰ Edmund S. Morgan, *American Slavery, American Freedom: The Ordeal of Colonial Virginia* (1975; repr., New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1995), 377.

³¹ For more on labor's uses of republicanism, see Leon Fink, “The New Labor History.”

³² Redpath, “Blackmail Knights,” *John Swinton's Paper*, December 14, 1884.

³³ *Ibid.* The rift between labor reformers and the Republican Party developed during Reconstruction. Historian David Montgomery outlined the ways in which labor reformers borrowed concepts from Radical Republicans to hurl at the new industrialists. This strategy made manufacturers question the unlimited democracy of Radical Reconstruction, which led Republicans to repudiate their positions. See Montgomery, *Beyond Equality: Labor and the Radical Republicans, 1862–1872* (1967; repr., New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1981), 89. The Panic of 1873, argued Eric Foner, shattered northern laborers' belief in free labor and stimulated class tensions, further threatening industrialists. See Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863–1877* (1988; repr., New York: Harper Collins, 2002), 512–553.

³⁴ “An Old Hero in a Poorhouse,” *John Swinton's Paper*, October 12, 1884.

³⁵ R. C. Weller, “An Old Soldier on the Tramp,” *John Swinton's Paper*, July 26, 1885.

³⁶ Richard Franklin Bensel, *Sectionalism and American Political Development, 1880–1980* (1984; repr., Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1987), 62–64; and James Marten, *Sing Not War: The Lives of Union and Confederate Veterans in Gilded Age America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 201–204.

³⁷ Weller, “An Old Soldier,” *John Swinton's Paper*, April 11, 1886.

³⁸ Foner and Garraty, *The Reader's Companion to American History*, 473–474.

³⁹ “Union Labor Platform,” *John Swinton's Paper*, June 5, 1887.

⁴⁰ “Gen. W. T. Sherman,” *John Swinton's Paper*, December 9, 1883.

⁴¹ Mary Ann Simpson, “A Woman Near the Edge,” *John Swinton's Paper*, February 24, 1884. For further reading on disabled Civil War veterans, see Brian Matthew Jordan, “‘Living Monuments’: Union Veteran Amputees and the Embodied Memory of the Civil War,” *Civil War History* 57 (June 2011): 121–152; and Marten, *Sing Not War*, 83–90.

⁴² I.X.X., “Why Not a National Convention?” *John Swinton's Paper*, May 18, 1884.

⁴³ The Hatless Editor, “A Kansas Soldier on Kingcraft,” *John Swinton's Paper*, January 11, 1885.

⁴⁴ Benjamin Urner, “Grant,” *John Swinton's Paper*, August 16, 1885.

⁴⁵ “The Soldiers,” *John Swinton's Paper*, August 16, 1885.

⁴⁶ Swinton, “Two Remarkable Interviews,” *The Independent . . . Devoted to the Consideration of Politics, Social and Economic Tendencies, History, Literature, and the Arts*, May 23, 1901.

⁴⁷ “For the Fourth of July,” *John Swinton's Paper*, June 26, 1887.

⁴⁸ John Swinton, “1860—Lincoln; Debs—1895,” *Lecture Course of Eugene V. Debs* (Terre Haute, IN: Anchor Company, 1895).

⁴⁹ For a discussion of Lincoln's views on laborers and the wage system, see Clayton Sinyai, *Schools of Democracy: A Political History of the American Labor Movement* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006), 15–16.

⁵⁰ Untitled newspaper article in *John Swinton's Paper*, December 14, 1884.

⁵¹ James M. McPherson, review of *John Brown, Abolitionist: The Man Who Killed Slavery, Sparked the Civil War, and Seeded Civil Rights*, by David S. Reynolds; *John Brown: The Legend Revisited*, by Merrill D. Peterson; *Terrible Swift Sword: The Legacy of John Brown*, ed. Peggy A. Russo and Paul Finkelman, May 12, 2005, *The New York Review of Books*.

⁵² Swinton, "Old Ossawatimie Brown," speech on the 22nd anniversary of John Brown's death. December 2, 1881 (New Haven: Yale University Microfilm, 1986). This speech was reprinted in the *Paper* in 1886; see John Swinton, "Old Ossawatimie Brown," *John Swinton's Paper*, December 5, 1886.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ "John Brown Dead at Last," *John Swinton's Paper*, March 8, 1885.

⁵⁵ "Cheap Thunder," *John Swinton's Paper*, May 24, 1885.

⁵⁶ Swinton, "Old Ossawatimie Brown."

⁵⁷ "Gen. B. F. Butler Upholds Child Labor in Mills," *John Swinton's Paper*, February 10, 1884.

⁵⁸ "600 Years Ago: An Extract from 'John Swinton's Paper,'" *John Swinton's Paper*, October 5, 1884.

⁵⁹ "New Forces at Work," *John Swinton's Paper*, September 14, 1884. During the Civil War, General Butler famously harbored escaped slaves, which he called "contraband of war." See James M. McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era*, (1988; repr., New York: Ballantine Books, 1989), 355. For further reading on Butler's presidential bid of 1884, see Gerald Friedman, "Success and Failure in Third-Party Politics: The Knights of Labor and the Union Labor Coalition in Massachusetts, 1884–1888," *International Labor and Working-Class History* 62 (Fall 2002): 164–188.

⁶⁰ "The Union of the New Political Forces," *John Swinton's Paper*, October 10, 1886.

⁶¹ "Henry George's Speeches," *John Swinton's Paper*, October 31, 1886. See also Robert E. Weir, "A Fragile Alliance: Henry George and the Knights of Labor," *American Journal of Economics and Sociology* 56 (October 1997): 421–439. George did not win the election.

⁶² Daniel Morgan, Private, "Yarns of the War: Sanguinary Simms," *John Swinton's Paper*, June 14, 1885; Morgan, "Yarns of the War: Uncle Pompey," *John Swinton's Paper*, June 21, 1885; Morgan, "Yarns of the War: Us," *John Swinton's Paper*, June 28, 1885; Morgan, "Yarns of the War: Rachel Romney," *John Swinton's Paper*, July 5, 1885; Morgan, "Yarns of the War: The Nashville Mail," *John Swinton's Paper*, July 26, 1885; and Morgan, "Yarns of the War: Dummy," *John Swinton's Paper*, August 16, 1885. For an analysis of plantation novels, see Blight, *Race and Reunion*, 211–222.

⁶³ Alfred Scott, "From a Colored Citizen of Texas," *John Swinton's Paper*, January 6, 1884.

⁶⁴ Sidney H. Kessler, "The Organization of Negroes in the Knights of Labor," *The Journal of Negro History* 37 (July 1952): 260. For further reading on the difficulties of organizing in the South, see Gerald Friedman, "The Political Economy of Early Southern Unionism: Race, Politics, and Labor in the South, 1880–1953," *The Journal of Economic History* 60 (June 2000): 384–413. The *Paper's* disregard for African Americans also had to do with widespread race prejudice within the labor movement. For a discussion of the Knights of Labor's failings regarding race, see Herman D. Bloch, "Terence V. Powderly and Disguised Discrimination," *American Journal of Economics and Sociology* 33 (April 1974): 145–160.

⁶⁵ L., "The Black Exodus," *John Swinton's Paper*, February 13, 1887. As the comment about "the rights of man" suggests, the Knights of Labor believed that African Americans, like white laborers, possessed the capacity for civic virtue. See Gerteis, *Class and the Color Line*, 49–75.

⁶⁶ A. S. Leitch, "The Ripening South," *John Swinton's Paper*, November 1, 1885.

⁶⁷ J. H. Armisted, "Away Down South in Dixie," *John Swinton's Paper*, December 14, 1884.

⁶⁸ Sinyai, *Schools of Democracy*, 21–22.

