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Property Conflict in the Promised Land:

A History of Black Home Struggles in Los Angeles, 1920-1950

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction

of the requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy in History

by

Marques Augusta Vestal, Jr.

2020

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## ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Property Conflict in the Promised Land:  
A History of Black Home Struggles in Los Angeles, 1920-1950

by

Marques Augusta Vestal, Jr.

Doctor of Philosophy in History

University of California, Los Angeles, 2020

Professor Eric R. Avila, Chair

Urban histories of race and housing currently ignore the daily conflicts over debt, occupancy, and autonomy that characterized the private market for shelter and home in the United States. The historical literature, instead, has concentrated on the role of government policy, economic restructuring, real estate professionals, white homeowners, and black activists in constructing and resisting racially segregated metropolitan real estate and mortgage markets, resulting in discriminatory access to homeownership and credit for black Americans. This study aims to construct a history not of the contested role of race in housing, but the contested role of private property in shaping the black experience of housing. Specifically, this dissertation examines seminal moments of *property conflict* in Black Los Angeles between 1920 and 1950,

arguing that the everyday conflicts over debt, rent, eviction, and autonomy comprised the central substance of the history of black home struggle in the city. Property conflicts were the complaints, jokes, gossip, lawsuits, deals, compromises, and regular violence that parties, often of unequal power, engaged in to claim contested entitlements over land, housing, and revenue, of which contests over segregation were but one aspect of conflict. Thus, the focus on struggle in this study is both broadened and made more intimate. For working-class black Angelenos, the goal of property conflict was to make and to keep home amid urban growth and contraction, not to make a city or to enter the vaunted status of homeowner. By centering the contentious intersection of home and private property, this study consolidates the struggles of both working-class property owners and tenants into a more holistic history of black land struggle.

To uncover the history of black property conflict in Los Angeles between 1920 and 1950, this study tracked a variety of scattered records that documented such conflict: black newspapers, manuscript collections, Los Angeles City Council minutes and petitions, Los Angeles Board of Supervisors minutes, Superior Court criminal and civil lawsuits, and other city, state, and federal records. Unearthing these records reveals that the history of black land struggle in Los Angeles is the history of conflict over the terms of private property. The findings of this study force urban historians, and anyone concerned with housing policy, to rethink the central problem of race and housing in the United States. The problem is not the discriminatory access to the private property rights and neighborhoods of white America, it is instead, the inadequate structure of private property governance that forces people of unequal power to fight over the contracts stipulating the terms of home for profit.

The dissertation of Marques Augusta Vestal, Jr. is approved.

Kathleen A. Lytle Hernandez

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Eric R. Avila, Committee Chair

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2020

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I decided to pursue this path to the doctorate degree more than sixteen years ago. I have benefited from the support of so many people, programs, and institutions that this moment of giving thanks feels impossible but equally necessary. I would not have survived Los Angeles of the late 1990s and early 2000s without the mentorship of the former Freedom Rider, Jerry Moore. He modeled for me a life of radical and humble service to the most vulnerable among us. May God forever bless his spirit. I must also acknowledge my family and friends. My aunt, Dinitra Jones, took in my two siblings and me after our mother was murdered. I will forever be in her debt for the impossible tasks she shouldered. I give thanks to all my Corning Street family; without them I would not have survived the many pitfalls of racial capitalism. I am deeply grateful for my brother and sister, William Vestal and Evita Jones, who have provisioned unconditional support for everything I have decided to do.

My intellectual career began in earnest at California State University Northridge when I enrolled in my first Pan African Studies class—remedial English. I was so taken by ethnic studies that I immediately changed my major. The Pan African Studies Department changed my life. A UCLA student, Sharmin Kalam saw potential I could not and encouraged me to transfer to UCLA. In that journey, El Camino Community College proved stellar and supportive. Elite universities are difficult places for working-class people to survive, but the African American Studies Department at UCLA (a program at the time of my undergraduate enrolled) was supportive. Without the support of ethnic studies faculty and staff, I would not have dedicated my energies to education or fight for my own life. My research career began with the Ronald E. McNair Research Program, and I am deeply thankful for the support, training, and encouragement of the faculty, staff, and graduate mentors of that program. Without their help,

encouragement, and financial support, I would not have had the courage or resources to continue into graduate studies.

My graduate studies have taken over eight years to complete two separate degrees. Again, African American Studies at UCLA proved supportive and transformative. I thank the faculty and staff for their support and teaching. Brenda Stevenson proved to be an incredibly generous mentor. On any given day, a stream of students waited outside her office, me among them, and I had no idea how special such dedication to mentorship was at the time. I have been blessed with what feels like hundreds of supportive relationships during my doctorate degree. One of my most important political and intellectual mentors in the Black Radical Tradition was Thabisile Griffin, who introduced me to work of Cedric Robinson and invited me to what was, ultimately, Robinson's final seminar before his death. With Griffin and other comrades at UCLA, we founded a freedom school—The Undercommons—drawing inspiration from the work of Fred Moten and Stefano Harney. Organizing with the Undercommons was a transformative political and intellectual experience for which I am deeply thankful. I must also give thanks to Peter Chesney, who seems to know absolutely everything about Los Angeles. If I had a question, needed to process ideas, or needed a lead on literature to flush out a concept, Peter was my intellectual companion throughout.

There are other influential institutions that I must acknowledge. The support of the Bunche Center at UCLA has been critical to my research and organizing in Los Angeles. With their support, I was able to work with Lola Smallwood and the Black Worker Center on political education and research. I have continued to work closely with Bunche over the years, and I am deeply grateful to all the people responsible for that incredible resource. The Community Scholars Program hosted by the Department of Urban Planning at UCLA was also

transformative. I benefited immensely from working alongside Gaye T. Johnson, who mentored me in the Black Radical Tradition. Gilda Haas taught me how to teach, organize, and think in a radically grounded way about justice. Lola Smallwood taught me the black politics of the city, and I thank them for allowing me to contribute to the efforts of the Black Worker Center and foregrounding the issues of black work in Los Angeles. The Institute on Inequality and Democracy has also been transformative. The Institute has been generous with speaking, organizing, and funding opportunities, and I have made lifelong connections to incredible scholars and organizers all over world through Institute events. My most recent work at UCLA has been deeply shaped and supported by Million Dollar Hoods (MDH). I came to MDH through the longtime mentorship and scholarship of Kelly Lytle Hernandez, who has modeled the kind of scholar and mentor I want to emulate. I also thank Danielle Dupuy, MDH director, for their continued support of our archival division. The Los Angeles Tenants Union has also made an immeasurable impact on my scholarship and organizing. Their work has been inspirational. When the pandemic of 2020 hit, it was LATU that I witnessed in the street fighting alongside tenants to resist illegal evictions, harassment, and violence. My experience with the South Central local further confirmed this study's findings and taught me what just and autonomous tenant governance may look like in the future of Los Angeles.

For financial support, I thank the Eugene Cota-Robles Fellows Program. For research support, I thank the Department of Black Studies at University of California, Santa Barbara. I am so grateful to the faculty and staff. They provided me teaching, research, and financial support at a critical juncture of my career. For archival research support I would like to acknowledge Michael Holland, Los Angeles City Archivist, whose vast historical knowledge of the city and

tireless efforts to find the most obscure documents I requested made this dissertation possible, especially navigating the records of various city agencies.

I would like to thank my dissertation committee, who have provided critical support and feedback, but have also allowed me the space to make a unique contribution to history. Their scholarship led me to UCLA and served as a model for how I wanted my work to feel. I have been rereading their work for years, and will continue to do so, and I could not have become the scholar I am without their insight, effort, and generosity. Gaye T. Johnson and Robin D. G. Kelley rooted me in the Black Radical Tradition and the works of Cedric Robinson. They taught me how to think about resistance. Kelly Lytle Hernandez challenged me to think about land and provided me valuable archival training and daring that was central to the success of this project. I learned that the archives are a place of struggle too. We must fight for them. My committee chair, Eric Avila, has been a trusting intellectual guide over the past six years. He provided me time, space, and encouragement to pursue my ideas, refine them, and develop a unique a contribution that will be the foundation of my scholarly career. To my committee, I offer my deep appreciation.

Lastly, I thank my mother, Leamonda Vestal. You survived in ways I cannot imagine. I am a testament to your courage and love. Please forgive me. I will never be silent again.

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Katz, Alisa with Peter Chesney, Lindsay King, and Marques Vestal. “People Are Simply Unable to Pay Rent: What History Tells Us About Rent Control in Los Angeles,” White Paper. Luskin Center for History and Policy, University of California, Los Angeles. (October 2018)

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## INTRODUCTION

The history of residential property in Twentieth-Century Black Los Angeles could be summarized in the following stories. On the backside of a subdivision boom, Ethel Davis' criminal complaint sent one of the most prominent leaders of Black Los Angeles, Sidney P. Dones, to county jail for usury in 1927. He was sentenced to 90 days imprisonment.<sup>1</sup> In 1935, after years of struggling to pay multiple and expensive special assessments levied to finance road modernization, Cora and George Farley lost their unencumbered home to a predatory debt collector. Three years later, after having become a tenant in a home he once owned, George murdered the two white sheriffs sent to evict him with a borrowed rifle. White workers in the surrounding industrial district considered lynching him in retaliation.<sup>2</sup> The following decade, Los Angeles became a defense manufacturing center during World War II, causing an unprecedented housing shortage amid unprecedented controls on rents and evictions nationwide. When "Mrs. Nellie Lilley" asked her male tenant to move in the fall of 1946, he reportedly offered this preamble before setting her on fire, "Alright, I'll show you I am a man."<sup>3</sup>

Taken alone, these stories seem like isolated conflicts. But, these sorts of stories spring up consistently over the 30-year period of this study for both homeowners and tenants. Superficially, the opposing parties sparred over a disparate assortment of transactions—loans, taxes, rents, and evictions. If we look more deeply, these were political relationships to land and housing, and Black people fought over these relationships with intensity. These conflicts, then,

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<sup>1</sup> R.G Lamar, "Sidney P. Dones is Granted Appeal in Usury Case," *California Eagle*, June 27, 1927; "Sidney P. Dones Loses Long Legal Battle," *Eagle*, Oct. 28, 1927.

<sup>2</sup> "Officers' Slayer to Make Plea When Able to Appear in Court," *Eagle*, Feb 24, 1938.

<sup>3</sup> "Irate Roomer Sets Fire to His Landlady," *Eagle*, Sep. 12, 1946.

were the stuff of U.S. property. A question then lingers, why were the courts and the streets the field of residential *property conflict*?

In the United States, prior to 1965, there was a glaring lack of federal legislative involvement in private housing law, especial tenant-landlord law, as compared to, for example, the United Kingdom. The U.S.'s constitutional system of checks and balances made it "extraordinarily difficult," as English legal scholar Charles Donahue stated in 1974, to get housing legislation passed without tremendous political pressure (public housing is one example). The federal constitutional design that frustrated change was mirrored in the states. Relatively ignored by government, the "institutional setting" for residential housing was near exclusively the private market economy, and its property law was adjudicated in the courts. Ethel Davis' pursuit for remedy against Sidney Dones served as an example. Housing disputes often involved small sums of money, and given the cost, complexity, and duration of seeking legal remedy through the courts, it was rare for working-class people to use it to settle those conflicts. For tenants, the prospects of court remedy were even more dire, as summary proceedings and tenant-landlord law heavily favored landlords.<sup>4</sup> Thus, the structure of U.S. governance and law effectively stranded everyday people without a responsive political institution whose membership granted them formal say in matters of everyday property. This political reality, unfortunately, was not an unintended consequence. It was an intentional feature of U.S. governance.

To get to the bottom of this provocation, we must search the foundation of that governance—the Constitution. In the aftermath of the Revolutionary War (1775-1783), the

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<sup>4</sup> Charles Donahue, "Change in the American Law of Landlord and Tenant," *The Modern Law Review* 37, no. 3 (1974): 242.



prospects that the government could protect the future of liberty was suspect, at least this was the assessment of colonial elites, such as James Madison and the Federalists. Under the Articles of Confederation, new state governments began issuing paper money and enacting debtor relief laws throughout the 1780s. As legal historian Jennifer Nedelsky highlights, these laws “were widely perceived as attacks on private property,” which struck at the very heart of revolutionary claims that a man is a slave if his property could be taken away without his consent.<sup>5</sup> Hence, duly elected legislatures became a threat to the security of property. A new structure of government was deemed necessary to solve the dilemma of republican ideology: how to protect minority private property from the propertyless majority while also guaranteeing that majority political participation.

The solution to this dilemma, argues Nedelsky, was the Madisonian influenced Constitution of 1787. Instead of creating hard prohibitions to protect property, Madison preferred a structural solution. The division of power among three chambers of government created a system of checks and balances that limited the power of any one chamber. To ensure that the colonial elite, propertied and thus politically competent men, filtered into elected office, the Constitution provided an “extended republic” with large election districts and layers of institutions that distanced the people from those in office. Even with later changes—direct election of Senators, post-Civil War Amendments, and women’s suffrage—large election districts advantaged men with the means to be widely known to the electorate. This structure would effectively frustrate the recurrence of the debtor relief laws of the 1780s. Even with this

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<sup>5</sup> Jennifer Nedelsky, *Private Property and the Limits of American Constitutionalism : The Madisonian Framework and Its Legacy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 4.

structure in place, legislatures could, under the kind of populist pressure that Donahue cited, make redistributive threats against the sanctity of private property.<sup>6</sup>

The development of “judicial review” considerably weakened this threat in the early Nineteenth Century. Under the Marshall Court, matters of property were accepted as the domain of law, not politics. Unlike that partisan field of competing political interests, colonial elites regarded the courts as neutral, with the added esteem and authority of a long tradition of English common law. Given this seemingly nonpartisan and venerable authority, the courts could legitimately enforce the limits of government power over citizens’ property rights. Those limits—on taxation, regulation, and eminent domain—would see some expansion by the end of the Nineteenth Century, and more robust and far-reaching changes under the New Deal of the 1930s challenged and expanded those government limits.<sup>7</sup> Although, as Donahue assessed in 1974, the courts remained a poor institution for everyday people to achieve remedies in residential property law. For example, I discuss briefly in chapter one, California courts invalidated Los Angeles’ first rent control law in 1921, enacted after tenants’ associations, organized labor, and veterans pressured the City Council to do so. The courts invalidated that law to protect the property rights of the plaintiff, a landlord. Thus, the constitutional designs of the Eighteenth-Century colonial elite and Nineteenth-Century courts came to bear on all the prospects of marginal peoples’ land representation in the Twentieth Century. Although this legacy left the U.S. housing scene with little government involvement when compared to its parent empire, this difference in protective and rights-granting legislation did not result in an absence of politics in that gap.

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<sup>6</sup> Donahue, "Change in the American Law of Landlord and Tenant," 242.

<sup>7</sup> Nedelsky, *Private Property and the Limits of American Constitutionalism : The Madisonian Framework and Its Legacy*.

This is the constitutional structure that set the scene for Black Los Angeles' home struggles between 1920 and 1950. The lawsuit, double murder, and attempted murder in the opening of this introduction ought not to be misconstrued as random, pathologized as crimes, or dismissed as spectacles of the desperate. Property conflict was the prosaic, everyday politics of residential property happening in the legislated gaps of U.S. government and law. As these politics were forced to scrimmage in the private market of housing capitalism, its political relationships were defined by the millions of contracts for home made over rents, mortgages, contract sales, pocketbook loans, and promissory notes. Where residential property met government power, its political relationships passed through the institutions that administered taxes, regulations, and land takings. Its political practices were the complaints, jokes, gossip, lawsuits, deals, compromises, and regular violence that parties, often of unequal power, engaged in to claim contested entitlements over land, housing, and revenue. The cold but regular consequences of these politics included uncounted millions of displacements of home, millions of dollars in transferred wages, and an unknowable body count that is now impossible to tally. Taken together, property conflict was the unwritten housing policy of the United States and constituted the boisterous center of Black Los Angeles' history of land struggle.

This dissertation examines some significant examples of property conflict in Black Los Angeles between 1920 and 1950. The outset of the study's periodization, 1920, marked the first year of Los Angeles' subdivision boom of the Twentieth Century. The 1920s heralded the city's full, unquestioned emergence as the principal metropolis in the West. For Black Los Angeles, the 1920s marked more than a real estate boom; it signaled the birth of its real estate market and the formation of a racial uplift ideology that took urban real estate as its Moses. The study closes in 1950, a pivotal and frightening year for Los Angeles tenants. After eight years of conflict-riddled

public controls on rents and evictions, the Los Angeles City Council voted to remove them. Victim to the same fate as Los Angeles' public housing program, elected officials, landlords, and realty associations roundly condemned federally administered wartime rent control's unprecedented intervention in the private housing market as a menacing step toward communism. Cumulatively, the 30-year period of this study—from realty boom, economic depression, to wartime emergency—represented one of the most dynamic and contentious periods for residential property in the city's history under a U.S. flag.

The concept of property conflict draws on several critical social historians of black and brown working-class life. This concept's sensitivity and commitment to forwarding unorganized, boisterous, and individual acts of complaint, petition, ridicule, and sometimes violence as skirmishes over power—in other words, as politics—is based on Robin D.G. Kelly's analysis of infrapolitics, most notably in *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class*. Kelly imported the concept from anthropologist James C. Scott, who studies South Asian peasant insurrection, and modified it for black, working-class, and urban politics in the U.S. Infrapolitics identifies the at times hidden, at times public, resistance of oppressed groups, which manifest in acts of disobedience informed by dissident political culture.<sup>8</sup> Eric Avila's *Folklore of the Freeway: Race and Revolt in the Modernist City* and Gaye Theresa Johnson's *Spaces of Conflict, Sounds of Solidarity: Music, Race, and Spatial Entitlement* inform the role of infapolitical struggle within cultural spaces in articulating new collective, multiracial identities and cutting critiques of state power. Kelly Lytle Hernandez' *City of Inmates: Conquest, Rebellion, and the Rise of Human Caging in Los Angeles* challenged me to think about the legacy of settler

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<sup>8</sup> Robin D. G. Kelley, *Race Rebels : Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class* (New York; Toronto; New York: Free Press ; Maxwell Macmillan Canada ; Maxwell Macmillan International, 1994), 8-9.

colonialism in structuring political relationships over the land, and thus, the my commitment to examining property (instead of housing) and alongside white settler notions of rights and claims to land. Lastly, the towering, unassuming, and now late scholar, Cedric Robinson and his critical text, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition*, endows the spirit of property conflict's unrelenting interrogation of how political economy hides its racial background and the potential to break it by seeming neutral and colorblind.<sup>9</sup>

This dissertation contributes to several literatures. The most immediate, of course, is the literature on Black Los Angeles. The rich studies of the historic Central Avenue community feature several critical themes that relate to black urban life across the U.S. Douglas Flamming's *Bound for Freedom: Black Los Angeles in Jim Crow America* exhaustively details what he called "civil rights as a way of life" among the city's middle-class activist leaders, as they fought for equal access and treatment in employment, politics, public accommodations, and housing in the pre-WWII era. Josh Sides' *L.A. City Limits: African American Los Angeles from the Great Depression to the Present* supplemented this history, carrying the periodization through the Second World War, and he integrated the role of organized black labor in the struggle for civil rights. Scott Kurashige's *The Shifting Grounds of Race: Black and Japanese Americans in the Making of Multiethnic Los Angeles* and editors Darnell Hunt and Ana-Christina Ramon's *Black Los Angeles: American Dreams and Racial Realities* enrich the literature with critical multiracial histories that disrupt the black/white binary and foreground the importance of identity and culture to the history of multiethnic Los Angeles. Most recently, Marne Campbell's *Making*

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<sup>9</sup> Eric Avila, *The Folklore of the Freeway: Race and Revolt in the Modernist City* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014); Gaye Theresa Johnson, *Spaces of Conflict, Sounds of Solidarity: Music, Race, and Spatial Entitlement in Los Angeles* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013); Kelly Lytle Hernandez, *City of Inmates: Conquest, Rebellion, and the Rise of Human Caging in Los Angeles, 1771-1965* (2017); Cedric J. Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 2000).

*Black Los Angeles* centers gender and the central role of black women in the dawning years of the city's history.<sup>10</sup>

This study should also be read in the context of Los Angeles' urban housing sociology that crosses both tenures of homeownership and tenancy. Gibbon's *City of Segregation: One Hundred Years of Struggle for Housing in Los Angeles* tracks the campaigns of homeowners battling race restrictive covenants in the 1920s and the unhoused battle for Skid Row at the turn of the new millennia through the critical lens of Marxist political economy. Don Parson's essential history, *Making a Better World*, highlights the roles of progressive administrators, architects, reformers, and tenants in tenuously winning a compromised program for public housing that the Red Scare quickly and effectively ended in the early 1950s. Dana Cuff's *Provisional City* takes a deeper examination of property, modernist planning, and architectural practice in constructing Los Angeles' public housing. Although they say too little about race, the literature on the professionalization of the real estate industry and planning are essential context for this study as well.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Douglas Flamming, *Bound for Freedom : Black Los Angeles in Jim Crow America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 3; Josh Sides, *L.A. City Limits : African American Los Angeles from the Great Depression to the Present* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003); Scott Kurashige, *The Shifting Grounds of Race : Black and Japanese Americans in the Making of Multiethnic Los Angeles* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2008); Darnell M. Hunt and Ana-Christina Ramón, *Black Los Angeles : American Dreams and Racial Realities* (New York: New York University Press, 2010); Marne L. Campbell, *Making Black Los Angeles : Class, Gender, and Community, 1850-1917* (2016).

<sup>11</sup> Andrea Gibbons, *City of Segregation : One Hundred Years of Struggle for Housing in Los Angeles* (2018); Donald Craig Parson, *Making a Better World : Public Housing, the Red Scare, and the Direction of Modern Los Angeles* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005); Dana Cuff, *The Provisional City : Los Angeles Stories of Architecture and Urbanism* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002); Marc A. Weiss, *The Rise of the Community Builders : The American Real Estate Industry and Urban Land Planning* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987); Greg Hise, *Magnetic Los Angeles : Planning the Twentieth-Century Metropolis* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997).

This study is also in dialogue with the literature on the history of race and real estate on a national scale. Andrew Wiese's synthetic and comparative social history of black suburbanization, *Places of Their Own: African American Suburbanization in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century*, outlines the shared social and cultural features of black ideas about suburban living, features of black suburbs nationwide, and black housing practices. On the racial politics of real estate, this study ventures to contribute to Robert Self's *American Babylon: Race and the Struggle for Postwar Oakland*. Self accomplishes an important corrective to our understanding of white flight, revealing that the inequality that opens between inner-city Oakland and its surrounding industrial suburbs was an incessantly fought battle over the redistribution of jobs, people, money, and political power. Nathan Connolly's *A World More Concrete: Real Estate and the Making of Jim Crow South Florida* forwards the collaborative relationships between white, black, indigenous, and immigrant people trying to boost the value of real estate, what Connolly calls Jim Crow governance. He also features the role of landlords in said governance, disrupting the typical narrative that privileges white homeowners as the local agents of racialized property politics. In *Colored Property: State Policy and White Racial Politics in Suburban America*, David M.P. Freund forensically reconstructs the role of public-private alliances in revolutionizing the home mortgage market for white Americans, creating the policy foundations for the widening of the racial wealth gap and constructing a narrative that obscured its work. Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor's *Race for Profit: How Banks and the Real Estate Industry Undermined Black Homeownership* picks up on the public-private alliance and reveals how it reversed the historic exclusion of black Americans from the mainstream mortgage market by constructing black inclusion on predatory terms.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Andrew Wiese, *Places of Their Own : African American Suburbanization in the Twentieth Century* (Chicago:

This study differs from the prevailing literature in critical ways. First, urban histories of black housing have marginalized private market tenants and the tenant-landlord relationship in exchange for their focus on discriminatory access to homeownership through segregation and mortgage financing, and to a lesser degree, public housing tenancy.<sup>13</sup> Since the Great Migration, most urban black Americans were born in homes that paid rent and died paying it on the private market for housing. Los Angeles was no exception. Their rents streamed to Black Los Angeles' landlords, which included, homeowners, rooming house operators, absentee investors, and community churches. In the eyes of this propertied cohort, tenancy served as the subordinate tenure that supported, in money and meaning, their visions of citizenship, ownership, land use, and segregation. Tenants did not simply concede to this subordinate status. They complained, ridiculed, sued, petitioned, and wielded weapons demanding their own entitlements in exchange for rent. In recovering some of these skirmishes, we uncover a black property culture, ideology, and practice as they grappled with seismic changes in real estate and rental markets. Framed more forcefully, urban rent in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and tenancy more broadly, defined the black migrant's political relationship to property and served as one of the most significant forms of wealth transfer in the economy of Great Migration.

The second critical difference in this study's approach is the central place given to property conflict and its role in securing home. The current literature provides a critical and

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University of Chicago Press, 2004); Robert O. Self, *American Babylon : Race and the Struggle for Postwar Oakland* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2003); N. D. B. Connolly, *A World More Concrete : Real Estate and the Remaking of Jim Crow South Florida*, Historical Studies of Urban America (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2014); David M. P. Freund, *Colored Property : State Policy and White Racial Politics in Suburban America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007); Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, *Race for Profit : How Banks and the Real Estate Industry Undermined Black Homeownership*, Justice, Power, and Politics (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2019); Kenneth T. Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier : The Suburbanization of the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985).

<sup>13</sup> On the history of black public housing tenancy see, Rhonda Y. Williams, *The Politics of Public Housing : Black Women's Struggles against Urban Inequality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).



visceral assessment of how housing policies made cities, suburbs, their infrastructure, and their markets for housing and credit, but not how intimate, contentious, and sometimes violent relationships made *home* in the United States. Thus, the current study ought to be read not just as a history of unwritten public policy (the policy of property conflict), but also a social history of informal contracts that serve as its political instrument. When home becomes the prized focus of analysis, the daily devastation of its making on private property comes clearly into view. The history of making the black home in the U.S. is pockmarked with arguments, assaults, and occasional disfigurements and murders. It reveals that violence is an essential pillar of U.S. housing policy. Furthermore, while studies have examined the acute, large-scale displacements and eviscerations of racialized homes that were the collateral for constructing public housing projects, luxury housing, civic centers, sports arenas, and freeways, they have relatively little to say about the millions of everyday displacements achieved through evictions.<sup>14</sup> We have, at present, a history of race and housing in the United States that has largely overlooked the conflicts, violence, and displacements that define the lived experience of residential private property for working-class people. Consequently, as a country, we do not possess even an estimate of the full human cost of siting home on a racialized market of private property.

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<sup>14</sup> Arnold R. Hirsch, *Making the Second Ghetto : Race and Housing in Chicago, 1940-1960* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983); John F. Bauman, *Public Housing, Race, and Renewal : Urban Planning in Philadelphia, 1920-1974* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1987); John F. Bauman, Norman P. Hummon, and Edward K. Muller, "Public Housing, Isolation, and the Urban Underclass: Philadelphia's Richard Allen Homes, 1941-1965," *Journal of Urban History* 17, no. 3 (1991); Don Parson, "'This Modern Marve': Bunker Hill, Chavez Ravine, and the Politics of Modernism in Los Angeles," *Southern California Quarterly* 75, no. 3/4 (1993); John F. Bauman, Roger Biles, and Kristin M. Szylvian, *From Tenements to the Taylor Homes : In Search of an Urban Housing Policy in Twentieth-Century America* (University Park, Pa.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2000); William D. Jenkins, "Before Downtown: Cleveland, Ohio, and Urban Renewal, 1949-1958," *Journal of Urban History* 27, no. 4 (2001); Samuel Zipp, *Manhattan Projects : The Rise and Fall of Urban Renewal in Cold War New York* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2010); "The Roots and Routes of Urban Renewal," *Journal of Urban History* 39, no. 3 (2012); Samuel Zipp and Michael Carriere, "Introduction: Thinking through Urban Renewal," *ibid.*; Lawrence J. Vale, *Purging the Poorest : Public Housing and the Design Politics of Twice-Cleared Communities* (2013); John H. M. Laslett, *Shameful Victory : The Los Angeles Dodgers, the Red Scare, and the Hidden History of Chavez Ravine* (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 2015); Francesca Russello Ammon, *Bulldozer : Demolition and Clearance of the Postwar Landscape* (New Haven: Yale University 2016).

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The intimate conflicts of America's unwritten housing policy may be lacking in the historical literature and difficult to find in the archival records that make it, but black literature, novels including, take it as the contentious center of the spatial relationships that define black life. Take Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*. A tenant, Mrs. Bains, comes beseechingly to her landlord, Macon Dead (the protagonist's father), pleading for leniency on her delinquent rent. Mrs. Bains is caring for several grandchildren and her "relief check ain't no more'n it take to keep a well-grown yard dog alive—half alive," correcting for the meagerness of the aid. Macon coldly reports the amount of rent and that it is two months late. Mrs. Bains offers Dead her dilemma: she can't feed the babies and pay the rent. Macon offers the landlord's answer to the dilemma, "Can they make it in the street Mrs. Bains? That's where they gonna be if you don't figure out some way to get me my money." Mrs. Bains' grandchildren meet her outside Dead's office and ask if they now must move. Their grandmother offers them answer to a different question they did not ask, "A nigger in business is a terrible thing to see. A terrible, terrible thing to see." Morrison, to ensure the statement does not roll by unnoticed, registers the statement in the hearing ears and impressionable faces of Mrs. Bains' grandchildren. They look at each other and then their grandmother, Morrison then ends the exchange, "Their lips parted as though they had heard something important."<sup>15</sup>

Another example, the opening scene of Richard Wright's *Native Son*. Bigger, the novel's protagonist, his mother, and siblings all rise from their beds arranged tightly in a one-room apartment. To cut to the core of the black family's regular degradation in rented housing, Bigger's mother commands her sons to avert their eyes while the women change their clothes.

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<sup>15</sup> Toni Morrison, *Song of Solomon* Plume Contemporary Fiction (New York: Plume, 1987), 21-22.

The women then contrived the same act of privacy for the boys. Then, they all paused, and for a moment, Wright reveals, “They forgot their conspiracy against shame and their eyes strayed apprehensively over the floor.” In the next moment, a monstrous rat appears and caused a one-room bedlam. Bigger eventually crushes the head of the foot-long rat with a shoe and uses its carcass to terrorize his sister, representative of Bigger’s internal struggle borne out of the frustration of living within the limits of white supremacy. When Bigger meets his friend on the street after the rat battle, the first complaint about white people they express are about landlords, before playing a game impersonating powerful white figures. “And they always knocking at your door for money,” Bigger’s friend Gus grumbled after commenting on their stinginess to provide heat in the winter.<sup>16</sup> The short opening scene, just a few pages, captures for the reader the lived experience of race, gender, and housing that will serve as the launching point for Bigger’s mounting rage against white supremacy, a rage covering for fear and humiliation that eventually leads him to murder two women. Housing is not just the scene of their oppression; it is also the external manifestation of the relationships that maintain it.

This dissertation searches for the moments when the frustrations, complaints, and entitlements of black people boil over into property conflict in Black Los Angeles between 1920 and 1950. They happen, as they did for the fictional Mrs. Bains, between black landlords and black tenants, as well as between white landlords and black tenants. They happen between all property relationships that withhold a power somebody else wants and needs, whether it is the power to stay or to get thrown out, the power to forgive the rent or to demand more, or the power to clear out the rats or to leave tenants to fight them with a cast-iron skillet and a shoe. These turns of power represent the substance of property conflict and the kinds of opposing claims that

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<sup>16</sup> Richard Wright, *Native Son* (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers 1940), 3-8, 13.

define the history of black housing in Los Angeles. Most of the conflict goes unrecorded, but this study seeks out those that caught the selective attention of reporters, reformers, “race men” and “race women,” and elected officials.

The elusive records of Black Los Angeles’ property conflict are scattered over disparate archives, but the first order archives for this study are the community’s various newspapers, primarily the *California Eagle*. Founded by the Texas native John J. Neimore, who arrived in Los Angeles in 1879, the *Eagle* (known as the *Owl* until 1892) was Black Los Angeles’ oldest and most influential newspaper until ceasing publication in 1966. Although Neimore founded the paper, it was most associated with its intrepid and longest running editor, Charlotta Bass (Spears was her maiden name), who Neimore willed the newspaper to on his deathbed in 1912. Charlotta later married Joe B. Bass, a newspaper man, in 1914, and they ran the *Eagle* together until his death until 1934.<sup>17</sup> As the premier race paper for Black Los Angeles, its pages serve as the best chronicler of daily life on Central Avenue, the main throughfare defining/g the community until it was later eclipsed by Crenshaw Boulevard later in the Twentieth Century.<sup>18</sup> Property conflicts usually appeared only as marginal bits of entertainment, but sometime rose to the level of the sensational political campaign. This study searches the *Eagle*, other newspapers, and city, county, state, and federal sources for both prosaic and extraordinary property conflicts, constructing a patchwork history Black Los Angeles’ land struggles between 1920 and 1950.

Chapter one contextualizes the linked tenures of homeownership and tenancy in Black Los Angeles. First, through a review of over a decade of classified advertisements in the

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<sup>17</sup> Flammig, *Bound for Freedom : Black Los Angeles in Jim Crow America*, 26-29, 32-33; Quintard Taylor, *In Search of the Racial Frontier : African Americans in the American West, 1528-1990* (New York: Norton, 1998), 208.

<sup>18</sup> Hunt and Ramón, *Black Los Angeles : American Dreams and Racial Realities*, 71.

*California Eagle*, it examines the market life of black real estate as it became a full-service market in the 1920s. Prior to that decade, black real estate brokers and financiers were few in Los Angeles, and their advertising was non-descript, rarely offering a vision of real estate as social policy. Brokers, most prominently Sidney Dones, were committed to all-black rural colonization schemes and denigrated the prospects of urban real estate for working class black Angelenos. Dones drifted from this position and became the ideological and business vanguard of a transformation in the land strategy for black uplift from rural land developments to urban real estate. As Los Angeles entered the subdivision boom in 1920, a rush of newly minted real estate players swamped the pages of the *Eagle* with advertisements for homes, subdivision lots, and financial services that promised solutions to racial disadvantages such as bad jobs, insecure tenancy, and segregation. The chapter concludes with a brief social history of tenancy in early Twentieth Century Los Angeles, as the oppressive legal character of that tenure and its cultural denigration were push factors driving black people to buy real estate. To the black real estate industry, tenancy was not full citizenship and a demerit on the credit of the race.

Chapter two is part one of a case study into property conflict among working class homeowners in Black Los Angeles. It centers on the property saga of Cora and George Farley, who owned an Eastside home, outright and unencumbered, and lost it to a complex system of public infrastructure financing called special assessments. Municipalities levied these one-time charges to fund improvements to the industrial boulevard bisecting their neighborhood. In the opening decades of the Twentieth Century, politicians, reformers, boosters, and businessmen in cities nationwide were committed to Progressive Era urbanism. According to this vision, a city required a battery of infrastructural improvements, such as concrete sidewalks and curbs, sewers, electric lighting, parks, and especially, paved streets and parkways to achieve the vaunted status

of urban modernity. Special assessments were the financing tools of this racialized plan for urban progress. The chapter uncovers the local political protest of working-class homeowners against the improvement of Long Beach Avenue. It demonstrates how the politics of special assessment financing obligated working class homeowners like the Farleys to subsidize infrastructure, that enriched capitalists and left this couple saddled with debt.

Chapter three continues with the second part of the Farley's municipal debt struggle. While the prior chapter tracks the politics of municipal debt *creation*, this chapter tracks the unprecedented rise and operations of predatory debt *collection* in Los Angeles during the 1920s and 1930s. In a rush to modernize increasingly inadequate roads to complement growth, city officials, lobbyists, and real estate developers instigated a glut of road modernization projects similar to the Long Beach Avenue improvement. The city was overrun with special assessments and thousands age into delinquency, including the Farleys'. Millions of dollars in municipal debt and little regulation or oversight in their collection, spawned the birth of a predatory debt market in the mid-1920s, unprecedented in Los Angeles. Most notorious among them, Oliver Trompeter, eventually forecloses on the Farley's home during the Great Depression for a pittance—\$29.66. The Farleys' dispossession was but one amid a tsunami of lawsuits filed by Trompeter's two bond collections companies that could harvest thousands more. The chapter concludes with Black Los Angeles' organized campaign to defend George Farley after he committed a violent act of self-defense to save the family home.

Chapter four, the final chapter, explores another critically understudied history of property conflict in the United States—rent control. Within a month of the bombing of Pearl Harbor, Congress enacted universal rent control in all designated defense production centers in the United States. It was an unprecedented intervention of Congress' emergency powers in rental

housing. Congress tried but failed to pass a national rent control law during World War I, and the failure drove tenants and landlords into bitter and violent clashes over rent hikes and evictions for years following the end of the war. Thus, the speedy passage of controls in the century's second world war between imperial rivals. For Black Los Angeles, and tenants in the city generally, federal intervention in rental housing constituted a New Deal era entitlement. Black tenants experienced some of the worst housing conditions and insecurity during a decade where housing insecurity was a common condition affecting the majority of people. Traditionally powerless in the courts, tenants enthusiastically leveraged a new federal complaint infrastructure to claw power away from landlords. This chapter uncovers this previously untold history in Los Angeles using the complaint records of the two federal agencies that administered controls, the Office of Price Administration and the Housing Expediter. These records offer a rare glimpse of the social history of tenancy in Los Angeles. The reason is simple. The production demands of a global war made tenants-as-defense-workers as valuable as victory. Tenants used this forum so boisterously that city officials swore off the reinstatement of controls when landlords found a new opportunity to hike rents during the Korean War boom.

Cumulatively, the principal intent of this study's concept and method of property conflict is to call attention to a fundamental problem of U.S. housing policy: a chronic lack of institutional structures empowering working-class people to make, to maintain, and to control the right to a home situated on private property. For black Angelenos, disempowerment was flagrant and persistent across tenures, and it characterized the racial experience of housing capitalism in the city between 1920 and 1950, with the brief exception of the wartime rent control era. When the focus of analysis is shifted from formal policy and organized politics to everyday, informal conflict, the history of that disempowerment is revealed as a messy and violent supplement to the

histories of segregation, white flight, red lining, eminent domain, and predatory mortgage financing. This history of conflict, then, bears down on the contemporary status quo of housing in Los Angeles particularly, and the United States generally. It is a status quo whose legacy is not only racially discriminatory access to private property, but racially inflected conflict over the terms of property itself.



## CHAPTER ONE: THE EMERGENCE OF LOS ANGELES' BLACK REAL ESTATE MARKET

The real estate men of 1920s Black Los Angeles advertised many promises about the ability of urban property to solve racialized problems. In an unstable and degrading world of anti-black racism, the Citizen's Home Investment Company offered property as a way forward to dignity: "Owning your home means, stability, character, better citizenship, foresight, thrift, development and pride, and the sum of these, is Progress."<sup>1</sup> In a world of generational tenancy, the Oklahoma Investment Company offered black Angelenos an escape from the cycle of rent, which both presumed their guilt as well as their suffering: "How long are you going to be a slave to the landlord?" The William H. Gamble & Company offered a working-class population a benefit usually claimed by middle-class homeowners—equity, "The man or woman who buys a home today will be the one who will profit by the great strides that our city is making."<sup>2</sup> Others told prospective buyers that acquiring property could beat the proliferating signs marking white people's violent commitment to segregation: "[H]ow long will it be before I will see another one that may apply to me?"<sup>3</sup> They offered a promise made of stability toiled for over time—security. "From cave to cottage man has struggled to know the joy of living under his own roof" and buying a home could, "[g]uarantee your family a future undimmed by the shadow of the Rent Collectors."<sup>4</sup> Sidney P. Dones, whom the *Eagle* crowned in 1916 as the "only real Negro real

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<sup>1</sup> Citizen's Home Investment Company Display Advertisement, *Eagle*, Feb 17, 1923.

<sup>2</sup> William H. Gamble Display Advertisement, *Eagle*, Nov. 4, 1922.

<sup>3</sup> *Eagle*, Nov. 11, 1922.

<sup>4</sup> S.B.W. May Display Advertisement, "Why Own Your Own," *Eagle*, May 12, 1923.

estate broker in Los Angeles,” perhaps made the property-as-social-policy plea most urgently. “Our only hope for the future is to buy homes.”<sup>5</sup>

This chapter tracks the emergence of Black Los Angeles’ real estate market in the 1920s. Since black real estate brokers were excluded from white realty associations, there are no consolidated archival records of prominent institutions or wealthy developers responsible for the professionalization of black real estate practice.<sup>6</sup> So, this chapter analyzes the changes in Black land ideology and practice from sources usually disregarded in the study of real estate—classified advertisements. In the classified pages of the *California Eagle*, real estate promoters sold a crowdsourced social policy of land, from rural colonization schemes in the opening years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century to urban real estate in the 1920s. Sidney P. Dones was a critical architect in the process by defining the shift in land strategy and establishing a black business district where white, black, and immigrant entrepreneurs could collectively market homeownership, subdivisions, and financing as solutions to racialized problems of bad jobs, oppressive tenancy, creeping segregation, and economic insecurity. Usually ignored in social histories of homeownership, the chapter concludes with a brief account of the legal and social conditions of tenancy in Los Angeles. Black homeownership was not just a value-based strategy but also an escape from tenancy and a tenuous grab for the power of ownership that U.S. law legislates, and the culture of black realty enshrines.

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<sup>5</sup> “Sidney P. Dones is Forging Ahead,” *Eagle*, Jan. 14, 1927; “Central Avenue and the Eagle,” *Eagle*, April 8, 1916.

<sup>6</sup> Laura Redford, “The Promise and Principles of Real Estate Development in an American Metropolis: Los Angeles 1903-1923” (Ph.D., University of California, Los Angeles, 2014); Weiss, *The Rise of the Community Builders: The American Real Estate Industry and Urban Land Planning*.

Thus, this account differs markedly from prior accounts of the black struggle for home in Los Angeles. Instead of a history of an organized political campaign against, say, race restrictive covenants, this chapter takes up how black, white, and immigrant realty brokers and financiers sold solutions to urban problems and their impact on racial character.<sup>7</sup> It does not serve as a replacement for those accounts, but a supplement. The institutional fact of U.S. housing is that nearly all of it transacts in private marketplaces, and interracial cohorts of land entrepreneurs control the packaging of property as a commodity and racialized social policy whereby people can buy status, security, and power. There, in the millions of contentious contracts made for homes, is the social history of America's land capitalism.

### **From Colonization Schemes to Real Estate**

The *Eagle's* dedicated front-page spread of the Sidney P. Dones Company on December 5, 1914 was unusual for what was, effectively, an advertisement for a real estate business. The full page featured personal biographies for each department head of the company in a business where black real estate brokers were typically lone entrepreneurs. Sidney Dones was only 23 years old, born in Marshall, Texas, around 1891, but his feature biography added a few years—and as far as any reader would know—Dones was 26 years old and accomplished.<sup>8</sup> He was a “christian gentleman,” a trustee in the First A.M.E church (founded by Biddy Mason), and an attorney-in-training courageous enough to get married in the unlucky year of 1913. He came to

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<sup>7</sup> Gibbons, *City of Segregation : One Hundred Years of Struggle for Housing in Los Angeles*, 19-40.

<sup>8</sup> Sources give conflicted information on Sidney Dones' birth, but several sources corroborate his year of birth as 1891-2. State of California. California Death Index, 1940-1997. Sacramento, CA, USA: State of California Department of Health Services, Center for Health Statistics; Ancestry.com. California, African U.S. Who's Who, 1948 [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2011; Ancestry.com. U.S., Find A Grave Index, 1600s-Current [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2012; Ancestry.com. U.S., World War I Draft Registration Cards, 1917-1918 [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations Inc, 2005.

California for a year before leaving for El Paso, Texas, when he was 18-years old to promote the New Day Colonization Company. As part of the company's delegation, Dones claimed to have secured 50,000 acres of Mexican land from President Porfirio Diaz toward the goal of black settlement. After spending a few years in Mexico, Dones claims, he returned to California and opened his namesake real estate business.<sup>9</sup> Whether true, inflated like his age, or plain false, Dones carried the self-certified achievement of colonization—negotiating rural land from a sovereign power on behalf of black uplift—as the seed for planting consumer confidence in an emerging black urban real estate.

If Dones planned to promote urban real estate as the primary land value strategy for black Angelenos, he had to pay homage to black rural colonization schemes. Although they were not new to the Twentieth Century, Booker T. Washington gave support to all-black towns and energized a generation of black leaders, like Dones, to promote agricultural land schemes as the premier social policy of black uplift at the turn-of-the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>10</sup> Washington's canonical theory of social change was clear from his 1895 Atlanta Exposition address. Racial segregation and black advancement, culturally and materially, were compatible. "In all things that are purely social we can be as separate as the fingers, yet one as the hand in all things essential to mutual progress."<sup>11</sup> In the concluding lines of the short speech, he revealed what would be the force to achieve black people's inclusion: "No race that has anything to contribute to the markets of the

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<sup>9</sup> "Sidney P. Dones Company," *Eagle*, Dec 5, 1914.

<sup>10</sup> Delores Nason McBroome, "Harvest of Gold: African American Boosterism, Agriculture, and Investment in Allensworth and Little Liberia " in *Seeking El Dorado: African Americans in California* ed. Kevin Mulroy Lawrence B. de Graaf, and Quintard Taylor (Los Angeles Autry Museum of Western Heritage and University of Washington Press 2001), 149.

<sup>11</sup> Booker T. Washington, *Up from Slavery* (New York: Airmont Publishing Company, Inc., 1967), 136.

world is long in any degree ostracized.”<sup>12</sup> Black people needed to *produce* market value as a force that achieved integration, but they could, and even optimally, produce that value separate from white people. The acquisition of property was central to that policy; and thus, land that had the potential to produce value, mainly in agriculture at the time of his speech, became fundamental to any project of social, political, or economic advancement for black people in the United States.<sup>13</sup>

Black leaders in early 20<sup>th</sup> century Los Angeles took up the policy with the urgency of unfulfilled progress and a booster’s soaring sales pitch. In 1916, J. D. Gordon, pastor of the Tabernacle Baptist Church, H. H. Williams, veteran real estate man, and Charlotta Bass, editor of the *California Eagle*, among others, founded the Progressive Educational Association, offering an opportunity that “promises to be the greatest Black Empire the world has ever known.” Through a white, downtown real estate broker, Edward S. Shank, the organization claimed to have secured “the promised land,” over 100,000 acres of “the best farming land in the West” in the Santa Rosa Valley located in Arizona—and had already sold 200 acres.<sup>14</sup>

As part of their pitch, they launched harsh critiques at the uplift prospects of urban real estate. “Our people are making a gross mistake in flocking to the great cities of the West, where Organized Labor has the door closed against them, and their wives and daughters have to go out in service and work to pay house rent, and part of the time the men are walking the street without work,” a November advertisement lamented. The article targeted the gendered, urban economy

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<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 137.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 128.

<sup>14</sup> “More About the Progressive Educational Association,” *Eagle*, September 16, 1916.

that provisioned black people with degrading jobs and bouts of unemployment that ultimately led to tenancy. Even aspiring homeowners, in a city nearly leading the nation in black homeownership in 1910, were not free from critique either.<sup>15</sup> “Some of them are trying to buy homes on the installment plan, and contracting four and five thousand dollars indebtedness, and it takes all their spare money just to keep up the interest.” The solution, the Association offered, was to buy acres of land at the Santa Rosa Valley industrial colony on the very installment plans they criticized for urban real estate.<sup>16</sup> The venture collapsed in 1917 when the Association received a telegram “from the national seat of this government” that the Tohono O’odham Nation, “Papago Indian,” filed a federal lawsuit challenging the U.S.’s designation of their sovereign lands as public.<sup>17</sup>

Other all-black towns and land developments in the Southwest would meet different but terminal fates. Aside from conflict with sovereign powers, black land schemes also succumbed to bad water, diverted railroads, anti-black racism, declining crop prices, and perhaps most fatal, they failed to attract migrants.<sup>18</sup> Dones certainly lent his voice to the doomed agricultural strategy, enshrining it as “our declaration of independence” in June 1914. But Dones simultaneously sensed an alternative land policy for black uplift that had been brewing since the

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<sup>15</sup> Reports two homeownership statistics, the lower is 36 percent (p. 473) includes farm homes, the second approximately 39 percent (p.477) is for "other" homes, United States, Joseph Hill, and John Cummings, *Negro Population in the United States, 1790-1915*, American Negro, His History and Literature (New York: Arno Press, 1968), 477, 80.

<sup>16</sup> “Progressive Educational Association,” *Eagle*, Nov 11, 1916.

<sup>17</sup> *Eagle*, June 30, 1917; Reports of the Department of the Interior for the Fiscal Year ended June 30 1919, Vol II Indian Affairs Territories, Washington: Government Printing Office, 1920, 60-61; *Pueblo of Santa Rosa v. Lane*, 46 App. D.C. 411, 1917 U.S. App. LEXIS 2563 (Court of Appeals of District of Columbia April 27, 1917, Decided).

<sup>18</sup> McBroome, "Harvest of Gold: African American Boosterism, Agriculture, and Investment in Allensworth and Little Liberia".

turn of the Twentieth Century among black entrepreneurs—urban real estate.<sup>19</sup> Land sellers like Dones would need to prescribe solutions to the problems of urban property ownership, such as taking on debt for property in an economy that held black wages near the bottom of its racial hierarchy. The December debut of the Sidney P. Dones Realty Company served as the unofficial beginning of Black Los Angeles’ realty men and women envisioning, building, and ultimately selling that solution. It would come to fruition during the realty boom of the 1920s, but its legacy would long outlive that decade.

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Sidney Dones established his realty business on Central Avenue, near 10<sup>th</sup> Street, which in the 1910s would become the undisputed spine of Black Los Angeles. Central Avenue ran on a north-south path, beginning at First Street on the north end and continued south to form the western border of Watts about eight miles away, which was until 1926, a scrappy, independent city where prominent white Angelenos facilitated black landownership.<sup>20</sup> The Avenue itself hosted the *California Eagle*, the community’s most important black newspaper and whose office served as an unofficial site of political discussion and organizing for local politicians. It was the *Eagle* in 1915 that crowned “the Avenue” as the “black belt of the city.” The *New Age*, whose editor, Frederick Roberts, would become California’s first black legislator representing the 74<sup>th</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> League National Negro Business, *Proceedings of the National Negro Business League: Its First Meeting Held in Boston, Massachusetts, August 23 and 24, 1900* (Boston: J. R. Hamm, 1901), 35-37, 78-79, 90, 22, 245.

<sup>20</sup> Draft of Autobiography, Fun, Fights, and Fiesta in Old Los Angeles, 1966, Box 4, Stimson, Marshall Fun, Fights, and Fiesta in Old Los Angeles – Draft, Marshall Stimson Papers, The Huntington Library, San Marino, California; “Around 1910 I noticed Negroes were coming into the City and found it hard to get settled. I bought a large tract of land south of Watts and deeded it to a bank, after putting in a water plant and subdividing it into acre lots. I placed a Negro agent in charge and announced it was a tract restricted to Negroes. I interested several of the finest Negro preachers to call attention to their members of this opportunity to acquire a hoe... I prize very highly the confidence these fine men—Dr. McCoy, Dr. Gordon and Rev. A.P. Shaw—gave me,” as quoted in, MaryEllen Bell Ray, *The City of Watts, California, 1907 to 1926* (Los Angeles, Calif.: Rising Pub., 1985), 15.

Assembly District in 1918, located its second office on Central Avenue and Pico Boulevard. Black churches, the flagship institutions of Black Los Angeles, beat a path toward the Avenue from the northwest on 8<sup>th</sup> Street (First A.M.E. was on Towne and 8<sup>th</sup>). Other prominent black churches straddled Paloma Street, which ran parallel to the west of Central Avenue.<sup>21</sup>

In the Central Avenue district, Dones walked a hybrid and reciprocal path between capturing formal political power and expanding black enterprises. In the spring of 1915, Dones announced his first run for City Council. With an exaggerated reserve of support of “30,000 Colored voters,” Dones promised to resist what he perceived as black Angelenos’ most urgent problems, discrimination in municipal jobs and “public places of accommodation and amusement,” and the thickening pall of white supremacy demonstrated by the Council’s refusal to censor screenings of *Birth of a Nation (The Clansman)*.<sup>22</sup> Residential segregation, as of 1915, had not grown to be a campaign defining problem. The issues were jobs and leisure. Later in the year, the *Eagle* celebrated Dones’ appointment as an agent for a “Big Caucasian Insurance Concern,” the Great Eastern Casualty Company, and called on readers to support black insurance agents because “[t]hey will make a place for your daughter, after they leave the school room, and not retrograde and finally fill a menial position in some white agent's kitchen.”<sup>23</sup> As Dones and the *Eagle* saw it, Black Los Angeles had a black business problem.

Part of the solution was white patronage in a Republican-run city. When R.H. Norton was running as an incumbent for the County Board of Supervisors in 1916 and hunting for the

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<sup>21</sup> Flamming, *Bound for Freedom*, 92, 95, 121-22.

<sup>22</sup> *Eagle*, April 3, 1915.

<sup>23</sup> Parson Mack, "Popular Colored Los Angeles Real Estate Man, Sidney P. Dones, Appointed Agent for Big Caucasian Insurance Concern," *Eagle*, Oct 16, 1915.



colored vote, it was the Norton Colored Voters Advisory Committee that informed *Eagle* readers that Norton placed County insurance contracts with the Sidney P. Dones Co., the only black Angeleno mentioned by name other than the *Eagle's* editor, Charlotta Bass. These reciprocal, though unbalanced, ties between the white political establishment and the black bourgeoisie were a feature of racial politics in Los Angeles and racially segregated cities, generally.<sup>24</sup> However, Dones' political and business ambitions, crafted swiftly, made him a quick target, or as the *Eagle* described it, "the victim of a vicious attack by a local newspaper" just before he was found not guilty of unspecified charges leveled against him in Superior court. To protect Dones rising political and business profile in the community, the *Eagle* distributed thousands of special edition handbills asking readers to withhold their judgements until the court's verdict decided Dones' guilt or innocence. When he was exonerated, the *Eagle* boasted it as "a signal victory for Dones and a knockout for his traducers."<sup>25</sup>

The *Eagle* had a good reason to be protective of Dones. Before that legal scrape, the *Eagle* opened the California Realty Company as a branch office of the Dones Co., conducted from the newspaper's office and managed by Dones' brother, Charles.<sup>26</sup> The partnership came a year after the *Eagle* tapped Dones to pen a series on the causes and prevention of "hard times," financial literacy targeting working class black Angelenos. After a brief primer on managing money, Dones advised readers to buy a home. "I only wish that every member of my race that lives in the city of Los Angeles would say down with paying rent," he wrote. To soothe working class trepidations about buying real estate on installments, Dones urged readers not to worry

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<sup>24</sup> Flammig, *Bound for Freedom : Black Los Angeles in Jim Crow America*, 133; E. Franklin Frazier, *Black Bourgeoisie* (New York: The Free Press, 1957), 91-97.

<sup>25</sup> "Sidney P. Dones Exonerated—Judge Crawford Holds No Case Against Him," *Eagle*, Nov 13, 1915.

<sup>26</sup> *Eagle*, April 24, 1915.

about buying real estate “far out” or near a train line because of the sure equity to be captured in Los Angeles’ growth. He made global assessments that were, at the time, breaking news, forecasting for the fledging black community that the recently completed Panama Canal would swell the city’s population to a million people. He offered to finance buyers’ taxes and interests if they decided to buy a property on terms and answer letters desirous of real estate advice.<sup>27</sup> At a time when Dones himself supported “back to the soil” ideology calling for wage workers to flee the city, he simultaneously served as a forerunner in publicizing a market theory of uplift to capture the equity of urban growth in a way that was accessible to working class black people. The *California Eagle* decided to commit to that emerging land policy and herald Dones as its champion and their real estate partner.

This was a significant break with the now fading “declaration of independence” that pedestaled the virtue of the soil and the “producer.” Dones’ strategy was also a break with the typical working-class practice of homeownership. Working-class black property owners, as well as white ones, were more likely to understand their homes as the basis of “economic survival.” In a harsh economy of irregular employment and little to no social safety net to help weather sickness, injury, and death, working class people used their homes to produce immediate incomes by renting rooms, raising livestock, and tending small gardens.<sup>28</sup> For example, in 1930, over 20 percent of black homeowners in Los Angeles took in boarders, nearly double the rate for the city.<sup>29</sup> Hence, black homeowners were less likely to buy property in hopes of reaping equity.

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<sup>27</sup> “Avoid Hard Times Mr. Dones Tells How,” *Eagle*, April 18, 1914; “The Art of Saving Money,” *Eagle*, April 24, 1914.

<sup>28</sup> Wiese, *Places of Their Own : African American Suburbanization in the Twentieth Century*, 69.

<sup>29</sup>Bureau of the Census and U.S. Department of Commerce, *Fifteenth Census of the United States : 1930*, vol. Volume 6: Families (New York: Ross Pub., 1933), 166.

Dones challenged this working-class ethic of property. For Dones and the *Eagle*, the future of community black uplift was business, and individually, real estate, through capturing the equity in property indexed to the sure growth of Los Angeles. Dones, confident in a land strategy of uplift, then sought a place in Los Angeles for those critical and race-saving black businesses to conduct their business.

A visit home to Marshal, Texas, during the winter months between 1915 and 1916 offered Dones a contrast between the tight social knitting of black businesses back home and the weaker migrant ties of Central Avenue. After exhorting young migrant men missing in the West to write a letter to their Texas mothers, he made a business critique not unlike that laid on those unnamed and untethered men. The people of Marshal “are prospering along all lines, just as we are here; and above all, they are together there, and we are not, here.”<sup>30</sup> When he returned to Los Angeles he refashioned his 1914 insurance advertising campaign, “A Get-Together Proposition,” into the more forceful “Get Together Movement.”<sup>31</sup> In February 1916, he announced that he was now manager of the Booker T. Washington Building at Central and 10<sup>th</sup> Street, what historian Douglas Flamming approximates as “an unofficial birth of the Central Avenue business district.”<sup>32</sup> He solicited office leases from black businesspeople and pleaded to black consumers to patronize them, all for the ambition of transforming Central Avenue between 8<sup>th</sup> and Pico into a black business district.

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<sup>30</sup> Sidney Dones, "The Southland," *Eagle*, Feb 5, 1916.

<sup>31</sup> *Eagle*, Nov 14, 1914.

<sup>32</sup> Flamming, *Bound for Freedom : Black Los Angeles in Jim Crow America*, 122.

The call to close ranks around black-owned businesses was an old one, but Dones took it up with a renewed vigor and the social contacts with whites to make it effective.<sup>33</sup> The movement was also a challenge, as it was common for some white and Jewish businesses to monopolize on black trade and resist incubating black businesses as competition for it.<sup>34</sup> “Won't be ousted by white agents of the uptown buildings any longer,” Dones boasted prior to victory.<sup>35</sup> And, indeed, he and black entrepreneurs were victorious. By the end of the decade, the area would feature a black-owned furniture store, roller rink, billiards hall, dry goods store, household goods store, and an ice cream parlor, many for which Dones handled the realty transactions with purportedly white, or at the very least, non-black owners.<sup>36</sup> The bigger achievement was how black entrepreneurs and black consumers secured an identifiable place in Los Angeles for black business, all tied to Dones' real estate connections.

Sidney Dones' deal making in the growing black business district placed him in deep communion in regional real estate transactions and capital flows. Linus Niemeyer, a California native with German parents, operated a fruit stand next door to Dones' prized Booker T. Washington building on Central and 10<sup>th</sup>.<sup>37</sup> In December 1917, Niemeyer was eager to trade his commercial property, a theater with two small stores, for something else outside of the city. A

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<sup>33</sup> Flamming finds evidence of the race enterprise trend as far back as 1888 in Los Angeles, *ibid.*, 118.

<sup>34</sup> “In quest of full citizenship oral history transcript: George Beavers” by Ranford Hopkins, UCLA Oral History Program, 1982, <https://calisphere.org/item/ark:/13030/hb3f59p12j/>, 33.

<sup>35</sup> Sidney Dones, *Eagle*, Feb 5, 1916; “The Get Together Movement Spreads,” *Eagle*, Feb 12, 1916.

<sup>36</sup> Flamming does not mention the racial identity of prior owners in discussion of founding of black business district, see Flamming, *Bound for Freedom : Black Los Angeles in Jim Crow America*, 121-22; McGruder uncovered interracial transactions in real estate in Harlem, see Kevin McGruder, *Race and Real Estate : Conflict and Cooperation in Harlem, 1890-1920* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015).

<sup>37</sup> Los Angeles, California, City Directory, 1916, Ancestry.com. U.S. City Directories, 1822-1995 [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2011.

trade for a property in Colorado was near consummated until the other party backed out, discovering an impropriety that would be a feature of Niemeyer's business practices. Determined, Niemeyer found another interested party, I. A. Wood, who agreed to trade their vineyard and alfalfa ranch, valued at over \$26,000, for Niemeyer's theater, which he claimed Dones managed. Niemeyer assured Wood that Dones leased the theater for \$175 a month and ran it as a profitable venture. Dones corroborated those assurances, boasting that the business was "absolutely alright" and that he "only regretted that there wasn't [sic] more seats in the building than it contained." It was a plausible claim given the emerging black business district Dones helped establish.

Wood agreed to the trade, but Dones immediately stopped paying rent, although the business was promised to be a "good revenue-paying affair." An ensuing lawsuit in 1918 revealed, and the California Supreme Court confirmed in 1921, that the lease was fictitious. Niemeyer and Dones misrepresented the character of the property, so Niemeyer could accomplish his desired trade.<sup>38</sup> This conspiracy over Central Avenue property revealed the interracial relationships forged in periods of neighborhood transition for which Dones was intimately involved, but also that even as first generation white businessmen looked to move on from the district, other white businessmen desired a stake in the Central Avenue property market—from Los Angeles' agricultural periphery to the broader Southwest. Indeed, there were new opportunities, but they were fused to these new exposures made from interracial relationships in the black business district.

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<sup>38</sup> Wood v. Niemeyer, 185 Cal. 526, 197 P. 795, 1921 Cal. LEXIS 578 (Supreme Court of California, Department Two April 18, 1921).

## The Limits of the Subdivision

Although Niemeyer and Dones duped I. A. Wood, he did carry to Los Angeles a desire for property at a profitable and opportune time. The agricultural boom ignited by World War I was crashing by 1921, uprooting millions and directing home-seeking populations and their incomes and wealth to the nation's cities. The influx of migrants to Los Angeles, some 100,000 people a year between 1920 and 1924, sparked a subdivision boom unrivaled since the wild and disastrous land boom of the late 1880s.<sup>39</sup> The valuation of building permits in 1920, about \$60,000,000, more than doubled from 1919. The boom peaked in 1923 when permits were valued at just over \$200,000,000, then slowly declined for the remainder of the decade.<sup>40</sup> Many of these permits were destined for Los Angeles' sprawling subdivisions, 3,233 of them holding nearly 250,000 lots on almost 50,000 acres of land were filed between 1922 and 1928.<sup>41</sup> The population boom for black Los Angeles during this decade of frenzied growth was a splash within a citywide wave, but in the Central Avenue district it was significant. Between 1920 and 1930, the black population in the City of Los Angeles more than doubled, from 15,579 to 38,894 people, most of whom would be forced into the increasingly segregated confines of Central Avenue that would define the contentious limits of Black Los Angeles residence for decades.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> For more on the late 19th century land boom see, Glenn S. Dumke, "The Real Estate Boom of 1887 in Southern California," *Pacific Historical Review* 11, no. 4 (1942).

<sup>40</sup> W. W. Robinson, "The Southern California Real Estate Boom of the Twenties," *The Quarterly: Historical Society of Southern California* 24, no. 1 (1942)., 25

<sup>41</sup> *Times*, March 31, 1929.

<sup>42</sup> Lawrence Brooks De Graaf, *Negro Migration to Los Angeles, 1930 to 1950: A Dissertation, University of California, Los Angeles, 1962* (San Francisco: R and E Research Associates, 1962), 31.

Residential segregation, seemingly unremarkable during Dones' 1915 City Council run, was suddenly an entrenched and legally protected feature of the Los Angeles' real estate market by the beginning of the boom in 1920. Its arrival began in 1915 when Homer Garrott purchased property on the coveted Westside, 420 W. 59<sup>th</sup> Place, in a tract developed by the Title Guarantee Company. Unknown to Garrott, Title Guarantee blanketed the tract with race restrictive covenants, which prohibited sale to non-white buyers. Race covenants were not entirely new by 1915. Garrott's attorney, Willis O. Tyler, believed the first local covenants dated as early as 1900. Legal fights attempting to restrict realty sales to black buyers dated to as early as 1911, but no legal precedents had been achieved confirming their legality.<sup>43</sup> Title Guarantee sued Garrott, seeking an injunction from the courts and forfeiture of the property, in a move described by the *Eagle* as "oblivious to its big Negro patronage." The *Eagle* was optimistic. "Judge Shenk was fair minded and will render an unprejudiced decision," the newspaper assured its readers.<sup>44</sup> Garrott's attorney planned to argue that the covenant was a violation of the Fourteenth Amendment, which prohibited any state from depriving "any person of life, liberty, and property, without due process." The case would wind its way through California courts for the next four years.

Title Guarantee Company's reliance on deed restrictions, or private contracts, were part of a national movement among larger realty concerns to control, standardize, and maintain urban land use to stabilize historically shaky markets. Along with *private* deed restrictions that controlled specific land uses, planners and developers also advocated for *municipal* zoning to

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<sup>43</sup> Gibbons, *City of Segregation : One Hundred Years of Struggle for Housing in Los Angeles*, 23.; "Color line on Title," *The Liberator*, April 7, 1911.

<sup>44</sup> "The Attitude of Official Authority with Regard to Negro Property Owners," *Eagle*, Jan 29, 1916.

control broader categories of land use (residential, commercial, and industrial) on contiguous parcels of land. Baltimore debuted its racial zoning ordinance in 1910, which would have allowed municipalities to create racial residential districts, but the NAACP defeated the growing effort when the Supreme Court invalidated racial zoning in its 1917 ruling in *Buchanan v. Warley*. The Fourteenth Amendment, the legal protection Garrott also sought to keep his Los Angeles property, served as the Court's constitutional justification.<sup>45</sup> Property served as a limit to state power, the liberty inhered in U.S. citizenship was defined as such, and racial zoning ordinances violated citizens' rights to freely engage in contracts and pursue property. If developers, planners, realty agents, mortgage lenders, title companies, politicians, and homeowners desired residential segregation to secure their forecast of rising land value, municipal police powers were not authorized to do it.

Segregationists found their constitutional support in 1919 as Garrott's case and a separate lawsuit, *Los Angeles Investment Co. v. Gary*, made their way to the California Supreme Court. Garrott won his case. In a ruling confirming the decisions of the lower courts, the justices found that the covenant on Garrott's property was unconstitutional because its prohibition against any sale to non-white buyers violated the white seller's right of alienation—the right to sell or dispose of their property as they saw fit. The very property rights that defined white citizenship in the U.S. also prevented them from their segregationist goals for subdivision property. In the *Gary* case, the courts found a way to avoid the protection of alienation and the Fourteenth Amendment limits on municipal powers that scuttled racial zoning. In that case, the Los Angeles Investment Company's covenant included an additional clause that prohibited non-white people

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<sup>45</sup> Freund, *Colored Property : State Policy and White Racial Politics in Suburban America*, 59; Flammig, *Bound for Freedom : Black Los Angeles in Jim Crow America*, 154.



from *occupying* the covered lot. The courts ruled that restricting occupancy was an allowed regulation on the use of property and such occupancy clauses were not a violation of the Fourteenth Amendment because they were not public acts but private agreements.<sup>46</sup> Through this circuitous route involving the Fourteenth Amendment, state police powers, and individual property rights, residential segregation in Los Angeles found its legal footing just in time for the city's real estate boom. It was a new problem that emerging black realty would need to address, along with the other problems of urban real estate exposed by the Progressive Educational Society in 1916.

Los Angeles' subdivision boom pulled ambitious wealth seekers from all walks of life into hawking real estate to migrant home seekers. By 1923, the *Times* reported an estimated twelve thousand people engaged in the business of real estate in Los Angeles as listed in the *California Real Estate Directory-Bulletin*, a full 234 pages of eager names (compared to San Francisco's forty pages).<sup>47</sup> As W. W. Robinson laughingly remarked, "In 1922 and 1923 white-collar clerks in southern California everywhere deserted good office jobs to become real estate salesmen. Only the dull-wits remained behind the counter and at the desk."<sup>48</sup> Central Avenue attracted its own, much smaller deluge of men and women flowing into real estate. Between 1920 and 1927, no less than 165 people and companies advertised real estate related services in the surviving pages of the *Eagle*, compared to some 23 people and companies between 1914 and

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<sup>46</sup>*Bound for Freedom : Black Los Angeles in Jim Crow America*, 156; Gibbons, *City of Segregation : One Hundred Years of Struggle for Housing in Los Angeles*, 28.

<sup>47</sup> "Los Angeles Has Many Realty Men," *Times*, July 22, 1923.

<sup>48</sup> *Times*, July 22, 1923.

1919.<sup>49</sup> Sidney Dones now had plenty of additional company, competition, and partners in the fields of real estate targeting black consumers and lands increasingly legislated as black. These new real estate sellers would crowdsource Black Los Angeles' real estate messaging, offering urban property as the solution to racial inequality.

The newly initiated brokers and salespeople and money lenders tossed whatever messages they thought would entice, inspire, or shame black Angelenos into landownership. Descriptions of paradise, what Toni Morrison calls "God's language," were common in evolving realty scripts.<sup>50</sup> A. J. Harris, with a realty office on Central Avenue, preached to *Eagle* readers remixed scripture in a November 1922 advertisement, "The Greatest Blessing that God gave Man was Land," placing aside the biblical message of salvation in Jesus Christ as God's greatest gift.<sup>51</sup> Black real estate brokers also used mortality tales to generate a sense of competitive social urgency and situate migrants within the time of urban real estate, "TAKE A LOOK AT THE CITY OF LOS ANGELES and one will at once observe that it is riding with the tide and keeping pace with 'Father Time.'" The ad then warned readers of Rip Van Winkle, who "went to sleep for twenty years, only to awaken and find his fellow citizens twenty years ahead of him, his opportunities gone forever."<sup>52</sup> This deluge of realty brokers, salespeople, contractors, money lenders, and although rare, subdividers, transformed the *Eagle's* advertising pages into a

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<sup>49</sup> See Appendix A.

<sup>50</sup> Toni Morrison, *The Source of Self-Regard : Selected Essays, Speeches, and Meditations*, First edition. ed. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2019), 246.

<sup>51</sup> *Eagle*, Nov 4, 1922; Ephesians 2:4-8.

<sup>52</sup> *Eagle*, Nov 11, 1922.

dynamic, crowdsourced space of real estate messaging that strained to define the new social policy of race uplift on the land.

When the Eastside Realty Company applied these floating scriptures and tales to a subdivision, the uplift messaging of the black real estate industry began to take definite physical and cultural shape. The Eastside Realty Company served as one of the few self-certified subdividers advertising in the *Eagle*. A partnership between two brothers, Otis and Fitzhugh Banks, and a third partner L.R. Ingram, launched the company sometime in the early 1920s. Prior to entering real estate, Otis was a postal clerk and Fitzhugh a conductor for Pacific Electric.<sup>53</sup> In November 1922, the company offered its inaugural tract, the Central Avenue Subdivision. They touted it as the “Tract of Merit,” strategically sited alongside Central Avenue, which was “[s]oon to be a 100-Foot Boulevard to the Harbor of Greater Los Angeles,” and south of Shorb Avenue. This was a new black realty practice, citing Central Avenue as the principal thoroughfare it expanding land base in the early 1920s. The advertisement also promised the development of forty factories in the near future, because, like with harbors, “[i]ndustry makes value.” Entirely speculative, the subdivision ventured to answer the problem of black urban work. Unlike the broadening of industrial work opportunities in the North, Los Angeles employers were mostly unwilling to hire black workers in skilled trades because they historically refused to hire black workers and drew from the surplus of white and Mexican laborers in a multiracial metropolis.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Ancestry.com. California, Railroad Employment Records, 1862-1950 [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2010; Ancestry.com. 1920 United States Federal Census [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2010.

<sup>54</sup> National Urban League, *Industrial Survey of the Negro Population of Los Angeles, California* (Los Angeles, California National Urban League, 1926).

Capturing the value of Los Angeles' industrial development made the offer urgent for capturing its equity, but segregation could blot it all out. The advertisement warned readers that the tract was, indeed, unrestricted but surrounded by tracts limited to only white buyers.<sup>55</sup> The subdivision was both undermining segregation and gaining value from it. But it was also moderately exclusive against *certain* black people. In a May 1923 advertisement it assured, "Central Avenue subdivision has restrictions, not race restrictions but restrictions that will preserve the value of the neighborhood and keep undesirables away."<sup>56</sup> This was a key and contradictory component of black property politics. The politics of the black subdivision condemned race-based land exclusions used to prop up white realty values, but in the same breath, sought to exclude poor black "undesirables" to prop up middle class black realty values.<sup>57</sup> Along with building restrictions, it promised graded and oiled streets (dirt), cement sidewalks and curbs, and full utilities—water, gas, and electricity—for which no special assessments were owed, urban improvements that were the built manifestations of the modern, white Progressive Era city.<sup>58</sup> Interestingly, the advertisement guaranteed no city taxes. Although it was never identified as such in the 1922 advertisement, the Central Avenue Subdivision was not in the City of Los Angeles, but in what was then still the City of Watts.

It went unnamed because Watts was not seen as a desirable place to live, and more so, it was the butt of Los Angeles' jokes. In 1922, it was still an independent city with a history of

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<sup>55</sup> *Eagle*, Nov 4, 1922.

<sup>56</sup> *Eagle*, May 12, 1923.

<sup>57</sup> "Most expressions of black people's land politics shared not only an indignation toward white supremacy, as an idea, but also a willingness to punish the black poor, thereby affirming white power, in practice," Connolly, *A World More Concrete : Real Estate and the Remaking of Jim Crow South Florida*, 165.

<sup>58</sup> A special assessment is a direct charge to property owners for public improvements near their property, for more assessments and Progressive Era improvements, see chapter two.

rough and contentious struggle between those in favor of liquor saloons (wets) and those who opposed them (dries). The city had such a poor reputation prior to World War I that residents and boosters tried to change its name. The *Times* jokingly wrote in 1913, “If [newspaper] editors are not being horsewhipped, it is a wet or dry election; and if it isn’t a wet or dry election it’s an agitation for a change of nomenclature.”<sup>59</sup> An early realty promotion targeting black buyers in 1914 played the same nomenclature game, promoting itself Dunbar Park after the famed and late black poet, Paul Lawrence Dunbar.<sup>60</sup> Prohibition laws during the 1920s did not help settle the wet-versus-dry dispute, as Los Angeles’ roadside bars and clubs relocated their illicit pleasures to Watts, especially “Central Avenue South” around 108<sup>th</sup> Street, a short distance from the southern part of the Central Avenue Subdivision on 98<sup>th</sup> and Central. Along with roads in a constant state of disrepair, insurmountable taxation problems, and aggressive frontier-style policing, Watts was peripheral real estate that had been available to black subdividers and realty men since at least 1910.<sup>61</sup> Watts thus became, ironically, the available canvass on which the basic unit of Los Angeles real estate—the subdivision—could be defined in black terms as a solution black urban problems.

On the blank canvass of Watts, a name redacted from the map, the black subdivision could be sited and imagined within the greater Los Angeles basin, which the Eastside Realty Company did. In their premiere November 1922 advertisement, the company featured one of the first subdivision maps used to promote black real estate in the 1920s (Figure 2). This map differed from a predecessor, the subdivision map drawn for Dunbar Park (Figure 1) in 1914,

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<sup>59</sup> “Watts Wants A Solon Arrested,” *Times*, Sep 12, 1913.

<sup>60</sup> “Dunbar Park,” *Eagle*, May 1, 1914.

<sup>61</sup> Mary Ellen Bell Ray. *The City of Watts, California, 1907 to 1926* (Los Angeles, Calif.: Rising Pub., 1985), 15, 46.

which featured Pacific Electric lines over streets, and ignored labeling Central Avenue altogether. The 1922 map's designer, signed "Brooks," put the map in a tight oval frame that compressed five miles of urban geography within a few inches. Central Avenue vertically bisected the map into halves; Vernon Avenue, which was north of the subdivision, was at the bottom; and 108<sup>th</sup> Street, which was south of the subdivision, was at the top. The artist inverted the map from a northern orientation, typical of white European practice. A dotted line on Central Avenue intended to guide prospective black homeseekers to the subdivision entered the map from the bottom, just outside that point was a well-known location to buyer or seller—the Central Avenue district.<sup>62</sup> This rendering, for the first time in the pages of the *Eagle*, predicted the principal vector of black real estate and city development was to unfold in a southern direction. From the Central Avenue District, black people would march south into land they bought and controlled. Eastside Realty used this map defiantly at a time when grassroots segregationists also printed thousands of maps as part of the campaign to secure all-white neighborhoods from the "Black Menace" of colored property.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> *Eagle*, Nov. 4, 1922.

<sup>63</sup> Fremont Improvement Association, according to the Pacific Coast News Bureau was involved in commissioning this map, according to Gibbons, they were active in segregationist campaigns in the mid-1920s, Gibbons, *City of Segregation : One Hundred Years of Struggle for Housing in Los Angeles*, 37.; Photocopy of map titled "A Study in Black & White Spread of Negro Race," undated, Box 10, Housing—Los Angeles 1951-1958 1967-1968 undated, 1804 Miriam Matthews Papers, UCLA Special Collections, Los Angeles, California.



Figure 1: Photocopy of segregationists' map displaying locations of black residence, "A Study in Black & White Spread of Negro Race," undated, Miriam Matthews Papers, UCLA Special Collections.



# Central Avenue SUBDIVISION

**THE TRACT OF MERIT**  
**In the Fastest Growing Section of Los Angeles**  
FOR THE INVESTOR AND THE HOMESEEKER



**HOW TO GET THERE**  
Follow the DOTTED LINE

On Central Avenue. Soon to be a 100-Foot Boulevard to the Harbor of Greater Los Angeles.

25 Minutes From 6th and Main.

CONVENIENT CAR SERVICE.

Over 40 Factories to be Located in this Vicinity in the near Future.

Industry Makes Value—The Workers Must Have Homes.

An Unrestricted Subdivision Surrounded by Tracts for Sale to White People Only.

With the Cheapest Prices and Lowest Terms.

No City Taxes.

Come Out and See the Improvements going in.

Oil Rights with all Lots.

Reasonable Building Restrictions.

This Tract is Legally Recorded in Book 69, Pages 88-89, Maps L. A. County.

**Full Size Lots—\$610 and up—  
Bring \$10 Deposit**

The Above Prices Include the Following Improvements for which NO ASSESSMENTS Will be Made: Streets Graded, Oiled and Scarified, Cement Sidewalks and Curbs, Water, Gas and Electricity—For full Particulars Call SOUTH 7620.

**Only a Few Lots Left in this Unit**  
Prices Increase 10 per cent JUNE 15, 1923. To get in on these Low Prices act Now!  
Over \$5,000,000 worth of Lots sold in this section since October, 1922.

**New Unit Opens For Sale, June 15, '23**

Reservation Deposits Now Being Received  
**10 PER CENT DISCOUNT**  
**TO-DAY IS THE TIME!**

## Eastside Realty Company

J. L. BANKS      L. R. INGRAM      O. L. BANKS  
**SUBDIVIDERS**

**1437 Central Avenue      South 7620**

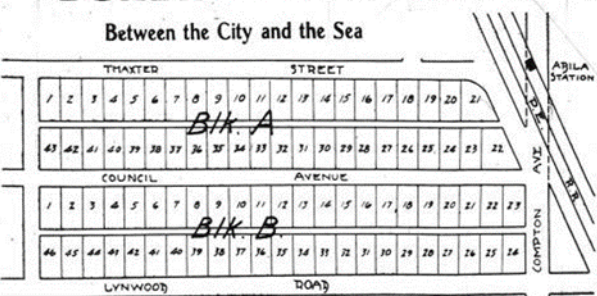
## DUNBAR PARK TRACT

Between the City and the Sea

THAXTED STREET											
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24
25	26	27	28	29	30	31	32	33	34	35	36

COUNCIL AVENUE											
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24
25	26	27	28	29	30	31	32	33	34	35	36

LYNWOOD      DOB



**GATES A'JAR**

A new departure in Real Estate operations where improvements are paid for by the promoters and where citizens are not debarred because of color. We believe in the plan of restrictions. The location is especially good for high class homes: Cheap transportation, gas, water, telephone and power poles in alley, graded streets, sidewalks, curbs and parking.

Property titles and funds will be handled through Title Insurance and Trust Co.

Parked between the City and the Sea, it is the natural trend of development and cannot help growing. Everything of the right kind is in the right place to make Dunbar Park the logical place to live.

Will you be one of the first to make a selection of a lot in the new sub-division, DUNBAR PARK. We have several on the waiting list now.

Do it now: own a home between the City and the Sea. If you are a good citizen you are eligible to buy one or more of these large lots, containing nearly 7,000 square feet, as compared with the ordinary lot of about 3,100 square feet.

Come to our office, get acquainted, get posted, get a home, get it paid for and quit paying rent. Make money by saving your earnings.

We predict the values in DUNBAR PARK will greatly increase in a very short time. Lots sold on monthly payments.

For prices and terms, call write or telephone.

**GODING & THOMPSON,**  
708 San Fernando Bldg., Los Angeles, California  
Phone, Main 4348

SHOWING LOCATION




Figure 2: Dunbar Park Advertisement. California Eagle, April 5, 1914

Figure 3: Central Avenue Subdivision Advertisement. California Eagle, November 4, 1922.



The Eastside Realty Company's updated 1923 map took the entire Los Angeles basin as black real estate at the peak of the city's subdivision boom. In his more ambitious iteration, Brooks shifted and widened the perspective of the new map (Figure 3). Instead of the God's eye perspective, peering directly overhead of the subdivision, the new map claimed a birds' eye perspective looking westward as if flying into the basin from east of the Pacific Electric Railway's Long Beach line, labeled on the lower border of the map. From this new vantage point, the entire basin, from the Los Angeles River to the Pacific Ocean, was claimed as relevant territory in locating the Central Avenue Subdivision. The Los Angeles River itself, so critical to the Spanish siting of the pueblo as a source of crop irrigation, disappeared.<sup>64</sup> The new arteries of life and value for property, no longer pueblo soil but urban real estate, were Central and Shorb avenues, fictively represented in thicker and bolder lines than the reality warranted as they led to downtown and the harbor. The P.E's Long Beach line went straight to Venice beach. The subdivision sited and identified at the intersection of the avenues in a magnified block of black ink, claimed access to, and thus pulled value from the beaches, hills, and harbor of Southern California. Although the Central Avenue District itself was not labeled as such, a bold black font drew the eye to streets north of Slauson and east of Central, unlike the few pencil thin streets labeled outside the district.<sup>65</sup> Cumulatively, the artist depicted the Central Avenue district and the Eastside Realty Company's subdivision as a developed island surrounded on its western and southern flanks by raw, unclaimed land and natural amenities. Indeed, the real estate of Black Los Angeles seized a mappable place in the basin, controlled not by segregationists but by black

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<sup>64</sup> Felipe de Neve, "Neve to Bucareli, Monterey, June 7, 1777," in *Los Angeles: Biography of a City*, ed. John and Laree Caughey (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976).

<sup>65</sup> *Eagle*, March 17, 1923.

subdividers—young and Texas born—who hired an artist to invite black Angelenos to buy a place and build their equity in the promised land. “PUT YOUR SAVINGS WHERE THEY WILL GROW—ANYONE CAN BE A RENT SLAVE,” commanded the advertisement for this aged and marginal land parcel.<sup>66</sup>



Black realty’s most promising black uplift development in the 1920s followed on the heels of the Central Avenue Subdivision. In 1926, the Eastside Realty Company partnered with Wilbur C. Gordon—an influential black physician and founder of black Los Angeles’ first building and loan association—and a new but rising firm, the Walter L. Gordon Company. Dr.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*

Gordon had a vision. “I wanted to build a real place where trees and shrubs and flowers abound, where rolling, grassy lawns prevail and every home would be a thing of beauty,” explained Dr. Gordon. In early 1925, Gordon was offered a favored site, 213 acres of land in the southwest of Los Angeles county, north of Torrance and east of Manhattan beach. While in negotiations, he began marketing it to *Eagle* readers in December in full page advertisements as Gordon Manor. He secured financing with the white Commercial National Bank and purchased the land in February 1926 for \$575,046, paying \$191,000 in money and securities as down payment.

Without additional investment, Gordon Manor likely faced a similar fate as Central Avenue Subdivision in Watts: a promise of concrete curbs, improved roads, street lighting, and full utilities with no capital to pay for it. Journee White, Gordon’s real estate broker, had been in the realty business since at least 1919, enticed a “group of white financiers” and raised an additional \$7 million dollars for improvements: half a million for streets and lighting, fifty thousand dollars for water and fire hydrants, and a building contract with the State Housing Finance Corporation to finance and build one thousand stucco houses at an average cost of \$3,500 each. Some “colored investors,” it was reported, had homes on order ranging in cost between \$22,000 and 36,000 each.<sup>67</sup> A list of sales from April 1926 revealed local purchasers from Watts, Pasadena, Long Beach, and out-state-state one from Tuskegee, Alabama; New Orleans, Louisiana; and Cleveland, Ohio.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> “Interview of George P. Johnson” by Adelaide G. Tusler in Johnson’s home in Los Angeles, California, 1970, Tape IV Side One, UCLA Library Center for Oral History Research, <http://oralhistory.library.ucla.edu/Browse.do?descCvPk=27283>; Flamming, *Bound for Freedom : Black Los Angeles in Jim Crow America*, 240.

<sup>68</sup> *Eagle*, March 26 and April 9, 1926.

For black realty, Gordon Manor would be the most ambitious expression of “community building” in the Los Angeles basin.<sup>69</sup> It was a chosen, not inherited, location. Sited at the southern boundary of the intersection of Redondo Boulevard and Prairie Avenue, it had access to several decently maintained north-south streets and was walking distance from both Yellow and Red Car train service. Gordon Manor, the booters promoted, would have access to western beach cities and their future development, such as the string of parks laid out by the Regional Planning Commission.<sup>70</sup> With this potential, Gordon Manor was still a reasonable distance from the cultural and economic center of Black Los Angeles, the Central Avenue district. No longer limited to the ridiculed area of Watts that clung to the side a freight train corridor, the new black subdivision wove into what advertisements would repeatedly chant as “the path of progress.” The idea that the “destined” development of Los Angeles, and thus land’s ability to reap equity, was westward along “excellent boulevards,” away from industrial land uses and toward the Pacific Ocean. In a March advertisement, promoters of the subdivision quoted Harry Culver, President of the California Real Estate Association predicting that “Southwest Los Angeles Business Property will increase 400 per cent in value in the next Six Years.”<sup>71</sup> If successfully developed, Gordon Manor would claim for black realty an entire westside subdivision, not merely a single, embattled house occupied tenuously by a lone black family, as was the case in most challenges to segregation in the 1920s.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> On “community builders” see, Weiss, *The Rise of the Community Builders : The American Real Estate Industry and Urban Land Planning*.

<sup>70</sup> *Eagle*, May 7, 1926.

<sup>71</sup> *Eagle*, March 26, 1926.

<sup>72</sup> Gibbons, *City of Segregation : One Hundred Years of Struggle for Housing in Los Angeles*, 20.

News of trouble for Gordon Manor hit the pages of the *Eagle* in May 1927. The report was vague. A wealthy “coterie of land owners,” who “with their millions have watched with fear and trepidation,” was using their influence to pressure the County Board of Supervisors to condemn the lands of Gordon Manor under the “farce” of building a park.<sup>73</sup> Details later emerged that the opposition owned five million dollars of sprawling rancho lands in Palos Verdes and Rancho San Pedro, to the south of Gordon Manor. The powerful group included the influential banker Henry O’Melveny, the president of the First National Bank of Los Angeles, and the famous landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted Jr.<sup>74</sup> O’Melveny mused in his personal journal that white opposition was more broad and potentially violent, “rumors of war, of Klu Klux—and all sorts of things.” O’Melveny did harbor personal reservations about the rancho consort’s secret plan to take the land, describing it as “downright fraud.” Gordon filed an injunction in federal court to prevent the taking, and he personally negotiated with O’Melveny, who thought his group would simply buy the land from Gordon for \$500,000. Eventually, the county used the new Mattoon Act, originally designed to streamline street improvement construction, to issue bonds for over one million dollars to pay for the condemnation. Gordon and his partners received a reported \$700,000, and the new county land was renamed Alondra Park, as it remains at the time of this writing.<sup>75</sup> The black real estate industry and prospective black homeowners could take scattered shots at single covenanted properties, but they could not subvert the invisible walls erected through racial covenants by developing an urban subdivision

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<sup>73</sup> “Zoning a Farce, Park Purposes a Joke,” *Eagle*, May 7, 1926.

<sup>74</sup> “Interview of George P. Johnson” by Adelaide G. Tusler in Johnson’s home in Los Angeles, California, 1970.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid*; Flammig quotes O’Melveny’s personal journal, Flammig, *Bound for Freedom : Black Los Angeles in Jim Crow America*, 241.

for themselves. There was too much money and state “infrastructural power” against them, but someone had to pay for its muscle.<sup>76</sup>

The case demonstrated a curious aspect of the political economy of segregation in Los Angeles prior to World War II. O’Melveny’s group of wealthy landowners could have easily fronted the \$700,000 to buy out Gordon Manor. Instead, they used their considerable political power to have the county issue \$1,014,961 in bonds using the Mattoon Act. Dean, Witter & Co. purchased the thirty-year bond issues and would collect 7 percent interest. The earnings potential of the improvement bond was so sought after that the company paid a premium of \$32,581 above its face value.<sup>77</sup> The principal and interest of the bonds were not public debt to be paid from county coffers, but private debt, carried by special assessments charged directly to local property owners neighboring what was planned to be a public park. The wealthy class of financiers, estate managers, and rancho heirs who orchestrated the taking of black land lived a considerable distance away, south of Torrance, while Gordon Manor was north of it. Segregation by land taking was not free; and instead, small-time, white property owners subsidized it.

Before the Great Depression devastated the state’s economy, local property owners began protesting the debt, claiming the assessments were illegally levied because they never received notices, by mail or public postings, during the approval process.<sup>78</sup> During the Depression, as the state scrambled to provide relief for property owners beleaguered by delinquent taxes and assessments, the Board of Supervisors refinanced the debt. The *Times* article reporting the

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<sup>76</sup> The term is William Novak's, quoting Connolly, "the state's 'infrastructural power included decentralized and discreet government authority to draft and enforce land law, build roads, provide government services," Connolly, *A World More Concrete : Real Estate and the Remaking of Jim Crow South Florida*, 136-37.

<sup>77</sup> “Bonds of County at Premium,” *Los Angeles Times*, Oct 11, 1927.

<sup>78</sup> Gardena Group Makes Protest,” *Times*, Feb 4, 1929.

refinancing made no mention of Gordon Manor, but attributed the refinancing as remediation for what became the wildly unpopular Mattoon Act.<sup>79</sup> Gordon Manor and the Central Avenue subdivision, taken together, demonstrated the possible limits and limited possibilities of black realty to develop marketable solutions to racial inequality through property in Los Angeles.

### **Financing Real Estate**

Financing property ownership was another problem black Angelenos faced in the city. Black Los Angeles before the 1920s had no black banks, building and loan associations, or insurance companies from which black Angelenos could apply for loans. This absence yawned against a market of white financial institutions, such as mortgage and insurance companies, that were generally discriminatory, either denying debt to black borrowers or issuing it at higher rates of commission and interest.<sup>80</sup> If mortgages were obtained, they differed markedly from contemporary mortgages that were popularized and supported through unprecedented federal intervention beginning in the Great Depression.<sup>81</sup> Mortgages during the 1920s covered much less of the purchase price of a property, requiring large cash down payments. The length of mortgages typically ran between five to ten years and were not fully paid at the end of the term. If money markets were slack, borrowers could renew their loans, but if lenders needed quick

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<sup>79</sup> "Relief Planned for Area Retarded by Mattoon Act," *Times*, May 19, 1940; On the unpopularity of and damage caused by the Mattoon Act in white working class South Gate see, Becky M. Nicolaides, *My Blue Heaven : Life and Politics in the Working-Class Suburbs of Los Angeles, 1920-1965*, Historical Studies of Urban America (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 144-50.

<sup>80</sup> On discriminatory lending markets in the early 20th century see, Building President's Conference on Home et al., "Negro Housing; Report of the Committee on Negro Housing, Nannie H. Burroughs, Chairman" (Washington, D.C., 1932), 92-97.

<sup>81</sup> Freund, *Colored Property : State Policy and White Racial Politics in Suburban America*, 99-100.

cash, borrowers ran the risk of having the remaining balance on their loans due immediately.<sup>82</sup> More typical to black realty markets were “pay like rent” arrangements or loans from personal, individual lenders. The most prominent of the latter in Black Los Angeles was Sidney Dones.

Dones began advertising money to lend in the spring of 1916, a year after promoting his debt collection services, which promised to make “[d]ead beats our victims” using the prowess of his company’s legal department to coerce Central Avenue’s debtors back to solvency.<sup>83</sup> The \$75,000 that Dones had on offer in 1916 grew to a self-claimed \$20,000 a month lending business capitalized at \$5 million in 1927.<sup>84</sup> This black debt market could not function by the standard industry practices of traditional financial institutions; thus, practices were intensely individual, and therefore, personal, as were black debt markets more broadly in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. As black borrowers were pinned to the near bottom rung of racial capitalism, community lenders assessed creditworthiness through character, gendered respectability, title, and family and community ties as opposed to income or collateral alone. When defaults occurred, collection methods included filing lawsuits, pressuring payment from endorsers, and contacting employers for wage garnishment.<sup>85</sup> The greater risk involved for lenders meant more exploitative terms for borrowers in the forms of higher interest, fees, and punishing loans terms.

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<sup>82</sup> Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier : The Suburbanization of the United States*, 196.

<sup>83</sup> "Watch It Grow," *Eagle*, April 8, 1916.

<sup>84</sup> He made these claims under a bevy a business names, such as the Sidney P. Dones Company, Bookertee Investment Company, and Associated Loan Company, “Sidney P. Dones,” *Eagle*, Dec 20, 1919; Display Advertisements, *Eagle*, July 1, 1927; *Eagle*, Sept 2, 1927.

<sup>85</sup> Shennette Garrett-Scott, *Banking on Freedom : Black Women in U.S. Finance before the New Deal*, Columbia Studies in the History of U.S. Capitalism (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019), 121-26, 46-7.



The records of these transactions in 1920s black Los Angeles have largely been lost, but a stray lawsuit that Dones filed against John and Phronie Bussey in 1928 offer a rare example. John was a janitor and Phronie was a housewife, as reported on voter registrations the year Dones sued them for defaulting on a \$2,600 promissory note. The purpose of the loan was not revealed, but the amount suggested money for a modest home purchase.<sup>86</sup> In exchange for the cash, the Busseys agreed to pay 8 percent interest per year on monthly installments of \$25. Payments were applied to the interest first, then the principal. If they defaulted, the sum of the interest and principal were due immediately in “U.S. gold coin.” The Busseys made one payment of \$57 and ceased any further payments, objecting that Dones obtained the loan by misrepresentation since they “did not receive anything of value.”<sup>87</sup> The Busseys were not alone in their complaint about Dones’ loan practices. The year prior to the lawsuit, Dones was incarcerated for usury when a borrower filed a criminal complaint that he charged her an illegal interest rate on a \$600 loan.<sup>88</sup> The Bussey’s case remained unresolved, at least in the courts, and the “hard times” that the working-class Busseys tried to prepare against through homeownership came to pass. Phronie died four years later at the age of 39 years. Indeed, borrowing money to own a slice of Los Angeles was a fraught business.

By the 1920s, white businesses, such as the Arrowhead Realty Company, began turning toward Central Avenue to offer financing to black consumers, oftentimes involving multiple

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<sup>86</sup> George and Cora Farley, the subjects of chapters two and three, purchased a modest worker cottage in 1923 for \$2,300 and paid \$25 a month.

<sup>87</sup> *Dones v. Bussey*, No. 248958, April 5, 1928, Superior Court of Los Angeles, Archives and Records Center, Los Angeles, California.

<sup>88</sup> R.G. Lamar, “Sidney P. Dones is Granted Appeal in Usury Case,” *Eagle*, June 27, 1927; “Sidney P. Dones Loses Long Legal Battle,” *Eagle*, Oct 28, 1927.

sources of credit. The prospective homeowner, especially of limited means, had to buy or finance a vacant lot then either self-build their home or arrange separate financing with one of the many contractors offering their services during the boom. This layered method was necessary for borrowers because lenders found it too risky to finance the entire process.<sup>89</sup> White-owned outfits like Arrowhead offered black buyers “no cash required” financing for construction on an owned lot, since the lot itself, potentially, could be leveraged as collateral for the debt.<sup>90</sup> They were a downtown-based company, headquartered on Broadway.<sup>91</sup> Arrowhead incorporated in 1906 and made its early capital on agricultural land deals, such as buying and selling vineyards and eucalyptus orchards to midwestern investors.<sup>92</sup> The company’s president, Dr. Rudolph Schiffman, was described by the *Los Angeles Times* as “many times a millionaire” and “one of the most notable figures in the development of agriculture in California.”<sup>93</sup> Arrowhead opened a satellite office on Central Avenue, the black business corridor Sidney Dones helped establish nearly a decade earlier, and became an integrated broker in Dones’ all-black resort—Eureka Villa (Val Verde).<sup>94</sup>

White immigrant capital turned toward black real estate financing, as well. Louis Stein, a Russian immigrant ran a furniture business before recognizing the chance to make a profit on

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<sup>89</sup> David Lawrence Mason, *From Buildings and Loans to Bail-Outs : A History of the American Savings and Loan Industry, 1831-1995* (Cambridge ;: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 59.

<sup>90</sup> *Eagle*, Oct 12, 1923.

<sup>91</sup> “New Market will be the Largest on the coast,” *Times*, October 28, 1917.

<sup>92</sup> “Another Large Ranch Deal is Consummated,” *Herald*, Vol 35, Number 60, Dec 1, 1907; “Arrowhead Company Elects,” *Herald*, Vol 35, No. 267, June 25, 1908; “Buys Ranch,” *Times*, Mar 26, 1910.

<sup>93</sup> “Death Closes Active Career,” *Los Angeles Times*, Dec 24, 1926.

<sup>94</sup> “Eureka Villa and Community Center,” *Eagle*, June 13, 1924.

black realty. “MONEY! MONEY!,” beckoned Stein’s *Eagle* advertisement offering building loans, first mortgages, and trust deeds to the paper’s readers in 1925. Unlike Arrowhead’s wealthy owners, Stein was an Eastsider. He did business out of his home, which he owned on East 27<sup>th</sup> Street between Central and Naomi Avenues in a neighborhood that was almost completely black by 1930, save for a few white and Chinese families.<sup>95</sup> Stein and his family remained a fixture of 27<sup>th</sup> street through the 1930s. By the end of that decade, the few white and Chinese families were gone, but Stein’s son and his new family built a rear duplex unit on his father’s property and ran a secondhand store in the neighborhood.<sup>96</sup> From large financiers to small ones, white and immigrant capital made their way to Central Avenue to make interest financing black real estate in the 1920s.<sup>97</sup>

White companies offering potentially fraudulent opportunities for credit appeared on Central Avenue in the 1920s as well. In late 1927, A. Corenson & Company, another downtown firm, began offering *Eagle* readers one-day loans to pay what they gently described as “unexpected debt that is coming up.” Less gently described, the unexpected debt was a combination of predictable property taxes and oftentimes unexpected and terrifically expensive special assessments, the same financing instrument used to condemn Gordon Manor. These assessments ballooned in the 1920s as the city and county officials, real estate developers, construction men, bond companies, automobile lobbyists, and industrial concerns politicked for

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<sup>95</sup> California, Voter Registrations, 1900-1968 (1924) [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations Inc, 2017; 1930 United States Federal Census [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations Inc, 2002; *Eagle*, Aug 14, 1925.

<sup>96</sup> Ancestry.com. 1940 United States Federal Census [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2012.

<sup>97</sup> White involvement in financing black homeownership was common, see, Andrew Wiese, "Black Housing, White Finance: African American Housing and Home Ownership in Evanston, Illinois, before 1940," *Journal of Social History* 33, no. 2 (1999).

road modernization.<sup>98</sup> The *Eagle* touted that the new firm was the only company in Los Angeles that “gives what is known as one-day service” to handle these debts. Applicants who brought papers in the morning, the *Eagle* explained, would receive cash before the bank closes. The company was also innovative in that it made daily promotions over the radio on stations K.F.W.B. and K.G.F.J. in the evening.<sup>99</sup> The integrity of A. Corenson’s innovative business practices would soon be thrown into doubt. In 1930, A. Corenson, along with staff of another business and two radio announcers, were indicted on federal charges of using the radio and mails to defraud investors, charges for which Corenson later pled “no contest.”<sup>100</sup> Whether Corenson’s targeting of black property owners with one-day loans was equally predatory is currently unknown, but the brew of mounting special assessments and taxes created a vulnerability in the realm of black property for potentially predatory white financiers. This predatory environment would soon claim white bodies. As explored in the following two chapters, the slow foreclosure crisis of Los Angeles’ predatory municipal debt led a dispossessed black homeowner to fatally shoot two white deputies during the waning years of the Great Depression. Indeed, opportunities for property in the promised land had its underbelly.

Less extractive and burdensome financing arrived in March 1924, when a handful of black businessmen founded the Liberty Building-Loan Association, among them was Wilbur Gordon and other figures who would become some of the principle leaders of Black Los

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<sup>98</sup> For more on special assessments and road modernization, see chapter two.

<sup>99</sup> “A. Corenson & Co. Mortgage and Loan Company Sign Contract with the California Eagle,” *Eagle*, Nov 4, 1927.

<sup>100</sup> “Thirteen Listed in Indictment,” *Los Angeles Times*, Oct 10, 1930; “Mail Fraud Defendant Given Fine,” *Times*, March 5, 1933.

Angeles.<sup>101</sup> Building and loan associations by the 1920s were nearly a century old and rooted in a goal to financially empower working-class people. Members invested their savings in shares of the association which they could, in turn, borrow against for a home purchase with better terms. Thrifts lowered monthly payments by extending the maturity of loans, which averaged twelve years by 1930, nearly twice as long as commercial bank mortgages. They provided lower interest rates, around 6 percent. Associations also provisioned borrowers with greater security against property loss from other liabilities by offering escrow services to pay property taxes and insurance.<sup>102</sup> After just six months, Liberty had \$45,300 in loans secured on over \$100,000 in real estate, and by 1932, issued nearly \$450,000 in loans to some 300 homeowners.<sup>103</sup> Liberty successfully weathered the Great Depression, although depositors at the time wondered if they would ever see their savings again. The company prospered in the postwar period from the massive leap in homeownership that was the harvested fruit of a war economy. Postwar success lead *Ebony* magazine in 1962 to call Louis Blodgett, the president and “force behind” the company’s founding, the patriarch of “the richest Negro family” in the United States.<sup>104</sup>

### **Failed Homeowners: The Rent Payers**

By the end of the 1920s realty boom, tenants would remain the majority body of Black Los Angeles, no matter how much it was willed by black realty to be otherwise. Tenancy was not

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<sup>101</sup> Liberty Building-Loan Association Annual Statement, March 1925, Box 11, Folder 3, 1804 Liberty Savings and Loan Association 1924-1960, Miriam Matthews Papers, UCLA Library Special Collections, Los Angeles, California.

<sup>102</sup> Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier : The Suburbanization of the United States*, 130; Mason, *From Buildings and Loans to Bail-Outs : A History of the American Savings and Loan Industry, 1831-1995*, 59.

<sup>103</sup> Liberty News, Oct 1924 and Programme for Eighth Anniversary, March 24, 1932, Box 11, Folder 3, 1804 Liberty Savings and Loan Association 1924-1960, Miriam Matthews Papers.

<sup>104</sup> “Black leadership in Los Angeles oral history transcript: Ivan J. Houston by Ranford B. Hopkins,” UCLA Oral History Program. 1986-1987, <http://content.cdlib.org/view?docId=hb3n39p1g2&query=&brand=calisphere> (accessed Dec. 2, 2020); Louise Robinson, “Richest Negro Family,” *Ebony*, Dec 1962.

a land tenure independent from homeownership, they were linked in the project of black uplift through real estate. As historian Andrew Wiese details, black people's desire for homeownership was value-based, driven by "a coherent vision of better living" that included preferences for economic independence, open space, and family life.<sup>105</sup> Scholars cannot fully grasp the desperate, risky, and sacrificial efforts of black people to own property and keep it, without at least a cursory social history of the tenure status from which they fled and would be encouraged to profit from. Property ownership held up the possibility of obtaining a legislated and culturally manufactured power specific to U.S. law, ideology, and economy that privileged it over tenancy. In other words, racial capitalism inhered differential power to ownership. The Black real estate industry enthusiastically participated in reproducing that legislated and cultural authority by pathologizing tenancy and encouraging landlordism as economic race uplift.

In 1920, rent paying Angelenos comprised over 65 percent of the city's population. The 1920s real estate boom (1920-1923) witnessed thousands of new subdivisions and thousands of new homeowners, but the proportion of tenants among the sprawling new subdivisions of the Los Angeles basin remained just over 62 percent in 1930. The economic cataclysm that was the Great Depression reversed the few percentage points gain achieved during the boom. Tenancy rose to above 66 percent as residents faced staggering unemployment, a mortgage default crisis, and widespread tax and special assessment delinquencies amid a simultaneous boom in predatory collections (see chapter three). World War II commandingly reversed the growing league of rent payers. Los Angeles became one of the most important war manufacturing centers in the United

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<sup>105</sup> Wiese, *Places of Their Own : African American Suburbanization in the Twentieth Century*, 69-70.

States, pulling in millions of federal war dollars and hundreds of thousands of war workers, who made Los Angeles a minority tenant city for the first time in the 20<sup>th</sup> century—46.4 percent.<sup>106</sup>

Whereas Los Angeles residents generally experienced a steady decrease in tenancy, reversed temporarily only by the Great Depression, Black Angelenos experienced a steady increase in rent paying from the turn of the century until World War II. Between 1910 and 1930, inclusive of the 1920s real estate boom, black tenancy increased from 60.5 percent to 64 percent. The racial economy of the city ensured the economic calamity of the thirties hit black Angelenos harder than white Angelenos, and consequently, black tenancy increased at a greater rate than Los Angeles generally, from 64 percent to 70 percent compared to the 4 percent jump for the city. Black Angelenos impressively escaped tenancy during the wartime and postwar boom as well, but not as impressively as the city more broadly. Black tenancy fell from a depression high of 70 percent to 58 percent in 1950, whereas Los Angeles residents generally experienced a staggering 20 percent decline in tenancy, nearly twice the decrease in rent paying when compared to black Angelenos. Even with the steep decline in tenancy during the 1940s, Black Los Angeles was a community defined by that rent paying tenure during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>107</sup>

Although the majority tenure status, the transactions of tenancy in Black Los Angeles—leases, rents, and evictions—are phantoms in the archival records of the city, which painstakingly enumerated transfers of ownership to the exclusion of the rent dollars that often

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<sup>106</sup> Leon E. Truesdell, United States, and Bureau of the Census, *16th Census of the United States: 1940 - Housing*, vol. II (Washington, D.C.: U.S. G.P.O., 1942), 252; United States and Bureau of the Census, *1950 United States Census of Housing*, vol. II (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Dept. of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, 1952), Table 17 on 5-16.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*; For 1910 data see, States, Hill, and Cummings, *Negro Population in the United States, 1790-1915*, 477.

supported that tenure. Thus, insight into the social history of Central Avenue's black rental market comes from one rather trivial, throwaway source, the classifieds of the *California Eagle*. "FOR RENT: furnished rooms, all modern with housekeeping privileges. Phone 77318," an anonymous landlord or agent said to potential black tenants in a 1922 rental ad.<sup>108</sup> This was a typical solicitation for tenancy listed in the *Eagle* in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, nestled among masonic lodge notices, drug store advertisements, and promises for longer hair. They were militantly concise, informing the prospective tenant of the bare facts of the living space for rent. For example, a 1916 classified advertisement for an Eastside flat listed the number of rooms and that it was "neatly furnished," gave an address where to apply, and offered an assurance—"rent cheap." It achieved this in three lines and sixteen words.<sup>109</sup> Rental rates, when revealed, were often listed in weekly intervals for rooms and monthly intervals for traditional apartments.<sup>110</sup> The feature "modern" was a routine shorthand in solicitations promising the presence of hot water, gas, and electricity in the unit.<sup>111</sup> Proximity to rail transit was also essential information to be found in rental ads.<sup>112</sup> Generally, rental advertisements featured frugal plain text, barren of flowers of speech that were made even more marginal by the spacious display advertisements offering real estate to own.

Eastside rental advertisements had their grand, although rare, moments in the classifieds. Take Charles Robinson's 1925 advertisement for his newly built Virgy Apartments on East 46<sup>th</sup>

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<sup>108</sup> Classified advertisement, *Eagle*, Oct 21, 1922.

<sup>109</sup> *Eagle*, Sept 9, 1916.

<sup>110</sup> *Eagle*, Nov 3, 1938.

<sup>111</sup> *Eagle*, Aug 26, 1922.

<sup>112</sup> *Eagle*, April 19, 1934.



Street. It offered tenant audiences the realism of photography, featuring a tightly framed picture of the apartment building paired with captions promising modern amenities. Occupancy was advertised as exclusive to “first class tenants.”<sup>113</sup> By 1930, the black “first class” renting in the Virgy included single, married, and widowed maids, cooks, waiters, porters, nurses, janitors, chauffeurs, and musicians, a veritable cross-section of black Los Angeles.<sup>114</sup> The grand solicitation that may have lured them to the Virgy was as rare as apartment buildings themselves in Los Angeles, where nearly 94 percent of dwelling were single-family homes. Although, multi-family housing was rare, black Angelenos lived in two-family housing at twice the rate and multi-family housing at three times the rate than the city as a whole.<sup>115</sup> Whether typical or special, soliciting a private room or a new apartment, rental advertisers offered tenants a clipped vision and language relative to the landscapes, maps, poems, and bent parables used to entice landownership. In advertisements that listed the Eastside for rent, tenants could exchange dollars for amenities but not the kind of franchise imagined for subdivision owners, which tried to claimed equity in Southern California’s healthful beaches, fertile harbor, and certain economic development against the power of wealthy segregationists.

Classified rentals were also littered with tenancy restrictions, especially for rented rooms in private homes, that revealed the many social limits of being a rent payer. Landlords had total power over tenant selection, for no anti-discrimination law existed to temper that authority in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Some restrictions were behavioral, enforced passively through a

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<sup>113</sup> Display ad, “The New Virgy Apts... 1163 E. 46<sup>th</sup> St.,” *Eagle*, June 12, 1925.

<sup>114</sup> Ancestry.com. 1930 United States Federal Census [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations Inc, 2002.

<sup>115</sup> Central Avenue is included in "Area 7," for description of areas see page 188, Census and Commerce, *Fifteenth Census of the United States : 1930*, Volume 6: Families, 189.

description of the rented space as a “Christian home.”<sup>116</sup> Another common restriction, “Adults only,” excluding families, who often search endlessly for a landlord willing to accept children.<sup>117</sup> Far more common were restrictions such as, “Gentleman and wife,” “married couple preferred,” and “single man.”<sup>118</sup> Remixed in other phrases, they all identified the unspoken exclusion from the rental market for private rooms—the single black woman, with or without children. Boarding with a non-kin private family was a mark of budding independence for urbanites, a tentative waypoint between a familial home—often rural—and establishing an independent household in the city.<sup>119</sup> Such transient independence for black women may have been socially suspect under the presumption that they were to transition from the familial home directly to the martial one. The rare exception for an explicit request for the tenancy of black women was for domestic service in private homes and boarding houses. A white landlady solicited, “WANTED: A middle-aged Colored lady to do housework and live on place.” Housekeeping rooms were usually rented for a domestic worker’s day off (commonly Thursday) from their live-in employment.<sup>120</sup> When taken together, the inventory of restrictions constituted a gendered social policy of urban space that aided the mobility of men and hampered the independence of black women.

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<sup>116</sup> *Eagle*, June 5, 1936.

<sup>117</sup> Frances Mae Reeves, "Housing Problems of the Tuberculous Clients in the Los Angeles County Central Welfare District: A Study in Administrative Procedure" (M.S., University of Southern California, 1936), 39.

<sup>118</sup> *Eagle*, Aug 12, 1921; Jan 14, 1922; April 22, 1922.

<sup>119</sup> John Modell and Tamara K. Hareven, "Urbanization and the Malleable Household: An Examination of Boarding and Lodging in American Families," *Journal of Marriage and Family* 35, no. 3 (1973): 472.

<sup>120</sup> *Eagle*, Feb 29, 1914; September 9, 1916; Nov 24, 1924.

As noted earlier in the chapter, black Angelenos who owned homes took in boarders more than any other racial group in the city, a practice that was common across the county. Boarders were legally different than tenants, occupying a position in property law similar to hotel guests, which equated to an even weaker set of rights. Although socially, boarders shared racial and cultural ties with the families from whom they rented shelter, creating security through the affect of a surrogate family. Homeowning black Angelenos knew the travails of migration, irregular employment, and white supremacy generally, so their homes served as critical waypoints helping new migrants and longtime black residents adjust and cope with urban troubles. Black boarders also benefited from increased housing availability and affordability, while black homeowners benefited from the modest boost in household incomes. While the boarder-landlord relationship generated property conflicts like those of the formal tenant-landlord, the intimacy, fictive family ties, and mutual economic benefits differentiated boarding from traditional tenancy.

Rental advertisements did not promise black tenants expanded rights, deepened entitlements, or strengthened citizenship as offered to prospective owners because U.S. tenant-landlord law did not endow rent payments with such powers over land. Prior to 1965, U.S. tenant-landlord law was characterized by a couple “classical rules” with some exceptions between states. First, a tenant’s lease and rent payment obligated the landlord to deliver possession of the premises and not interfere with tenant’s “quiet enjoyment” of it. The landlord generally had no obligation to deliver the rented quarters in a habitable condition or maintain it as such during a tenant’s occupancy. Some states, most notably New York, passed legislation in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century regulating the condition and existence of tenements, but laws like these were

generally difficult to enforce by states and, even more so, by tenants themselves.<sup>121</sup> Second, a tenant's rent obligation was independent of the landlord's satisfaction of the covenants of the lease. In other words, with some exceptions, come rats, fire, or flood—the rent was due. This also meant tenants could not withhold rent to pressure the landlord to satisfy a lease covenant, what legal practitioners call a “self-help” remedy or “rent action.”<sup>122</sup>

When it came to pursuing remedies, U.S. law and procedure heavily favored landlords. As a method to protect tenants from forcible, physical eviction by landlords, U.S. courts, during the urbanizing Nineteenth Century, developed summary proceedings for tenant-landlord litigation. Summary proceedings are essentially expedited procedures (short cuts) that allow landlords to quickly settle rental disputes with tenants by eliminating practices found in other areas of law, such as discovery. To this practice, an English legal scholar lamented, “There is nothing quite so depressing for one's sense of the majesty of the law than to sit through a morning session of an U.S. metropolitan landlord-tenant court and watch the judge issue seventy-five judgments in as many minutes.”<sup>123</sup> Effectively, the violence of Nineteenth-Century landlord practice was given an alternative legal procedure that was swift, accessible, and efficient enough to hopefully, though not in reality, replace the property violence of urban rental markets. For tenants, any remedy for violations of a lease, written or by mouth and handshake, had to be litigated in court, with all the associated costs and specialized knowledge required to navigate that system. As mentioned above, tenants in the United States in the first half of the

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<sup>121</sup> Bauman, Biles, and Szylyan, *From Tenements to the Taylor Homes : In Search of an Urban Housing Policy in Twentieth-Century America*, 22-32.

<sup>122</sup> Mary Ann Glendon, "The Transformation of American Landlord-Tenant Law," *Boston College Law Review* 23, no. 3 (1981): 509-10.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*, 512; Donahue, "Change in the American Law of Landlord and Tenant," 244.

Twentieth did not have many self-help avenues to achieve relief. An exception was “constructive eviction,” achieved when conditions were so intolerable in an area for which the landlord was responsible that a tenant must vacate their quarters to claim relief.<sup>124</sup> Taken together, U.S. tenant-landlord law left much of the conflict and negotiation of tenancy to the private market. For the working class, that meant the street, the alley, the hallway, and the rented quarters itself. Legal procedures favored landlords when pursued. Permanent protective and rights-granting legislation for tenants, at all levels of U.S. government, was a myth.<sup>125</sup>

Thus, landlords wielded awesome powers over tenants in the United States and its cities like Los Angeles. This was especially so for black and other socially marginalized tenants. L. G. Robinson, a black head janitor of the Hall of Records, recalled his landlord’s “numerous demands” that resembled the strictures of sharecropping, but in turn of the century Los Angeles. His family was required to buy groceries from his landlady’s store neighboring the rental, pay all rent in advance, “waste no water” on the front or rear yards, and prohibited his children from playing in the front yard.<sup>126</sup> Limiting access to accommodations could be quite extreme. In a rooming house during the Great Depression, facilities in a bathroom malfunctioned and instead of fixing the problem, the landlord nailed the door shut. The four families sharing the barred bathroom had to make do without it. Complaints meant to remedy conditions such as these were easily subverted. When the Board of Health ordered a landlord to cure a rat infestation in response to a tenant’s complaint, the landlord simply evicted the tenant, “saving the cost of pest

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<sup>124</sup> Glendon, "The Transformation of American Landlord-Tenant Law," 512-13.

<sup>125</sup> Donahue, "Change in the American Law of Landlord and Tenant," 242-44.

<sup>126</sup> Mikel Hogan Garcia, "Adaptation Strategies of the Los Angeles Black Community, 1883 - 1919 (California)" (Ph.D., University of California, Irvine, 1985), 64.

remediation.” Tenants had no legislative protection against retaliatory evictions and landlords could achieve them without ever setting foot in court. Since leases were often oral and rental periods weekly, a property owner could simply raise the rent as a form of what one researcher called a “polite eviction.” The power granted to landlords was not only wielded over tenants, but it also transformed policy. Los Angeles landlords commonly refused tenants who received county welfare because some families used the limited funds on expenses other than rent, which “worked a hardship on landlords.” County workers found it so difficult to place relief tenants in housing, the county welfare department changed their policy and began sending rent payment directly to landlords, undermining tenant’s financial autonomy.<sup>127</sup>

The power granted to landlords to arbitrarily raise rents without limits became the focus of a short-lived movement for rent control during Los Angeles’ “house famine” following World War I.<sup>128</sup> Beginning in 1919, tenants of Los Angeles began roundly condemning “rent profiteering.”<sup>129</sup> Hundreds of complaints began filtering into the *Los Angeles Times*, the City Council, and local realty boards that area landlords were, in some instances, doubling rents.<sup>130</sup> An “Ex-Solider,” writing to the *Times* in December 1919, appreciated the coverage but complained that the stories “lack punch to jolt apartment pirates.”<sup>131</sup> In 1920, organized veterans and labor began petitioning the City Council to establish a “rent profiteering board” modeled after ones established in Dallas, Texas. “Let the City Council at least make an attempt to end this

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<sup>127</sup> Reeves, “Housing Problems of the Tuberculous Clients in the Los Angeles County Central Welfare District: A Study in Administrative Procedure,” 33, 37, 47.

<sup>128</sup> “Want Vacant Room List,” *Times*, Oct 23, 1920.

<sup>129</sup> “Fact and Comment,” *Times*, Dec 14, 1919.

<sup>130</sup> “Profiteering in Rents and Building Materials,” *Times*, Jan 22, 1920.

<sup>131</sup> Ex-Solider, “Boost the Limit,” *Times*, Dec 29, 1919.

local saturnalia of avarice,” petitioned the Oil Field, Gas Well & Refinery Workers of America.<sup>132</sup> The Los Angeles Rent Payers Protective Association—12,000 strong by 1921—successfully mobilized pressure on the City Council to pass a rent ordinance limiting landlords to “reasonable” rent increases in January 1921 and ordered rent strikes on hikes to test the law. Organized landlords rallied, and the law was soon invalidated in the courts later that year, effectively ending Los Angeles first rent control movement.<sup>133</sup> Polite evictions would continue unabated until World War II brought federal controls (see Chapter 4).

The regular eviction of tenants by Los Angeles’ many landlords, and tenants’ resistance to them, typically received scant coverage in weekly newspapers. The Great Depression was a violent exception. As Los Angeles renters lost jobs and wages, evictions ran rampant. When a mother of four children could not pay a rent hike of more than double the original rate, \$12 to \$25, in the winter of 1936, the landlord called on Deputy Marshal Crittenden and his squad to throw them on the street. A broom, a broken vanity, chairs, and box of Christmas decorations accompanied the ejected family as they sat on the sidewalk. It was a humiliating termination of home that tenants sometimes resisted outside the courts of law. When 17-year-old Kathryn Schaffer’s landlord attempted to affect an eviction by nailing the door shut, Schaffer threatened to chop it down with an ax to gain reentry. To save the door from destruction, the landlord decided to “establish an armistice.”<sup>134</sup> In 1936, a 60 year old tenant facing eviction stepped into a

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<sup>132</sup> Oil Field, Gas Well & Refinery Workers of America Petition No. 135 (1920), Jan 15, 1920 and Metal Trades Council Petition No. 146 (1920), Jan 16, 1920, City Council Minutes, City Archives, Los Angeles, California; “U.S. Legion Goes After the Rent Hog,” *Times*, Nov 4, 1920.

<sup>133</sup> “Rent Strike is Ordered,” *Times*, Jan 13, 1921; “City Rent Law Found Invalid,” *Times*, June 4, 1921.

<sup>134</sup> “Girl and Ax Balk Eviction,” *Los Angeles Times*, Mar 22, 1930.

closet and shot herself in the chest with a .38 caliber revolver.<sup>135</sup> Communist organizations, or those accused as such, helped tenants resist evictions as well. In the fall of 1932, the Junior League of the Unemployed Council of America barricaded the door of a home and “loudly abused” the deputies as they tried to evict a tenant who could not pay the rent.<sup>136</sup> Eviction blockades such as these occurred all over the country, sometimes evolving into what newspapers bemoaned as riots.<sup>137</sup>

The weak position of tenancy within the law and the private market meant rent payers’ lives were extremely transitory compared to those of homeowners prior to World War II. A Works Progress Administration (WPA) housing survey in 1939 revealed stark differences in the stability of occupancy between homeowners and landlords prior to World War II. In a survey area centered on downtown Los Angeles, which included the Central Avenue district, 57 percent of tenant occupied households held a median occupancy of less than two years. 40 percent held median occupancies of less than one year. In census tracts flanking Central Avenue, median tenancies ranged between one to four years. When surveyors turned to homeowners a relative chasm of stability opened between them and their rent paying neighbors. 65 percent of homeowners held median occupancies of more than ten years, 23 percent for more than twenty years.<sup>138</sup> For many, tenancy in Los Angeles meant a move or effective eviction every few years,

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<sup>135</sup> "Shot Halts Ouster Step," *Times*, Feb 29, 1936.

<sup>136</sup> "Reds' Threats to Resist Eviction Cause Riot Call," *Times*, Aug 9, 1932.

<sup>137</sup> "Nine Men Hurt in Eviction Riot," *Times*, Aug 26, 1932 "Brooklyn Mob Fights Eviction," *Times*, Jan 17, 1933; "Riot Squad Clears Court in San Diego as Throng Upsets Eviction Hearing," *Times*, Jan 31, 1933; Frances Fox Piven and Richard A. Cloward, *Poor People's Movements : Why They Succeed, How They Fail* (New York: Vintage books, 1979), 78-81.

<sup>138</sup> Housing Authority of the City of Los Angeles, *Housing Survey: City of Los Angeles, California*, April 1940, City Archives, Los Angeles, CA.



sometimes every few months compared to a stability of ownership mostly unknown to rent paying Angelenos. Tenant instability was a double-edged sword. On one hand, it meant housing insecurity; on the other, it meant a tenant's choice of housing served as a sort of market power, but it was only as effective as there were alternative options and the means to buy them.

Black real estate advertisers used the instability of tenancy in making their case against it. Sidney Dones' Bookertee Investment Company advertisements served as examples. "To be a home in the true sense, it must be your very own. A leased or rented dwelling hasn't the atmosphere, the permanency—cannot possibly represent the love and pride you [have] in the home you really own," assured a company advertisement in 1919.<sup>139</sup> Another ad dramatized the gendered social implications of tenancy's instability in a city of migrants. The "true story" recalls a conversation between two black women who live in owned homes. One woman asked the other, "Who lives in that pretty little house over there?," to which her neighbor responded, "I have never called on her. They only RENT the house." The reason for this enforcement of social isolation, according to the Bookertee Company, is that tenants are not entitled to the same social credit as owners. They lack an investment in stability, for the owner, gendered as a man, "is considered a steady, stable, settled CITIZEN of Los Angeles," and he and his wife and children "are admitted to full standing in their neighborhood" and are thus able to "form permanent alliances, long-lived friendships."<sup>140</sup> The instability of tenancy could cause owners, as the realty men told it, to withhold the social investment needed to build political relationships or intimate bonds with renting neighbors because they consistently churn through neighborhoods. The 1939

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<sup>139</sup> *Eagle*, Nov 8, 1919.

<sup>140</sup> *Eagle*, Oct 4, 1919.

WPA survey would later map the conditions of this social anxiety. Tenancy was unstable, but perhaps more draining for migrants, tenants were ostracized, and above all, lonely.

Though social exclusion would have been a frightening prospect, black realty's case against tenancy was far more damning. Tenancy was race pathology. In 1925, Dr. William Burlin Humphrey, a Central Avenue physician, penned an editorial in the *Eagle* addressing the question of whether black Angelenos ought to buy or rent. He answered by diagnosing the tenant. Tenants "evade responsibility of almost any kind." The person who continues to pay rent is "weak-willed" and will do so against good sense "until sickness or adversity may wreck the power to pay." Against the effective absence of a welfare state in the 1920s, Dr. Humphrey foresaw tenants eventually becoming public charges. In sum, tenancy was a symptom of poor individual character. For realty men advertising in the *Eagle*, urban tenancy's weak schedule of rights, instability, and assumption of faulty character analogized the rent payer as a slave who shouldered the full responsibility for their unfreedom.<sup>141</sup> Tenants were not owners because they were "less enterprising."<sup>142</sup> Thus, the goal was not for society to abolish tenancy but for the individual to become a master—an owner and landlord. These achievements gilded the racial character of owners and justified analogizing tenancy to enslavement. The Walter L. Gordon Company described being a "house renter" in Los Angeles, with its wide availability of homes, as "appalling."<sup>143</sup> This message would effectively hold as a pillar of black property ideology and animate the property conflicts of homeownership and tenancy through the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It is to that history of conflict we now turn.

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<sup>141</sup> Oklahoma Investment Company Display Advertisement, *Eagle*, Dec 30, 1922.

<sup>142</sup> William H. Gamble & Co. Display Advertisement, *Eagle*, Oct 14, 1922.

<sup>143</sup> Walter L. Gordon Company Display Advertisement, *Eagle*, Jan 7, 1927.

## CHAPTER TWO: LONG BEACH AVENUE AND THE POLITICS OF SPECIAL ASSESSMENTS

On February 17, 1938, George Farley was both wielding and facing death. Two white marshals laid dead outside his Los Angeles home, slain by his hand with a friend's rifle. He prepared for a certain siege by the police, determined to die and to take white lives in opposition to a lawful eviction from a home he and Cora, his wife, once owned unencumbered. The black couple purchased the house at 1741 East 23<sup>rd</sup> Street on installments in 1923 for \$2,500. They successfully satisfied their mortgage in 1929. Despite Cora's negotiations to stave off a skillful financial predator, a private debt collector foreclosed their home in 1935 for a delinquent \$29 balance for special assessment that the city levied for the improvement of Long Beach Avenue, the industrial thoroughfare traversing their Eastside community.<sup>1</sup>

It was the violent nadir in the lives of Cora and George who, by all accounts, were common black migrants to a city whose real estate men and women had made so many promises. Cora was born in Texarkana, Arkansas, the seat of Miller County, around 1888. A census enumerator noted that her father dug wells for a living in 1910 but preaching the word of God filled his life. Cora's mother took in laundry that year, a businesswoman, and by then had birthed thirteen children and endured the returned of three of them to God. Cora's parents owned their home, and she left it to build another with George Farley, whom she married when she was 23 years old around 1911.<sup>2</sup> George was born in South Carolina. By 1900 he moved to Cora's home county with his mother and stepfather, who were farmers. At 17 years old, George labored on his

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<sup>1</sup> "Officers' Slayer to Make Plea When Able to Appear in Court," *California Eagle*, Feb 24, 1938.

<sup>2</sup> Ancestry.com. 1910 United States Federal Census [database on-line]. Lehi, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations Inc, 2006; 1930 United States Federal Census [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations Inc, 2002.

father's farm, where the demands of the harvest and the limits set on black life in the South provisioned only second grade schooling.<sup>3</sup> For unknown reasons, by unknown means, and on an unknown date, Cora and George decided to try to make Los Angeles home. By 1923, they bought a parcel of the city. Before the end of that hopeful decade, they were indebted to it. By the end of the next decade, they lost the property they owned, George was in prison for double murder, and Cora carried its aftermath. Indeed, something was amiss with property in the promised land.

Why were the Farleys, and hundreds of their working-class neighbors, financially obligated to pay for the improvement of Long Beach Avenue? More broadly, how did infrastructure development produce working-class land insecurity in Los Angeles, not through post-World War II eminent domain, but prewar municipal finance? How was Farleys' debt made and who commissioned it? This chapter gathers the scattered evidence needed to answer these questions.

The first stage of the Farleys' dispossession was a system of municipal infrastructure politics and finance central to the making of Los Angeles' modern roads in the early Twentieth Century. Amid city and private efforts to modernize urban infrastructure, state improvement laws effectively allowed business interests with speculative and logistical ambitions to direct road construction. The financing instrument embedded in those laws, called special assessments, spread the cost of these ambitions to surrounding property owners. On the industrial Eastside, by the market dictates of race and class segregation, those special assessments fell disproportionately on working-class homeowners like the Farleys. According to their city leaders, both black and white, improvements such as the opening, widening, and paving of Long

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<sup>3</sup> 1900 United States Federal Census. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations Inc, 2004.

Beach Avenue was necessary for progress. The working-class burdens of municipal debt, though, throws some necessary light on the lived experience of such urban development schemes.

## **THE IMPROVEMENTS OF URBAN PROGRESS**

The Farleys' migrated to Los Angeles at a time when a city's aggressive commitment to public improvements determined their level of "progress" in the growing field of "municipal sociology." The 1916 revised and expanded edition of *American Municipal Progress* delivered to city officials, social workers, realty men, and entrepreneurs case studies on cities' successful public improvement projects as the built companions of Progressive Era political reforms, such as "humanizing the police" and expanding citizen participation in the legislative process. The list of public improvements was dizzying: opening and widening streets, building vast parkways, paving dirt streets, street cleaning, installing ornamental electric lighting, building systems of public parks and libraries, among many others. These improvements were not understood as merely convenient or a frivolously luxury, they were essential for all cities without exception if they were to be modern. The authors exaggerated the point, "[T]he smallest city without a park and playground is not quite civilized."<sup>4</sup>

Among city highlights presented in the text were Kansas City and New York's park and boulevard projects of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and Chicago's completion of its boulevard system where Michigan Avenue crossed the Chicago River by way of a two-level bridge. Los Angeles too gained honorable mentions. "The Great White Way" was named for a section of Broadway in the city's downtown business district lined with ornamental electric light fixtures that later

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<sup>4</sup> Charles Zueblin and Helen Bernice Sweeny, *American Municipal Progress*, New and rev. ed. ed., Social Science Text-Books (New York: Macmillan Co., 1916), xii.

graced promotional postcards of the city.<sup>5</sup> The author praised the improvement as setting the pace for the rest of nation in public lighting. As to how it was paid for, they added in passing, “In Los Angeles to-day, as in most progressive cities, the lighting standards are erected by district assessment.” The collective progress achieved by these municipal improvements nationwide, the authors argued, served as “a greater advance than the whole nineteenth century compassed.”<sup>6</sup> These urban improvements were the new spatial standards defining and differentiating the measure of American cities and civilization in the adolescent years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The umbrellas of progress and civilization as municipal improvement became the products of special interest groups hungering for profit in the transformation of the land. Most prominent among them, perhaps, were real estate developers because street improvements were the jewels of value for their subdivisions. Developers with the capital built impressive thoroughfares gliding through subdivisions marketed to the wealthy and middle class as a strategy to increase access, desirability, and thus, value. For example, Henry Huntington’s San Marino development featured Huntington Drive, and Robert Gillis built San Vicente Boulevard in Los Angeles (Sawtelle).<sup>7</sup> Leimert Boulevard served as the centerpiece improvement of Leimert Park (1928), one of the earliest comprehensively planned communities in Los Angeles.<sup>8</sup> Wealthy property owners also collaborated with developers through improvement associations, who used Municipal Improvement Districts to tax themselves to claim for their real estate a

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid, 72; Postcard, Western Publishing & Novelty Co, “The Great White Way. ‘Broadway’ Los Angeles, California,” 1916, James H. Osborne Photograph Collection, Gerth Archives & Special Collections, Cal State Dominguez Hills. <https://cdm16855.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/p16855coll2/id/3303>

<sup>6</sup> Zueblin and Sweeny, *American Municipal Progress*, xii, 72, 272, 82, 93, 98-9.

<sup>7</sup> Robert M. Fogelson, *The Fragmented Metropolis : Los Angeles, 1850-1930* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 92-94.

<sup>8</sup> Hise, *Magnetic Los Angeles : Planning the Twentieth-Century Metropolis*, 15, 17.

modern thoroughfare. Such was the strategy used to issue a \$1 million in bonds to fund the construction of the twenty-one-mile Mulholland Drive in hopes of boosting property values by way of its attractive vistas.<sup>9</sup> A regional trade journal commented on the property owners' intent, "The property in the district is owned by a small group of capitalists who expect to be rewarded for their enterprise by the subdivision of the frontage on the highway into building sites."<sup>10</sup> Although the bountiful harvest of their intent was ill-fated, it demonstrated the deep investments in road improvement as the value added transformation of property.

Indeed, road improvements were inherently speculative in the game of uneven real estate development, but there were real, experiential differences and hazards in driving on some of Southern California's shoddy roads in the early Twentieth Century, certainly substantive enough to ridicule. When members of the Inter-City Commission presented the Board of Trustees of South Pasadena a resolution encouraging the benefits of "liberal spending for good roads and fine streets," a newly seated member joked that the road winding down Raymond Hill was kept rough for their own good, as the "jolting" was "fine for their livers." A member of the pleading commission testified, "Automobiles stop at my office every day to ask me where they can find a good road into Pasadena and I can't consciously say Fair Oaks," who also made the tall claim that property values recently rose 40 percent in Alhambra following a successful commitment for street improvements.<sup>11</sup> Similar arguments for street improvements in downtown Los Angeles became a kind of common sense of public welfare often featured in the *Los Angeles Times*, an

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<sup>9</sup> Fogelson, *The Fragmented Metropolis : Los Angeles, 1850-1930*, 94.

<sup>10</sup> As quoted in Matthew Roth, "Mulholland Highway and the Engineering Culture of Los Angeles in the 1920s," in *Metropolis in the Making : Los Angeles in the 1920s*, ed. Tom Sitton and William Deverell (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 45.

<sup>11</sup> "Good Roads Enhance the Value of Property," *Times*, May 24, 1912.

article pleaded in 1912, “We must tax our energies and our pockets until we have removed from the densely populated portions of the city, whether residence sections or for business, all the old 'dirt' streets that now are such a sore annoyance to those who have to pass through them.”<sup>12</sup>

Taxing energies to relieve drivers and passengers of the annoyance and aggravation of liver-jolting roads likely found broad consensus among Southern Californians, but the taxing of pockets was another matter. Financing public improvements, including streets, in many American cities prior to World War II relied heavily on the use of special assessments. A special assessment is a “special or local charge,” different than a property tax, levied on real property to finance a nearby improvement, most commonly for streets, but also for sewers, parks, trees, and public lighting. Its use is derived from a theory of benefit, that owners in the vicinity of a local improvement (assessment district) stand to gain from increased enjoyment and value of their property, and therefore, are directly charged for the improvement, instead of the use of general taxes or a bond issue.<sup>13</sup> As a city planner explained it, “the more a street was used the better it had to be improved and the more valuable the [property] frontage.”<sup>14</sup> Special assessments were critical financing instruments for accumulating capital for public improvements for cities in the U.S. until the 1930s, but especially so for capital poor cities in the West. Los Angeles, along with Kansas City, Portland, and Oakland, generated a full 20 percent of their 1913 annual revenue

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<sup>12</sup> "Let's Us Have the Streets," *Times*, Feb 6, 1910.

<sup>13</sup> California and Ernest Stoddard Page, *California Street Laws; a Discussion of the General Laws of California Relating to the Opening and Improving of Streets within Incorporated Cities and Towns, of Charter Provisions, and of the Principles Relating to Street Work by Private Contract, with Forms and an Appendix Containing the Text of the Statutes* (San Francisco: Bancroft-Whitney Co., 1911), 2-3.

<sup>14</sup> As quoted in Fogelson, *The Fragmented Metropolis : Los Angeles, 1850-1930*, 92.



from special assessments.<sup>15</sup> For property owners of these cities, these assessments could be modest, a few cents at times, or, at other times, they could be disastrously expensive, forcing property owners to surrender their properties when unable to pay them.<sup>16</sup>

Several state laws codified property owners and local governing bodies' authority to initiate, protest, and levy special assessments for public improvements. The Opening and Widening Act of 1903 and the Improvement Act of 1911 were most used for road construction in Los Angeles. The former authorized cutting new streets or widening existing ones, and the latter authorized street paving and sewer and sidewalk installation on existing streets. The Act of 1911 carried far more proceedings throughout the city than the Opening and Widening Act, over ten times as many in 1928. But the opening and widening of streets was nearly ten times more expensive per proceeding, \$428,015 versus \$44,656 for the Act of 1911, since the former often required the condemnation of properties abutting the street.<sup>17</sup> The two acts often worked in tandem, as they did for the Long Beach Avenue project.

Generally, the City Council (or Board of Supervisors for the County) passed an "Ordinance of Intention" for a new improvement proceeding, usually in response to a resident's petition or a report by the city engineer. Anyone could make a request, even if they did not own property around the improvement, which was a boon for speculators and businessmen. The city engineer then drafted an assessment district map which enumerated all properties to be assessed if approved. Property owners then received notice of the proposed project and a date for hearing

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<sup>15</sup> Tax Foundation, *Special Assessments and Service Charges in Municipal Finance* (New York 1970), 9.

<sup>16</sup> "'HOUSE AND LOT'--The Times' Weekly Review of Real Estate and Building," *Times*, July 14, 1901.

<sup>17</sup> John C. Porter, *Annual Message of the Mayor, 1930, Annual Message of the Mayor 1929-1930*, Box B-1061, Police Commission Files, City Archives and Records Center, Los Angeles, CA.

objections, which could also be mailed. An estimate of costs was not required. If a simple majority of property owners objected to the project, measured by property footage abutting the street, then the Council could either sustain the protest or overrule it. If less than a majority was achieved, the Council could move forward with the project, ultimately issuing special assessments *that carried a lien on each assessed property*.<sup>18</sup> In essence, an improvement ordinance was by default approved unless sufficiently protested, threatening possible foreclosure if unpaid as was the case with property taxes. Seemingly technical and coldly bureaucratic, the process was crowded with competing interests, rife with fraud, and held possibilities for common and uncommon bedfellows—from real estate speculators to contractors to segregated neighbors—and these collaborations and contests centered on the assessment district.<sup>19</sup>

Take, for instance, in 1931, when two white men crossed the racial boundary into Watts to present their municipal debt worries to the black women of the Republican Study Club. Although the men were “white residents north of 92<sup>nd</sup> street,” they were in the same assessment district as the black women, bound by Manchester and 100<sup>th</sup> Street north to south, and Central and Compton Avenues west to east. The two delegations gathered at the Mount Olive Baptist Church, where the white men warned the study group of two improvement projects whose special assessments would indebt the propertied among them. The informers shared that county properties in their district were exempt from the coming assessments for sewer installation and street paving which would increase their individual debts. The projected special assessment for the paving alone nearly equaled what black Angelenos paid in median rents over the course of

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<sup>18</sup> California and Page, *California Street Laws; a Discussion of the General Laws of California Relating to the Opening and Improving of Streets within Incorporated Cities and Towns, of Charter Provisions, and of the Principles Relating to Street Work by Private Contract, with Forms and an Appendix Containing the Text of the Statutes*, 411-15.

<sup>19</sup> Marshall Stimson, "The Special Assessment Racket," *Times*, Jan 17, 1932; Association California Taxpayers, *Brief on Special Assessment Laws and Procedures* (Los Angeles 1930).

seven months in 1930.<sup>20</sup> This proposed special assessment would carry a lien on the little rectangle of home so charged with it. Property was on the line, not over where racialized Angelenos could own it, but whether racialized Angelenos could pay the debts of city development to keep it. So warned of this threat, the club women formed a committee to research the improvements further and circulated petitions protesting the county exemptions and the planned street paving.<sup>21</sup> They did so triggered by white informants, who were partnered to them geographically by the assignment of debt which harbored the possibility of uncompensated land loss. Special assessment districts, then, deepened the meaning of urban proximity. They could defy the social lines of segregation and incorporate the racial motley of Los Angeles into a shared struggle over land, development, and debt.

Eastside residents also incorporated race itself into their social accounting of their assessment districts. Just walking distance from the Farleys' home, Mary Keily and her neighbors protested the Council's plan to install sidewalks on 20<sup>th</sup> Street between Compton and Long Beach Avenues in 1929. Keily was a white woman, born in California to Irish immigrants, and was the mother to four children. She balked at the Public Works Committee's report that sidewalks had already been installed on adjacent blocks and that residents west of Compton found it inconvenient to walk to the Pacific Electric station on Long Beach Avenue. Keily did not assess her neighborhood as deficient of this modern public mobility. It was "located in the industrial section of Los Angeles," she explained, and the area was "sparsely settled by residents and most of these either being colored or Mexican inhabitants, and that it is not necessary at this

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<sup>20</sup> "Central Gardens Notes," *Eagle*, Feb 6, 1931; the article notes that the paving assessment was \$3 per foot of property frontage. The common width of a working-class lot was about 40 feet, which equaled a \$120 assessment. Median rent in 1930 for black Angelenos was \$27, Census and Commerce, *Fifteenth Census of the United States : 1930*, Volume 6: Families, 162.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

time to construct sidewalks.”<sup>22</sup> In Keily’s racialized planning outlook, the district did not merit modern development because it was the living space of black and Mexican people which was also synonymous to industrial land use. It was a unique anti-development politics available to residents of racially diverse districts in Los Angeles. Keily chose not to plead poverty or financial hardship, although they may have been motivating factors. She simply informed the Council that the racial character of the land, surrounded by industrial land use and straddling a freight corridor, was not valuable enough for her household’s wages.

Citywide, property owners’ resistance to special assessments were not always borne out of anti-development politics, explicitly racial or otherwise. Improvements may have been desirable, but Angelenos sometimes rejected their obligation to pay *directly* through special assessments. When Theodosia Conner received notice in 1924 that city officials intended to open Flower Street south from Washington to 38<sup>th</sup> Street, she sent a letter protesting that the assessment district was “unjust and inequitable,” challenging her property’s inclusion in the area of benefit for the improvement, and thus, not liable for the debt and interest waiting in those special assessments. At the heart of the indignation though, Conner was not angling for a complete suspension of her financial obligation, but instead, the use of monies already paid by her and other propertied Angelenos. Usually reserved for notable street improvements, Conner demanded that the city not rely on special assessments but apply its power to issue bonds to raise capital, essentially spreading the cost of the improvement among taxpayers citywide.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Mary Keily to Council, Petition No. 3058 (1929), April 19, 1929, City Council Minutes, Council Minutes Archive, Archived Digital Vault, Los Angeles City Clerk, <https://clkrep.lacity.org/oldcfidocs/>.

<sup>23</sup> Theodosia B. Conner to Council, Petition No. 3093 (1924), May 13, 1924, City Council Minutes, Council Minutes Archive.

The decision between using special assessments or bond financing, or more commonly, of what proportion of each to dedicate to public improvements had been a long and unresolved conflict in Los Angeles. City officials, and sometimes voters, held the power to determine if an improvement served a “broad public benefit” that qualified it for those exclusive bonds whose use was capped by the city’s charter. Prior bond issues for major street improvements included \$3.5 million by the Board of Supervisors in 1909 and \$73 million issued by the California legislature between 1910 and 1920.<sup>24</sup> But, as the *Times* explained in 1913, the city’s bonding capacity must be jealously guarded for “projects that are imperative,” and it was “out of the question” to seek out that source of revenue for “ordinary improvements” even when the city’s use of special assessments was excessive.<sup>25</sup> Conner’s protest, though, picked at the spatial politics of that designation power, which had in its hands bond and special assessment. If the latter was chosen, as it was in the millions of dollars, a dangerous and fickle debt then threatened people’s cuts of land. This was often the dilemma of financing city modernization in the West prior to the Great Depression, progress as incessant development must be had but the means to debt were limited and sensitive to pressures on all sides. Long Beach Avenue’s improvement, we shall see, serves as a case study of Los Angeles broader development politics and its indebted means to those progressive ends.

## **DEBT FOR PROGRESS**

The debt at the center of the Farley double murder began with a standard, innocuous petition. In 1905, a new real estate firm headed by a conflict-ridden entrepreneur from West Virginia, James Monroe Flowers, petitioned with other business owners for improvement of

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<sup>24</sup> Fogelson, *The Fragmented Metropolis : Los Angeles, 1850-1930*, 94-95.

<sup>25</sup> “Piling Assessment Upon Assessment,” *Times*, Aug 3, 1913.

Long Beach Avenue, then a dirt road, by grading and oiling between 22<sup>nd</sup> and 29<sup>th</sup> streets.<sup>26</sup> In the first decade of the century, real estate concerns such as Flowers' began purchasing and subdividing the lands straddling the avenue north of Slauson, offering lots, cottages, and bungalows for sale with "wide graded and oiled streets, cement walks and curbs, [and] water piped to every lot."<sup>27</sup> One subdivider promised that "two great wide thoroughfares will traverse" the area, Long Beach Avenue and Holmes Avenue. With Compton Avenue as the "main highway to the sea" and the Pacific Electric rail line that ran down the center of Long Beach Avenue as a link to downtown (completed in 1902),<sup>28</sup> buyers were promised that the "tracts will enjoy transportation facilities unequalled in all the south."<sup>29</sup> Indeed, part of the package of selling Los Angeles was transportation infrastructure that made it accessible for destinations of work, consumption, and pleasure.

What they were subdividing and selling was the eastern boundary of what would become known as the Central Avenue district, the heart of historic Black Los Angeles. Long Beach Avenue would serve as a mixed residential and industrial area providing cheap housing for racially diverse working-class families, like the Farleys, who would labor in the surrounding industrial districts.<sup>30</sup> Rail infrastructure helped determined the destiny of industrial land uses surrounding the Central Avenue area. Pacific Electric established their main repair and

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<sup>26</sup> Petition 1331 (1905) from J.M. Flowers to City Council, Sept 19, 1905, CF 1295-1332 (1905), City Clerk Petitions, City Archives and Records Center, Los Angeles, CA.

<sup>27</sup> "Display Ad 57 – No Title," *Times*, March 22, 1908.

<sup>28</sup> Electric Railway Historical Association, "Long Beach Line," <http://www.erha.org/peslb.htm> (accessed September 5, 2019).

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid*; "Display Ad 125 – No Title," *Times*, Dec 9, 1906.

<sup>30</sup> For Central Avenue area boundaries in 1930 see, Flamming, *Bound for Freedom : Black Los Angeles in Jim Crow America*, 94.

maintenance shops at 7<sup>th</sup> and Central in 1902 and their main freight yard for the Southern District lay across the Los Angeles river, establishing the rail infrastructure for what would become the Central Manufacturing District from the City of Vernon eastward. Immediately north, the East Side Industrial District of Downtown would develop from 9<sup>th</sup> Street to Elysian Park between Alameda and the Los Angeles River.<sup>31</sup> Long Beach Avenue's proximity to industry, rail infrastructure, and residence would entangle competing interests as both Black Los Angeles and the rest of the city bought and built space in the early decades of the Twentieth Century.

As Flowers' petition alerted, the condition of Long Beach Avenue in the opening decades of the Twentieth Century was inadequate for real estate speculation, and apparently, for city officials and manufacturers. As Flowers' business fate devolved into assaults, fraud, and eventual imprisonment, the City Engineer, Board of Public Works, and local manufacturing concerns expanded his speculative improvement into a grander plan.<sup>32</sup> Prior to its improvement in the late-1920s, Long Beach Avenue ran south to north between Slauson and 9<sup>th</sup> Street. It provided local access to budding subdivisions of mixed residential and industrial use on its western and eastern flanks, but its irregular cuts from its piecemeal development made it useless as a through highway between Slauson Avenue and the southern reaches of downtown's industrial district.<sup>33</sup> South from 9<sup>th</sup> Street, the avenue abruptly terminated at Washington Boulevard, then continued south as two roads straddling the Pacific Electric rails. Neither road

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<sup>31</sup> Tom Sitton and William Deverell, *Metropolis in the Making : Los Angeles in the 1920s* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 14 and 101.

<sup>32</sup> On Flowers' tumultuous career in real estate and business see, "A Few Unhappy Happenings," *Times*, Jan 25, 1903; "J.M. Flowers, Arrested for Fraud, Shows Fight," *Times*, Oct 25, 1919; "One-Ten Years for Flowers," *Times*, Jan 4, 1921; Ancestry.com. California, Prison and Correctional Records, 1851-1950 [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2014.

<sup>33</sup> Homer Hamlin, Map of the City of Los Angeles: Showing Location of Sanitary Sewers, June 1916, City Engineer Annual Report 1915-1916, Box C-0725, City Archives and Records Center, Los Angeles, CA; "Bids to Be Opened on Widening," *Times*, July 11, 1927.

was uniformly cut continuously south to Slauson. To partially rectify the problem, the City Engineer in May 1909 recommended, and the Board approved, to open and widen Long Beach Avenue forty feet on each side of the Pacific Electric tracks between 20<sup>th</sup> and 39<sup>th</sup> streets. In November 1909, the Board expanded the engineer's recommendation, proposing to open and widen a straight cut from 20<sup>th</sup> Street south to Slauson Avenue, which the City Council approved.<sup>34</sup> Neither the Board of Public Works nor the Council offered a justification for the expansion of the project at the time.

One of the largest producers of olive oil and canned ripe olives in the world at the turn of the century, the American Olive Company (Amoco), called the city's plan inadequate. As proposed, Long Beach Avenue would still have a gap in travel between 20<sup>th</sup> Street and Washington Boulevard. The company supported the southern boundary of the improvement but petitioned the Council to extend it north to Washington instead of the currently proposed 20<sup>th</sup> Street. Although Amoco's explicit planning interest in the extension are unknown, the City Engineer assessed that extending the improvement to Washington would create a continuous street from Slauson to 8<sup>th</sup> Street, "which would be of great benefit to the manufacturing industries lying on the easterly side of Long Beach Avenue south of 20th street."<sup>35</sup> With direct access as far north as 8<sup>th</sup> street, manufacturers on Long Beach Avenue would gain an alternate and expanded route to Downtown's industrial district, including Amoco's processing facilities on

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<sup>34</sup> Board of Public Works to City Council, Nov 2, 1909, City Council Minutes, File 1021909, Council Minutes Archive, Archived Digital Vault, Los Angeles City Clerk, <https://clkrep.lacity.org/oldcfidocs/>.

<sup>35</sup> Report from City Engineer to Council, Feb 21, 1911, City Council Minutes, File 2211911, Council Minutes Archive, Archived Digital Vault.



the east and west sides of Long Beach Avenue near East Adams Boulevard.<sup>36</sup> Neither the City Engineer nor Amoco proffered any potential benefits to local property owners.

Amoco's petition was no small ask. The extension would lengthen the project approximately an eighth of a mile, necessitate more property condemnations, extend the total time for proceedings, increase the cost of the improvement, and thus create more debt for future homeowners like the Farleys. Amoco's petition carried significant influence. Wealthy Southern California landowners organized Amoco in 1904 to process, market, and sell their olive crops grown on their sprawling ranches. Perhaps the most notable incorporator was James Irvine II, who inherited his father's acquisitions comprised of three Spanish and Mexican land grants—110,000 acres stretching 23 miles in today's Orange County from the Pacific Ocean inland to the Santa Ana River (including his namesake city Irvine established in the 20<sup>th</sup> century). In the 1880s, Irvine shifted land use from cattle grazing to a diversity of agriculture, including 110 acres of olive orchards, whose 100,000-pound annual yields by 1907 became the inaugural raw ingredients for Amoco's Eastside processing plant.<sup>37</sup>

Charles Henry Frost was also part of Amoco's wealthy cohort of original investors. His independent business ventures began in Chicago. In 1877 he organized that city's only pressed brick company, the fundamental ingredient of the urban built environment in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. He made a fortune. In 1886, he sold his interest in the company and moved west searching for investment opportunities in a much smaller, more rural Los Angeles region marked with the

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<sup>36</sup> Appendix to the Journals of the Senate and Assembly of the Forty-third Session of the Legislature of the State of California, Vol V, 1919, 371.

<sup>37</sup> Kemper Cambell, interview by Corne L. Gilb, April 13, 1954. Library Press Reference and Examiner Los Angeles, *Notables of the Southwest, Being the Portraits and Biographies of Progressive Men of the Southwest* (Los Angeles, Cal.: The Los Angeles Examiner, 1912). "CHEAP TRICK IN OLIVE OIL," *Times*, March 11, 1906; "James Irvine Turns Ranch Into Agricultural Treasure," <http://irvinehistory.org/james-irvine-ii-turns-ranch-into-agricultural-treasure/> (accessed May 26, 2019).

attributes of urban growth and its accompanying material demands. Duplicating his Chicago business plan, Frost organized the Los Angeles Pressed Brick Company the year following his arrival, capitalized by other wealthy men, including Isaac Newton Van Nuys, who owned ninety square miles of the southern San Fernando Valley. The company produced some six million bricks per year, used in the construction of “practically every large building” in Los Angeles, including the ten-story Huntington (Pacific Electric) Building, twelve-story Trust Building, and his own six-story Frost Building, all in Downtown Los Angeles. Like other wealthy men in Southern California, Frost bought land. His 115 acres of olive trees grew in El Toro, today’s Lake Forest just southeast of Irvine’s orchard, whose yields would join Irvine’s at the Amoco plant on Long Beach Avenue. With James Irvine II and Charles Frost as financiers and suppliers, along with a board of directors that included the railway and real estate magnate Henry Huntington, Amoco certainly held considerable political and economic influence in Los Angeles and Southern California more broadly.<sup>38</sup>

In the context of Amoco’s financial and governing ties to some of the wealthiest and influential white men in Southern California, the City Council approved Amoco’s request in March 1911, finalizing the boundaries for the opening and widening of Long Beach Avenue between Slauson and Washington. What began as a *speculative improvement* for real estate concerns in 1905 grew into an *industrial infrastructure project* by 1911 to service industrial truck traffic. This proxy business planning of local road infrastructure in early 20<sup>th</sup> century Los

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<sup>38</sup> *Notables of the Southwest, Being the Portraits and Biographies of Progressive Men of the Southwest*, 239. Burton, George Ward. *Men of Achievement in the Great Southwest, Illustrated: A Story of Pioneer Struggles during Early Days in Los Angeles and Southern California. with Biographies, Heretofore Unpublished Facts, Anecdotes, and Incidents in the Lives of the Builders*. Los Angeles: Los Angeles Times, 1904, 67.

Angeles was standard practice, and it would define the life of the Long Beach Avenue project.<sup>39</sup> State improvement laws, in this case the Opening and Widening Act of 1903, empowered local governing bodies to initiate and define street improvements “[w]henver the public interest or convenience may require” and influential businesses such as Amoco simply had to write a letter to those governing bodies to inscribe their logistical needs into Los Angeles’ landscape. Those needs would be subsidized by the working class residents who planted their stakes in the lands surrounding the avenue, that object of urban progress.

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Around Christmas of 1913, two years after the City Council passed the Ordinance of Intention to open and widen Long Beach Avenue, Eastside property owners finally received a postcard from the City Clerk notifying them of the improvement. The message was uninformative and concise. It offered no estimate of the cost or benefit to the recipient. If property owners wished to contest it, written protest should be filed with the City Clerk within thirty days of the notice.<sup>40</sup>

In the subsequent letters of protest, working class homeowners gave the City Council plenty of reasons to forego continuation of the improvement. For one, wrote several owners, it would not benefit them. Alameda, Compton, and Central already enabled the same direction of travel, and they had no problem getting to their destinations of pleasure, like the beach. Additionally, the avenue’s high-grade railroad crossings, argued the Long Beach Boulevard Improvement Association, made them “regular death traps.” Earlier that year, the driver of a

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<sup>39</sup> On the role of business in infrastructure planning see, Fogelson, *The Fragmented Metropolis : Los Angeles, 1850-1930*, 92.

<sup>40</sup> Minnie Nathan et al to Council, Petition 161, Jan 21, 1914, City Clerk Petitions 151-164, Box A-53, City Archives and Records Center.

bakery wagon and his young child passenger died when stuck at a Pacific Electric rail crossing on Long Beach Avenue. Witnesses, including the child's mother, were aghast at the sight of their bodies being thrown forty feet from the impact.<sup>41</sup> From the planning perspective of these Eastside property owners, indebting themselves to widen this dangerous and effectively useless avenue would not manifest any net benefits for popular traffic or the lives it carried.

Compounding the lack of popular need and safety, working-class owners feared that they could not afford the assessments the City resolved to levy for the improvement. Similar to the industrial suburb of South Gate, Eastside residents chose the area because it offered affordable ownership in Los Angeles; and unlike South Gate, it lacked race restrictive covenants.<sup>42</sup> A local homeowner, R.B. Page, informed the Council that most residents chose the industrial Eastside for this very reason. But, as Page worriedly told the Council, people still struggled to pay the financing terms on their property and all the associated costs. "It is all we can do to pay the city taxes[,] most of it takes several years to pay just the lot alone," complained Page.<sup>43</sup> Associated costs included prior assessments. Property owners complained they were already paying assessments for other street and sewer improvements. One encumbered owner claimed three separate assessments on his lot at Long Beach Avenue and 26<sup>th</sup> Street.<sup>44</sup> Given these problems of popular utility and affordability, the Long Beach Boulevard Improvement Association concluded

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<sup>41</sup> "Mother Waves Last Farewell," *Los Angeles Times*, May 24, 1913.; L.M. Brown et al to Council, Petition 163, Jan 21, 1914, City Clerk Petitions 151-164, Box A-53, City Archives and Records Center.

<sup>42</sup> Nicolaidis, *My Blue Heaven : Life and Politics in the Working-Class Suburbs of Los Angeles, 1920-1965*.

<sup>43</sup> Mrs. R.B. Page to Council, Petition 437, Feb 25, 1914, City Clerk Petitions 408-450, City Archives and Records Center.

<sup>44</sup> H.E. Siddall to City Council, Jan 20, 1914, Petition 162, City Clerk Petitions 151-164, Box A-53, City Archives and Records Center.

that the use of the law to push the improvement forward would deprive “the poor, who cannot pay the assessment, of their homes.”<sup>45</sup>

The clutch of protest letters solicited by the City Clerk’s postcard were anxious, pleading, and probably useless. Eastside owners would have needed to write hundreds of them to legally force termination of the project. The City’s postcard failed, or omitted, to inform them that they could overrule the Council’s ordinance if owners representing a simple majority of property footage protested the improvement, measured as the length of property abutting the street in the assessment district. The total property footage in the Long Beach Avenue district was 123,715 feet, meaning an owner protest representing 61,858 feet was required to force the City Council to suspend the proceeding for at least six months or, at their discretion, abandon the project completely.<sup>46</sup> The typical length of a working-class owner’s residential lot was a mere 40 feet. A dozen letters would not suffice. Given that arithmetic of power, over 1,500 forty-foot property owners needed to protest the project to avoid the added insecurity of municipal debt. It was a vital piece of information, couched in complex state improvement law, that the City had no legal obligation to reveal to the working-class, migrant, racially and ethnically diverse homeowners of the Eastside.

However, opposing Eastside property owners gained an unusual ally—the Pacific Electric Railway Company—who was the single largest property owner in the assessment district. By 1914, Henry Huntington’s Pacific Electric had transformed Los Angeles into a modern metropolis of the West and laid the transportation infrastructure that would help define

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<sup>45</sup> Letter from Long Beach Boulevard Improvement Association to City Council, Feb 25, 1914, Petition No. 437, City Clerk Petitions 408-450, City Archives and Records Center.

<sup>46</sup> Letter from City Engineer to Council, Feb 11, 1914, Petition No. 160, City Clerk Petitions 151-164, Box A-53, City Archives and Records Center.

its characteristic sprawl from the Pacific Ocean to its inland deserts and from its northern valley to its southern harbor.<sup>47</sup> Pacific Electric's Long Beach passenger and freight line ran parallel down the middle of Long Beach Avenue and served as the backbone of Pacific Electric's freight oriented Southern District.<sup>48</sup> State road improvement laws made a railroad company's land, including their tracks' right-of-way, subject to assessment for improvements the as residential and industrial lots.<sup>49</sup> Pacific Electric and its land company (Pacific Electric Land Company) collectively owned 19,887 feet of property frontage. They would incur the greatest debt for the project but also held the greatest amount of power since property footage gave proportional franchise. Pacific Electric cast their nineteen thousand feet of choice against the improvement, over thirty percent of the required majority to stop the project.<sup>50</sup>

Even with Pacific Electric's massive property holdings, the improvement's opposition was still far short of attaining a majority, but Pacific Electric knew Los Angeles' road politics. With their massive property footage, a successful protest needed a few hundred—not over a thousand— signatures representing opposing property owners. When they submitted their company's nineteen-thousand-foot protest, a petition accompanied it with over 550 signatures representing mostly small property owners. Pacific Electric representatives, like corporate evangelists, must have canvased the working-class neighborhood for signatures, which also

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<sup>47</sup> Merry Ovnick, *Los Angeles, the End of the Rainbow* (Los Angeles: Balcony Press, 1994), 142.

<sup>48</sup> Electric Railway Historical Association, "Long Beach Line," <http://www.erha.org/peslb.htm> (accessed September 5, 2019).

<sup>49</sup> California and Page, *California Street Laws; a Discussion of the General Laws of California Relating to the Opening and Improving of Streets within Incorporated Cities and Towns, of Charter Provisions, and of the Principles Relating to Street Work by Private Contract, with Forms and an Appendix Containing the Text of the Statutes*, 432-33.

<sup>50</sup> Pacific Electric Railway Company et al, Petition No. 160, Jan 21, 1914, City Clerk Petitions 151-164, Box A-53, City Archives and Records Center.

doubled to inform owners of the proceedings when notifications were notoriously unreliable. Pacific Electric's intervention created a corporate-working class alliance. This allied protest was significant—51,219 feet—which still fell 10,000 feet short of a majority but constituted a formidable opposition to the project, nonetheless.<sup>51</sup> The petition revealed not only the volume of opposition on the Eastside, but also its geographic concentration over the two mile stretch of Long Beach Avenue between Washington and Slauson. A significant portion of signatories lived in the northern portion of the assessment district, between 20<sup>th</sup> Street and Vernon Avenue, with few signatories between Vernon south to Slauson.

Concentrated to the south, the Long Beach Avenue project had its proponents, most conspicuously, the Compton Avenue District Improvement Association. The organization was a medley of business owners, would-be politicians, and speculative real estate men who lived predominately south of Slauson where Long Beach Avenue terminated and the street car suburb of Huntington Park began.<sup>52</sup> By the early 1920s, the area south of Slauson would come to be defined as a sort of white working class factory suburb, a hotspot of KKK organizing, and a fierce prosecutor of segregation.<sup>53</sup> While these politics of segregation were largely solidified in 1914, the politics of development were not, as far as the Compton Avenue Improvement was concerned. Since 1905, real estate developers marketed the area under their respective tract names—Miramonte Tract, Florence Villa Tract, Bryson Villa Tract, for example—making

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid; also Minnie Nathan et al, Petition No. 161 (1914); E.L. Henck et al, No. 162 (1914); and L.M. Brown et al, Petition No. 163.

<sup>52</sup> Index to Water Co's Maps, Huntington Park, Los Angeles County, California, circa 1890-1910, Hurley-Wright Surveyors Map Collection, LMU Digital Collections, Loyola Marymount University William H. Hannon Library. <https://lmudigitalcollections.quartexcollections.com/Documents/Detail/index-to-water-cos-maps-huntington-park-los-angeles-county-california/11275>.

<sup>53</sup> see Map 3, 4, and 5 for KKK activity and "faultlines" Gibbons, *City of Segregation : One Hundred Years of Struggle for Housing in Los Angeles*, 35, 47; Kurashige, *The Shifting Grounds of Race : Black and Japanese Americans in the Making of Multiethnic Los Angeles*, 43-44.

similar promises of sure profit, efficient transport, health, and abundant fruit.<sup>54</sup> The Association tried to make those promises pay in infrastructure.

For the Association, the improvement of Long Beach Avenue was also part of a larger attack on the infrastructure of the Pacific Electric Railway, which they indicted as a speculative obstacle to raising the value of property and people in their neighborhood. They calculated that Pacific Electric's four-track freight line on Long Beach Avenue was a value draining nuisance for residential speculation. Others thought the same. Protesting plans to build a municipal rail line, George Wilson of the San Pedro Street Improvement Association warned, "Do you want your children killed or maimed? Do you think it will improve your property? If you do, look at Santa Fe avenue and Long Beach avenue."<sup>55</sup>

In concert with street improvement, the association petitioned the City Council to force Pacific Electric to lower its tracks to street grade and remove fencing along Long Beach Avenue, ban elevated tracks (the city railroad engineer's solution to dangerous rail crossings), clear billboards, and provide passenger rail extensions on Ascot and Compton avenues south to Slauson. These logistical and aesthetic changes, they hoped, would help increase property values by making the area more accessible, safer, and less visibly industrial.<sup>56</sup>

These two factions, tangled in what the *Los Angeles Times* described as "months of controversy," entered the Council chambers of City Hall on February 25, 1914 for the hearing

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<sup>54</sup> "Bryson OK Villa," *Times*, May 22, 1904; "Florence Villa Tract" and "Miramonte Tract," *Times*, Feb 28, 1905.

<sup>55</sup> "Fight Municipal Line and Favor PE," *Times*, Oct 17, 1912.

<sup>56</sup> "Tracks at Grade, Elevated Roadway Opposed," *Times*, May 10, 1914; "Against 'L' Roads, Association Petitions," *Times*, Sep 19, 1914; Compton Avenue Improvement Association, Petition No. 1732, Sept 3, 1914, City Council Minutes, Council Minutes Archive, Archived Digital Vault; Petition 2178 and 2179, Sept 21, 1914, City Council Minutes.



that would decide the approval or rejection of the Long Beach Avenue improvement. Against the project stood representatives from Pacific Electric and opposing property owners. In favor of the project stood representatives from the Compton Avenue Improvement Association and the Los Angeles Investment Company, of which Harry Chandler was third vice president. Although it was not legally required to secure approval for the improvement, the project's proponents submitted a petition representing about 3,500 feet of property footage requesting that the protest (representing over 51,000 feet) be overruled. The Council, indeed, had the authority to do so since Pacific Electric's petition fell short of achieving a majority. Despite this technical requirement, the minority petition represented a large cohort of small property owners, whose pleas convinced the Council to abandon the proceedings for the improvement of Long Beach Avenue. Although the Council was sympathetic to the financial hardship property owners exclaimed, they thought the proceedings ought to move forward as soon as "better conditions prevail," which effectively meant either less owner resistance or more owner support.<sup>57</sup>

The Compton Avenue Improvement Association worked to make those conditions prevail expeditiously by misinformation, promotion, and petition. In a *Los Angeles Times* article in May, the group disingenuously framed the dispute over the improvement proceeding as the Pacific Electric against a united front of homeowners whose community needs were "frowned on" by city officials. They claimed six thousand homeowners—there were only an estimated 2,200 lots—had struggled for years to have Long Beach Avenue opened, only to be thwarted by Pacific Electric's 20,000-foot petition. The *Times* reporter never pressed the claim's veracity, so no mention was made about the hundreds of opposing property owners nor the exaggerated estimate

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<sup>57</sup> City Council Minutes, Feb 25, 1914, Council Minutes Archive, Archived Digital Vault; Petitions 161, 162, 163, 433, 434, 435, 436; "Long Beach Avenue Protest Sustained," *Times*, Feb 26, 1914.

of support. The Association tied this misleading claim to other Pacific Electric transgressions widely shared among residents. First, the billboards on Pacific Electric land straddling the avenue gave rail passengers the impression that the area was not “peopled by a desirable class” and were “unsanitary, unsightly, and dangerous.” Second, and most urgent, Pacific Electric ran their cars at high speed across the avenue, which the Compton group charged “menaces the lives of the public.”<sup>58</sup> The horrific death of the bakery wagon driver and his five-year-old passenger the year prior gave the Association’s complaints the weight and indignation of preventable death.

The Compton Avenue Improvement Association’s public talking points give an indication of their door-to-door message as they canvassed the assessment district for petition signatures in support of the improvement. The Association drew their battle lines, Pacific Electric versus property owners. An anonymous letter to the editor of the *Times* titled “Long Beach Avenue,” echoed this message in April when it questioned, “Are you a stockholder in the P.E.? If not, sign the petition and get your neighbor to do likewise.”<sup>59</sup> By August 1914, the Compton association submitted their 45,000-foot minority petition for the opening, widening, and extension of Long Beach Avenue to the City Council. Pacific Electric representatives submitted a new protest, which had not lost much ground from the prior February protest, representing 50,300-feet of property, a loss of about 1,000 feet. The protests demonstrated that the Association organized a different base of support for the project, owners who lived further south and west of the industrial district homeowners.

Nearly a year of infrastructure organizing culminated in a public hearing on January 20, 1915. The Association achieved what the Council wanted—an increased show of support for the

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<sup>58</sup> “Want Avenue Opened,” *Times*, May 13, 1914.

<sup>59</sup> “Long Beach Avenue,” *Times*, April 1, 1914.

improvement that the Council and the Board of Public Works already desired. Neither side of the conflict held a clear majority. The burden of evidence, though, fell to the opposition, where the law required a majority protest to achieve a mandatory stoppage of the improvement. The Council denied the protest and authorized the two-mile widening of Long Beach Avenue. Given the size of the project, the Council passed an ordinance in March to extend the time of the proceedings, which was required to allow the City Attorney appropriate time for the property condemnations necessary for the improvement. Those condemnations would take nearly 10 years to complete, and the prospective debt sat coiled in Eastside properties waiting for the next phase of development.

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This was the history, politics, and planning of a modern Long Beach Avenue into which the Farleys bought their home in 1923. Real estate ads in the *California Eagle* promised Black prospective homeowners like the Farleys certain profit if they purchased a home in a rapidly growing Los Angeles. Perhaps, above all, they promised security—of status, wages, and place—unavailable to tenants who were subordinate to their landlords. More intimately than those promises was the guarantee the seller offered the Farleys. George recalled the seller’s assurance, “It was one of the best kinds of deeds and that nobody could ever take the place from me unless I mortgaged it or sold it.”<sup>60</sup> But behind and among them were the politics of municipal infrastructure debt. Vested industrial and property interests with logistical and speculative needs influenced, prodded, and pushed a development-oriented City Council to improve Long Beach Avenue amid no clear majority supporting the project. Consequently, they sowed the neighborhood with special assessment debt that could, if unpaid, result in foreclosures.

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<sup>60</sup> “Farley Tells Slaying Story,” *Sentinel*, May 19, 1938.

In the budding years of the Farleys' homeownership, Long Beach Avenue debt multiplied as exploding automobile use pressured Los Angeles' infrastructure needs. During the 1920s, Los Angeles County added 45,000 new automobiles per day.<sup>61</sup> The cars became a populace unto themselves, demanding accommodation in the chaotic form of traffic. In addition to private automobiles, Los Angeles industries populated the roads with an increasing inventory of commercial trucks that, by April 1924, numbered nearly 50,000. The influential traffic study, *A Major Traffic Street Plan for Los Angeles* published in May 1924, recommended, along with widening roads and other interventions, paving dirt streets to increased traffic speed.<sup>62</sup> At the recommendation of the city engineer in October, the Council moved to authorize paving and laying sewers on Long Beach Avenue for industrial traffic, which required thicker pavement and robust drainage, increasing the cost of the improvement versus the paving of a residential street.<sup>63</sup> Eastsiders like the Farleys would subsidize these modernization costs.

Eastside freight companies and manufacturers, such as the Union Terminal Warehouse, supported the paving, petitioning the Council for the same improvement in early 1925.<sup>64</sup> The Union Terminal Company (parent company of the Union Terminal Warehouse) was, perhaps, the largest international and domestic commercial shipper in Southern California. In 1917, the

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<sup>61</sup> Eric Avila, *Popular Culture in the Age of White Flight : Fear and Fantasy in Suburban Los Angeles* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 192.

<sup>62</sup> Traffic Commission of the City and County of Los Angeles and Major Highways Committee, "Major Traffic Street Plan, Los Angeles, California," (Los Angeles: The Commission, 1924), 17, 20.

<sup>63</sup> "The coming of the fast motor vehicle and of trucks and trailers with very heavy loads—amounting sometimes to as much as 10 and 12 tons on two wheels—has made necessary more permanent, wider, heavier and far more costly hard surface pavements on streets subjected to this traffic," *Major Traffic Street Plan*, 20; Office of the Board of Public Works to City Council, Oct 15, 1924, Petition 6596 (1924), City Council Files, Box A-224, Petitions 1924 Vol. 1568-6685, Los Angeles City Archives and Records Center.

<sup>64</sup> Terminal Wholesale Co. et al, Petition 2465, April 23, 1925, No. 6596, Petitions 1924 Vol. 1568, 6586-6685, Box A-224, City Council Files, City Archives and Records Center.

company built a two-million-square-foot storage, shipping, and wholesale complex at Central and 7<sup>th</sup> Street, a part of which was the Union Terminal Warehouse (now the American Apparel factory) and the Terminal Produce Market.<sup>65</sup> The complex created a centralized wholesale and shipping district for the regions burgeoning produce industry. This downtown facility would complement the half-million square foot warehouse the company leased at the San Pedro Harbor in 1920, which “housed the majority of non-petroleum goods shipped into and out of the southern California markets.”<sup>66</sup> Sited at the northern terminus of Long Beach Avenue, the widened and paved street would offer the downtown wholesale district reciprocal access to their potential client manufacturing plants straddling the avenue, also signatories on the petition. There was the Marbelite Corporation of America, manufacturer of the ubiquitous ornamental lighting fixtures for which the authors of *American Municipal Progress* so praised Los Angeles.<sup>67</sup> A newcomer to the Eastside, Mack International Motor Truck Corporation, was also a signatory. They built their \$750,000 distribution plant between Long Beach Avenue and Alameda Street, “one of the most important adjuncts to the automotive industry in Southern California.”<sup>68</sup> These companies and others like them, some native and others eastern branch plants, were the putative beneficiaries of further improvement of Long Beach Avenue.

By the decade’s end, the Farleys and neighboring property owners received their allotments of debt for the improvement of Long Beach Avenue, a parcel of progress for the

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<sup>65</sup> Greg Hise, "'Nature's Workshop,' Industry and Urban Expansion in Southern California, 1900-1950," in *Manufacturing Suburbs : Building Work and Home on the Metropolitan Fringe*, ed. Robert D. Lewis (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University, 2004), 185.

<sup>66</sup> *The Traffic World*, Vol 32, July 14, 1923, 115; “Warehouse No. 1, the Product,” Port of Los Angeles Virtual History Tour, [http://laporthistory.org/level4/Warehouse1/warehouse\\_product.html](http://laporthistory.org/level4/Warehouse1/warehouse_product.html).

<sup>67</sup> “Marbelite Corporation of America,” *Times*, Feb 19, 1923.

<sup>68</sup> “Big Mack Truck Plant Rushed,” *Times*, Feb 22, 1925.

making of modern Los Angeles. The Council levied assessments for each phase of the improvement authorized under different improvement laws: one assessment for opening, widening, and extending; another for paving; and another for the installation of a sewer. The Farleys' neighbors knew the beneficiaries of the improvement were not the same as those paying for it. Fred Bold, 81 years old, from New Jersey of German parents explained it plainly to the Council in 1927 that "[o]ur property is most all industrial it will only be a question of a short time that Long Beach ave will be all cut up with tracks to factorys [sic] from the P.E.R.R. [Pacific Electric]." Sabrina Encagli also mentioned the certain railroad tracks to come and added, "I can't see how it will benefit to widen Long Beach avenue unles [sic] it is some Contractor."<sup>69</sup> None of the letters mentioned anything about property values, equity, or improved access as potential private or public benefits accrued to residential owners in the district. L.H. and Artie Broyles' letter placed the matter in what is often the final arbiter of working-class life, "we are not able to pay."<sup>70</sup> The Council's continual dismissal of these working class needs and burdens since 1914 was another seed planted for the future killing grounds on Long Beach Avenue and East 23<sup>rd</sup> Street.

The black policy elite of the Eastside largely ignored this working-class discontent over municipal debt. As households like the Farleys' slowly drowned in special assessments by the close of the 1920s, the policy elite's chosen struggle of residential property was segregation, chiefly, the battle against race restrictive covenants. Historian Andrea Gibbons claimed this campaign among black bourgeois property owners sought to out-boost and out-homeowner white

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<sup>69</sup> Fred Bold and Sabrina Encagli to City Council, March 26, 1927, Petition Nos. 2726-2730 (1927), City Clerk Petitions 2701-2740, Box A-330, City Council Files, City Archives and Records Center.

<sup>70</sup> L.H. and Artie Broyles to City Clerk, April 7, 1927, Petition Nos. 2726-2730 (1927), City Clerk Petitions 2701-2740, Box A-330, City Council Files, City Archives and Records Center.

Angelenos to “prove their class position and desirability as neighbors” and win white acceptance.<sup>71</sup> This also meant a commitment to street improvements. Following the publication of the *Major Traffic Street Plan*, the *Eagle* called Eastside readers to take notice of the street improvements happening all over the city. With each “one [sic] vieing with the other to beautify the section in which they live,” the *Eagle* pleaded for black Angelenos to organize improvement associations “to look after the attainment of all things which will beautify and improve this section.”<sup>72</sup> As the newly established Liberty Building Loan Association strategized in 1925, improvements were not just about beauty. “The Great Eastside” was, in the speculative eyes of the black real estate industry, favorably sited between the downtown business district, the harbor, and the central manufacturing district “in which millions of dollars are now being spent for factories.” Street improvements will increase Black Los Angeles’ property values because “the city's growth and major traffic plans reveal that we hold a most strategic position in the future development.”<sup>73</sup> With a politics of anti-segregation married to a politics of development, the Eastside’s own political leadership could not see, or chose not to, the politics of debt necessary to make beauty and equity in Los Angeles real estate possible.

By the Farleys’ account, they owed a total of \$119 for the improvement of Long Beach Avenue, a debt nearly equal to five months of their mortgage payment.<sup>74</sup> The creation of the municipal debt was more than a decade in the making before the Farleys purchased their home.

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<sup>71</sup> Gibbons, *City of Segregation : One Hundred Years of Struggle for Housing in Los Angeles*, 31-32.

<sup>72</sup> *Eagle*, Oct 3, 1924.

<sup>73</sup> "Property Holdings Show Large Increase," *Eagle*, March 13, 1925.

<sup>74</sup> Superior Court of Los Angeles County, Case #716634, *City of Los Angeles vs. George Farley* (1938), Archives and Records Center, Los Angeles, CA.

At times coordinated, other times merely synchronized, a varied cohort of manufacturing, real estate, and shipping concerns used their economic and political clout to ensure the approval of the Long Beach Avenue improvement. They did not need to pry too forcefully. The City Council acted as a vehicle empowering business driven planning at the literal expense of working-class property owners, who were financially linked to industrial infrastructure interests by a stratified residential geography of race and class. An exasperated Eastside homeowner, Margery Alexander wrote the Council in 1927 in response to the paving special assessment, “all property owners are near bankrupt now[,] I think the goose that laid the golden egg is just about dead.”<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> Letter from Margery Alexander to City Council, April 11, 1927, Petitions No. 2726-2730 (1927), City Clerk Petitions 2701-2740, Box A-330, City Council Files, City Archives and Records Center.



## CHAPTER THREE: PREDATORY MUNICIPAL DEBT COLLECTION IN LOS ANGELES

The Farleys' indebted property was a small, rectangular piece of Los Angeles' explosive growth during the 1920s, which brought a combination of hasty subdivisions, industrial development, and longing people who purchased more automobiles than any other city in the country. The early rise of the automobile age in Los Angeles aggravated problems in the city's turn of the century infrastructure, such as traffic and death, among others. A bevy of special interests and municipal officials, some coordinated, others not, instigated road building all over the city. In the Farleys' Eastside subdivision, those interests met over the prior campaign for the improvement of Long Beach Avenue, where the race and class segregation of urban real estate and special assessment financing ensured working class property owners subsidized industrial infrastructure. These needs, and not those of neighborhood residents, instigated the creation the Farleys' debt prior to the 1920s, but it was the city's street modernization campaign that heaped on more. The Farleys' debt of \$119 was a tall order, even when wages and rents were thick in hand and regularly in pocket. But when George Farley shot dead two white men over the home where he and Cora lived, this public-private governance that generated millions of dollars of citywide debt was not the sole culprit leading the family into desperation. When they did not pay the debt, an institution came to collect.

When working-class property owners did not pay special assessments for public improvements in pre-1930s Los Angeles, neither a county nor city agency administered the collection of the delinquent debt or possible foreclosure. These duties were delegated to the private contractors who completed street improvements. If a property owner failed to pay on the

principal plus 10 percent annual interest on a street bond, the contractor could petition the Superior Court to order the property sold at auction to pay the principal, interest, and other fees associated with processing the collection of the debt (attorney’s fees, title search, notary, etc.). State improvement laws not only authorized contractors to collect these debts but also their “assignees.” This seemingly inconsequential addition allowed contractors to “assign” or sell assessments to other, more specialized entities dedicated to debt collection—bond companies.<sup>1</sup> With thousands of improvement projects amassing tens of millions of dollars in assessments by the mid-1920s, Los Angeles as a global city on the make cultivated the rise of a predatory finance market thriving off its delinquent municipal debt.<sup>2</sup> The companies that made this market had official names such as Municipal Bond Company or Elliott-Horne Company. The most reviled and active among them was the Los Angeles Bond and Securities Company (LABSC). Property owners in Los Angeles collectively maligned these debt collectors as “lien sharks.”

This predatory debt market and its lien sharks served as the final link in the mechanism of the Farleys’ dispossession, but it had supporting antagonists. The debt fueled growth of the 1920s collapsed and cast the nation down and low into the Great Depression for the entirety of the next decade. The sudden loss of jobs and their disappeared wages incited a municipal debt crisis for heavily encumbered property owners and the cities dependent on their solvency. California and the federal government’s responses were, for the Farleys’, ultimately inadequate and racially discriminatory with fatal consequences. The Farleys’ also had support. Their dispossession by lien sharks inflamed parts of Black Los Angeles. They too carried street debt

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<sup>1</sup> California and Page, *California Street Laws; a Discussion of the General Laws of California Relating to the Opening and Improving of Streets within Incorporated Cities and Towns, of Charter Provisions, and of the Principles Relating to Street Work by Private Contract, with Forms and an Appendix Containing the Text of the Statutes*, 369-70.

<sup>2</sup> For annual statement of assessments for 1923-1929, John C. Porter, Annual Message of the Mayor, 1930, Annual Message of the Mayor 1929-1930, Police Commission Files, Los Angeles City Archives.

and feared the bond companies' property taking lawsuits. The community rallied to their defense. They condemned the taking of Black property happening on the underside of Los Angeles' municipal financing and organized a communist-style legal campaign to save George Farley from the executioners of San Quentin.

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The road modernization campaign of the 1920s that inflated the Farleys' neighborhood special assessment debt also defined the financial burdens of property owners citywide. After the publication and city adoption of the *Major Traffic Street Plan* in 1924, improvement projects in the city doubled the following year. Total parcels assessed annually more than quadrupled in just three years, 60,697 in 1923 to 284,283 in 1926, resulting in at least 1.4 million properties assessed by the end of the decade. The mounting value of these assessments was staggering. Between 1923 and 1928, annual assessment value multiplied over seven times, from approximately \$5.5 million to \$40 million. Cumulatively for the seven years tallied in the Mayor's Annual Message of 1930, the City of Los Angeles levied \$162.7 million in assessments to finance the construction or maintenance of public lighting, parks, and streets. Street improvements comprised the preponderance of these assessments, totaling 90 percent in 1929 and 87 percent in 1928.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, Los Angeles' rush to modernize its roads created a massive reserve of thousands of individual debts that held liens on thousands of parcels of property citywide.

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<sup>3</sup> For calculating street improvement related assessments I used Vrooman Act, 1911 Act, 1913 Act, Scarifying and Oiling, and Opening and Widening Streets Act totals, John C. Porter, Annual Message of the Mayor, 1930, Annual Message of the Mayor 1929-1930, Police Commission Files, Los Angeles City Archives and Records Center.

Although this explosion of special assessments was unprecedented in the history of the city, the governing process, for which the Long Beach Avenue improvement served as an example, remained the same. The approval process was long, the rules were complex and obscure, and the personal notifications to owners that special assessments were outstanding proved regularly unreliable. Delinquencies mounted and contractors, who held the assessment bonds, were responsible for their collection. When a direct demand for payment lingered unsatisfied, the contractor would need to petition the court for a foreclosure. Los Angeles was now home to tens of thousands of delinquent special assessments, where a single improvement project could indebt thousands of owners. Contractors would have been hard pressed to provision for themselves the specialized capacity to file thousands of lawsuits and see them through to foreclosure. Even more, the debt lingered on their books for capital already spent. Cumulatively, these conditions encouraged contractors to sell, or as the law euphemizes it, “assign,” the municipal debts to those who specialized in their collection.

Sometime in the mid-1920s, Los Angeles area entrepreneurs recognized this opportunity and began establishing bond collection companies that Angelenos gladly insulted as “lien sharks.” It was an apt name describing how predatory bond companies operated Los Angeles’ municipal debt market. After purchasing delinquent assessment rolls for sewer and street improvements from contractors or other bond companies, lien sharks preyed on unsuspecting property owners with ruthless legal action. As the Los Angeles City Attorney explained in the *Times*, lien sharks filed a foreclosure suit, then sent a copy of the complaint to property owners with a demand to pay the assessment plus interest, arbitrary attorney fees, and other costs or risk foreclosure. A property owner, the attorney reported, “not accustomed to being involved in litigation, immediately becomes frightened” and pays the fees demanded to avoid intimidating

legal proceedings and the possibility of losing their property.<sup>4</sup> Consequently, the arrival of bond companies in the age of special assessments exacerbated litigation in Los Angeles courts. In the latter months of 1926, special assessment lawsuits against delinquent property owners exploded 750 percent, from just 398 lawsuits between July 1924 and June 1925 to 3,008 lawsuits during the same months between 1925 and 1926.<sup>5</sup>

Filing a lawsuit was not the final, exasperated effort to recover a long-demanded payment for a street assessment bond, it was a lien shark's opening gambit. An anonymous official of the Los Angeles Bond and Securities Company admitted to the *Times* that bondsmen purchase assessments for the "right" to file lawsuits and collect fees. The most valuable assessment rolls were those that were "fresh," the bondsman informed the *Times* reporter, because they had not been "picked over" by other bond companies.<sup>6</sup> According to the Improvement Act of 1911, contractors or their assignees were required to make a personal demand for payment before filing a lawsuit. If the property owner could not be found, they "shall publicly demand payment on the premises assessed."<sup>7</sup> This was hardly a regulation. For example, bond companies used the personal service exemption to send an agent to the assessed property and "sing out a rigmarole" in the street.<sup>8</sup> With an affidavit of said "service," a lien shark was authorized to file a foreclosure

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<sup>4</sup> "Lien Evil Curb Parley Called," *Times*, Jan 4, 1927.

<sup>5</sup> Stimson offers some statistics and claims 800 percent increase, "Plea Made for Small Owners," *Times*, Feb 11, 1927, but the City Clerk's study of lawsuits probably provides more reliable data equaling 750 percent, "CITY SHARPENS SHARK HARPOON," *Times*, Jan 6, 1927.

<sup>6</sup> "Liens on Drain Bring Premium," *Times*, Jan 5, 1927.

<sup>7</sup> California and Page, *California Street Laws; a Discussion of the General Laws of California Relating to the Opening and Improving of Streets within Incorporated Cities and Towns, of Charter Provisions, and of the Principles Relating to Street Work by Private Contract, with Forms and an Appendix Containing the Text of the Statutes*, 435-36.

<sup>8</sup> "Fight Opens on Bonding Sharks," *Times*, Dec 18, 1926.

lawsuit for the debt plus additional fees to the usual surprise of an unsuspecting property owner. The effective absence of regulations made the aggressive fee strategy easily permissible.

Municipal debt collection was a lucrative business. Improvement laws gave unregulated discretion in what fees and at what amounts companies could charge. The law suggested \$15 for attorney fees and all taxable costs, although a presiding judge in a suit was authorized to award “reasonable” attorney fees other than the suggested amount.<sup>9</sup> In practice, the vague statute permitted lien sharks to charge property owners whatever they could collect through direct demands to owners or awards from municipal judges. For example, Pacific Finance Company sued a property owner for \$45 to collect what was originally an assessment of 75 cents.<sup>10</sup> Another lien shark demanded \$137 from a “poor Mexican” for an original assessment of \$45, charging a \$75 attorney’s fee.<sup>11</sup> A study of one hundred “worse cases” in 1927 revealed original assessments totaling \$380 that lien sharks inflated to \$3,800, a 1000 percent markup.<sup>12</sup> The same anonymous LABSC bondsmen explained, “These assessments are in no sense bad debts, they are 100 per cent collectable as fast as we can locate the owners of the property. Those we have to hold bear 10 per cent interest, and they have to be paid some time.”<sup>13</sup>

Not only was infrastructure debt profitable through the payment of interest and fees, but they were also collateralized against millions of dollars of property that took priority over other

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<sup>9</sup> California and Page, *California Street Laws; a Discussion of the General Laws of California Relating to the Opening and Improving of Streets within Incorporated Cities and Towns, of Charter Provisions, and of the Principles Relating to Street Work by Private Contract, with Forms and an Appendix Containing the Text of the Statutes*, 440.

<sup>10</sup> Draft of Autobiography, Fun, Fights, and Fiesta in Old Los Angeles, 1966, Box 4, Stimson, Marshall Fun, Fights, and Fiesta in Old Los Angeles - Draft. Marshall Stimson Papers, The Huntington Library, San Marino, California.

<sup>11</sup> "Lien Shylocks Seeking Cover," *Times*, Dec 29, 1926.

<sup>12</sup> "Lien Evil Curb Parley Called," *Times*, Jan 4, 1927.

<sup>13</sup> "Liens on Drain Bring Premium," *Times*, Jan 5, 1927.

interests, such as a mortgagee, meaning a bondholder was paid before any other creditor. Prior to later amendments, a bondholder was authorized to file foreclosure proceedings just 30 days after notice of delinquency. Bondholders were only required to provide an affidavit that the owner was personally served and to list the foreclosure in a local newspaper. As Stimson and others have reported, this process was rife with fraud. "Property owners, more than irate," reported Charles Cohan of the *Times*, "have come forward with the fervid declaration that no notices ever were served on them in person, and that there wasn't a chance to reach them by publication of notice because care was taken to publish the notifications in obscure papers." The targeted property was then sold at auction for a fraction of its value. Cohan reported that two elderly women lost their home in this fashion, and in near exact detail as the Farleys' case, when a bondsmen offered to resell the property to the original owners for \$1,000.<sup>14</sup> By law, foreclosed owners could "redeem" their property within one year through payment of the debt, but bondholders were not required to notify owners of this recourse nor were they prevented from leveraging property deeds for a greater cash payoff than what was required for redemption. This unregulated and predatory financial market made street and sewer bonds desirable for investors, which also meant the market greased the cogs of city development by ensuring municipal debt readily circulated.

The most active and notorious among the ranks of lien sharks was Oscar V. Trompeter and his Los Angeles Bond and Securities Company, for which he acted as president and Elva, his wife, as vice president.<sup>15</sup> Trompeter was Kentucky born, the son of a Louisville police officer,

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<sup>14</sup> Cohan, Charles, "COURT RECORDS EXPOSE LIEN SHARK OPERATIONS," *Times*, June 24, 1928.

<sup>15</sup> "Los Angeles Bond and Securities Co." L. A. County Incorporation Records. Seaver Center for Western History Research, Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County.

and 30 years old when, in 1926, he founded the company that would sow fear and reap loathing across the city. Whether Trompeter first discovered that Los Angeles' municipal debt was an entrepreneurial opportunity is uncertain, but it is certain the LABSC transformed street bond debt collection from a smattering of lawsuits into a torrent of them. According to newspaper accounts, there were less than 400 special assessment foreclosure suits in the year between July 1924 and June 1925. Superior court indexes reveal that the Los Angeles Bond and Securities Company *alone* filed 7,830 lawsuits in the closing four years of the decade, an average annual increase of over 1,500 foreclosure suits.<sup>16</sup> The Farleys' would be one victim among many thousands.

Indignation toward lien sharks was broadly held in both white and black Los Angeles, and news reporting about them centered on the one-man reform crusade of white Los Angeles attorney Marshall Stimson. As a child, he migrated to Pasadena with his well-to-do family in 1887 then to a ranch in Los Angeles near Hoover and Adams in 1889. Stimson understood himself as a lifelong fighter, from a childhood of scrappy fistfights to a legal career advocating for Progressive Era political and business reforms. For Stimson, his legal battles over special assessments were a defining aspect of his life as told in his unpublished autobiography, "Fun, Fights, and Fiesta in Old Los Angeles," dedicating a chapter to "The Great Special Assessment Battle," which chronicled his legal reform efforts against lien sharks.<sup>17</sup> He became aware of bonding companies' predatory practices in 1926 when a lien shark demanded \$25 on a \$4

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<sup>16</sup> Special Account for Los Angeles Bond & Security Co., Plaintiff Index Superior Court Los Angeles County January 1, 1921 to December 31, 1930, "L," Los Angeles Superior Court Archives.

<sup>17</sup> See note 58.



assessment from his mother.<sup>18</sup> Personally impacted and predisposed to relish in legal fights, Stimson took up a campaign against bond companies.

Stimson's anti-lien shark campaign in the 1920s and early 1930s became a sort of rallying point for disaffected white homeowners frustrated with lien sharks. Stimson's publicized defense of property owners informed the indebted of Los Angeles that that their common enemy was organized private debt collectors, preeminently the Los Angeles Bond and Securities Company. Each published case disseminated the narrative of their predatory financial practice. A property owner wrote the *Times*, "I hope you continue your publicity against the lien shark. I am a victim." He complained that when his assessment was sold to a lien shark, "I was squeezed as per custom."<sup>19</sup> Since property owners found it more expedient and less expensive to pay lien sharks' demands rather than hire an attorney to challenge them, people were left incensed and exploited but encouraged by Stimson's efforts.

Accompanying these stories of lien shark victims were Stimson's call for amendments to the state Improvement Act of 1911, the most commonly used state improvement law for road paving and street sewer construction in Los Angeles. Stimson had the influence locally to make these calls more than mere suggestions. He was deeply involved in Republican party politics in California. He was president of the prominent and influential City Club in 1925, served on both the Republican State Central and Congressional Committees, served as a presidential elector for the state, and was a delegate for the Republican National Convention in 1912.<sup>20</sup> Before the close

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<sup>18</sup> "Fight Opens on Bonding Sharks," *Times*, Dec 18, 1926.

<sup>19</sup> B.H. Bendheim, "Dangerous Waters," *Times*, Jan 7, 1927.

<sup>20</sup> "Stimson Named by City Club," *Times*, Mar 21, 1925.

of 1926, Stimson leveraged that influence to hail representatives from the City Council, City Attorney's office, the Los Angeles County Bar Association, the Chamber of Commerce, as well as real estate and civic organizations to lobby state legislatures for amendments to the Improvement Act. The proposed amendments sought to remedy a tangle of problems enabling lien sharks: regulation on attorney's fees, requirements for adequate notice to property owners, personal demands for payment before lawsuits could be filed, and extended payment schedules.<sup>21</sup>

Black Los Angeles carried its own cautions and remedies addressing the predations of lien sharks undergirding Los Angeles growth bubble. Months before the *Los Angeles Times* began publishing stories about bond company practices in 1926, The *California Eagle* reported that Mr. Leonard of the Westside Improvement Association "is warning our people in the West Jefferson District to have the assessment for the storm drain when it comes due and not put it in the hands of bondsmen who are more than anxious to get our property into their hands."<sup>22</sup> The following year during the City Council election cycle, candidates for the 11<sup>th</sup> District campaigning in Black Los Angeles made special assessments and lien sharks central to their platforms. One candidate, F.H. Mouser, speaking to the Forum, one of the oldest Black political institutions in Los Angeles, railed against "bond sharks" and their purchase of small infrastructure bonds against local property. Mouser promoted the transfer of bond collections to a city or county agency for bonds under \$50, which would have effectively eliminated the core bond market for lien sharks.<sup>23</sup> Mouser's proposition in the political space of the Forum suggested

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<sup>21</sup> On possible amendments see, "Reform in Assessing Proposed," *Times*, Dec 22, 1926; "Lien Shark Curb Outlined" Dec 30, 1926; "Changes Listed for Land Law," *Times*, Jan 9, 1927; "Lien Evil Curb Parley Called," *Times*, Jan 4, 1927.

<sup>22</sup> "Improvement Association Notes: West Side Hold Interesting Meeting," *Eagle*, June 18, 1926.

<sup>23</sup> "F.H. Mouser Addresses Forum," *Eagle*, April 8, 1927.

that its Black audience was more receptive to fundamental transformations of municipal debt collection. For Stimson, administrators, and elected officials, removal of bond companies entirely from assessment collections remained merely a suggestion.<sup>24</sup>

In the closing years of the decade, envoys from Los Angeles would carry amendment propositions to Sacramento chasing a solution to lien shark abuses. Marshall Stimson, city and county attorneys, city clerks, and tax associations all suggested various reforms aimed at standardizing attorney's fees and establishing reliable notification procedures, the most comprehensive coming from the City Clerk's office.<sup>25</sup> In Sacramento, amendments to improvement laws faced what Stimson and the *Times* described as a powerful political lobby of contractors, materials men, and bond dealers who profited from sprawling infrastructure projects and their accompanying assessment debt.<sup>26</sup> By the end of the decade, reform efforts achieved moderate success. Homeowners could expect notifications of special assessments on their regular county property tax statements, reduced attorney's fees, reduced penalties for delinquency, and extended payment schedules.

Although *Times* reporters lauded these incremental reforms of the late-1920s as "death blow[s]" and sharpened "harpoon[s]" in the legislative fight against lien sharks, the reforms left the fundamental mechanisms of municipal infrastructure debt acquisition and collection unmodified.<sup>27</sup> Property owners, especially the working-class, were still relatively disempowered

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<sup>24</sup> See note 67.

<sup>25</sup> California Taxpayers, *Brief on Special Assessment Laws and Procedures*, 10-11.

<sup>26</sup> "BILL DEALING DEATH BLOW TO SHARKS UP TOMORROW," *Times*, Jan 17, 1927.

<sup>27</sup> "CITY SHARPENS SHARK HARPOON," *Times*, Jan 6, 1927; "BILL DEALING DEATH BLOW TO SHARKS UP TOMORROW," *Times*, Jan 17, 1927.

in protesting street construction that would saddle them with assessment debt. They were vested with an inadequate land franchise. Reformers had no plan to address the imbalances of power rampant throughout the governance of infrastructure improvement and financing. There was no plan to address millions of dollars of assessments already in circulation which working-class property owners were struggling to pay. The most effective reform considered to prevent lien shark abuses was to transfer collections to a city or county agency, which 18 cities did in 1928 for assessments levied under the Improvement Bond Act of 1915.<sup>28</sup> In the City of Los Angeles, street and sewer assessments would remain privately collectable through the 1930s. Although bond companies had lost the judicial grey zone under which they leveraged fictive attorney's fees, they continued to use the same tactics crafted and refined in the 1920s to extract settlements out-of-court where there was no judge or municipal oversight.<sup>29</sup> Most critical as the nation fell into the Great Depression, bond companies were still empowered to foreclose on properties for non-payment even if their ability to profit from fees was curtailed.

Perhaps this was the business opportunity O.V. Trompeter planned to exploit when he established the business that foreclosed the Farleys' home—Trompeter & Company—in 1932.<sup>30</sup> The Great Depression's precipitous loss of jobs and incomes combined with the prior decade of rapidly expanding special assessment levies produced a generative brew for people in the business of delinquent bonds. Between 1929 and 1933, personal incomes in the U.S. declined 44

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<sup>28</sup> Cities were Burbank, Compton, Culver City, Glendale, Hawthorne, Inglewood, Lynnwood, Covina, El Segundo, Glendora, Tujunga, Torrance, Signal Hill, South Gate, and Los Angeles city annexations of Venice and Watts, Cohan, Charles, "COURT RECORDS EXPOSE LIEN SHARK OPERATIONS," *Times*, June 24, 1928.

<sup>29</sup> "Another Assessment Victim," *Times*, Aug 18, 1931.

<sup>30</sup> "O.V. Trompeter & Company" incorporated in 1932 and "Trompeter & Co." incorporated in 1934, L. A. County Incorporation Records. Seaver Center for Western History Research, Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County.

percent while unemployment rose to 25 percent.<sup>31</sup> Black Angelenos were unemployed at twice this rate.<sup>32</sup> The Farleys initially survived by dint of intermittent day labor, salvaging scrap metal, and renting a room to domestic workers on Thursdays, but all sources of income dried up by 1933 and their outstanding street assessments soured.<sup>33</sup> Even though the Farleys owned their home and were safe from the national mortgage foreclosure crisis, bond collection foreclosures threatened every piece of taxable private property in Los Angeles regardless of its unencumbered status. Thousands of property owners like the Farleys were indebted to Los Angeles' municipal bond market with dwindling means to pay.

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<sup>31</sup>Robert S. McElvaine, *The Great Depression : America, 1929-1941* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 1993), 75.

<sup>32</sup> Sides, *L.A. City Limits : African American Los Angeles from the Great Depression to the Present*, 27.

<sup>33</sup> Superior Court of Los Angeles County, Case #716634, *City of Los Angeles vs. George Farley* (1938), Superior Court Archives, Los Angeles.

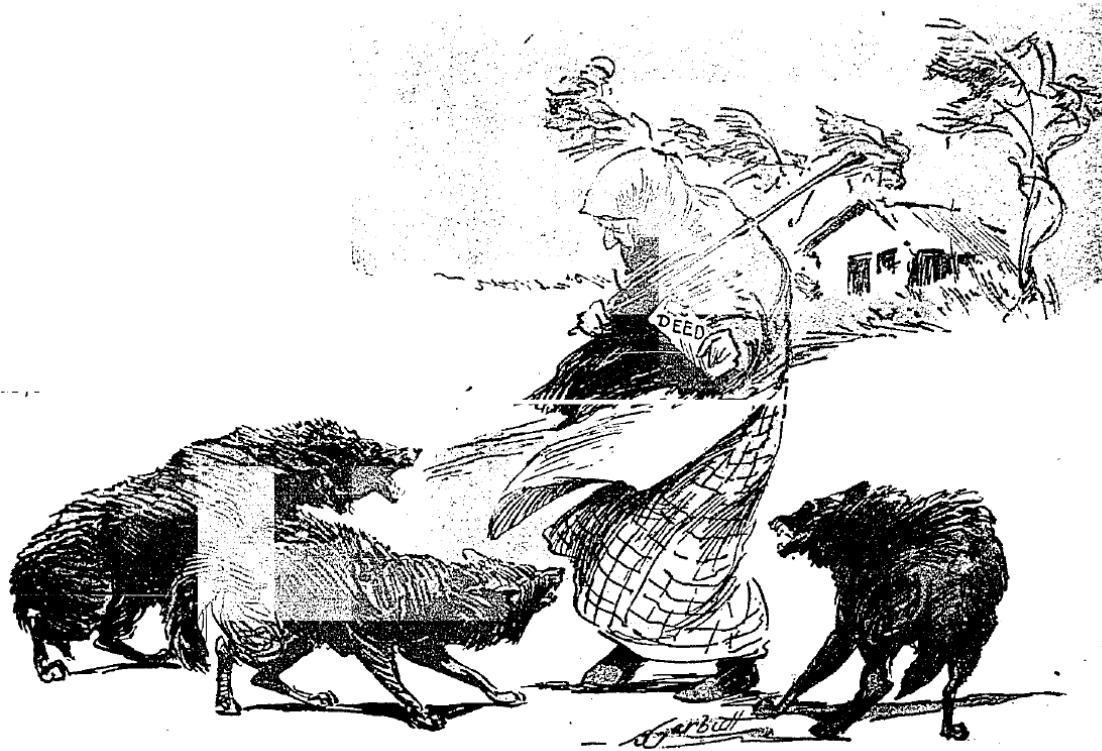


Figure 5: Illustration depicting bond collectors as wolves, "Special Assessment Racket," *Los Angeles Times*, January 17, 1932. Proquest.com.

There were a few options for relief and race, the law, and political economy complicated the effectiveness of them all. While the Farleys' property ownership may have disqualified them for county and state relief, eligible federal work relief programs under the New Deal were unabashedly racist in Los Angeles.<sup>34</sup> The short-lived Civilian Works Administration (CWA), established in 1933, effectively denied public works employment to Central Avenue's six thousand applicants, while employing non-black applicants in every other district. CWA officials

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<sup>34</sup> Farley claimed that he was denied relief because he was a homeowner, "Farley Tells Slaying Story," *Sentinel*, May 19, 1938. As residents, the Farleys were eligible for County and State relief, but homeownership was considered a potential source of income that could be used to justify the denial of benefits, but not automatically, see State Relief Administration Manual, Jan 13, 1941, Box 146, State Relief Admin Administrators Office Files, 1941, California State Archives.

deflected NAACP protest until the program was terminated in 1934.<sup>35</sup> George Farley applied for Works Progress Administration (WPA) employment when it was established in 1935, but the same CWA officials, the *Eagle* alleged, took over management of the WPA. So blatant was the discrimination that local black ministers denounced the CWA and WPA officials as an “army of oppression.”<sup>36</sup> George never found employment with the WPA, and whether Cora tried is unknown. Her prospects for employment with the WPA were probably equally bleak. When a black typist reported for work at WPA headquarters in November 1935, she was allegedly told that only “maid work” was available.<sup>37</sup>

Other New Deal Era relief aimed directly at the preservation of property may have saved their home. In California, the various scales of the state did not want nor intend for municipal infrastructure finance to wreak property dispossession on its residents. With the symbiotic combination of economic depression and bond collections, the swell of foreclosures and the certain coming of more created a crisis of state-destabilizing proportions. In 1934, Governor Frank Merriam called a special session of the Legislature with the critical objective of establishing emergency relief to stem the bleed of ownership sapping the Golden State. Together they enrolled into law a moratorium on special assessment proceedings from that date—September 20, 1934 to February 28, 1935—giving enough slack on the expiration of the law for the regular session of 1935 to consider another moratorium, if necessary.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Flamming, *Bound for Freedom : Black Los Angeles in Jim Crow America*, 337-42.

<sup>36</sup> "The W.P.A. Antics," *Eagle*, Nov 15, 1935.

<sup>37</sup> "Typist Refused at WPA Headquarters," *Eagle*, November 22, 1935.

<sup>38</sup> *Statutes of California, Extra Session of the Fiftieth Legislature, 1934*, 10-12.  
[https://clerk.assembly.ca.gov/sites/clerk.assembly.ca.gov/files/archive/Statutes/1935/35Vol1\\_34Chapters.pdf](https://clerk.assembly.ca.gov/sites/clerk.assembly.ca.gov/files/archive/Statutes/1935/35Vol1_34Chapters.pdf)

It was necessary. The 1935 Legislature enacted a fresh moratorium for two additional years that would have prevented the Farleys' foreclosure, but the Sacramento politicians added an additional clause that exempted protection for the Farleys. The law authorized bondholders to collect their debts and, if denied, foreclose properties if the *interest* on said debts were delinquent.<sup>39</sup> The provision ensured at least a trickle of capital flow to circulate in the municipal debt market with the grander possibility of property foreclosure, which was critical if the state expected its street bonds to hold any value. The change revealed the state's role in managing the social consequences of the municipal debt market.<sup>40</sup> For municipal finance to be effective in the age of special assessments, it needed to maintain a balance between its own need for infrastructure capital, bondsmen profits, and residents' property security. There had to be *some* profit and *some* foreclosure in the municipal debt market for street assessment financing to work.

It was O.V. Trompeter's business to know about this provision, whereas the Farleys almost certainly did not, knowledge of which may have focused the Farleys' efforts on paying their assessment's interest exclusively. Indeed, Trompeter was an attorney whose specialized knowledge gave him acute advantages, but segregation in Los Angeles also produced segregated spheres of information. Whereas the more resourced *Times* had a correspondent deciphering the essentials of the bevy of relief legislation for its putatively white audience, the scrappy *Eagle* had no such privilege, it appears, for its black readers on the Eastside. The *Eagle* never mentioned

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<sup>39</sup> *Statutes of California, Fifty-first Session of the Legislature, 1935, 72-74.*

<sup>40</sup> On the role of the state in managing the social consequences of debt see, Susanne Soederberg, "Student Loans, Debtfare and the Commodification of Debt: The Politics of Securitization and the Displacement of Risk," *Critical Sociology* 40, no. 5 (2014).



the 1935 moratorium—one bill among 1,113.<sup>41</sup> With that information, the Farleys could have postponed foreclosure for \$7.87, the amount due by December 10, 1935 on the \$29.66 principal on the street bond.<sup>42</sup> Effectively though, for Trompeter, the moratoriums amounted to challengeable obstacles. During the comprehensive 1934 moratorium, Trompeter petitioned for a bond foreclosure and was denied by the Superior Court who invoked the moratorium. Trompeter was not deterred. He challenged the moratorium as unconstitutional in the Appellate Court but was rebuffed same as the lower courts.<sup>43</sup> The moratoriums would not stop Trompeter’s attempts at taking property.

The Farleys best chance for relatively non-discriminatory relief for their road debt was the Home Owners’ Loan Corporation (HOLC). Established in 1933, the HOLC is known, on one hand, for the dual achievements of refinancing over a million failing mortgages and saving the home lending industry. On the other, it created color-coded residential security maps that became the basis of a generation of government and private mortgage discrimination against Black Americans—popularly known as “redlining.” In terms of its refinancing mandate, new research has revealed that in many cities, including Los Angeles, the HOLC refinanced black mortgages at parity with white ones despite its racist production of redlining maps.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> "MORTGAGE FORECLOSURES HOLIDAY GIVEN EXTENSION," *Times*, Jan 23, 1935; "HEAVY GRIST OF BILLS PASSED BY LEGISLATURE," *Times*, July 28, 1935.

<sup>42</sup> Decree of Foreclosure and Order of Sale, No. 385985, Trompeter vs. Farley et al, Superior Court Archives.

<sup>43</sup> O.V. Trompeter & Co. v. Superior Court of Los Angeles County, 5 Cal. App. 2d 80, 42 P.2d 79, 1935 Cal. App. LEXIS 1010 (Court of Appeal of California, Second Appellate District, Division Two March 2, 1935, Decided). <https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=cases&id=urn:contentItem:3S1W-P9R0-003V-P2DG-00000-00&context=1516831>.

<sup>44</sup> Todd M. Michney and LaDale C. Winling, "New Perspectives on New Deal Housing Policy: Explicating and Mapping Holc Loans to African Americans," *Journal of Urban History* 46 (2019).

In fact, a black HOLC employee in the Los Angeles office, John Fowler, vigorously promoted HOLC relief to black homeowners. He authored numerous explanatory articles in the *Eagle* that detailed the refinancing process and qualifications for mortgage relief, and for those facing down delinquent property taxes and special assessments, Fowler informed homeowners that they could borrow up to 40 percent of the appraised value of their home to pay for taxes and assessments.<sup>45</sup> But perhaps more importantly, he attempted to assure suspicious black Angelenos that the HOLC staff and operating procedures were respectful and non-discriminatory. Followed by an example of a “colored” woman in Watts who received refinancing, Fowler testified, “I wish to cite a case in point that will help my readers to understand how broad and sympathetic and unprejudiced are those who are carrying on this work.”<sup>46</sup> Fowler understood what white HOLC administrators could understand only in part, it was hard to ask for help, but it was humiliating for black homeowners to request it from potentially condescending and racist white New Deal administrators.

Whether the Farleys learned of the HOLC and weighed the trade between rescuing their property for the potential indignities of white New Deal administrators is unknown. The *Eagle* reported that George Farley waited for hours in “loan offices,” but did not specify further.<sup>47</sup> The Farleys, in this instance, may have been victims of timing, but just as likely victims to the predatory workings of municipal bond collections. In terms of timing, the HOLC only accepted applications for two years, between 1933 and 1935, where qualifying homeowners had to be in

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<sup>45</sup> John Fowler, "Discusses Home Owners Loan Bank In Los Angeles," *Eagle*, Aug 11, 1933.

<sup>46</sup> John Fowler, "Spreading Joy," *Eagle*, Jan 15, 1933.

<sup>47</sup> *Eagle*, May 19, 1938.

foreclosure proceedings, not anxiously in threat of it. The Farleys' home was not *technically* in foreclosure until April 1935, leaving a narrow qualifying window in which to apply.

In terms of predatory bond practices, knowledge of foreclosure itself was insider information. The Farleys' home was in foreclosure as described on a piece of paper known to O.V. Trompeter and the court. Although Trompeter provided affidavits to the court that the Farleys were served with his complaint in May and August of 1935, the Farleys alleged that they never received those notices. Their claim echoed those of Marshal Stimson's clients and other frustrated white homeowners since the founding days of the Los Angeles Bond and Securities Company in 1926. Indeed, on January 13, 1936, the day Trompeter & Company petitioned the court to foreclose on the Farleys' home, Cora and George were not there to defend it. The judge ordered the home to be sold at auction to recover the unpaid street improvement bond debt, to-wit, \$29.66, plus fees and interests. On auction day, February 15, 1936, Trompeter & Company purchased the Farleys' home. Part of the sale proceeds paid for commissioner fees, most circled back into Trompeter's pockets for the debt owed and his court costs. All said and decreed, Trompeter owned what was once the Farleys' at a net cost of \$30, and the parcel of debt levied for the making of Long Beach Avenue was satisfied.<sup>48</sup>

Trompeter & Company's foreclosure of the Farleys' home was not an outlier but concert to a torrent of lawsuits and foreclosures unknown to the written history of Los Angeles. Between 1932 and 1939, Trompeter & Company filed 3,319 lawsuits in Los Angeles Superior Court.<sup>49</sup> Of these lawsuits, no official account of foreclosures has been found. The defense committee

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<sup>48</sup> Trompeter & Co. vs. Farley et al.

<sup>49</sup> Special account for "Trompeter & Co.," Plaintiff Index Superior Court Los Angeles County 1931 to 1939 for T, Archives and Records Center, Los Angeles, CA.

formed to support George Farley examined court records and claimed the company secured more than 1,200 foreclosures between 1932 and 1938, about 40 percent of total lawsuits.<sup>50</sup> In a 1936 court hearing involving *Times* writer Alma Whitaker, O.V. Trompeter estimated 50 percent of his company's lawsuits resulted in foreclosure.<sup>51</sup> At this rate, the company would have accumulated approximately 1,650 properties by the end of the decade with an average value of \$7.6 million in 1940 (\$140 million in 2019).<sup>52</sup>

To assess the potential scale of this foreclosure operation, the HOLC refinanced 9,044 mortgages in Los Angeles, a full 12 percent of all mortgaged properties in the city.<sup>53</sup> Thus, for every five foreclosures the HOLC potentially prevented, Trompeter & Company sued for nearly three and achieved one. It was a devastatingly efficient operation. This account only incorporates the tally of Trompeter's second company. When broadening the scope to both the Los Angeles Bond and Securities Company and Trompeter & Company between 1926 and 1939, they collectively filed 12,949 lawsuits, enough to blanket about 9 percent of owner occupied single-family homes in the City of Los Angeles in 1940.<sup>54</sup> This was just one company in a single city in California. Unaccounted for are the activities of any other bond companies operating in Los

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<sup>50</sup> "Mass Meet Monday as Trial Nears," *Eagle*, April 28, 1938.

<sup>51</sup> "Street Bond Fee Beaten," *Times*, Jan 11, 1936.

<sup>52</sup> Using the average value of owner-occupied property in the City of Los Angeles of \$4,625, United States, Bureau of the Census, *Sixteenth Census of the United States: 1940: Housing: Volume II – General Characteristics - Part 2: Alabama-Indiana*. (Washington, D.C.: United States Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, 1943), 235.

<sup>53</sup> United States, Bureau of the Census, *Sixteenth Census of the United States: 1940: Housing: Volume IV – Mortgages on Owner-Occupied Nonfarm Homes – Part 2: Alabama-New York*. Washington, D.C.: United States Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, 1943, 87.

<sup>54</sup> I used the sum of owner occupied 1-family detached and attached dwelling units = 145,489, United States, Bureau of the Census, *Sixteenth Census of the United States: 1940: Housing: Volume II*, 216.

Angeles and companies in other cities in the West reliant on a similar system of predatory debt collection for delinquent municipal bonds.

The Farleys' tenancy in their once owned home signaled the final act of that predatory process. In 1937, Louis Troutman of the Quick Action Loan Company bought the Farleys' home then offered to resell it to them for \$1,100. He gave them a few days to raise the money. When they could not pay, he made them tenants, charging \$7.50 monthly rent beginning in May 1937. Due to either their inability or refusal to pay the rent, or perhaps a bit of both, the Farleys became delinquent again on a property debt created to profit others.<sup>55</sup>

On February 17, 1938, Troutman arrived with two marshals to evict the Farleys' from their home. Dr. Victor Parkin related to the court George Farley's recollection of the fatal moment as told in the county jail:

Three men came to the house and his wife [Cora] entered the home ahead of them; that one man [Troutman] said to the other two [marshals], "Get these tubs and pack up the dishes and things" and they did so. Defendant [George] states that he asked the man if he couldn't let them stay until tomorrow morning and the answer was, "No, I am throwing you out today." The defendant states he was standing just inside the bedroom door; there was a gun in the corner and that he picked it up and shot one of the men as he was about thirty feet from the house; another man grabbed him, he tore loose and shot the other man who was a few

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<sup>55</sup> "Officers' Slayer to Make Plea When Able to Appear in Court," *Eagle*, Feb 24, 1938.

feet away. He does not know what became of the third man. States he did not know who the men were, they gave him no information as to their identity.<sup>56</sup>

Dozens of police officers responded. Volleys of gunfire betrayed the usual sounds of home and racket of industry known to the racialized Eastside. The police lobbed tear gas into smashed windows, and its acidic clouds billowed into the air as if the house were aflame. After an hour, the siege quieted. Officers found Farley slumped over in a back room, wounded but not mortally. Farley's shot body was carried from the home, the LAPD claimed their prisoner, and Louis Troutman won his eviction at a bloody cost.



*Figure 6: Photo depicting George Farley's defense of family home against LAPD, Los Angeles Times, February 18, 1938. Los Angeles Times Photographic Archive, UCLA Library.*

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<sup>56</sup> The People of the State of California vs. George Farley, Superior Court Archives.

Both black and white Los Angeles rushed to the scene to take account of what was lost, in lives and in property. In the coming weeks, they would defend and prosecute the rights and sins of those entangled in this saga. What was the place of black land entitlement and security in a system of finance that held debt, property, and insecurity as the backing of Los Angeles' modernization? Are the murders of white men regrettable but understandable defenses of such an entitlement? White stories and verdicts would have official say in the answers and black Los Angeles knew it.

### **ADJUDICATING DEBT(S)**

The wounded George Farley was in custody when “grim-faced white men” from nearby manufacturing plants muttered threats of lynching. The call evoked the historic role of vigilance committee lynchings in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, wielded as an “instrument of social discipline” to repair breaches in the racialized social order of Los Angeles.<sup>57</sup> What was potentially the first double murder of white law enforcement agents by a black man in the history of Los Angeles qualified as such a breach. Heightened even more, Farley killed white men over the contested ownership of residential property.

The *Times* drafted a narrative that illustrated the police had handled the situation to the editor's satisfaction. In a frontpage article the following day, the *Times* described the LAPD's effective response, courageously ousting a barricaded Negro tenant who “had contracted for rent of \$7.50 a month and had been in arrears since last May.” Live action photographs accompanied the story, one depicting Detective Robert Underwood stoically taking aim at the Farleys' home

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<sup>57</sup> Victor Jew, "The Anti-Chinese Massacre of 1871 and Its Strange Career," in *A Companion to Los Angeles*, ed. William Devereil and Greg Hise (Chichester, West Sussex, U.K. ;: Wiley-Blackwell, 2014).

and another wide angle shot demonstrating the department's broader show of force. The *Times* fed its local readers a simplified narrative of a delinquent, "maniac" Negro tenant whom the LAPD successfully evicted and neutralized.<sup>58</sup> Culled of any context of special assessments, lien sharks, reform efforts, and the Great Depression, Farley was denied the empathy and cultural authority that his past home ownership may have granted him in this Los Angeles story of property, debt, and urban development. Ultimately, the *Times* reported, Farley neither owned nor rented ground to defend, the LAPD had repaired the breach, and the sanctity of property and white life were restored.

In a frontpage article and back page editorial of the *Eagle*, Charlotta Bass painted Farley as a "pioneer" whose failed struggle to save his home from "highbinding cutthroats" led him to murder two men. Predatory debt, according to Bass, also ensnared the marshals, who "through no choice of their own, came to carry out the mandates of the law, in accordance to their oath of office." It was this "cussed system" that would eventually cost three men their lives—two by murder and one by sure execution. Farley was defending his "castle" and the marshals were doing their job. The *California Eagle* rendered the cause and guilt for these murders through a narrative of tragedy, where predatory debt was the worker of fatal iniquity between two virtuous protagonists. Thus, Bass closed her editorial, "Let's throw the mantle of charity around George Farley and place the blame at the door of a hellish system that we condone without an effort to stamp it out."<sup>59</sup>

This racialized conflict of criminal judgment was at stake between the *Times* and the *Eagle*. The telling of the crime implicitly justified its sentence. The *Times'* narrative that elided

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<sup>58</sup> "Two Officers Die in Battle With Maniac," *Times*, Feb 18, 1938.

<sup>59</sup> "Officers' Slayer to Make Plea When Able to Appear in Court" and "A Sad Tragedy," *Eagle*, Feb 24, 1938.



the Farleys' prior ownership, their victimization to predatory debt, and the lingering specter of their property rights set the Solomonic judgement of white Angelenos toward a verdict that would send Farley to asphyxiate on poison gas. After catching wind of the *Times*' story, the *Eagle* editorialized in March that "the *Times*' at it again." Alleging a pattern of narrating crime in racial terms, the *Eagle* stated the *Times* intentionally "garbl[ed] reports and distort[ed] facts" to paint Farley's homicides in as heinous and indefensible context as possible. "The *Times*' scribe had his back turned," inveighed the *Eagle*, when at Farley's crowded preliminary hearing details of the bond foreclosure, predatory resale, and reduction to tenancy were told to the court.<sup>60</sup> It was in that place, with a white judge and a white jury, where authorities weighed the racial and economic politics of property. They had to determine the severity of punishment, which their empathy for Farley as a property owner tempered. The *Eagle* and Black Los Angeles were familiar with the stakes, especially in the 1930s. In response, they moved from charity to political tactic and organized the George Farley Defense Committee to bend the arc of white racial justice away from black execution.

The tactical decision to create a defense committee was not a usual organizational response to white vigilance in Black Los Angeles prior to the Great Depression, it was squarely rooted in the politics of what was arguably the most sensational criminal trial of the first half of the 20th century—the Scottsboro case. In March 1931, Alabama authorities expeditiously arrested, indicted, and sentenced to death nine black itinerant teenagers for the rape of two white women on a freight train, absent any legal representation for the condemned prisoners and reliable evidence of guilt. The International Labor Defense, an affiliate of the Communist Party, contacted the "Scottsboro Nine," who accepted the I.L.D.'s offer of legal defense. The I.L.D.'s

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<sup>60</sup> "The *Times*' At It Again," *Eagle*, March 24, 1938.

defense strategy differed dramatically from that of the elite-led NAACP. The organization's defense committees leveraged "mass pressure" using public opinion and fundraising through direct action campaigns to influence and fund their court defense, which spanned eleven prosecutions, two U.S. Supreme Court hearings, and repeated sentences of death and life imprisonment by all-white juries throughout the 1930s. The I.L.D.'s militant defense of the Scottsboro defendants garnered broad support among Black Americans nationwide, who themselves organized local defense committees.<sup>61</sup> In Los Angeles, George Farley's attorney, Loren Miller, worked for the I.L.D. and the local Scottsboro committee while the *Eagle* chronicled the Southern saga for Black Los Angeles readers.

"Naturally, I came into contact both with the local I.L.D and the national office as the fight for the boys went on. One of the first things that drew me closer to the I.L.D was its campaign for mass pressure," wrote Miller in 1933. As a member of the Los Angeles Scottsboro Defense Committee, Miller helped organize fundraising events, conferences, and information campaigns as the bare elements of generating mass pressure.<sup>62</sup> Indeed, Miller positioned himself to exert influence on public opinion on racial economic matters more broadly. Although trained as a lawyer, Miller understood himself as "radical writer." He came to Los Angeles by way of Nebraska in 1929 and worked for various newspapers, among them the *Eagle* from 1931 to 1933. Along with his work with the I.L.D, he also wrote articles and columns in radical presses, such as the Harlem based *Negro Liberator* and *New Masses*. In 1932, inspired by poet Claude

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<sup>61</sup> Robin D. G. Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe : Alabama Communists During the Great Depression* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 78-81; Jennifer Ruthanne Uhlmann, "The Communist Civil Rights Movement: Legal Activism in the United States, 1919–1946" (Ph.D., University of California, Los Angeles, 2006), 96-101; Stephan Landsman, "History's Stories," *Michigan Law Review*, no. 6 (1994): 1742.

<sup>62</sup> "Plan Benefit at Alabam for Scottsboro Boys," *Eagle*, April 3, 1936; "Scottsboro Group to Meet Tonight," *Eagle*, April 10, 1936; *Eagle*, May 29, 1936.

McKay, Miller accepted an invitation to the Soviet Union to produce a film on Black America with his friend, Langston Hughes, and twenty other Black Americans. Although the film never materialized, he returned to Los Angeles in high demand for speaking engagements, as churches, women's clubs, and civic organizations clamored to hear about the Soviet Union and communism's potential to achieve racial justice amid the Scottsboro trials and economic depression. Miller learned from the I.D.L. that power was won writing and speaking to these groups, he wrote, "public opinion exerts the determining role in the law."<sup>63</sup>

Indeed, Miller understood public opinion as its own sphere of power, but the court cases themselves, Scottsboro serving as a template, potentially acted as political education and a radicalizing force on Black Americans. In a 1933 letter to Frank Crosswaith, member of the Socialist Party of America in New York, Miller described what role cases such as Scottsboro ought to serve:

It seems to me that if you take the case as an isolated piece of "injustice" you are just shutting your eyes to the plain implications of the whole business and are denying what you and I, as Negroes, know to be the plain facts: that the case in its broader aspects has happened a dozen times over to other Negroes. Therefore, I have come to understand, Negroes ought to use the case not only to fight the particular issue but to educate those other Negroes who cannot ordinarily see that our ills flow from capitalism. For it seems to me, if Negroes are ever to be educated as to the workings of capitalism with its mock trials, its lynchings, its poverty, its misery, its unemployment, they must be educated with particular

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<sup>63</sup> Letter from Loren Miller to Frank Crosswaith, March 3, 1933, Box 3, Letters Answered, 1929-1934, Loren Miller Papers, Huntington.

instances in which you can show them the inter-relation of the particular "injustice" to the whole social order.<sup>64</sup>

Thus, the Farley Defense Committee took the story of Los Angeles' partnership with predatory municipal debt collectors—that the *Times* selectively refused to tell for the Farleys—to the public. As the criminal trial approached, they hosted mass meetings at local churches and benefits at popular Central Avenue night clubs. The committee enlisted the political and cultural influence of former and current black elected officials, entrepreneurs, and celebrities. Event speakers included state assemblyman Augustus Hawkins, former assemblyman Frederick Roberts, and movie actor Clarence Muse. The events aimed to raise funds for Farley's legal defense through tickets sales, individual donations, and creating public pressure on local businesses to donate. The events also disseminated their narrative of the case in collaboration with the *Eagle's* printed accounts, that together generated public support and indignation around the workings of municipal infrastructure law and debt collection practice that generated the dispossession of black property.

This, then, was the context and tactical and ideological lineage of the defense committee formed to advocate for the life of George Farley in March 1938. Black Los Angeles was primed for deep, critical probing of both the justice system's handling of alleged Black capital crimes and their structural ecology through communist-inspired activism. This consolidated position in Depression era Los Angeles was a far cry from earlier community responses, for example, the 1913 Rebecca Gay murder. In that case, an eccentric and apparently mentally ill Burr Harris, a black man, confessed to bludgeoning Gay to death with a pipe in her office after being

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<sup>64</sup> Letter from Loren Miller to Frank Crosswaith, March 3, 1933, Box 3, Letters Answered, 1929-1934, Loren Miller Papers, Huntington.

contracted by an anonymous client he met in the Plaza. He told investigators that the unnamed man paid him at a custom's house on the U.S. side of the border with Mexico, then Harris buried the money on the Mexican side. He even drew a map that inspired treasure hunters to rush to Mexico to find his killing money. After his confession, black leaders chose sides. The board of the Western Baptist Association of Southern California passed a resolution endorsing the *Times'* efforts to apprehend any Black suspect and condemned Harris and his sole defender, J.L. Edmonds of the *Liberator*, as "a disgrace to their race," and furthermore, "sounded a clarion call to all negroes to assist in uprising and maintaining the dignity of the colored population." The clarion call was more than just symbolic, it was didactic. Indeed, it was a command. Part of the resolution read, "Be it Resolved, that the colored ministry of California preach special sermons denouncing all lawlessness and crime, and warn the members of the race guilty of crime that they may expect no sympathy or support from the better class of this race" and commanded further that the resolution be read in all their churches and disturbed to the newspapers.<sup>65</sup>

In 1938, black churches in Los Angeles now donated money for the defense of a man who shot two unarmed white marshals in the back. The public sympathy and support denied Burr Harris was, at least in part, offered to George Farley due to Black Los Angeles' ideological leftward movement during the Great Depression, yet it was predominantly rooted in a black settler tradition of property rights and landownership. Before the Farley Defense Committee organized, the *Eagle* captioned a photo of a wounded George Farley, "Because the precept 'a man's home is his castle' is strong within the breasts of even the most lowly, George Farley, lies wounded in the General Hospital and two deputy marshalls [sic], white, are dead." After listing

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<sup>65</sup> "Why Edmonds Threw Dust?," *Times*, Oct 13, 1913; "Negroes Praise 'Times' Stand," *Times*, Nov 22, 1913.

employment discrimination, employment competition from “aliens,” and the Scottsboro case, Bass surmised, “To top it all off, his castle—though but a shack—was to be forcibly taken through a system of highway robbery sanctioned by society.<sup>66</sup> Bass’ invocation of “castle doctrine” was broadly shared. It is the cultural and common law concept that endows the home with strict privacy protections against unlawful entry, search, and seizure and the positive right to repel unlawful intrusions by force.<sup>67</sup> A letter to Bass published in the *Eagle* also invoked this popular concept of defense, Ernest Barefield praised the “brave although foolhardy” Farley as an “inspiration to harassed homeowners” and that a “determined fight should be put up for one’s home.”<sup>68</sup> Bass later lamented Farley’s probable execution “for protecting what he thought IRREVOCABLY his.”<sup>69</sup>

Indeed, those involved in Farley’s defense had deep and long investments in black property access and ownership. A principal speaker at the Farley Defense’s Committee final mass meeting, Hugh McBeth, was a Harvard-trained attorney, realtor, land developer, booster and race advocate who believed black freedom and autonomy, and profit for himself, could be achieved through landownership. Perhaps his most ambitious venture was the development of Little Liberia circa 1918, an all-black agricultural colony in Baja California that McBeth held out

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<sup>66</sup> Charlotta Bass, “Editorial,” *Eagle*, Feb 24, 1938. The *Eagle* also captioned a photo of George Farley, “Because the precept 'a man's home is his castle' is strong within the breasts of even the most lowly, George Farley, lies wounded in the General Hospital and two deputy marshalls [sic], white, are dead.”

<sup>67</sup> *Eagle* discussed castle doctrine in relations to unlawful police searches, “Violating the Law of Enforcing It?,” *Eagle*, April 18, 1924.

<sup>68</sup> Ernest Barefield, “Letter to the Editor,” *Eagle*, March 24, 1938.

<sup>69</sup> Bass, “On the Sidewalk,” *Eagle*, May 26, 1938.

hopes would become an independent black state.<sup>70</sup> Farley's champion in printed word, Charlotta Bass was, arguably, the single most important activists in Black Los Angeles' multiple campaigns against race restrictive covenants, which barred black access to property ownership in most of the city for nearly half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Farley's attorney, Loren Miller, life's work would come to be defined by his central role as NAACP chief counsel in the case that outlawed race restrictive covenants nationwide in 1948.<sup>71</sup> The committed involvement of McBeth, Bass, and Miller demonstrated the most visible underpinnings of property rights and ownership buttressing support for George Farley.

What the *Eagle* and Black Los Angeles conferred onto the Farley case was a conflict over the protection of a bundle of land entitlements endowed through its ownership. The sanctity of municipal bond contracts and the profitability of debt markets be damned, black property ownership, to a degree, was inviolate. New Deal efforts created and tasked the HOLC and moratorium legislation to secure homeownership, but when those state protections failed against the extractions of capitalism, as they did for the Farleys, the black home was the last and ultimate self-help defensible space. Bass optimistically warned as much in the final editorial she wrote on the trial, "Through the medium of this case—whether Farley be declared innocent or guilty—I believe the State of California will effect a great reform, and if it does not, I am fearful for the future."<sup>72</sup> Farley's exercise of this entitlement was never indicted as wrong among the black Angeleno voices that made it to print. Bass deftly called the episode a "tragedy," an assessment

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<sup>70</sup> Lawrence Brooks De Graaf et al., *Seeking El Dorado : African Americans in California* (Los Angeles: University of Seattle Press, 2001), 25, 157-8, 63.

<sup>71</sup> Gibbons, *City of Segregation : One Hundred Years of Struggle for Housing in Los Angeles*, 13, 21, 42; For more on the career of Loren Miller see, Amina Hassan, *Loren Miller, Civil Rights Attorney and Journalist* (Norman. Oklahoma University of Oklahoma Press, 2015).

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*

held throughout Black Los Angeles, as both Farley and the marshals exercised their respective rights and obligations of property that inexorably led to the suffering of all.

Thus, the community's pretrial mobilizing was a combination of communist inspired tactics of "mass pressure" shot through the non-communist politics of black property rights violated by predatory debt. With this pressure of property rights entitlement at their back, Miller and the rest of Farley's legal team borrowed from a sensational criminal trial still fresh in white popular culture. In 1937, Paul Wright, a wealthy airline executive, murdered his wife Evelyn and close friend, John Kimmel, when he claimed to have caught them in an "inappropriate" embrace in the Wright's home. Wright hired famed defense attorney Jerry Giesler, who was well-known for his defense of high-profile clients such as Benjamin "Bugsy" Siegel. He argued that Wright shot the victims in a "white flame" of passion, driven to temporary insanity by the shock of the claimed infidelity. A jury found Wright guilty of manslaughter, but at a later sanity hearing, he was found not criminally liable due to insanity. Farley's legal team applied the same defense.

Calling George Farley, the "black flame" slayer, the defense team employed the same "alienists" used in the Wright trial, who testified that property loss and the "mental shock of eviction caused him [Farley] to lose consciousness" and become temporarily insane. The city's prosecutors argued premediated first-degree murder, foregrounding the fact that Farley shot the marshals mercilessly in the back, which for one of the victims, "literally tore the heart from the body." The City demanded Farley be put to death.<sup>73</sup> On May 25, 1938, after eight hours of deliberation, the all-white jury reached a verdict. "[T]hrongs and interested spectators sat with bated breath; and some muttered prayers through tense or trembling lips as all eyes were glued

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<sup>73</sup> "No Summons Served on Farley, Says Defense; State Ask Death," *Eagle*, May 12, 1938.



upon the foreman of the jury who held the partial fate of the broken old man on a slip of white paper in his hands,” recounted the *Eagle*. The jury found George Farley guilty not of first-degree murder but manslaughter. Calm held in the courtroom after the verdict, an *Eagle* reporter witnessed, “but outside pandemonium broke loose among the spectators who shouted and cried and laughed from sheer gratitude that justice has prevailed at least half-way—and Mrs. Farley covered the face of Loren Miller with kisses and tears.”<sup>74</sup>

Like Paul Wright, Farley was found guilty of manslaughter, but the insanity plea did not stand at a later hearing. For the manslaughter convictions, the judge sentenced Farley to two consecutive terms of five to ten years for each count. The judge’s final words to George Farley: “You are remanded to the custody of the sheriff of Los Angeles County to be by him delivered to the warden of the state’s prison of the State of California at San Quentin, and the sheriff is directed to carry this order into effect.”<sup>75</sup> George Farley was not free, but he was not going to die either, neither at the hands of vigilante white industrial workers nor by official orders of the state.

Those in Black Los Angeles with a possessive investment in property or criminal justice reform—or both— felt vindicated. They felt recognized, maybe even safe. The fact that a working-class black man shot dead two white marshals over property and was not consequently swinging from a Los Angeles tree or choking in Sacramento’s gas chamber was an achievement. There were two turbulent decades of infrastructure development, city growth and contraction, and predatory debt behind them. Many more decades of lynching and many thousands gone to its popular white sentences of death held up most visibly in the Scottsboro trials. On that day in

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<sup>74</sup> “FARLEY FOUND GUILTY!” *Eagle*, May 26, 1938.

<sup>75</sup> The news accounts report the sentence length, sentencing documents do not specify the length of the sentence, “Farley Gets Maximum Term; Declared ‘Sane,’” *Eagle*, June 2, 1938.

May, in that courtroom in Los Angeles, George Farley would not be added to that long roster, and Cora Farley would not be its suffering and enduring widow. Loren Miller wrote a letter giving thanks to Charlotta Bass and her *California Eagle* for its “widespread publicity” that “pointed out the real issues.” Miller also thanked the black community for rallying to the Farleys’ aid which ensured he received a fair trial.<sup>76</sup> Within a few months the Farley’s name disappeared from the news as he served his sentence in San Quentin State Prison.

George Farley died in 1950.<sup>77</sup> During his life, and well before and after his passing, Black Americans spoke of the promised land, some other physical place of plenty and security that could only be claimed as possible if it was owned. Migrants nominated their own candidates with their feet, Chicago or New York perhaps. The Farleys chose Los Angeles for themselves. Despite the prophesies, Black people possessed a skepticism about the achievement of freedom in the physical life of this world—the achievement of home. So, Black Americans, then as they do now, ordain death, that passage from this world to heaven, with an alias grand enough for the audacity of paradise prepared especially for black people—its security, pleasure, and everlasting life—they call it a “homegoing.”<sup>78</sup>

Before his death, Farley was paroled in 1942 as the United States entered the bloodiest of its many wars of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. He returned to Los Angeles a tenant in a booming war

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<sup>76</sup> Loren Miller, “Letter to the Editor,” *Eagle*, June 2, 1938.

<sup>77</sup> Ancestry.com. California, Prison and Correctional Records, 1851-1950 [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2014. Original data: Department of Corrections. Folsom State Prison Records, 1879–1949. ID #R136, California State Archives, Office of the Secretary of State, Sacramento, California. Department of Corrections. San Quentin State Prison Records, 1850–1950. ID #R135, California State Archives, Office of the Secretary of State, Sacramento, California. Department of Corrections. Youth Authority Dept. Records, 1872–1950. ID #R233, California State Archives, Office of the Secretary of State, Sacramento, California.

<sup>78</sup> On the concept of "homegoing" see, Regina Lemel Graham, "I Have a Testimony: A Perspective of Death, Grief and Widowhood in African American Culture" (Ph.D., The University of North Carolina at Greensboro, 2002), 35-37.

manufacturing economy, the same tenure status as when he was carried away during the Depression—but not exactly. Even under the aegis of the welfare state of the New Deal, the government—federal or otherwise—had little to no role in private rental markets other than relief payments for rent. With the economic pressures of war production and its consequent housing shortages, the federal government went beyond offering meager financial aid in the form of relief payments and entered as an affirmative regulator and prosecutor in the form of universal rent control. A new generation of tenants in search of promised lands would seize the intervention, commencing a decade of housing security struggle the likes of which Los Angeles had never seen.

## CHAPTER FOUR: THE CONFLICT OVER WORLD WAR II RENT CONTROL

Landlord, landlord,  
My roof has sprung a leak.  
Don't you 'member I told you about it  
Way last week?

Landlord, landlord,  
These steps is broken down.  
When you come up yourself  
It's a wonder you don't fall down.

Ten Bucks you say I owe you?  
Ten Bucks you say is due?  
Well, that's Ten Bucks more'n I'll pay you  
Till you fix this house up new.

What? You gonna get eviction orders?  
You gonna cut off my heat?  
You gonna take my furniture and  
Throw it in the street?

Um-huh! You talking high and mighty.  
Talk on-till you get through.  
You ain't gonna be able to say a word  
If I land my fist on you.

Police! Police!  
Come and get this man!  
He's trying to ruin the government  
And overturn the land!

Copper's whistle!  
Patrol bell!  
Arrest.  
Precinct Station.  
Iron cell.  
Headlines in press:  
MAN THREATENS LANDLORD  
TENANT HELD NO BAIL  
JUDGE GIVES NEGRO 90  
DAYS IN COUNTY JAIL!

—Langston Hughes,  
*Ballad of the Landlord* (1940)

Rarely mentioned or acknowledged by urban historians, universal rent control instigated bitter property conflicts between tenants and landlords in Los Angeles between 1942 and 1950. To weaponize for total war, the United States government required massive amounts of labor to produce munitions, ships, and planes, and these workers needed affordable and secure places to live to reproduce themselves.<sup>1</sup> Though World War I had provided a painful lesson, peacetime housing markets met war-induced housing shortages with massive rent inflation, profiteering, and wanton eviction.<sup>2</sup> The exact opposite of housing security. The urban landlord's peacetime prerogative to raise rents, evict tenants, or use these punitively had become a threat to the

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<sup>1</sup> Housing is conceptualized here as one important site where human labor engages in the social reproduction of workers, see Johanna Brenner and Barbara Laslett, "Gender, Social Reproduction, and Women's Self-Organization:: Considering the U.S. Welfare State," *Gender & Society* 5, no. 3 (1991): 314.

<sup>2</sup> Robert M. Fogelson, *The Great Rent Wars : New York, 1917-1929* (New Haven Yale University Press, 2013).

housing security necessary to transform a mass of tenants into an army of war labor. Therefore, rent and occupancy, already matters of life, violence, and freedom—as Hughes demonstrates—had become matters of war. To promote these base elements of housing security, Congress passed the unprecedented Price Control Act of 1942, which froze rents and narrowed the scope of evictions for millions of tenants nationwide. Indeed, the terms of power and conflict wielded over Hughes’ archetypal tenants had transformed.

Chapter 3 examines the property conflict of black housing security in Los Angeles under federal rent control between 1942 and 1950. This chapter argues that unorganized black tenants used rent control to press their claims for housing security by channeling their property politics through the infrastructure of rent enforcement. In other words, tenants used complaints to culturally legitimize their entitlements, realize better rents, secure occupancy, and demand dignified housing conditions under the violent and insecure terms of urban tenancy. Federal rent control expanded the practical and cultural purview of tenant housing security practice, and thus, provided an expanded field of property conflict. It provided a listening, enforcement, and entitlement venue that made tenant complaints culturally legitimate and, in some cases, legally enforceable. When the law aligned, tenant complaints became rent actions and secured occupancy. When it did not, tenants complained and fought anyway. They did so individually and uncoordinated to the effect of a tenant movement. Furthermore, tenants demonstrated the empowering potential of self-help governance in rental housing, if only for a brief period of war induced emergency.

## **The Price Control Act of 1942: Federal Rent Control in Los Angeles**

As the 1940s progressed, rent control in Los Angeles would serve a growing black Central Avenue, what historian Josh Sides calls the Great Migration for Black Los Angeles. With the United States' entry into WWII at the end of 1941, Los Angeles transformed into the second largest war manufacturing center in the country, which employed half a million workers by 1943 and required thousands more.<sup>3</sup> Black people from predominately Texas, Louisiana, and Mississippi streamed into Los Angeles to take up industrial opportunities unwillingly conceded by white employers due to the tremendous need for labor to fulfill a cascade of federal war production contracts. At the height of the migration in 1943, an estimated 6,000 Black people arrived in Los Angeles each month. At the peak 1943 rate, just three months of migration nearly equaled the cumulative Black migration to Los Angeles for the prior decade. By the end of the war in 1945, the Black prewar population nearly doubled. By 1950, Black Los Angeles had grown by 107,000 people, all of which needed shelter in the supposed "promised land."<sup>4</sup>

How each Black migrant paid for shelter invariably indicated their tenure status. They added to Black Los Angeles' tenants and paid rent or entered the lauded league of homeowners and paid a mortgage or the full cost of a house. Black homeownership in Los Angeles exploded during the 1940s, growing over three and half times for the Los Angeles census district by the end of the decade. The exponential rise in homeowners shifted their proportion in relation to Black tenants. In 1940, Black tenants comprised 68 percent of Black households in Los Angeles,

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<sup>3</sup> Sides, *L.A. City Limits : African American Los Angeles from the Great Depression to the Present*, 37.

<sup>4</sup> "Working Away : African American Migration and Community in Los Angeles from the Great Depression to 1954" (1999), 80, 84.; "Letter to Gordon McDonough from Welfare Council of Metropolitan Los Angeles, April 3, 1945," Box 65, Housing Jan-July 1945, Gordon McDonough Papers, Special Collections, University of Southern California, Los Angeles, California.

which fell to 58 percent by the end of the decade. Even so, Black tenants remained the majority of the Black population. But more critical than proportion, the ranks of Black tenant households more than doubled between 1940 and 1950, from 14,500 to 33,600.<sup>5</sup> During this dynamic decade, tens of thousands of new Black tenants would pay frozen or illegal rents to old and new landlords alike, all under a system of federal rent control regulations and infrastructure unprecedented in U.S. history. Massive in both breadth and scope, it all revolved around tenant complaint.

When the United States officially entered World War II after the attack on Pearl Harbor, Congress passed the Emergency Price Control Act in February of 1942, which authorized price ceilings on essential commodities and residential rents in designated war production areas, but only after cities failed to implement voluntary control within a sixty-day grace period. The act established the Office of Price Administration (OPA) as an independent agency tasked with administering and enforcing all price and rent controls.<sup>6</sup> The act regulated two main areas of rental housing: rent and eviction. When the OPA established federal rent control in a designated city, rents froze at a 1942 date that represented prewar inflation rent levels. In Los Angeles, the freeze date for rents was March 1, 1942. Rent control applied to all rental housing, rented rooms, single family homes, boarding houses, apartments, motels, hotels, and auto courts until the Price Control Act expired in 1947, after which hotels and other “transient” accommodations were

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<sup>5</sup> See note 12 on slight difference between city versus district tenancy rate. 1940 data is for Los Angeles District, data for 1950 is Los Angeles Area. These were the most comparable areas available, as the 1940 listed Los Angeles City data but the 1950 Census did not. States United et al., *Sixteenth Census of the United States: 1940*, vol. II (Washington, DC: United States Government Printing Office, 1943), 214; States and Census, *1950 United States Census of Housing*, II.

<sup>6</sup> Emergency Price Control Act of 1942, 50a U.S.C. § 961 (1942).

decontrolled.<sup>7</sup> The OPA also regulated evictions. Landlords were not permitted to evict a tenant paying freeze-date rent except under a few limited conditions, which will be taken up later in the chapter.

Violation of these regulations came with heavy penalties. The criminal punishment for violation of the Price Control Act was a fine not to exceed \$1,000 (\$15,787 in 2018) or imprisonment not to exceed one year. Criminal prosecution was rare and usually reserved for chronic or severe violations in quantity and scope. “Treble damage” claims were more common. Aggrieved tenants could pursue civil damages in small claims court for a maximum of three times their actual damages (treble) or \$50 (\$789 in 2018), whichever was greater.<sup>8</sup> Negotiated settlements were the most common form of monetary enforcement under rent control. When violations were uncovered, rent investigators oftentimes negotiated a cash settlement between the landlord and the tenant that avoided the need for court intervention.<sup>9</sup>

Federal rent and price controls did more than lay a blanket of abstract regulations over the city’s housing, commodities, and growing population, it established a geography and infrastructure. When old residents or new migrants wanted to complain about rent or price ceilings they had listening and enforcement sites to do so. For the Central Avenue area, the OPA had two physical locations. First, the rent office on Broadway between West Olympic Boulevard and West 11<sup>th</sup> Street, which served as the rent office for the Defense Area. The OPA built the

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<sup>7</sup> John W. Willis, "The Federal Housing and Rent Act of 1947," *Columbia Law Review* 47, no. 7 (1947).

<sup>8</sup> Examples of treble damage claims, "Woman win \$50 in First Rent Control Case in County," *Los Angeles Times*, Dec. 2, 1942; "Tenants win Treble damage awards in overcharging suits," *Times*, Jan. 19, 1943.

<sup>9</sup> Example of settlement, Progress Sheet For Complain and Violation Cases, June 29, 1950; Docket 272207; Select Sample Rent Enforcement Case Files, ca. 1942-1950; Region VIII – Regional Office; Records of the Office of Housing Expediter, Record Group 252; National Archives Records Administration - Pacific Region, San Francisco.



rent office expecting high volume. The office featured a large counter allowing twenty simultaneous interviews with tenants and landlords. For telephone calls, the office was initially equipped with a dedicated switchboard and twenty-one telephones, expecting 2,000 calls per day.<sup>10</sup>

Second, the OPA established a local rationing price board, Board 5.40, in the Vernon Library, just four blocks south of the Dunbar Hotel. The Central Avenue board served as the only all-Black rationing and price board in the entire Pacific Region, comprised of California, Washington, Arizona, Oregon, and Nevada. In 1944, it employed thirteen clerks, while the Los Angeles Rental Area's other 129 boards employed none.<sup>11</sup> The board's area boundaries were Main to the west, Slauson to the south, Alameda to the east, and Adams to the north.<sup>12</sup> With mostly a volunteer staff, they served as registration sites, issued rationing books, assigned fuel rations, issued purchase certificates for rationed commodities, and helped negotiate complaints on price violations.<sup>13</sup> The board's singular existence in the Black West signaled an unparalleled context for the community's commitment to federal rent and price controls in 1940s Black Los Angeles.

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<sup>10</sup> "Twenty First Cabinet Meeting Mr. Samuel Leak's Office," Oct 26, 1942; "Twenty Eighth Cabinet Meeting Mr. Samuel Leak's Office," Dec 14, 1942, General Records, 1942-1947; Collected Records of District Offices – Fresno; Los Angeles; Records of the Office of Price Administration Region VIII Regional Office; National Archives Records Administration - Pacific Region, San Francisco.

<sup>11</sup> Negro Employment Report Region VIII, March 31, 1944; Report – Negro Employment, 1944-1946; General Records, 1942-1947; Collected Records of District Offices – Fresno; Los Angeles; Records of the Office of Price Administration Region VIII Regional Office; National Archives Records Administration - Pacific Region, San Francisco.

<sup>12</sup> Los Angeles City and County War Price and Rationing Boards, July 7, 1942; Early Organization Maps and Boundaries - Board Management - Los Angeles; Los Angeles Price Board Management Records; Los Angeles District Office; Records of the Office of Price Administration, RG 188; National Archives Records Administration – Riverside, CA.

<sup>13</sup> States United and Administration Office of Price, *Opa Is Our Battle Line : Employee Handbook : Region Viii Ed., October 1943* (Washington: U.S. G.P.O., 1943), 23.

The Office of Price Administration officially controlled the rent in Los Angeles on November 1, 1942, but the rent effectively froze in December, due to the albatross of administrative labor necessary to register some 600,000 units of rental housing in Los Angeles and Orange counties, called the Los Angeles Rental Defense Area. According to the OPA, it was the second largest in the country.<sup>14</sup> The registration process put both landlord and tenant on notice that rent control had arrived. Regulations required landlords to submit registration forms to the OPA, which reported tenant names, freeze-date rents, and freeze-date services (laundry, cleaning, etc.) for rental units. To process hundreds of thousands of registrations, the OPA established fifty temporary registration stations staffed with 250 paid and volunteer workers.<sup>15</sup> Another sixty workers then filed registration forms by street name, while another set of workers mailed 35,000 landlord and tenant copies of registration forms per day, a total of 1.2 million.<sup>16</sup> When landlords received their copies, controls required that their tenants sign them to acknowledge the information provided on the registration. Operators of rooming houses posted room rates in a central location or in rented rooms themselves.<sup>17</sup> Tenants' copies matched the

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<sup>14</sup> For number of estimated units see, Cabinet Meeting Mr. Samuel Leak's Office" March 15, 1943; L.A. Cabinet Meetings 1942 - 1943; General Records, 1942-1947; Collected Records of District Offices – Fresno; Los Angeles; Records of the Office of Price Administration Region VIII Regional Office; National Archives Records Administration - Pacific Region, San Francisco; On size of rental area see, "Ninetyeth Cabinet Meeting Mr. Samuel Leak's Office" Oct 21, 1942.

<sup>15</sup> Twenty Fourth Cabinet Meeting Mr. Samuel Leak's Office; L.A. Cabinet Meetings 1942 - 1943; General Records, 1942-1947; Collected Records of District Offices – Fresno; Los Angeles; Records of the Office of Price Administration Region VIII Regional Office; National Archives Records Administration - Pacific Region, San Francisco.

<sup>16</sup> Memorandum re: Weekly Progress Report of the Los Angeles District Office for the Week Ending Jan 9, 1943; L.A. Narrative Progress Reports District Director to Regional ADM; Collected Records of District Offices – Fresno; Los Angeles; Records of the Office of Price Administration Region VIII Regional Office; National Archives Records Administration - Pacific Region, San Francisco.

<sup>17</sup> States United and Administration Office of Price, *Mr. Landlord, Rent Control Is an Asset for You!* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Office of Price Administration, 1945).

landlord's and provided a mailable insert to contest their landlord's reported rent or services on the freeze date of March 1, 1942.

While the Los Angeles Rental Defense Area represented the second-largest defense area in the country, it presided over the largest rental market in California and the Western United States. Los Angeles alone comprised 31 percent of all rents in the state in 1940 at \$9.5 million, \$1.5 million more than San Francisco and Oakland combined. 33,700 vacant units represented another \$1.1 million in potential rents for the year. In this massive rental market of the West, tenants occupied 66 percent of all housing units. For Black Los Angeles, tenants comprised 70 percent of Black occupied units in the city, up 4 percent after a decade of depression. Nonwhite tenants, the majority being Black, paid an estimated \$450,000 in rents annually to their landlords for shelter. The larger Los Angeles "census district," which included Orange County and closely aligned with the Los Angeles Rental Defense Area, witnessed the exchange of \$15.5 million in rents in 1940, just over half the state's rents.<sup>18</sup> These were staggering sums of cash transfers for shelter now regulated under federal rent control. Indeed, the Los Angeles rent office led as the western epicenter in both population and cash value of rents under control.

### **Dark Laughter and Gossip: Black Culture on Rent Control Complaint**

Rent control enforcement not only required an infrastructure of complaint and enforcement—offices, investigators, and monetary penalties—but also a tenant *culture of rent complaint and redress*. Black Angelenos, come westward from the South, were overflowing with rich traditions of complaint and redress, rooted in what Dubois called the "sorrow songs," crafted

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<sup>18</sup> Proportion of Black tenancy was higher in the City of Los Angeles, 68 percent, than it was in the Los Angeles Census District, 68 percent, which included all of Los Angeles County, see States in the Pacific Region were Arizona, California, Nevada, Oregon, and Washington; Truesdell, States, and Census, *16th Census of the United States: 1940 - Housing*, II, 235, 36, 51.

by the enslaved and transformed into jazz, blues, and gospel by their tenuously free descendants. For rent complaints, cartoonist Oliver Harrington and columnist Jay Gould mobilized two other cultural practices of complaint, closely linked, but ultimately distinct from these musical traditions—newspaper comics and gossip. As Hughes demonstrates in the “Ballad of the Landlord,” Black people already possessed a sharp practice of tenant complaint before the outbreak of WWII, but those complaints hit an indifferent or hostile wall. The comics of Harrington and the gossip column of Gould, both published in Black Los Angeles’ primary newspaper—the *Eagle*, offered a sample of how Black tenant culture integrated rent control entitlement into existing expressions and practices of complaint. In a sense, they gave cultural intimacy to the unprecedented intervention of federal rent control in black tenant life through laughter and talking shit.

In the words of Langston Hughes, Oliver Harrington was “Negro America’s favorite cartoonist” from the early 1930s to the late 1950s, beloved for his character “Brother Bootsie.”<sup>19</sup> Harrington began his career as a satirical cartoonist and tenant (he rented a room at the YMCA) in Harlem during the early Depression in the aftermath of the Harlem Renaissance. During this time, Harrington befriended the Renaissance’s canonical figures: Arna Bontemps, Rudolph Fisher, Wallace Thurman, and Langston Hughes. Harrington’s early cartoons in 1932 chronicled black discontent with discriminatory employment, racial violence, and the Republican Party. In 1935, Harrington created his most acclaimed character, Bootsie, under the cartoon series *Dark Laughter*, which grew to capture the admiration of his literati circle and the black working-class

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<sup>19</sup> Oliver W. Harrington, *Bootsie and Others : A Selection of Cartoons* (New York Dodd, Mead & Company 1958), 1.

alike. Harrington's Bootsie cartoons enjoyed a national circulation in black newspapers, but most notably in the *Pittsburgh Courier*.<sup>20</sup>

Bootsie's popularity grew from his representation as the black "urban everyman," who, as Langston Hughes praised in the introduction of Harrington's 1958 book *Bootsie and Others*, represented "the trials and tribulations of the average Negro from Lenox Avenue in Harlem or Hastings Street in Detroit to Central Avenue in Los Angeles or Rampart in New Orleans—woman problems, pocketbook problems, landlady problems, and race problems are the same." With Bootsie's broad engagement with the troubles of black life, Hughes interpreted the character as a comic representation of the blues, where a bit of laughter was the final guard against crying from perpetual mistreatment.<sup>21</sup> Jeff Todd Titon identified this defensive humor as the central theme of the blues, what he coined as "ironic comedy." The blues performer crafts a story of aggrievement, of suffering the woes of a bad lover perhaps, and uses the listener's sympathy as the artist's moral authority to deliver judgement. Unlike Anglo- and Euro-American ballads that centered romantic tragedy, the blues often resolved their theme of aggrievement by asserting independence and freedom. The intent of the blues was, ultimately, not unredeemed sadness, but a hard-won restoration.<sup>22</sup>

Indeed, Richard Wright argued that the blues' central role in black life was to "indict the social system," which among the plantation, Jim Crow, and a no-good lover included the

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<sup>20</sup> Oliver W. Harrington and M. Thomas Inge, *Dark Laughter : Satiric Art of Oliver W. Harrington : From the Walter O. Evans Collection of African-American Art* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1993), xvi-xvii; "How Bootsie Was Born," in *Harlem, USA*, ed. John Henrik Clarke (New York: Collier Books 1971), 72-79.

<sup>21</sup> Harrington, *Bootsie and Others : A Selection of Cartoons*, 1.

<sup>22</sup> Jeff Todd Titon, *Downhome Blues Lyrics : An Anthology from the Post-World War II Era* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1990), 2.

landlord.<sup>23</sup> Similar to a blues song, Harrington positioned Bootsie, his friends, or black Harlemites as victims of mistreatment, but depicted them in exaggerated scenarios of their partial making for comedic and rhetorical effect. During WWII, Bootsie's single pane adventures leveled complaints at poverty, rationing, interpersonal relations, and of course, landlords.<sup>24</sup> Thus, Harrington positioned Bootsie as a comic archetype of black aggrievement. Bootsie could move into the various circumstances of black life, cast judgements from the downtrodden position of the mistreated, but simultaneously carry a comedic air because his own foolishness bore some of the responsibility for his own plight.

In a cartoon published in the *Eagle* in October 1942, Harrington poked fun at the arbitrary schedule of fees landlords charged roomers for purportedly billable services. In the cartoon (Fig. 1), Harrington depicted Bootsie in his rented room hiding under his bed, the landlady is standing in the doorway, and the remains of a meal sat on a small table in the foreground. The cartoon's caption reads the landlady's announcement, "I know you been sneaken food in. That's gonna cost you fifty cents – fer privileges."<sup>25</sup> The scenario was doubly ridiculous. The landlady held the power to charge for privileges for no real expenditure of a service, and Bootsie held no power to contest it, exaggerated by his hiding under the bed. More broadly, Bootsie's landlady blues positioned him as an aggrieved tenant exposing contentious tenant-landlord property relations, which black tenants from Harlem to Los Angeles could

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<sup>23</sup> Richard Wright quoted in, Clyde Adrian Woods, *Development Arrested : The Blues and Plantation Power in the Mississippi Delta* (London; New York: Verso, 1998), 33; Tilton says blues lyrics cast "a bill of indictment," Tilton, *Downhome Blues Lyrics : An Anthology from the Post-World War II Era*, 2.

<sup>24</sup> "Dark Laughter," *Pittsburgh Courier*, Oct 24, 1942; *Courier*, June 5, 1942; *Courier*, Aug 7, 1943; *Courier*, Aug 28, 1943.

<sup>25</sup> Harrington, "Dark Laughter," *Eagle*, Oct. 22, 1942.

commiserate. When federal rent control threw these relationships sideways at the end of 1942 and beginning of 1943, Harrington would also aimed these complaints directly at the prospects of rent control for black tenants.

In September of 1942, rent control hung in the air in Harlem and Los Angeles. Rents froze in Detroit, Cleveland, Philadelphia, Birmingham, Indianapolis, Pittsburgh, Chicago, St. Louis, Louisville, and Atlanta, but not in Harlem and Los Angeles. Black leaders in Harlem began to campaign for 100,000 signatures the same month, demanding the OPA establish rent control protections due to rising rents.<sup>26</sup> In Los Angeles, rent control sat on the horizon. The city's sixty-day grace period to implement some form of voluntary controls expired in June, but officials postponed the city-wide rent freeze due to budget problems.<sup>27</sup>



Figure 7: Bootsie Newspaper Cartoon, Harrington, Oliver. *Dark Laughter*. October 22, 1942. *California Eagle*. [Archive.org](https://archive.org).

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<sup>26</sup> "Rent Ceiling Drive to Open in Harlem," *New York Times*, Sept 6, 1942.

<sup>27</sup> "Federal Rent Control Here by Aug 1 Indicated," *Los Angeles Times*, Jun 30, 1942; "Machinery Set for Rent Control," *Times*, Oct 6, 1942.

In either case, the buzz around rent control encouraged Bootsie to inform his landlady about the government freeze on rents. In the September 3<sup>rd</sup> comic (Fig. 2), Harrington drew Bootsie tossed onto the stoop of his rented Harlem brownstone with his belongings, two suitcases and their contents, dashed around him. Male spectators looked on with a sort of blank pity. The only window in the scene displayed a “vacancy” sign. The caption reads, “Bootsie said he was gonna tell his landlady that the government frozed rents ‘til after the war.”<sup>28</sup> Given that rents were not frozen in Harlem, Harrington offered a funny but disconcerting prophesy in tune with the ballad of the landlord. Perhaps too, it was less a prophesy than it was an account, since Harrington squarely admitted that “not much imagination was required for the job,” since he “simply recorded the almost unbelievable but hilarious chaos around me and came up with a character.”<sup>29</sup> Whether prophetic or documentary, the complaint was clear. Bootsie, and black tenants at-large, were entitled to rent control when and if it arrived, but Harrington suggested that the landlord’s power to wield an informal eviction was greater than some distant and physically absent regulation. The source of the power, in this sense, was not physical, as Harrington never revealed the perpetrator of the eviction. Bootsie’s status as a black tenant determined his vulnerability and neither his, nor his landlady’s, physical stature. For black Angeleno readers, Bootsie’s eviction trouble served as one of their first cultural representations of rent control while it was tied up in bureaucratic delays, a representation fused with the complaint practice of the blues.

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<sup>28</sup> Oliver Harrington, “Dark Laughter,” *Eagle*, Sep. 3, 1942.

<sup>29</sup> Harrington, “How Bootsie Was Born,” 72-73.





Figure 8: Bootsie Newspaper Cartoon, Harrington, Oliver. Dark Laughter. September 3, 1942. California Eagle. Archive.org.

By the first week of December 1942, the delays and property registrations settled, and rent control fully regulated Los Angeles' rental housing. Rents froze on March 1, 1942 rates, and tenants could file complaints against non-compliant landlords.<sup>30</sup> Although, at less than two months old, Central Avenue lacked a community culture of rent control enforcement. In other words, the formal rules set out by the OPA needed integration into a black system of meaning and morality, and a cultural practice to exercise them. Newspaper gossip provided one cultural practice for renters in the Central Avenue district and in cities of the Black West. A regular column in the *Eagle*, Jay Gould's San Francisco based "Race Track Gossip" functioned as a crowdsourced clearinghouse for sports, society, and entertainment news for black communities in the West. Gould solicited readers for information on black social affairs from San Diego to

<sup>30</sup> "Twenty Seventh Cabinet Meeting Mr. Samuel Leak's Office" Dec 7, 1942; "Woman win \$50 in First Rent Control Case in County," *Los Angeles Times*, Dec 2, 1942.

San Francisco, all received by letter, telegram, or word of mouth.<sup>31</sup> On December 11, Gould passed along a rent complaint provocation, “That certain landlady on third and Townsend streets who raised her rent fifty cents and a dollar, should be told that she may get into serious trouble if some one reports her to the office of Price Administration.”<sup>32</sup> The unspecific tidbit gave local readers just enough information to surmise the identity of the culprit, while tentatively enlisting “some one” to file a complaint. For Central Avenue readers, gossip surveilled landlords’ rent compliance and character, and threatened landlords with complaints capable of forcing cash refunds to an aggrieved tenant.

Further bolstering a culture of rent complaint, Gould’s gossip column made landlords the butt of public jokes and name-calling. As demonstrated in Chapter 1, Black Los Angeles’ real estate interests promoted a culture that lauded and encouraged the attainment of the status of landlord. For Central Avenue readers, Gould’s jokes furnished ammunition to demote the character of landlords. He jabbed in December, 1942, “The only man in the world that never receives a good word from a landlady or landlord is the man in the office of the Price Administration who put the ceiling prices on.”<sup>33</sup> In January, Gould’s name-calling went further, positioning rent control as a sort of New Deal entitlement, “The rent control by the Government has saved poor people millions and millions of dollars in all big cities and the landlords have not

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<sup>31</sup> For an example of the column see, “Race Track Gossip,” *Eagle*, September 3, 1942. Gould solicited information for publication from readers, “For any information write or wire Jay Gould, 1716 Webster Street, San Francisco, Calif,” I therefore call it a clearinghouse of black social news.

<sup>32</sup> Jay Gould, “Race Track Gossip,” *Eagle*, December 11, 1942.

<sup>33</sup> Jay Gould, “Race Track Gossip,” *Eagle*, Dec 18, 1942.

even squawked with the exception of a few boobs.”<sup>34</sup> For Harrington though, the exceptions were not simply squawking.

In the same month of Gould’s latest rent gossip, Bootsie gave his rent control entitlement another shot in a new cartoon (Fig. 3). His landlady, on the other hand, rebuffed him violently. The caption read in the voice of a Harlemite who witnessed Bootsie’s landlady chase him down the street with her broom. “Its Bootsie an’ his landlady agin. Like he mentioned sumpin’ about price ceiling on room rent.”<sup>35</sup> Similar to his first attempt, Bootsie’s quest for rent control recognition ended in violence. Apparently, the ballad of the landlord as a parable of property remained unchanged. But did it? Aggrievement for black tenants was nothing new, yet Bootsie and his landlady stood on modified, contested ground. Indeed, Bootsie no longer hid under his bed in this new spat over rented shelter and cash. Rent control entered as a new arbiter of housing conflict in 1943. If tenants harnessed the entitlement to use it, Bootsie and his tenant audience could file a complaint against a broom-wielding landlord at the rent office.

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<sup>34</sup> Gould, "Racetrack Gossip," *Eagle*, Jan 8, 1943.

<sup>35</sup> "Dark Laughter," *Eagle*, Jan 28, 1943.



Figure 9: Bootsie Newspaper Cartoon, Harrington, Oliver. *Dark Laughter*. January 28, 1943. *California Eagle*. *Archive.org*.

In July 1943, Gould's gossip column gifted tenant readers the successful example of rent control enforcement that was twice denied to Bootsie. Gould reported that an unnamed tenant, "the lady at the corner of Webster and Sutter," refused an eviction and was consequently locked out of her home. The tenant reported the unauthorized eviction to the OPA. Gould then shared the good news, "The attorney representing the city explained the case to the judge when the case was tried and the landlord was put on probation for two years with a suspended 30 day sentence."<sup>36</sup> Gould's story completed an arc of rent gossip. The story began in December 1942 with nudging tenants to file complaints, continued with deriding landlords' character, and ended with a story of successful rent enforcement. The cultural significance cannot be understated. Before federal rent control, the "Ballad of the Landlord" as a representation of black urban tenancy began with complaint and ended with the tenant serving a stint in jail. Three years later,

<sup>36</sup> Gould, "Race Track," *Eagle*, July 8, 1943.

a new ballad reversed the lyrics. Under the revised script, tenant complaints to the rent office now subjected landlords to possible incarceration. The first step: file a complaint.

### **“Ten Bucks you say I owe you?”: The Property Politics of Rent Complaint**

Tenant complaints fueled the machinery of rent control enforcement and served as a critical instrument in the struggle for wartime housing security in Los Angeles. If tenants harbored a gripe about rent violations, rent adjustments, poor housing conditions, or undignified treatment, they could write, call, or visit the rent office in Downtown Los Angeles and register a complaint. Seemingly innocuous, the rent office intervened as an unprecedented urban space and advocate in the history of tenant-landlord relations in the United States. Through this historic venue, unorganized tenants faced down powerful real estate interests, religious institutions, and legal entities to transform complaints into effective rent actions. Tenants’ larger goals for housing security also injected complaints with concerns and desires beyond the narrow purview of rent control. Tenants submitted grievances. They complained about housing conditions. They reported landlord abuses and disrespect. All revealed through hand-written letters and verbal complaints for which there was no recipient in the prior political economy of peacetime housing. By organically mixing their rent actions and complaints, tenants attempted to expand the scope of rent control to better serve their security needs. A new property politics of rental housing emerged.

Black tenants’ housing security stood diametrically opposed to that of real estate investors and their agents. The 1948 edition of *Negro Who’s Who in California* described James Hayes as an automobile dealer, but he also dabbled in realty investments and the management of

rental properties in the 1940s.<sup>37</sup> In 1946, he owned or operated at least two hotels, Hotel Theresa at East 54<sup>th</sup> Street and Avalon and Southway Hotel three blocks north at East 52<sup>nd</sup> Street.<sup>38</sup> Hotel Theresa, once owned and occupied by all-white residents in 1940, experienced the early retreat of white flight. As whites fled, their property opened as a source of housing income for enterprising black investors seeking to profit from an expanding, segregated black community.<sup>39</sup> Hayes, along with Agnes Corsey and Hazel Slaughter sought to profit from the opportunity and overcharged tenants for rent. With OPA legal counsel, 29 tenants of Hotel Theresa won \$50 each as redress, with another nine pending awards at Southway Hotel.<sup>40</sup> Using rent complaints, tenants put a check on unscrupulous hotel operators well positioned to extract profit where the Great Migration met white flight and segregation.

Black tenants also confronted other black real estate interests on Central Avenue, who held not only the power of the landlord, but spiritual power as well. In 1950, tenant Gene Underwood rented a “ramshackle” house in the rear of Ward Chapel AME Church at 25<sup>th</sup> and Hopper streets. Underwood learned about rent control and alleged that the church charged her \$10 per month more than the registered rent. The *California Eagle*, like Gould’s gossip column, shamed the church, “officials of the chapel faithfully collected the rent each month,” wrote the *Eagle*, “although they reportedly knew Mrs. Underwood possessed scarcely enough to give her children to eat, that her husband was in the hospital, that she could not find work.” Underwood

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<sup>37</sup> Ancestry.com. *Negro Who's Who in California, 1948* [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2011.

<sup>38</sup> “Watts Hotel Operator Loses Bout With OPA,” *Eagle*, Aug 1, 1946.

<sup>39</sup> Hotel Theresa was owned and occupied by White residents in 1940, the surrounding homes were mostly owned by Black, Japanese, and Chinese residents, Ancestry.com. 1940 United States Federal Census [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2012.

<sup>40</sup> “Watts Hotel Operator Loses Bout With OPA,” *Eagle*, Aug 1, 1946.

retained an attorney and filed a treble damage claim against the church. When church officials received the subpoenas to appear in court, Underwood reported them saying, “You are suing God.” She disagreed. The church confessed their shock to the *Eagle*, who reported, “They had never dreamed of Mrs. Underwood’s doing anything so forceful. She always seemed so quiet and docile.”<sup>41</sup>

Whether facing down investors or the church, tenants needed rent receipts to corroborate their complaints, so unscrupulous landlords sometimes refused them to tenants. In 1946, the rent office alleged a downtown hotel at 545 South Wall Street overcharged tenants on weekly rates amounting to \$1,170 (\$14,461 in 2018) in excess rents. To obscure their profiteering, the rent office charged that hotel operators refused to exchange receipts for tenants’ rent payments.<sup>42</sup> The problem proved pervasive enough that Los Angeles tenant, Emmett J. McPhillips, wrote to Congressman Gordon McDonough demanding legislation requiring landlords to give their tenants rental receipts. McPhillips complained that landlords refused new tenants unless they agreed not to receive them. “I know of many [landlords] says if you take us to court, you have no receipts and the Judge will dismiss the case,” he explained to McDonough. To remedy the problem, McPhillips further suggested a fine on landlords who failed to produce rental receipts when suing tenants. His idea, he says, “will stop all of this cheating, of the Govt.”<sup>43</sup>

Even in the face of receipt troubles, black tenant Clarence Williams leveraged the power of the rent office to win a tenuous rent complaint against his landlord. Less than two

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<sup>41</sup> "Woman Sues Church for Overcharging in Rent," *Eagle*, Aug 4, 1950.

<sup>42</sup> CPI Inflation Calculator, <https://data.bls.gov/cgi-bin/cpicalc.pl>; "OPA Sues E'side Hotel Operators," *Eagle*, Sept 5, 1946.

<sup>43</sup> "Letter from Emmet J. McPhillips to Congressman Gordon McDonough," July 1, 1949, Box 18, Rent Cases July 1948, Gordon McDonough Papers, Special Collections, University of Southern California.

weeks after moving in 1949, Williams filed a complaint claiming that he paid an illegal bonus at the beginning of his tenancy and \$50 monthly rent for two-and-a-half-years, although the registered ceiling was \$35. Williams' landlord employed the Central Avenue law firm of Matthews & Williams as representation in the rent dispute.<sup>44</sup> The Matthews side of the firm referred to none other than Charles H. Matthews, who served on the Board of Police Commissioners and the board of directors for the historic Liberty Savings and Loan Association (see Chapter 1). Before his appointment to the Police Commission, he was the Deputy District Attorney for the City of Los Angeles.<sup>45</sup> Williams, as the former tenant of the law firm's client, represented himself. He also lacked documented evidence for his alleged rent overcharges, further disadvantaging his claim. Williams offered what proof he could muster to accompany his complaint: alleged false receipts for \$35 and a witness who could attest to the payment of the bonus. But Williams carried one other piece of leverage, the rent office itself. Under the possibility of legal action from the OPA, Williams won a settlement for treble damages for one year's rent overcharges of \$535, instead of \$1,215 for the full two and half years.<sup>46</sup> The refund represented a compromise, but a compromise extracted from a bare complaint to the rent office against a landlord with powerful legal representation.

Thousands of Los Angeles tenants like Clarence Williams leveraged the downtown rent office to disrupt the ballad of the landlord between 1942 and 1950. During the first full month of

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<sup>44</sup> Docket 5-53, 5-54, 5-55; Box 1; Rent Control Case Files (Sampled); Office of Rent Stabilization – Los Angeles; Records of the Office of the Housing Expediter, RG 252; National Archives Records Administration – Riverside, CA.

<sup>45</sup> *Negro Who's Who in California*, (Los Angeles: "Negro who's who in California" Pub. Co., 1948), 59. "Mayor Denies Dropping Charles Matthews," *Sentinel*, September 29, 1949; "Clarissa Matthews Interred," *Sentinel*, July 6, 1950.

<sup>46</sup> Docket 5-53, 5-54, 5-55; Box 1; Rent Control Case Files (Sampled); Office of Rent Stabilization – Los Angeles; Records of the Office of the Housing Expediter, RG 252; National Archives Records Administration – Riverside, CA.



rent control in December 1942, the rent office received approximately 2,000 phone calls per day.<sup>47</sup> Tenants did not relent. In September 1943, the rent director reported to his boss a record number of personal interviews, 1,499 in a single day, necessitating the need for more manpower to process tenant complaints.<sup>48</sup> The opportunity for tenants to call or visit the rent office made it a non-stop medium of tenant-landlord property negotiation, with a personal or telephone interview conducted every twelve seconds in an eight hour workday in October 1943.<sup>49</sup> This mass use of the rent office in tenant housing security politics made sense. It provided a centralized listening and enforcement venue that charged no fees, required no prior legal knowledge, and provided tenants government investigators to substantiate their complaints. The rent office remained a high-volume site of complaint through the closing years of controls. The rent office reported 148,847 visits for 1948, netting tenant complainants \$352,666 (\$3,705,138 in 2018) in refunds, an amount tenants nearly doubled the following year.<sup>50</sup> Through rent complaints, tenants clawed back part of the usual wealth transfers that characterized tenancy as a form of slavery (see Chapter 1).

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<sup>47</sup> Twenty Eighth Cabinet Meeting Mr. Samuel Leak's Office, Dec 14, 1942, Box 34, L.A. Cabinet Meetings 1942-1943, Collected Records of District Offices – Fresno; Los Angeles, RG 188, Records of Office of Price Administration Region VIII, National Archives, San Francisco.

<sup>48</sup> Memorandum re: Weekly Progress Report of the Los Angeles District Office for the Week Ending September 4, 1943; L.A. Narrative Progress Reports District Director to Regional ADM; Box 36; Collected Records of District Offices – Los Angeles; General Records, 1942-1947; Region VIII – Regional Office; Records of the Office of Price Administration, RG 188; National Archives Records Administration - Pacific Region, San Francisco.

<sup>49</sup> Memorandum re: Weekly Progress Report of the Los Angeles District Office for the Week Ending October 23, 1943; L.A. Narrative Progress Reports District Director to Regional ADM; Box 36; Collected Records of District Offices – Los Angeles; General Records, 1942-1947; Region VIII – Regional Office; Records of the Office of Price Administration, RG 188; National Archives Records Administration - Pacific Region, San Francisco.

<sup>50</sup> “352,666 Paid Back to Tenants,” *Los Angeles Times*, Jan 3, 1949; “Refunds for Illegal Charges During 1949 Top 650,000 Mark,” *Times*, Jan 2, 1950.

This veritable onslaught of tenant complaints was not confined to the provisions of federal rent regulations. Tenants brought all their property security and entitlements to the rent office, not just those aligned with rent control policy. In June 1943, after nine months of rent control in Los Angeles, the rent director reported an upturn in interviews due to recent publicity calling landlords to register newly rented units, “However, the bulk of interviews has to do with relatively minor disagreements between landlords and tenants. Many of these are in the nature of complaints concerning very petty items.”<sup>51</sup> Not so for the tenants lodging complaints, for which an exchange of housing for cash purchased other obligations. Charlotte Jones and her ailing mother, who were Westlake tenants, desired freedom from humiliating treatment. For instance, Jones complained that her landlady threw dirt on the threshold of their doorway and flung her mother’s change on the floor after she paid rent.<sup>52</sup> Senior tenant Myrtle Custer, after recounting abusive treatment from her landlord, announced in the parting words of her complaint letter, “I have always been a law abiding citizen & have lived here 27 years & don’t like to be treated that way.”<sup>53</sup> These tenant protests suggest that rent control extended beyond fidelity to federal regulations. They held out the prospect, in ways immeasurable by a treble damage claim, of dignity and respect, as well.

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<sup>51</sup> Memorandum re: Weekly Progress Report of the Los Angeles District Office for the Week Ending June 26, 1943; L.A. Narrative Progress Reports District Director to Regional ADM; Box 36; Collected Records of District Offices – Los Angeles; General Records, 1942-1947; Region VIII – Regional Office; Records of the Office of Price Administration, RG 188; National Archives Records Administration - Pacific Region, San Francisco.

<sup>52</sup> Notice to Tenant and Tenant's Statement, May 4, 1945; Docket 204252; Selected Sample Rent Enforcement Case Files, ca. 1942-1950 (Los Angeles); Region VIII Regional Office; Records of the Office of Housing Expediter, RG 252; National Archives Records Administration - Pacific Region, San Francisco.

<sup>53</sup> Letter from Myrtle Custer to OPA, July 14, 1948; Docket 254236; Selected Sample Rent Enforcement Case Files, ca. 1942-1950 (Los Angeles); Region VIII Regional Office; Records of the Office of Housing Expediter, RG 252; National Archives Records Administration - Pacific Region, San Francisco.

Curtis McDonald and David Wilson’s complaints illustrate this point for black tenants. Both Texas migrants lived at a rooming house a few blocks east of the historic Dunbar Hotel in April 1948.<sup>54</sup> McDonald and his growing family rented a one-bedroom back house on the property, while Wilson rented a room in the main house. When they received a notice that their absentee landlord petitioned the Housing Expediter to raise the rent, the two men sat down and wrote separate, but thematically coordinated letters to the rent office both dated April 14, 1948. “Landlord was telling tenant that she have a rite [sic] to raise rent. But I feel like I am paying her enough for the condition the place is in,” wrote Wilson indignantly. Both tenants fortified their protests with detailed inventories of the poor conditions under which they lived. No personal bathrooms. No hot water. Boarded windows. A sink broken for three and half years. Ceiling was collapsing. Snails in the kitchen at night. All this undignified living amounted to five visits and a condemnation by the health department, reported McDonald in his complaint letter, “please send an investigator at once to see the apartment.” These complaints did not matter to the rent office, which granted the landlord’s petition to receive rents comparable with neighboring accommodations. For Wilson, the expectation he purchased with his rent superceded comparability, declaring to the rent office that he “would be glad to pay if I had a deson [sic] place to live the water run in the bath room Keep it wet where the pipes are busted.”<sup>55</sup>

McDonald and Wilson’s attempt to make their complaints actionable through the rent office reflected the broader conditions of housing in working-class Black Los Angeles during the

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<sup>54</sup> Ancestry.com. 1940 United States Federal Census [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2012.

<sup>55</sup> Docket 267439; Selected Sample Rent Enforcement Case Files, ca. 1942-1950 (Los Angeles); Region VIII Regional Office; Records of the Office of Housing Expediter, RG 252; National Archives Records Administration - Pacific Region, San Francisco.

1940s. Wartime migration and race restrictive covenants created a housing vise for black Angelenos where surging demand packed black families into both aging housing and creatively converted structures. Little Tokyo became the infamous exemplar of this racially slanted crisis. When the United States incarcerated the area's Japanese American residents in 1942, black migrants filled Little Tokyo to more than two times its prewar capacity. This northern section of downtown Los Angeles where Central Avenue physically originates became ground zero of the black housing crisis.<sup>56</sup> An official of the City Housing Authority described the area in 1945:

But—these people have to live somewhere while they are waiting for something to happen in their favor. I have walked through a few of these places. In one case “home” was an abandoned store front in Little Tokyo with nearly windowless storage rooms behind it. Twenty-one people lived there. In another it was an old garage back of a church with no sanitary facilities of any kind. A couple and their three children lived there and cooked in a bucket over an open fire. You’ll find people living in all the tiny cages and shops of this section abandoned by the Japanese. Any roof has now become a home.<sup>57</sup>

Indeed, black migrants shouldered some the worst conditions borne out the housing shortage, but the problem of undignified housing was not segregated to Central Avenue alone. Migrant war workers of every racial and ethnic stripe faced unacceptable living conditions. In a plea for emergency housing, the Welfare Council of Metropolitan Los Angeles reported to Congressman Gordon McDonough that migrants citywide housed themselves “in substandard motor courts, in barracks, in trailers without utilities, sleeping in autos, whole families crowded in single hotel rooms, or living two or three families in a dwelling.” But among all war workers

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<sup>56</sup> Sides, *L.A. City Limits : African American Los Angeles from the Great Depression to the Present*, 44-45.

<sup>57</sup> H.L. Holtzendorff, “Public Housing in Los Angeles,” April 4, 1945, Box 6, Committee for the Study of Inter-Cultural Tensions, Eshref Shevky Papers, Library Special Collection, UCLA, Los Angeles, California.

suffering through the housing shortage, the Council declared, “the most neglected group is the in-migrant Negro.”<sup>58</sup>

The housing shortage was not, in fact, a shortage of any housing, it was a shortage of affordable rental housing. The occupancy rate of rental housing in 1945 tipped to a 106 percent, but new housing construction during the 1940s ignored the demand for more rental housing. In 1940, nearly 70 percent of new dwelling units were rentals, by 1947, it fell to 20 percent, although a survey of 500,000 veterans in California found that 68 percent wanted to rent. Similar claims were made for migrants.<sup>59</sup> Neither veterans nor migrant war workers could afford new housing intended for sale since its inflation had not been subject to wartime controls.<sup>60</sup> People witnessed the contradiction. A war worker facing eviction who could not afford to purchase a new home complained in a 1945 letter, underlining his statement for the reader’s attention, “There are many vacant homes in and around Los Angeles but only for sale.”<sup>61</sup>

Black complaints about undignified housing conditions stemming from the shortage displayed the public face of a deeper discontent about the contradictions of private housing markets in the 1940s. In the editorial section of the *Eagle* in September 1946, complaints about

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<sup>58</sup> "Letter to Gordon McDonough from Welfare Council of Metropolitan Los Angeles" April 3, 1945, Box 65, Housing Jan-July 1945, Gordon McDonough Papers, Special Collections, University of Southern California, Los Angeles, California.

<sup>59</sup> "To Mayor Bowron's Special Committee on the Housing Emergency: Report No. 2 of the Sub-Committee to Determine Over-All Community Need for Housing for Los Angeles County" July 11, 1945, Box 65, Housing Jan-July 1945, Gordon McDonough Papers, Special Collections, University of Southern California, Los Angeles, California; Joint Committee on Housing, *Study and Investigation of Housing. Proceedings at Los Angeles, Calif*, 80th Congress, 1st Session (1947), Nov. 11, 1947.

<sup>60</sup> "Letter to Gordon McDonough from Welfare Council of Metropolitan Los Angeles" April 3, 1945, Box 65, Housing Jan-July 1945, Gordon McDonough Papers, Special Collections, University of Southern California, Los Angeles, California.

<sup>61</sup> "Letter to McDonough from Samuel Adorian," April 8, 1945, Box 65, Housing Jan-July 1945, Gordon McDonough Papers, Special Collections, University of Southern California, Los Angeles, California.

the housing shortage flirted with an extra-legal solution committed across the Atlantic Ocean. The *Eagle* announced to its readers that WWII veterans in England “have taken over some of London’s swankiest apartment houses.”<sup>62</sup> The article referenced Britain’s postwar squatters’ movement, when in 1946, veterans and their families occupied vacant military camps and eventually took possession of unoccupied luxury flats and hotels.<sup>63</sup> The editorial hesitantly supported a similar break in legal property relations, targeting “empty mansions” in Beverly Hills, Hollywood, and the black elite Sugar Hill for a Los Angeles squatters’ movement. Minding the ballad of the landlord, the editorial masked its nudge for direct action with sheer thin reprobation, “We wouldn’t want our war vets to take matters into their own hands, as their English buddies did—but at the same time, why shouldn’t they?”<sup>64</sup> A documented mass squatter movement the postwar period never occupied Los Angeles, but the absence of direct action did not evidence mass acquiescence to existing property relations. Provocation and fantasy—the combustible kindling of housing complaints—gave life and hesitant sanction to the restorative possibilities of mass tenant disobedience.

Between fantasy and the limits of agency sat compromise, an old fact of black housing security on Central Avenue modified by new federal rent control. Part of that compromise manifested as the kitchenette, a euphemism for a cheaply subdivided room to increase a unit’s occupancy for greater profit. Since June 1947, Maudie Haywood, a domestic worker from Texas on public relief, rented a kitchenette on the upper floor of a two-story church a block east of Central Avenue. The rent office held on file a registration for the church listing ten “rooms” and

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<sup>62</sup> “Solving the Housing Situation,” *Eagle*, Sep 12, 1946.

<sup>63</sup> Colin Ward, Chris Wilbert, and Damian F. White, *Autonomy, Solidarity, Possibility : The Colin Ward Reader* (2011), 64-68.

<sup>64</sup> “Solving the Housing Situation,” *Eagle*, Sep 12, 1946.

a single shared bathroom, but registrations lingered unverified unless contested. In April 1948, Haywood or her case worker complained about the \$6 weekly rent.<sup>65</sup> The office struggled to identify which of the ten registered “rooms” Haywood reported. To clear the confusion, the rent office sent an investigator.

Upon inspection, the OPA official found that the ten unverified “rooms” registered with the rent office turned out to be just five. The discovered sleight warranted someone in the rent office to hand write “fake registration” on the form. If collecting the rents reported on the old registration, the ten kitchenettes grossed \$30.50 a week at full, single person occupancy in each room. The rent office set new “comparable” weekly rents at \$3 to \$4 for the five rooms, grossing \$17 per week for single occupancy.<sup>66</sup> Haywood’s compromise of sharing limited housing with other black Angelenos now cost half the price.

The case demonstrated how the rent office intervened as an important arbiter of value and made black tenants’ compromised housing security less exploitative. The Central Avenue rooming house offered kitchenettes since at least 1940, where census records list ten black tenants, migrants from Arkansas, Louisiana, Oklahoma, Tennessee, Texas, and South Carolina.<sup>67</sup> The office’s determination of rent and what constituted a unit of salable living intervened on the

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<sup>65</sup> The “Progress Sheet for Complaint and Violation Cases” in the docket list Haywood as the complainant with “c/o Bureau of Public Assistance” handwritten next to her typed name. Another form in the docket, “Notification to Office of Rent Control, April 28, 1948,” suggest that case workers contact the rent office when a client finds a place to live to verify the rental amount for relief budgeting. When a difference between what the client is being charged and what the rent office had on file as maximum rent is found, the Bureau sends a notification to the rent office for investigation.

<sup>66</sup> Docket 270754; Selected Sample Rent Enforcement Case Files, ca. 1942-1950 (Los Angeles); Region VIII Regional Office; Records of the Office of Housing Expediter, RG 252; National Archives Records Administration - Pacific Region, San Francisco.

<sup>67</sup> Ancestry.com. 1940 United States Federal Census [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2012, <https://search.ancestrylibrary.com/cgi-bin/sse.dll?db=1940usfedcen&indiv=try&h=72465672>.

kitchenette dynamics of segregated housing that long operated as a residential feature of the Great Migration.<sup>68</sup> “A war sets up in our emotions,” writes Richard Wright of the migrant’s dilemma of the kitchenette. On one side is the relative improvement of urban life outside the South, on the other hand, “in terms of worry and strain, the cost of living in the kitchenettes is too high, that the city heaps too much responsibility upon us and gives too little security in return.”<sup>69</sup> The rent office, this new character in the ballad of the landlord, disrupted the usual plot of the kitchenette. Perhaps, for Haywood and her neighbors, the rent office and its workers tipped the scale a little more toward the hands that paid rent and away from the hands that took it.

### **The New Character in The Ballad of the Landlord: Rent Workers**

On the other side of tenant’s rent and complaints were rent workers, the new characters in the ballad of the landlord. Capitalism under total war not only amassed industrial labor but also leagues of administrative workers necessary for the deep integration of the state, industrial capitalism, and private housing markets that made rationing and controls possible during WWII. Of all the departments that administered rationing and controls in Los Angeles, rent control employed the greatest number of workers, many of whom were women employed in front-line clerical positions that made rent administration viable.<sup>70</sup> Like the tenants they served, these

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<sup>68</sup> Sides, *L.A. City Limits : African American Los Angeles from the Great Depression to the Present*, 45.

<sup>69</sup> Richard Wright et al., *12 Million Black Voices* (New York: Basic Books, a member of the Perseus Books Group 2008), 105.

<sup>70</sup> Several budgeting reports show rent division salaries and positions as greater than all other divisions, “Memorandum Re: Budget Estimates, March 8, 1943,” “Memorandum Subject: Budget Estimates for Second Quarter 1943-44 September 13, 1943,” and “Office of Price Administration Regional Fiscal, Aug 29, 1945” all located in, Box 34, L.A. Budget; Collected Records of District Offices – Los Angeles; General Records, 1942-1947; Region VIII – Regional Office; Records of the Office of Price Administration, RG 188; National Archives Records Administration - Pacific Region, San Francisco.



workers were not automatons of rent regulations. They too had personalities and prejudices, personal issues and political beliefs that gave rent control a unique character apart from the official one pandered to the public. Above all, perhaps, many rent workers paid rent too. Rent workers made the infrastructure of rent complaint and enforcement real and present in the new contentious space of property governance under federal rent control. While we do not have access to the intimate consciousness of rent workers, we can explore their conditions of work and reports about how property owners perceived the bias of the rent office under the rent-controlled ballad of the landlord between 1942 and 1950.

Rent office work proved punishing on rent workers as tenants and landlords exchanged volleys in the battle over rent and occupancy. Full-time rent workers labored for 48 hours during six-day work weeks.<sup>71</sup> Throughout 1943, the rent office struggled with high turnover due to stressful and impossible workloads. In the beginning of the year, landlords' rush for rent adjustments caused a backlog of 3,000 petitions. OPA leadership described the work of processing petitions as a "production line," assigned rent workers 12-hour days, and set quotas to get ahead of the paperwork demands.<sup>72</sup> In May, the office lost 31 employees in one week.<sup>73</sup> Two months later, the Rent Director reported "that the load of handling interviews is so heavy that several have collapsed under the strain. The head of the Interviewing section has resigned because of a nervous breakdown and several others also have had to leave."<sup>74</sup> By September, the

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<sup>71</sup> United and Office of Price, *Opa Is Our Battle Line : Employee Handbook : Region VIII Ed., October 1943*, 27.

<sup>72</sup> Cabinet Meeting Mr. Samuel Leask's Office Feb 8, 1943 and Cabinet Meeting Mr. Samuel Leask's Office Feb 15, 1943.

<sup>73</sup> Cabinet Meeting in Mr. Harry Silke's Office May 24, 1943.

<sup>74</sup> Cabinet Meeting Mr. Samuel Leask's Office July 19, 1943.

constant turnover in the office forced the Rent Director to keep a standing order with the Civil Service Commission for new applicants. Seeking more workers, the rent office began releasing calls over the radio in October to maintain the flow of fresh applicants to keep pace with turnover.<sup>75</sup> The stress induced labor shortage in the rent office reflected the destabilization of gender hierarchies witnessed in the industrial workplace during WWII. In November, the OPA begrudgingly promoted women workers into male-gendered CAF-4 positions, such as Rent Examiner, because there were not enough men to do it.<sup>76</sup>

Rent office work fell particularly hard on women. The dramatic shift in residential property relations set tempers and emotions on edge as people struggled over cash, occupancy, and customary authority. The telephone operator became a focal point of this pitched property battle, a gendered position labored over by women workers. The Rent Director reported in July 1943:

A difficult personnel problem has always existed, as no one on the rent staff was anxious to sit at a table and talk practically the entire eight hours to landlords and tenants. Many of these people are very upset when they call, worried about facing eviction or concerned about an amount of rent, and their emotions are exceedingly close to the surface. In other words, a telephone interviewer in the Rent Office is under continuous nervous strain.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> Cabinet Meeting in Mr. Balthis' Office Sept 27, 1943.

<sup>76</sup> Cabinet Meeting in Mr. Balthis' Office Nov 1 1943.

<sup>77</sup> Memorandum re: Weekly Progress Report of the Los Angeles District Office for the Week Ending July 10, 1943; Box 36, L.A. Narrative Progress Reports District Director to Regional ADM.; Collected Records of District Offices – Los Angeles; General Records, 1942-1947; Region VIII – Regional Office; Records of the Office of Price Administration, RG 188; National Archives Records Administration - Pacific Region, San Francisco.

For women rent workers, a workday negotiating these conflicts then ended with a “second shift.”<sup>78</sup> Full-time, six-day work weeks monopolized rent workers’ daytime hours, but women workers still had households to maintain during wartime scarcity and commodity rationing. They complained to their male supervisors that stores were often closed or sold out of needed staples by the time they arrived. Their supervisors were perplexed. In one case reported to a supervisor, a woman rent worker delegated daytime domestic task to her 10-year-old daughter.<sup>79</sup>

Under these burdensome work conditions, rent workers carried on property politics of their own. Complaint letters from landlords demonstrated how rent workers established petty obstacles and expectations of social deference in the administration of rent regulations. “I went down to the office of rent control, the name would be more suitable if they called it the torture chamber,” wrote Mrs. Sadler, “One would think we were criminals because we ask for a raise in rents.” Sadler’s torture was the rent increase petition, which sent her back and forth to rent office five times because the petition was continually rejected for mistakes. On her fifth visit, a rent worker that Sadler calls, “the lady,” assured her that the petition could now be mailed to the office. Workers rejected it again. Sadler confessed that “by that time I was mad and the lady said don’t say anything or you won’t get a raise in rent.” After more exchanges of correspondence, the rent office required receipts to verify items on the petition, which Sadler did not have. “My husband and I was so mad we told them to go to hell.”<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> Arlie Russell Hochschild and Anne Machung, *The Second Shift* (New York: Penguin Books 2003).

<sup>79</sup> Cabinet Meeting Mr. Samuel Leask's Office, Jan 30 1943

<sup>80</sup> “Letter from Mrs. A. Sadler to Gordon McDonough,” Aug 11, 1948, Box 65, Rent Cases July 1948, Gordon McDonough Papers, Special Collections, University of Southern California, Los Angeles, California.

Other landlords explicitly complained about the rent office's bias favoring tenants or hostility to landlords not attributable to the rent regulations themselves. An Echo Park landlord complained of rent workers, "They make no pretense at investigating or inquiring, and make important decisions, reminding us that if we do not like conditions we can get out of the business and get rid of the properties!"<sup>81</sup> A Hollywood landlord, Stella Lauch, pleading for relief from rent control, complained in a 1948 letter that the rent office arbitrarily "turns down applications right and left," but tenants "get favors galore – all they have to do is tell the OPA a pack of lies – and the Gestapo is on the owner's neck."<sup>82</sup> Lauch's naming the OPA as the Nazi's infamous secret police did not stand as an anomaly, landlords and their business organizations commonly associated the OPA with fascism and communism. As early as 1943, a spokesman of the Los Angeles County Apartment House Association called rent investigators' practices "gestapo tactics," referring to investigators questioning tenants on rents and their satisfaction with landlords. The spokesman complained that rent investigators have "broken down tenants' confidence in many landlords."<sup>83</sup>

The most comprehensive summary of landlord complaints of rent workers arrived in December 1945, when the Board of Supervisors established a fact-finding committee tasked with collecting testimonies on rent control practices in the county. The committee's report summarized Angelenos' perceptions of rent control practices collected from a public hearing, a conference with the OPA, and written and telephone testimonies. Among general complaints

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<sup>81</sup> "Letter from Edward Knapp to Gordon McDonough," May 1, 1945, Box 65, Housing Jan-July 1945, Gordon McDonough Papers, Special Collections, University of Southern California, Los Angeles, California.

<sup>82</sup> "Letter from Stella Lauch to McDonough" Feb 24 1945.

<sup>83</sup> E.B. Conser of the Los Angeles County Apartment House Association called OPA rent control practices "gestapo tactics," see "Gestapo Tactics Laid to OPA Rent Bureau" *Times*, May 21, 1943.

about delays and evasions, landlords registered complaints about rent worker practices. Complaints accused workers of misinforming landlords then subsequently sanctioning them for acting on bad information. They also accused rent workers of withholding acknowledgement of documents, which consequently subjected landlords to penalties for failure to file within required time limits. Complaints assailed rent workers' adjudication of rent regulation as "arbitrary," and they further "subjected to persecution" those landlords who appealed to the courts for redress. More specifically, landlords reported, OPA employees reduced and refunded rents for tenants without investigation and disputed funds could not be held in escrow. Contested cash went immediately to tenants.<sup>84</sup> These complaints about the rent office and their workers signaled another level of rent control politics not in the employee manual. As tenants complained, rent workers labored, and their respective conflicts mingled to give federal rent control in Los Angeles its distinctive character in the contentious ballad of the landlord.

### **"What? You gonna get eviction orders?": The Struggle Over Occupancy Under Rent Control**

Eviction terminated a tenant's home. Legally executed or not, it was violent. Hence, Hughes' archetype black tenant turned to threats of assault in response to eviction. While they were, indeed, violent displacements of tenants' lives and material belongings, evictions existed as a regular practice and experience of private rental markets. The law held evictions as well-secured property right of landlords and a standard feature of urban tenancy. Much has been written about the disruptions of slum clearance and urban redevelopment as the prime agents of

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<sup>84</sup> "A Report of Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors' Committee on Rent Control Practices and Procedures in the County of Los Angeles," Dec 4, 1945, Box 65, Housing August - Dec. 1945, Gordon McDonough Papers, Special Collections, University of Southern California, Los Angeles, California.

provisionality (insecurity) in Los Angeles and cities more broadly.<sup>85</sup> But for tenants, the provisionality of home began long before urban redevelopment. It began with eviction. For black tenants in Los Angeles, more than just the landlord's immediate common law prerogatives threatened evictions, but also segregation, single-family homeownership, and municipal housing authorities. In other words, eviction featured an essential part of the daily dynamics of race, class, and property serving a violent urban ecology of land management in the post-colonial city of angels. Federal rent control's eviction provisions, by modifying these daily relations of property, gave tenants some new ground for contestation over the struggle for home in the 1940s.

Federal rent control did not eliminate evictions, it narrowed their allowable scope under the strain of total war and its aftermath. Rent regulations provided landlords with two routes for evictions depending on circumstance. Through the first route, landlords could petition municipal courts directly if a tenant failed to pay rent, refused to renew their lease, violated a substantial obligation of their tenancy, caused a "nuisance," or landlords themselves needed immediate personal use of housing owned prior to rent control. For evictions outside of these circumstances (property sales, major remodeling, or demolition), regulations required landlords to obtain a "Certificate of Eviction" through the rent office before filing an eviction petition in local court.<sup>86</sup>

Even under these provisions, tenants experience regular and devastating evictions. Landlords petitioned for thousands of evictions and executed them annually without a hitch.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> Cuff, *The Provisional City : Los Angeles Stories of Architecture and Urbanism*.

<sup>86</sup> States United and Administration Office of Price, *Rent Regulation for Hotels and Rooming Houses : With Official Interpretations* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. G.P.O., 1943).

<sup>87</sup> "Memorandum re: Weekly Progress Report of the Los Angeles District Office for the Week Ending April 3, 1943, Box 36, L.A. District Directors Weekly Letters to Regional ADM. 1944, , Collected Records of District Offices – Fresno; Los Angeles, RG 188, Records of Office of Price Administration Region VIII, National Archives, San Francisco; Memo re: Budget Estimates for Second Quarter 1943-44, September 13, 1943, Box 34, L.A. Budget,

People high and low found themselves in the streets. A white lawyer, former candidate for Attorney General, suffered eviction along with his family of ten in October of 1943 when his landlord wanted her Normandie Avenue house for personal use. Desperate for any housing, the lawyer tasked his teenage children to chase moving trucks to track down rare wartime vacancies to avoid homelessness.<sup>88</sup> The regular desperation of black tenants facing eviction was rarely newsworthy, so sensational stories stood in the place of a mass of evictions behind it.

Take Harold Jordon for example. A 20-year-old black veteran, he suffered eviction in January 1947 with his parents and eight siblings over what their white landlord alleged was late rent. Jordon alleged that his landlord lied about the true basis of their eviction. He explained that the corporate landlord wanted to remodel and raise the rent for greater profit. His complaints were to no avail, Jordon and his family ended up in a condemned shack near Little Tokyo with no running water, electricity, or gas, holding rent and repair receipts for a house they could no longer call home.<sup>89</sup> Other tenants anonymously took to the classifieds of the *Eagle* when facing eviction. Nestled between ads for skin lightening cream and headache relief, a tenant solicited for home, “WANTED TO RENT – Family of seven would like to purchase or rent house due to eviction.”<sup>90</sup>

Amidst these permitted displacements, rent control set the authority over occupancy on new, contested ground. The rent office, and the rent provisions it enforced, gave tenants a new

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Collected Records of District Offices – Fresno; Los Angeles, RG 188, Records of Office of Price Administration Region VIII, National Archives, San Francisco ; “OPA Aids 3,329 Evictions,” *Los Angeles Times*, Dec 13, 1944; “OPA Says Evictions Now at High Mark,” *Eagle*, May 16, 1946.

<sup>88</sup> “Lawyer Evicted After Hunt for New Home Fails,” *Los Angeles Times*, Oct 9, 1943.

<sup>89</sup> “Vet, Family of Ten Living in Shack Here,” *Eagle*, Jan 23, 1947.

<sup>90</sup> *Eagle*, Aug 9, 1945.

theater of complaint and entitlement to secure occupancy that challenged the prewar ballad of the landlord. Under purportedly legal evictions, tenants protested for redress through the rent office. In 1944, when 32 tenants—mothers, children, and war workers—received mass eviction notices to vacate their apartments on the 5100 block of Sunset Boulevard for major remodeling, they “stormed” the OPA office demanding protection from the pending evictions.<sup>91</sup> A westside tenant facing what she argued was a retaliatory eviction, not for remodeling as her landlord claimed, wrote the rent office, “I was previously too intimidated by him to try to clear this up with your office and stand up for my rights, but now have the courage to raise it, since he is threatening eviction anyway.”<sup>92</sup>

For black tenants on Central Avenue, their entitlement for the right to stay in place challenged the rent regulation’s narrow scope. In 1945, in what the *Eagle* called the “famous Jesse R. Towns eviction case,” Towns, a black landlord, petitioned the rent office for a certificate to evict twenty families from his Central Avenue building after he was served notice to remedy sanitary violations. Six of the tenants, representing their neighbors, took Towns to court. Their lawyer, speaking on their behalf, told the *Eagle* that Towns’ approach was “against the best interests of the people of this community” and “that this eviction is entirely unnecessary.”<sup>93</sup> The rent office discovered themselves in a blind spot. Rental regulations covering evictions made no mention concerning the landlord’s prerogative to evict tenants to remedy health code violations and to do so in good faith. More broadly, the tenants’ appeal to the interests of the community

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<sup>91</sup> “Tenants Seek OPA Aid in Ouster Move,” *Los Angeles Times*, Oct 14, 1944.

<sup>92</sup> “Letter from Harriet Goldblatt” Feb 11, 1950, E 5773, Box 53, Selected Sample Rent Enforcement Case Files, ca. 1942-1950 (Los Angeles); Region VIII Regional Office; Records of the Office of Housing Expediter, RG 252; National Archives Records Administration - Pacific Region, San Francisco.

<sup>93</sup> “OPA ‘On Spot’ As Landlord Trial Set for Tomorrow,” *Eagle*, Nov 1, 1945.



introduced a black standard of care that rent control regulations never sought to engage meaningfully. With so much black housing under the potential sanction of the Health Department, what community precedent shall the OPA set for future landlords and the security of their tenants? The *Eagle*, it appears, never confirmed the housing security fate of these twenty families.

When federal rent and price controls lapsed for a month in July 1946, Los Angeles landlords served tenants with thousands of evictions notices.<sup>94</sup> Tenants refused their legitimacy *en masse*. During the month, a youth group staged a mock funeral in Downtown Los Angeles to mourn the death of price and rent controls, carrying a casket through the streets with “Here lies the OPA” eulogized on its side. Young actors dressed as congressmen whom they mocked in skits for allowing rent and price control to lapse.<sup>95</sup> As the expiration of 30-day eviction notices approached, Marian Inglewood, regular columnist for the *Eagle*, used nothing less than the biblical suffering of Hell to describe the pending housing scene. “When those evictions and sky-high rents are being enforced, listen to the weeping and wailing and gnashing of teeth.”<sup>96</sup> Inglewood’s words were prescient. President Truman signed an extension bill on July 26<sup>th</sup>, restoring rent control and its eviction protections. In the ensuing confusion, thousands of tenants and landlords—tenants outnumbering landlords three to one—spilled out the rent office demanding clarification on whether landlords’ eviction petitions served during the lapse were

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<sup>94</sup> "Rents, Prices Skyrocket as Price Controls Lifted," *Eagle*, June 27, 1946; "OPA Killed by Truman's Veto" *Los Angeles Times*, June 30, 1946.

<sup>95</sup> "AYD Stages Street Parade to Mourn, Protest Death of OPA," *Eagle*, July 11, 1946.

<sup>96</sup> Marian Inglewood, "Things I See," *Eagle*, July 25, 1946.

enforceable. Local OPA officials reported the boisterous crowd as one of the largest handled by the rent office to date.<sup>97</sup>

Contests over occupancy under federal rent control also disrupted the politics of segregation in Los Angeles in revealing ways. In March 1943, white landlord, Mary Eastland leased her home tucked in the hills of Los Feliz on a month-to-month basis to Irene Pineau, the white wife of the first black heavyweight boxing champion Jack Johnson. When Eastland discovered Pineau's husband was black, she asked the couple to move so she could remain faithful to the property's race restrictive covenant. This covenant expired, so Eastland and her husband attempted to use rent control eviction provisions to get the interracial couple ejected. The landlords argued in Municipal Court that they wanted to occupy the home for personal use and make major repairs for termite damage. The judge informed the landlords, "During peacetime you could order these people out of your home at any time." But under wartime rent regulations, landlords seeking evictions for personal occupancy were required to act "in good faith," established to counteract retaliatory evictions. "I do not believe you proved you acted in good faith in first requesting them to move for racial reasons and then switching to repair and own occupancy reasons," the judge ruled.<sup>98</sup>

The case revealed that black tenants, and their white partners, suffered another layer of property relations and law not rooted solely in race but in their status as tenants too. If Pineau and Johnson owned their home, the expired covenant would have legally ended the matter. Outside the law, prospective black homeowners faced vulnerability to white vigilante violence to

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<sup>97</sup> "Thousands Storm OPA On Rents," *Eagle*, Aug 1, 1946.

<sup>98</sup> "Jack Johnson Winner in Home Eviction Fight," *Los Angeles Times*, March 31, 1943.

enforce segregation.<sup>99</sup> But for tenants facing legal assaults against home, the failure of race restrictive covenants did not exhaust whites' legal arsenal. Black housing insecurity for tenants still lurked in common and "color-blind" prewar tenant-landlord law.

Segregation sometimes pitted the housing security of the black tenant and prospective black homeowner against one another. 1940s Los Angeles witnessed a boom in homeownership, but the violence of eviction is rarely, if ever, discussed as a direct result, so often associated with the explosion of suburban development where people previously did not live.<sup>100</sup> But for black and many other Angelenos during the war and immediate postwar period, their experience of the homeownership boom was nearly zero-sum. As reported by James Rodgers, administrator of the OPA, the bounty of home sales removed what was once rental housing from the market.<sup>101</sup> Black home buyers were especially limited to existing housing in the city core. Expansion into the restricted Westside (west of Main) was limited by 1945. One committee estimated just 2 percent of new black migrant families purchased homes in the segregated area.<sup>102</sup> This segregation arithmetic penciled out to black tenant evictions.

Federal eviction regulations between 1942 and 1947 helped temper this rush on tenant occupied homes in Black Los Angeles. OPA regulations required a new homeowner of a tenant

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<sup>99</sup> Gibbons, *City of Segregation : One Hundred Years of Struggle for Housing in Los Angeles*, 45-47.

<sup>100</sup> See note 19 on homeownership boom. Freeway development is the exception, for example see Avila, *Popular Culture in the Age of White Flight : Fear and Fantasy in Suburban Los Angeles*. For wartime and postwar suburban development see, Greg Hise, "Home Building and Industrial Decentralization in Los Angeles: The Roots of the Postwar Urban Region," *Journal of Urban History* 19, no. 2 (1993).

<sup>101</sup> Letter from James Rodgers to Gordon McDonough, April 6, 1945, Box 65, Housing Jan-July 1945, Gordon McDonough Papers, Special Collections, University of Southern California, Los Angeles, California.

<sup>102</sup> Letter from Committee for Church and Community Cooperation to McDonough, April 16, 1945, Box 65, Housing Jan-July 1945, Gordon McDonough Papers, Special Collections, University of Southern California, Los Angeles, California.

occupied home to pay 20 percent of the price to receive a certificate of eviction from the rent office, which allowed the tenant six months to find new housing.<sup>103</sup> In July 1946, a frustrated Central Avenue realty company instructed new, waiting homeowners to illegally raise rents to force out these protected tenants. Subsequently, the company reversed tactics. They offered tenants 50 percent rental discounts to move, bundled with a plea about the company's clients, "Owners under the old OPA system, waiting six months for possession, are sleeping in the streets, hallways, parks, garages, and City Hall lawns, are waiting to get in homes they now own."<sup>104</sup> The company's logic was insightful, that the allocation of suffering be meted out based on one's ability to own property. With an estimated housing deficiency of over 11,000 units for black Angelenos in 1945, tenants nor awaiting homeowners had anywhere else to go.<sup>105</sup>

July 1947 marked an ominous turning point for tenant eviction protections. President Truman reluctantly signed the Federal Housing and Rent Act, which set property relations over eviction on new, landlord-favored ground. The Price Control Act of 1942 was gone, along with critical eviction protections for tenants in rent-controlled units. The act eliminated the certificate process for the sale, remodeling, or demolition of rental properties, along with its six months wait period. More broadly, the scope of allowable evictions expanded, and all eviction proceedings returned to the local courts. Under the Act of 1947, landlords in Los Angeles could petition the courts for eviction for expired leases; immediate but not compelling necessity to occupy a unit; sale, remodeling, or demolition of a property; in addition to any violation of the

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<sup>103</sup> Willis, "The Federal Housing and Rent Act of 1947," 1135.

<sup>104</sup> "Notice! Notice!," *Eagle*, July 11, 1946.

<sup>105</sup> Letter from Committee for Church and Community Cooperation, Gordon McDonough Papers.

lease.<sup>106</sup> The result was the effective end of rent office mediation of evictions and an eviction stampede into local courts.

Landlords “lost not a single minute following President Truman’s signing of the rent bill to flood tenants with dreaded eviction notices,” complained the *Sentinel*.<sup>107</sup> While rents were still under the authority of the rent office, the act returned evictions back to the landlord’s preferred venue, the courts. The municipal clerk’s office reported to the *Los Angeles Times* that they were “snowed under” by calls from landlords seeking information on filing eviction petitions, while the CIO and the AFL were “flooded daily” by calls from tenants desperate for information on how to fight them.<sup>108</sup> Cities across the country witnessed marked increases in eviction filings following the new rental act. Chicago, for example, reported the largest increase in eviction filings since the Great Depression.<sup>109</sup> In Oliver Harrington’s Harlem, Bootsie’s friend was out on the street. (Fig. 4) When the *Sentinel* reported an “avalanche” of evictions falling on black tenants in Los Angeles, the local rent director had little recourse to offer. Since the courts were backlogged with evictions proceedings, he advised tenants to ignore eviction notices to force landlords into illegal detainer proceedings in court. He estimated the tactic would buy tenants an extra one to two months before the case would see a judge.<sup>110</sup>

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<sup>106</sup> Willis, "The Federal Housing and Rent Act of 1947."

<sup>107</sup> "Chaos Feared in L.A.: Thousands Face Eviction: Notices Swamp Tenants," *Sentinel*, July 3, 1947.

<sup>108</sup> "To Hold Public Hearing Today on Rent Crisis," *Los Angeles Times*, July 16, 1947; "Labor on the March," *Eagle*, July 24, 1947.

<sup>109</sup> "Major Cities Report Eviction Suit Rising" *Los Angeles Times*, Aug 3, 1947.

<sup>110</sup> "Eviction Avalanche Hits Negro Tenants; Advised to 'Sit Tight,'" *Sentinel*, Jul 10, 1947.



Figure 10: Bootsie Newspaper Cartoon, Harrington, Oliver. *Dark Laughter*. July 26, 1947. *Pittsburgh Courier*. Proquest.com

When Central Avenue tenant Thelma Norwood received an eviction notice from her landlord, the People's Independent Church, she did exactly what the rent director advised. The church first served eviction papers in May of 1947, which Norwood ignored. The Health Department had recently served notice to the church to remedy a rat infestation in the apartment building, located at Central and East 33<sup>rd</sup> Street. After the Housing and Rent Act passed in July, they renewed their efforts using the rat infestation to enact the nuisance provision of the act. Norwood ignored the second eviction notice, forcing Independent into court. Independent complained in their suit that Norwood was responsible for the rat infestation because she permitted garbage to accumulate around the incinerator and filth to accumulate in the toilet. The judge denied Independent's petition and Norwood, according to voter registration records, secured her occupancy at the Central Avenue address until at least 1962.<sup>111</sup> Even without rent

<sup>111</sup> "People's Independent Church Loses in Suit to Evict Tenants," *Sentinel*, Oct 2, 1947; Ancestry.com. California, Voter Registrations, 1900-1968 [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations Inc, 2017.

office intervention, black tenants resisted the violence of eviction, but with much less legal protection at their flanks in the daily skirmishes over occupancy in Los Angeles.

### **“If I land my fist on you”: Violence Over Property**

The “Ballad of the Landlord” ended with physical violence (including subsequent incarceration); but be not mistaken, violence is a means to a property end. In the throes of the modified relations of property in Los Angeles between 1942 and 1950, conflicts over residential property were not only adjudicated through rent office complaint, but also through violence. Housing violence, from intimidation to murder, were not borne out of the criminal pathology of landlords and tenants, although they were often reported as such. Landlords and tenants used violence to impose or defend their entitlements to rents, occupancy, and gendered authority. These uncoordinated, interpersonal incidents of violence are but the base elements of more systemic forms of land and property control.<sup>112</sup> As Hughes, Harrington, and the lived experience of tenants and landlords demonstrated, violence was an essential force structuring urban property relations that was routinely sanctioned by the state (evictions) or carried out extralegally with whatever means of violence was available. Consequent incarceration for unauthorized violence only signaled the limits of official sanction, but not the effective limits of how violence over property mediated and enforced entitlements to it.<sup>113</sup>

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<sup>112</sup> See the following footnote, other forms of land and property control include but are not limited to capital punishment, colonial violence, and incarceration.

<sup>113</sup> My understanding of violence in the making of property and land relations leans heavily on, Peter Linebaugh, *The London Hanged : Crime and Civil Society in the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge [England]; New York N. Y., USA: Cambridge University Press, 1992), XIII; Ned Blackhawk, *Violence over the Land : Indians and Empires in the Early American West* (2008); and Hernandez, *City of Inmates : Conquest, Rebellion, and the Rise of Human Caging in Los Angeles, 1771-1965*.

WWII rent control disrupted landlords legal and customary prerogatives over property, so violence was used to reclaim their entitlements. Take Jeff Burns, his wife Estelle Burns, and two teenage children, who came to Los Angeles by way of Franklin, Arkansas, during the war.<sup>114</sup> The family rented an apartment at 410 Crocker Street in Skid Row in 1944.<sup>115</sup> The building was one of at least sixteen operated for black tenants by a white, Hollywood-based manager, Russell L. Krodel. When Burns attempted to pay his rent in September, a clerk notified Burns that his rent had been raised. Burns maintained his entitlement to controlled rent. According to the *Eagle*, “Burns is said to have refused to pay until he could consult the O.P.A. and ascertain if he were legally required to do so and made such a statement.” An armed “special police officer,” John Spencer, threatened Burns to pay the illegal rent or suffer an illegal eviction. When Burns refused, Spencer struck him in the head with a gun. Continuing to refuse intimidation, Burns filed suit against Spencer and won a \$100 in damages the following year, and his family remained at the Crocker Street address until at least 1950.<sup>116</sup>

Landlord Catherine Johnson went further. “I’m sorry it wasn’t a shotgun so I could have hit ‘em both,” proclaimed Johnson as reported by arresting officers after she shot at her black tenant and a U.S. Marshal in January 1947. Johnson and her tenant, Erma Boglin, had been fighting over rent and eviction for at least two months prior to the shooting. In October 1946, Boglin confronted Johnson that she overcharged him for rent after checking his unit’s registration at the rent office. In retaliation, Johnson removed and hid Boglin’s belongings. At

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<sup>114</sup> Ancestry.com. 1940 United States Federal Census [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2012.

<sup>115</sup> “Gets Judgment for Assault by Hotel Clerk,” *Eagle*, Oct 11, 1945.

<sup>116</sup> “Gets Judgment for Assault by Hotel Clerk,” *Eagle*, Oct 11, 1945; Ancestry.com. California, Voter Registrations, 1900-1968 [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations Inc, 2017.



some point in the dispute, Boglin filed a suit against his landlord. The contentious back and forth over the course of their dispute prompted Erma to take some caution when he escorted the court marshal to serve Johnson with a subpoena. Foregoing a face-to-face interaction, they reportedly placed the subpoena on the steering wheel of Johnson's car and ran down the street. "The irate woman charged from the house and chased them in her car," reported the *Eagle*, and at an intersection on Broadway "she assertedly drew a .38 pistol and fired at them."<sup>117</sup>

These episodes of violence over rent demonstrate how rent control disrupted the ballad of the landlord. Since unauthorized rent increases and informal evictions were illegal, landlords or their agents sought to enforce their property entitlements by wielding violence. Informal violence was surely effective, but the effectiveness of the violence is only part of the story. The use of informal housing violence indicated a shift in power consequent to a shift in property relations. The change in authority over rent and eviction precluded the use of law or sanctioned state violence to enforce either an illegal rent increase or an eviction. Granted, rent control set limits on landlords' prewar property rights, but they were not alone in the exercise of violence over property.

Indeed, tenants shot back. In 1946, Charles Turner, a returning veteran who grew up in Black Los Angeles, rented an apartment above a garage at 2108 West 29<sup>th</sup> Street in the prized West Jefferson district.<sup>118</sup> In July, Turner's landlord Harold Le Sesne, tried to arbitrarily raise the rent. Turner refused. His defense attorney reported that Le Sense then broke Turner's window with a revolver "which he carried with him all the time." Turner continued to pay his rent via

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<sup>117</sup> "Irate Lady Fires Fusillade at Tenant Who Complained to OPA," *Eagle*, Jan 2, 1947.

<sup>118</sup> Ancestry.com. 1920 United States Federal Census [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2010. Images reproduced by FamilySearch.

mail minus the disputed overcharge. Months of these tense exchanges ended in violence. In October, Le Sesne tried to serve Turner an eviction notice. Turner then shot him in the back with a 12-gauge shotgun.<sup>119</sup> As a tenant and not an owner, Turner had no legally recognized right in this instance to defend his entitlement to occupancy with homicide. He was convicted of manslaughter the following year and sent to San Quentin for a sentence of 1-10 years.<sup>120</sup>

Male tenants used violence to impose gendered authority over landladies to fatal and disfiguring ends. In June 1945, Chester Slayton notified Alice Robinson, his landlady, of his plans to move. Robinson, described in the *Eagle* as “prominent in church and social circles,” reported that an argument ensued. Robinson testified that Slayton threatened to kill her while armed with a knife. Robinson fatally shot Slayton, later determined a justified homicide.<sup>121</sup> Suggestive of the regularity of such housing violence, the *Eagle* reported in September 1946 that “the housing crisis produced another casualty,” when Nellie Lilley of 4216 Hooper Avenue was reportedly set on fire by her tenant Sidney Bell after being asked to move. The will to gendered authority was explicit. A moment before being set ablaze, Lilley told police that Bell announced, “Alright, I’ll show you I am a man.”<sup>122</sup>

Some tenants sought the help of the rent office directly to remedy housing violence. Gita Caplan, a Santa Monica tenant, wrote the rent office in 1948 seeking help against her violent landlord. She alleged that Max Ravin, the landlord, used threats to evict two senior tenants

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<sup>119</sup> “Turner Pleads Not Guilty in Landlord Slaying,” *Eagle*, November 28, 1946.

<sup>120</sup> “News Round-up,” *Eagle*, Jan 16, 1947; Ancestry.com. California, Prison and Correctional Records, 1851-1950 [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2014.

<sup>121</sup> “Landlady Freed After Shooting Boarder Twice,” *Eagle*, Oct 11, 1945.

<sup>122</sup> “Irate Roomer Sets Fire to His Landlady,” *Eagle*, Sep 12, 1946.

“because from new ones he charges enormous rents.” These rent violations were alleged to be coerced too, but new tenants “are afraid to make any complaint as Mr. Max Ravin is vicious, strong like an ox & is boasting about his drinking at least a quart of whiskey per day.” Caplan believed rent regulations and the recourse of complaint were not enough to overcome the landlord’s physical intimidation. Tenants needed an example. She suggested that a rent control investigator go undercover as a tenant, rent an apartment, and pay the landlord’s illegal rent, then subsequently file a treble damage claim. Then her neighboring tenants “will not be afraid any more & follow your example, & this unscrupulous Mr. Ravin will be brought to justice, the truth about him will come into the open.” It never did. The rent office dismissed the case.<sup>123</sup>

### **“Closed’ Sign Hangs on Control Office”**

Federal rent control empowered tenants to rewrite the ballad of the landlord amid modified property relations, but the controls were not intended to make any revisions to the ballad permanent. In 1949, the Housing and Rent Act was amended with a “local option” proviso, which provided state and municipal governments a path to decontrol rental housing after submitting evidence that their respective housing shortages were resolved.<sup>124</sup> In July 1950 the City Council voted to decontrol rents in the City of Los Angeles, a local order made official by federal recognition by the end of the year. Los Angeles’ parting with rent control signaled more than a neutral conversion to a peacetime political economy. In the July hearing, landlords and

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<sup>123</sup>Letter from Gita Caplan to Office of Price Administration, July 7, 1948; Docket 230339; Selected Sample Rent Enforcement Case Files, ca. 1942-1950 (Los Angeles); Region VIII Regional Office; Records of the Office of Housing Expediter, RG 252; National Archives Records Administration - Pacific Region, San Francisco.

councilmen hurled charges that rent control was “un-American,” an ideological refrain that signaled the growing anti-communism of the postwar period that also doomed public housing in Los Angeles.<sup>125</sup> What began as a temporary and patriotic change to housing to support the war, transformed, in the eyes of many landlords, into the creep of state authoritarianism over private housing markets.

But the tenants’ remix of the ballad of the landlord through the infrastructure of rent control between 1942 and 1950 attested to an opposing understanding. For tenants in Los Angeles, the existence of a rent office where tenants could challenge rents, contest an eviction, or complain about housing conditions was an enhancement on the prewar political economy of home. As Marian Inglewood articulated it in the pages of the *Eagle* in 1945, the OPA “was one of the many happy contributions of the New Deal to the welfare of the common man.”<sup>126</sup> The federal government had no stake in enfranchising tenants, black or otherwise, within the protective sphere of the New Deal through rent control. Although tenants, through the infrapolitics of housing security, attempted to enfranchise themselves.

Some of the highest echelons of city government received the message. Retrospectives on rent control from Los Angeles officials in 1951, made clear the role of tenant and rent worker infrapolitics on property relations. Harold Kennedy, Counsel for Los Angeles County complained that although rental regulations technically had provisions to evict troublesome

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<sup>125</sup> Los Angeles City Council. “Regular Meeting of the City Council of the City of Los Angeles held Friday, July 28, 1950.” (Transcript, Los Angeles, CA, 1950), 108-115. Although the City Council ordered rents decontrolled in July, the Los Angeles Tenants Council filed a suit over procedural errors in hopes to save rent control, see “Suit Readied to Stall Rent Decontrol,” Los Angeles Times, Aug 11, 1950 and “Closed Sign Hangs on Control Office,” Los Angeles Times, Dec 21, 1950. For the role of anti-communism in public housing see, Parson, *Making a Better World : Public Housing, the Red Scare, and the Direction of Modern Los Angeles*.

<sup>126</sup> Marian Inglewood, "Things I See," *Eagle*, May 2, 1945.

tenants, “this was very difficult to prove and it resulted in many extremely undesirable tenants being foisted on unwilling landlords.”<sup>127</sup> Future Mayor of Los Angeles, Norris Poulson, went further, claiming that “rent control authorities” exerted “dictatorial control over property owners.”<sup>128</sup> The most revealing letter came from the office of the City Attorney, quoted at length:

From the inquires received in this office, it would appear that landlords have been subjected to abuses by tenants relying upon the rent control law and its enforcement as a shield against any retaliation by the landlord. It would appear that the administration of the rent control law, at least in this area, has been such as to arouse a decidedly hostile attitude between landlords and tenants in many cases, and while some calculated “gouging” on the part of the landlords has occurred, it is not unlikely that in many cases investigation will show an underlying animosity generated by real or fancied grievances on the part of individual landlords arising out of rent control.<sup>129</sup>

These retrospectives confirm that tenants (with at least some rent workers) used the infrastructure of rent control to forward their own goals of housing security beyond the scope of federal intent. The wartime modification of residential property relations provided an unprecedented moment for tenants to make their complaints turn into cultural legitimacy, cash, security of occupancy, and dignity. Rent control may have been temporary, but the near decade of transformed rental property relations revealed a tenant consciousness that was there before and after rent control, whether anyone one was listening or not. By the end of 1950, the “closed

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<sup>127</sup> "Letter from Harold W. Kennedy to McDonough," Feb 8, 1951, Box 37, Banking & Currency Rent Control HR 2051 3871 S 1397 1717 (rent Control Act [UNK] 1951, '52, Gordon McDonough Papers, Special Collections, University of Southern California, Los Angeles, California.

<sup>128</sup> "Letter from Norris Poulson to McDonough," April 10, 1951, Box 37, Banking & Currency Rent Control HR 2051 3871 S 1397 1717 (rent Control Act [UNK] 1951, '52, Gordon McDonough Papers, Special Collections, University of Southern California, Los Angeles, California.

<sup>129</sup> "Letter from Bourke Jones, Executive Assistance Attorney to McDonough," Feb 13, 1951, Box 37, Banking & Currency Rent Control HR 2051 3871 S 1397 1717 (rent Control Act [UNK] 1951, '52, Gordon McDonough Papers, Special Collections, University of Southern California, Los Angeles, California.

sign” hung on the Los Angeles rent office, but the tenants and their infrapolitics of housing security were still there, complaining.<sup>130</sup>

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<sup>130</sup> “‘Closed’ Sign Hangs on Control Office,” *Los Angeles Times*, Dec 21, 1950.

APPENDIX A: BLACK REAL ESTATE PERSONS AND BUSINESSES  
ADVERTISING IN THE *CALIFORNIA EAGLE*, 1914-1927

COMPANY	YEAR OF AD	NAME	ADDRESS	SERVICES	SUBDIVISION
GODING & THOMPSON	1914		703 SAN FERNANDO BLDG	LOTS	DUNBAR PARK
NOAH D. THOMPSON REALTY CO.	1914	NOAH D. THOMPSON; J. EDMONDS	NE CORNER 55TH STREET AND LONG BEACH AVE; N. BROADWAY	REAL ESTATE; RENTALS (HOUSEKEEPING APARTMENTS)	
SIDNEY P. DONES CO	1914	SIDNEY DONES	224 SOUTH SPRING STREET (Germain bldg)	REAL ESTATE; INSURANCE; NOTARY	
	1914	HH WILLIAMS	12TH AND HEMLOCK	REALESTATE	
	1914	WM KENARD (GOV LAND AGENT)	618 E 8TH STREET	RURAL REAL ESTATE; GOVERNMENT LAND	VICTOR VALLEY
	1914	AA GRANT	2146 CENTRAL AVE	INVESTMENTS; BUILDING LOANS; INSURANCE; REAL ESTATE	
	1914	J ALLEN REESE	600 SAN JUAN AVENUE, VENICE	REAL ESTATE; RENTALS	
PEOPLE'S REALTY COMPANY	1914(1919)	FH CRUMBLY	785 SAN PEDRO	REAL ESTATE	
CALIFORNIA REALTY COMPANY	1915	JD GROVES	814 CENTRAL AVE	REAL ESTATE; LOTS; RENTALS	
MILTON W. LEWIS & CO.	1915	MILTON W LEWIS	949 BIRCH STREET; 1617 TARLETON	LOT SALES	
	1919	MRS K BARR	102 SPRING	RENTALS	

			STREET		
	1919	CR RANSOM	982 E 37TH STREET	REAL ESTATE; RENTALS;	
BUFFALO REALTY AND INVESTMENT COMPANY (BUFFALO REALTY)	1919	JOURNEE W. WHITE (MANAGER)	412-415 GERMAIN BUILDING		
ACME BUFFALO REALTY CONSOLIDATED	1919	JOURNESS W. WHITE; CLARENCE A. JONES; V.M. COLE	224 S SPRING STREET	WILLS; DEEDS; MORTGAGES; INSURANCE; REAL ESTATE; LOWER CAL. MEX. LAND (VM COLE)	
THE LOWER CALIFORNIA LAND AND DEVELOPMENT COMPANY	1919		524 SPRING STREET	LOWER CALI FARM LANDS	
STOKES REALTY CO.	1919		1333 EAST 12TH STREET	INSURANCE; REAL ESTATE; RENTALS	
SLEDGE & GROVES	1919		1541 CENTRAL AVE	PERHAPS NOT A BUSINESS, TWO REALTORS SELLING HOME?	
GROVES REALTY CO.	1919		1521 CENTRAL AVENUE	REAL ESTATE; RENTALS; INSURANCE	
BOOKERTE INVESTMENT COMPANY	1919	SIDNEY P DONES; SBW MAY (MGR)	224 SOUTH SPRING STREET (Germain bldg)		
	1919	ER TABER	1630 EAST 9TH STREET	REAL ESTATE; RENTALS; LOANS; INDUSTRIAL PROPERTY	



PACIFIC COAST INDUSTRIAL FEDERATION	1920	LIBERTY LIFE INSURANCE CO. OF CHICAGO	824 CENTRAL AVE	PROMOTERS; FINANCIERS; REALTORS	
	1920	AW COOK	324 MARKET STREET	OAKLAND REAL ESTATE	
ROOSEVELT REALTY COMPANY	1920	WH GAMBLE; FL BANKS; OL BANKS; SG SAMUELS; CHAS S DARDEN; JT TAYLOR; AP TOENS; TA COLE	224 SOUTH SPRING STREET (Germain bldg)		
	1921	JW OWENS	3412 SOUTH NORMADIE	REAL ESTATE; RENTALS; LEASES; EXCHANGES; INSURANCE; INVESTMENTS	
M.L. DUCKETT	1922	M.L. DUCKETT	210 MANHATTAN STREET, WATTS	REAL ESTATE SALES	
WILLIAM H. GAMBLE & CO	1922	WILLIAM H. GAMBLE	1807 CENTRAL AVENUE	REAL ESTATE SALES; LOANS, AND INSURANCE; REFINANCING	
ALEXANDER REALTY COMPANY	1922		862 WALL STREET		
	1922	AJ HARRIS	1823 1/2 CENTRAL AVE	REAL ESTATE	
CLIMAX REALTY COMPANY	1922	EJ PORTER; A. SIMS; WALTER GORDON	2517 CENTRAL AVENUE	REAL ESTATE	
MARLOWE REALTY COMPANY	1922;1926	SAM B. MARLOWE	1410 E. 15TH STREET	REAL ESTATE; INSURANCE; CONTRACTOR	PEACEFUL VALLEY
	1922	MB KORMAN	728 LOEW STAT BUILDING	REAL ESTATE	
SP DONES COMPANY	1922	SIDNEY P DONES	1740 CENTRAL	REAL ESTATE; LOANS; MORTGAGES AND TRUST	PEACEFUL VALLEY

				DEEDS BOUGHT AND SOLD; REFINANCING	
EASTSIDE REALTY COMPANY	1922	LR INGRAM; OL BANKS; JL BANKS	1437 CENTRAL AVENUE	REAL ESTATE; "SUBDIVIDERS" ; COMMERCIAL PROPERTY	CENTRAL AVENUE SUBDIVISI ON; CENTRAL AVENUE GARDENS ; CASTAIC COUNTRY CLUB (1924)
REALTY MORTGAG E COMPANY OF CALIFORNI A	1922		206 SO. SPRING STREET	REAL ESTATE MORTGAGES; MORTGAGES AND TRUST DEEDS BOUGHT AND SOLD; LOANS;	
PROTECT U REALTY COMPANY	1922	ART SIMS	5203 LONG BEACVCH AVENUE	REAL ESTATE	
		MB WRIGHT; MRS MB WRIGHT	301 THAXTER STREET, WATTS	REAL ESTATE; LOANS; RENTALS	PEACEFUL VALLEY
CITIZENS HOME INVESTME NT COMPANY	1922	SBW MAY (WAS MGR OF BOOKERTEE)	1240 CENTRAL AVE; (NEW LOCATION, 1515 CENTRAL AVE)	REAL ESTATE; LOANS; INSURANCE; MANAGEMENT	DUNBAR PARK (1922)
WOOD WILSON'S REALTY AND INVESTME NT COMPANY	1922		680 CENTRAL AVENUE	REAL ESTATE; INSURANCE; RENTALS	
OAKLAHO MA INVESTME NT	(1919)19 22	KC VENERABLE; WH PHILLIPS; IS WATTS; JE CHERRY(PRES 1919); WB COGLE; AH HARRIS; OW GURLEY; SBW MAY	1804 CENTRAL AVE	REAL ESTATE; RENTALS	PEACEFUL VALLEY

COMPANY		(BROKER)			
SHACKELFORD & LOGGINS (?)	1922	JH SHACKLEFORD	1315 EAST 12TH STREET	REAL ESTATE	DUNBAR PARK (1922)
ORANGE REALTY CO	1922	VM COLE	1400 CENTRAL AVE	REAL ESTATE	DUNBAR PARK (1922)
	1922	ROY L. LOGGINS	1521 1/2 CENTRAL AVE	REAL ESTATE	DUNBAR PARK (1922)
LAMAR REALTY CO.	1922		1331 CENTRAL AVE	REAL ESTATE	DUNBAR PARK (1922)
AMERICAN MORTGAGE COMPANY	1923		1047-1049 SO HILL STREET	MORTGAGES AND TRUST DEEDS BOUGHT AND SOLD;	
	1923	CLARENCE ENNIS	1450 CENTRAL AVENUE	REAL ESTATE; CONTRACTOR; RENTALS	
	1923	L. EGGLESTON	420 RAMSAUR STREET, WATTS	REAL ESTATE	
THE ARROW REALTY COMPANY	1923	SUTTON; CROSBY; SCOTT KENNEY	2218 HOOPER AVENUE	REAL ESTATE	
INDIANA REALTY COMPANY	1923	WM SHELTON; FC COTHRAN; EA WILLIAMS	1521 1/2 CENTRAL AVE	REAL ESTATE	DUNBAR PARK (1922); PEACEFUL VALLEY (1924)
	1923	F & W SHUMAN	3817 LIVINGSTON DRIVE, LONG BEACH	REAL ESTATE	
ARROWHEAD REALTY COMPANY	1923	CM JONES (PRES); CW COPLAND (TRES)	315 BROADWAY; 2522 CENTRAL	REAL ESTATE; LOANS; CONTRACTOR	PEACEFUL VALLEY

			AVENUE (CENTRAL AVE REPRESENTA TIVE)		
GOLDEN STATE HOUSE MOVING CO.	1923		45TH AND MAIN	REAL ESTATE; HOUSE MOVING	
WOODS REALTY CO.	1924	TL WOODS; PR SMALLWOOD; MG BLACKWELL (SALESMAN); CH PALMER (SALESMAN)	849 CENTRAL AVE	REAL ESTATE; RENTALS; COLLECTIONS; INSURANCE	
	1924	CHARLES CJ WILLIAMS	1313 CENTRAL AVENUE	REAL ESTATE;NOTAR Y;	PEACEFUL VALLEY; GORDON MANOR
IMPERIAL VALLEY LAND COMPANY	1924	JEW FISHER; JB BASS; RA HOLT (PRESIDENT); WF ROOT (LOCATOR, LISTED AS LOCATED IN HOLTVILLE, CA)	833 CENTRAL AVENUE	RURAL REAL ESTATE	
	1924	J DONES	3218 CENTRAL AVE	REAL ESTATE	
	1924	J DAVIS	3218 CENTRAL AVE	REAL ESTATE; EXCHANGE; RENTALS	
	1924	MRS RANDOLPH	943 CENTRAL AVE	REAL ESTATE	
	1924	JACOB MARCOLESCO	228 SO. COMPTON AVE, WATTS	REAL ESTATE; COMMERCIAL	
	1924	MATTIE SHACKELFORD- MCKNIGHT	711 LINWOOD ROAD	REAL ESTATE	WATTS
	1924	MZ MILLER	1427 1/2 CENTRAL AVE; 1137 E 11TH STREET	CONTRACTOR	
	1924	STELLA KEGLER	WATTS	INDIVIDUAL SALE?	PEACEFUL VALLEY
CITY BROTHERS	1924	GW CITY; RJ CITY	1100 1/4 CENTRAL AVE	REAL ESTATE	

MITCHELL & THORTON	1924	DC MITCHELL; WJ THORTON	1704 CENTRAL AVE	REAL ESTATE; INSURANCE	
OK INVESTMENT COMPANY	1924		3406 NORMANDIE AVE	REAL ESTATE	
	1924	VM COLE	1400 CENTRAL AVE	REAL ESTATE	PEACEFUL VALLEY
	1924	MRS CHRISTAL REED	1240 CENTRAL AVE	REAL ESTATE	PEACEFUL VALLEY
SQUARE DEAL REALTY COMPANY	1924		3420 1/2 CENTRAL AVE	REAL ESTATE	PEACEFUL VALLEY
FORD & FARRIS REALTY CO.	1924	ORANGE D FORD(PRES); EC HARPER (V PRES); GUS FARRIS (TRES); WH JARMAN (SALES MGR); JAMES E PERRY; A BROWN; M LITSHIUTZ; JAMES HOWARD; SAM LIVITZ	2531 CENTRAL AVENUE	REAL ESTATE	LINCOLN GARDENS (N OF WESTMINSTER)
	1924	RH LAMBERT	2152 EAST 10TH STREET	REAL ESTATE; INDUSTRIAL	
MUTUAL NATIONAL FINANCE CORPORATION	1924		608-9-10 LOEW STATE BUILDING	REAL ESTATE; VACATION HOMES SITES	RIALTO PARK (1924)
	1924	WALTER J LOWE	2201 CENTRAL AVENUE	REAL ESTATE	PEACEFUL VALLEY
	1924	CH ALSTON	580 CENTRAL AVE	REAL ESTATE	PEACEFUL VALLEY
SAN PEDRO INVESTMENT COMPANY	1924		1541 1/2 CENTRAL AVE	REAL ESTATE	PEACEFUL VALLEY
	1924	FRANK C. COTHRAN	2825 CENTRAL AVENUE	REAL ESTATE	PEACEFUL VALLEY
	1924	EDWARD GORDON	2612 1/2 CENTRAL AVE	REAL ESTATE	PEACEFUL VALLEY

	1924	HOMER JONES	538 HAMMOND STREET, PASADENA	REAL ESTATE	PEACEFUL VALLEY
	1924	AUBREY A GITTENS	1448 WEST JEFFERSON STREET	RELA ESTATE	PEACEFUL VALLEY
	1924	IB RUFFIN	224 SOUTH SPRING STREET (Germain bldg)	LOANS-FIRST AND SECOND MORTGAGES	PEACEFUL VALLEY
ROZIER- LAWSON COMPANY	1924		843 CENTRAL AVENUE	CONSTRUCTIO N; INVESTMENT; LOANS	
BLOGETT- BRANT CO/ THE BLODGETT REALTY COMPANY (1925)	1924		2506 CENTRAL AVE	REAL ESTAE; RENTALS; MANAGEMENT	GORDON MANOR
	1924	CG HART	417 NORTH BONNIE BRAE STREET	LOANS	
UNITY FINANCE COMPANY	1924; 1926	WA CLARK (MANAGER); DR AC GARROT (PRESIDENT)	1145 EAST 12TH STREET	LOANS (NOT SURE IF REAL ESTATE)	
ER TABER REALTY CO	1924	SIDNEY W. NEIGHBORS; RUSSELL B MORGAN	1616 EAST 9TH STREET	REAL ESTATE; LOANS; INDUSTRIAL	
	1925	VM COLE	1400 CENTRAL AVE		
	1925	CE JOHNSON	1824 CENTRAL AVE		
	1925	CH JONES	1059 E JEFFERSON		
	1925	PO HOLT	2522 CENTRAL (SAME AS ARROWHEA D)		
RANSOM & NELSON	1925		1704 CENTRAL		

			AVE		
THE WALTER L. GORDON COMPANY	1925	G DUNCAN (SALESMAN FOR THE WALTER GORDON COMPANY)	3617 SO CENTRAL AVE	REAL ESTATE	CENTRAL AVENUE GARDENS ANNEX; GORDON MANOR
	1925	W STOVALL (SALESMAN DOR THE WALTER GORDON COMPANY)	3617 SO CENTRAL AVE	REAL ESTATE	CENTRAL AVENUE GARDENS ANNEX
	1925	C MILLS	485 OAK KNOLL, PASADENA	REAL ESTATE	
AJ HARRIS REAL ESTATE CO.	1925	AJ HARRIS	1824 CENTRAL AVE (WITH THE SAN PEDRO INVESTMENT COMPANY)	REAL ESTATE; COMMERCIAL PROPERTY; RENTALS	
	1925	ALBERTA L WILLS	1134 E 23RD STREET	REAL ESTATE; INSURANCE	
SPIKES & ROBERTS	1925		939 GENESEE STREET	SUBDIVIDERS	
LOGGINS & COOPER	1925	ROY L. LOGGINS; ELIJAH COOPER; MRS AE WALKER	3808 CENTRAL AVENUE	REAL ESTATE; INSURANCE; LOANS	
MT VIEW INVESTMENT COMPANY	1925	WILLIAM BROOKS; DL WILLIAMS; WH ROZIER; H HOLLAND; AT HINES; TH THURMAN; WILLIAM STALLINGS; WILLIAM SMITH; WILLIAM WALTON;			
	1925	LOUIS STEIN	1146 E 27TH STREET	BUILDING LOANS; MORTGAGES; TRUST DEEDS	
FRANCIS P JONES COMPANY	1925; 1926	FRANCIS P JONES; BUELL A THOMAS (MANAGER); INEZ BAKER (SEC); WILLIAM MELLS WATSON (MANAGER, REAL ESTATE DEPARTMENT)	3759 LASALLE; 4122 1/2 CENTRAL AVE	REAL ESTATE; LOANS; REFINANCING; BUILDING LOANS	
JC BROWN & CO.	1925	JC BROWN	1000 CENTRAL AVE	REAL ESTATE; RENTALS	

	1925	WILLIAM B LEFRIDGE	AUBURN, CA	REAL ESTATE	
ALSTON REALTY AND INVESTMENT COMPANY	1925	REV MACK GAMMONS (MGR OF MONROVIA BRACH); CH ALSTON (OWNER)	412 EAST MAPLE STREET; 3003 CENTRAL AVENUE		GORDON MANOR
WM FARNSWORTH CO	1925	WM FARNSWORTH; SK NOLAND (AUCTIONEER)	916 BROADWAY (AUCTION)		
	1925	JAX ALEXANDER (OWNER)	ELSINORE, CA	REAL ESTATE (LOTS)	COLORED SUBDIVISION AT ELSINORE JUNCTION
WC CONWAY REALTY COMPANY	1925			REAL ESTATE	GORDON MANOR
CALDWELL H JONES REALTY COMPANY	1925				GORDON MANOR
	1925	TP HOWARD (OWNER?)	4320 S VERMONT AVE		
	1925	RAYMOND A CLARK	4126 CENTRAL AVE	REAL ESTATE	GORDON MANOR
GEORGE S GRANT CO	1926	WILLIAM MELLS WATSON	1315 E 12TH STREET	REAL ESTATE; MORGAGES; REFINANCING	
WD MARTIN REALTY CO	1926	WD MARTIN	1150 E PICO	MORTGAGES	
HA HOWARD & CO	1926		3208 CENTRAL AVENUE	REAL ESTATE LOANS; INSURANCE	
WEST END REALTY COMPANY	1926	EA JOHNSON;	3419 SOUTH NORMADIE AVENUE; 2024 CENTRAL AVENUE (BRANCH OFFICE)		



GREAT WESTERN REAL ESTATE COMPANY	1926	HC FOUSE (MGR)	3420 1/2 CENTRAL AVE	RURAL LAND	COACHELL A VALLEY
DC MITCHELL COMPANY (SEE MITCHELL & THORTON, 1924)	1926	DC MITCHELL; RALPH B WILLIAMS (THE RENT MAN)	1704 CENTRAL AVE		
ELIJAH COOPER REALTY CO	1926	1411 WASHINGTON STREET			
DEWITT CONSTRUCTION CO	1926		3653 S. NORMADIE AVE	CONTRACTORS ; REAL ESTATE (RENTAL PROPERTY)	
EARL REALTY COMPANY	1926		10502 COMPTON AVENUE	REAL ESTATE	WATTS
	1926	MB JOHNSON	432 SO MAIN STREET	AGRICULTURAL LAND (COTTON LANDS)	PALO VERDE VALLEY
KNOX-KNOX REALTY BROKERS	1926		WILMINGTO N AVENUE		
HUGHES REALTY COMPANY	1926		1466 W JEFFERSON STREET		WESTSIDE
	1927	HARRY LEVETTE; VM COLE	TELEPHONE ONLY (SHADY?)	BEACH PROPERTY	
	1927	CLARENCE E MILLS		PASADENA	
	1927	WILLIAM R FULKS	10501 1/2 SO COMPTON AVE, WATTS	WATTS	
	1927	JAMES H PERKINS		PALO VERDE VALLEY (SEE MB JOHNSON)	
	1927	EE ARMITAGE	862 KENSINGTO		ROCK VALLEY

			N RD		SUBDIVISI ON, PERRIS CA
ASSOCIATE D LOAN COMPANY	1927	SIDNEY DONES	1720 CENTRAL AVE	MORTGAGE FINANCE/REFI NANCE	
JR HUDSON REAL ESTATE CO.	1927	JR HUDSON	1191 E 49TH STREET		
	1927	BOB ROBERTS	1801 1/2 K STREET, BAKERSFILED		
WH HARRISON COMPANY	1927		1334 LINCOLN AVE, PASADENA		

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